

SAHARA KELLY

A BALLINGER BASTARD ADVENTURE



THE *Jeweller*



The Jeweller

Sahara Kelly

Content © 2023 Sahara Kelly
Cover art © 2023 Sahara Kelly
Cover portrait - Carl Joseph Begas
Self-portrait of the artist, circa 1820

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Acknowledgements

My deepest thanks to all the readers who have embraced the first two books in this series. I wasn't sure that stories about "bastards" would be of interest, or find a home on historical romance readers' bookshelves, but you all have reassured me, and for that I am so very grateful.

To my family, thanks, as always. My ever-patient husband accepts my vanishing into my office for days on end, only to emerge around cocktail hour with my hair sticking up in tufts, my eyes red and bleary, stumbling for the gin.

To Apple, for making a system that will take my endless abuse and give me that "bring it on" gesture periodically, I thank you as well. I sometimes feel that my tech and I are truly in sync. (I won't mention the other times.)

Writing is both a fierce joy and an agonizing struggle. But if it brings pleasure to *one* reader, it's all worth it. I'd like to hope you're that reader.

Table of Contents

THE JEWELLER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

APPENDIX

ABOUT THE COVER ART

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALSO BY SAHARA KELLY

HISTORICAL ROMANCES

CONTEMPORARY (AND OTHER GENRE) ROMANCES

Prologue

“Here now, no fussing.”

A gentleman in a fine carriage leaned forward and looked into the basket on the seat opposite. A tiny whimper had escaped from the blanketed bundle within, so he tucked the covers more snugly against the cool morning air.

“We’re nearly there.”

His gaze drifted to the window and the green landscape outside, trees heavy with leaves, flowers dotting the hedgerows. It was a far cry from the busy streets of London, but his long journey here was nearly at an end. In truth, he’d be glad of it, since his backside was getting sore after so many hours bouncing over roads that could use some improvement. But all in all, it could have been worse. And it was his duty to complete this task.

He’d told himself that more than a few times on the road from London out to the country, and reminded himself how important it was, even though it had been a long night’s trip before a brief stop to collect this priceless cargo.

Their pace slowed as the horses turned onto a gravel drive, and within moments slowed to a halt in front of a pair of staircases leading up to the entrance of Ballinger Priory.

Shadowed now, as the sun rose behind the building, he could just make out the door as it opened, and a figure emerged onto the top of the stairs.

Sighing, he jumped down from the carriage, then reached back for the basket, his heart heavy at the knowledge of what he was about to do.

“Good morning, sir. We’ve been expecting you.” The woman smiled at him, her voice warm and comforting. “May I take your precious bundle?”

He dredged up a smile. “Thank you, yes. I expect he’ll want his breakfast soon.”

“Indeed, and we’re ready to provide that, along with everything else he’ll need.”

“I’ve heard of this place.” He glanced around, then back to that smiling face. “He’ll be happy here, won’t he?” Whether it was a question or a plea, he wasn’t quite sure.

“He will, sir. We make sure of it. That’s our mission, as I’m sure you know. To raise these children into the adults they are destined to become, and to make sure they know they are here not because they weren’t loved, but because they *were*.”

He nodded. “I have something. I understand he may have an item from— from his parents?”

“Yes, if you wish. We have no objection to these children having something solid to remind them that they were thought of, even if circumstances made it impossible to raise them.”

“Then, if you would give him this...” He produced a slim gold signet ring with an engraving on it. “To be given to him at an appropriate time.”

“A lovely memento, sir. We shall indeed make sure he has it as soon as he’s able to wear it and care for it himself.”

The gentleman nodded, hoping that would be the case. But he could not linger, and knew he would never be able to check back to see for himself. This would be his last goodbye.

He looked once more at the tiny face with the eyes already darkening from the blue he’d been born with. “I wonder what they’ll be like when you’re a grown man?” he whispered. “May they see kindness in the world, little one. And know that once upon a time there were two people who loved you very much.”

His mind at ease, he gave the woman a half-smile, then turned away, retracing his steps to the carriage, jumping inside, and closing the door.

They were off immediately, and despite his urge to do otherwise, he never looked back.

Chapter One



Spring was taking its own sweet time to arrive in London, thought the man sitting at an untidy desk. The surface was littered with an assortment of tools, a few papers, a quill pen with the ink drying on the nib, and quite a bit of dust.

It wasn't regular dust, however. This dust sparkled just a little in the weak late afternoon sunshine that barely made it into the room through the abundant windows. That sparkle echoed the brilliant colour of an assemblage of stones ordered neatly in rows to one side of what was clearly a working space.

Three or four branches of candles were lit, adding much needed light to the entire surface, and striking flashes of rainbows now and again from several of the stones. They were sitting tidily in place, waiting for the hand of the master to seal them into their positions, to align them and then wrap delicate gold strands around them, forming the whole into a necklace fit for a queen.

Actually, this one was fit for a Countess's daughter, but the magnificent creation could have graced a royal neck with no trouble at all.

Dominic Greybrooke leaned back in his chair and wiped his hands on a rag, narrowing his eyes at the piece lying before him, wondering if the elegant gold swirls were sufficient to offset the diamond and ruby flower design he was perfecting. The rubies had arrived only last week, which gave him perilously little time to complete the commission. He disliked working to a deadline, but sometimes—in his business as a jeweller—it was necessary.

These rubies had come from the far east, and the ship had been delayed by storms off the coast of France. Thus, he'd had to work almost around the clock to reach this point, and he still wasn't sure he'd matched the stones correctly. Some of the diamonds had a pinkish hue, nothing that the untrained eye would notice, but something that he knew added a touch of depth when

placed beside a rich, glowing ruby. One of the reasons he'd selected those particular gems.

The sound of the traffic outside, the rumbling of carriages, the clatter of hooves, never distracted him. In fact, he was barely aware of the passage of time when he was this immersed in the process of creation. It was his way... holding on to the vision he knew would provide something unique, something that would please the Earl and Countess of Linton, and incidentally, bring in more business.

Was it mercenary to think along those lines? Possibly. But he was an artist at heart and wanted nothing more than for his jewellery to be appreciated and admired. And yes, the financial rewards were substantial, which ensured he could afford a pair of new boots if he needed them, and the spacious rooms above his workshop, which were set up exactly the way he preferred them.

His landlord was a friend, the rent was fair, and he'd been able to hire help to come in twice a week and clean for him, since God knew he didn't have the time to do it himself.

Overall, Dominic was content with his life, and his heart lifted whenever he worked on what he loved best—jewellery. His friends often chuckled at him for sequestering himself away from the world as he developed a new design, but they supported him and understood his passion for his chosen career.

He was blessed, he knew, not only for being able to work on jewellery, but for having a few people in his life who really mattered.

And one of them was about to knock on his door.

“You in there, Dom?”

“Just finishing up.” He brushed his hands on the rag once more and rose to release the lock. “Hallo Nick. Come on in. I could use an eye on this...” he waved a hand at the desk. “Still not convinced I've matched up the right diamond in the right place with the right ruby.”

Nick Polbury shook his head and walked over, turning the candles to illuminate the scene as best he could. “How you do any of this in candlelight, I have no idea.” He bent forward. “But to me? It looks...magnificent. Opulent, even. And I simply can't see that pink tone you say is there, so how the hell can I tell you if you've got one wrong?”

“And you call yourself an artist,” snorted Dominic.

“Now then, young man. Oils are a completely different kettle of fish. They’re everything from soft to vibrant, they vary in every kind of light. I know oils. These?” He waved at the jewels. “Pebbles in fancy dresses. Your preference, not mine.”

Dominic grinned. “I guessed that your reply would be something along those lines, but I had to ask.” He shook out his sleeves and reached for his jacket.

“Is this the Linton piece?”

“Yes.”

“The wedding’s coming up, isn’t it?” Nick leaned against the desk.

“Too soon for my liking. That’s why I’m putting in some extra time on it.”

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“Nothing, really.” Nick straightened and moved toward the door as Dominic covered his work carefully, and then opened a very large safe, sliding the tray holding everything onto one of the shelves. The door closed with a robust clang, and he engaged the lock using the key he wore around his neck.

“You can tell me over dinner.” Dominic buttoned his jacket. “The Book and Barrel?”

“Of course. I yearn for an excellent venison pie and a tankard of equally excellent ale.”

“Chillendale?”

Nick raised his eyebrows. “We can always hope...”

With a final glance, Dominic satisfied himself that the workshop was secure. He had not made a secret of his profession, but with the help of his amenable landlord, he’d added several layers of extra security. The shutters had iron reinforcements secreted beneath a wood exterior, and the door was similarly designed, with a lock that had a few of its own secrets. The key, of course, remained with him at all times, unless he was sleeping. It was not large, but very solid.

He had no qualms about leaving the premises, and once all those things had been set in place, he’d come and gone pretty much as he pleased, with nary a hint of anyone attempting to rob him of the riches that were part of his stock in trade.

Thus, it was only moments before he and his friend left the building and headed along a darkening street toward their destination.

“Have you heard from John?”

“Not recently. He and Caro are busy getting settled at Merriman Hall, I’ll wager.” Nick grinned at the thought of their friend who had wed not long before. “And Fitz is busy too, learning how to be a Papa to his daughter.”

Dominic couldn’t help but chuckle at that. Fitzallan Wilde, man about town, who swore he’d remain single for the rest of his life, had married and was now a father.

“Strange, isn’t it?” Nick mused as they walked. “I doubt any of us imagined a settled kind of future when we left the Priory.”

“I certainly didn’t,” agreed Dominic. “I knew I was going to be a jeweller’s apprentice. I never really looked further ahead than that. For me, having my own business? That’s the future I didn’t expect. Marriage doesn’t feature into any plans or desires at the moment, come to think of it.”

“We’re Ballinger bastards, my friend. Fitz and John were lucky, since not many women would even *think* of us as potential husbands.” Nick grinned. “Which fact, however, makes life a lot easier, wouldn’t you say?”

“Absolutely.”

And with that emphatic response, the two men strolled into the Book and Barrel Inn and ordered their dinner.

~~*~*~*

Neither of them realised it, but their presence attracted some attention, mostly from the ladies, who were also enjoying a meal at the charming inn. Whether they were in a group or with gentlemen, the sight of two such handsome faces drew more than a few glances of appreciation.

Nick Polbury was the flamboyant one, his hair a tumble of unruly black curls, his face frequently shadowed by stubble that refused to go away no matter how many times he shaved, and eyes as dark and mysterious as the laughter that lurked behind them. The cleft in his chin and his casual wardrobe completed a picture that drew feminine gazes like a magnet and

inspired more than a few dreams.

Since his heritage was somewhat murky—Ballinger bastards were known to be talented at whatever profession they chose, but were still bastards—he wasn't part of the *Ton*, nor invited to elegant affairs in equally elegant homes. Which was quite acceptable, since he didn't give a farthing about such things. His world was made up of canvas and oils.

Dominic, on the other hand, was a counterpoint to his friend, although sharing his colouring. His hair was thick and tended to curl, but he kept it under control, annoyed that there was one small sprig that refused to do anything but fall over his brow. His eyes were gentle, dark doe eyes, and his lips full, promising kisses that would melt the hardest of hearts. He had a care for his appearance, always being as neat as possible, whereas Nick threw on whatever was clean and handy, affecting a somewhat bohemian style that contrasted nicely with Dominic's subdued propriety.

Was it any wonder, then, that when they dined in the convivial atmosphere of the Book and Barrel, more than a few nods and smiles came their way?

"This place gets busier all the time," muttered Nick as he smiled and nodded at the fourth person to call out a welcome.

"Stop complaining," grinned Dominic. "You should be thankful there's a place we can eat where we're welcomed, and the food is excellent." He followed his friend through the diners to a table they'd come to think of as their own.

"Evening gents."

"Wilfred, you old beetle. How are you this evening? Back still bothering you?"

"Ah, Mr Nick. You always remember. Thank you for askin'. Bit sore, but me wife's got a new salve for it. Gives me a bit o' a better time, thank God." He drew out a chair. "You'll be 'avin' the pie, then?"

"We certainly will," Dominic nodded. "Best pie in town, Wilfred. No doubt about it."

"You're kind to say so, sir. It'll be right up." He leaned in to the two men as they seated themselves. "Fancy a tankard o' Chillendale ale, then, do we?"

Nick's eyes lit up as Dominic drew in a breath. "You have Ch..."

"Shhh." Wilfred held a finger to his lips. "Couple o' barrels just arrived. I wasn't going to tap 'em tonight, but for you gents, since you're regulars..."

“You are a prince among men,” he beamed.

“I shall sing your praises on high,” agreed Nick, grinning from ear to ear.

“Well, I’d better get that going then, before you make a saint out of me.”

He scurried off, a smile adding to the many wrinkles on his face.

“What a man,” sighed Dominic. “And a perfect ending to the day.”

“So about the Linton necklace...”

“What about it?”

Nick glanced around, hoping that there was sufficient noise to ensure their conversation would be confidential. He needed to impart some information to his friend, but wasn’t quite sure how to present it.

“You’re looking quite...mysterious.”

“Sorry, it’s just that this is not something I would want bruited abroad.”

He drew closer to the table and leaned in, as did Dominic.

“The Lintons, I hear, are in financial straits.” He took a breath. “I’m not convinced they’ll be able to pay for that necklace you’re working on.”

“Good God. Are you sure?”

“The information came from a trustworthy source.” Nick paused. “I was contacted by the family about a portrait of Lady Helen, to coincide with her marriage.” He leaned even closer. “I thought it a bit odd when the request was cancelled. But then I heard that the Earl’s gambling debts have surpassed his fortune. Man can’t keep himself away from the card table, apparently.”

“But...” Dominic struggled with this news. “He has a massive estate, Nick. Fairmeadows is huge, from what I understand. The income from that alone should be more than enough to cover any debts?”

“This is where it gets tricky...” Nick pursed his lips. “There is some question as to the validity of his title. Thus, a portion of the income is being held by the estate while this issue is pending, and he can’t access any of it right now. There are legal ramifications, lawyers doing what they always do, which is holding everything close to their waistcoats, and nothing is firmly established. So nobody is really too clear about what’s happening. But what seems pretty definite is that the Lintons are in some kind of financial difficulty.”

“This is very unwelcome news,” murmured Dominic. “Some of the stones were taken from older Linton pieces that were never worn, and the rubies ordered from the Far East. So I’m not accountable for those, but the gold is mine and will be billed upon completion, as usual, along with my

charge for the work.” He thought about it and leaned back as Wilfred brought tankards of ale.

Both men nodded their thanks at the news that the pie would be served shortly.

“John Perrin was in line to become Earl Linton when his father died, wasn’t he?” Dominic frowned.

“I think so, yes. If I remember correctly, there was some discussion over Bertram Perrin’s claim to the title. John had gone abroad...he’d lost his wife, and then contracted something bad enough to kill him. Never came home. Bertram was a somewhat distant member of the family, but there was nobody else with a claim...and things slide, as well you know.” Nick shrugged. “He’s been the Earl for a few years, but every now and again, a rumour surfaces that there’s another who should have inherited. And mutterings of such things certainly don’t help Linton’s situation.”

“Rumours are rumours,” commented Dominic. “But what matters to me, to be blunt, is getting paid for my work. I really hope that this all gets sorted out before Lady Helen’s wedding, because there’s quite a bit of gold in that necklace, not to mention the time and effort. And I’d like to be able to see a profit from it.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

Chapter Two



Cold. So very cold.

She'd been cold before, more times than she could remember. But this was different. Every bone in her body was like ice, she couldn't feel her feet, and the torn piece of cloth she used as a wrap was proving to be futile, offering no relief from the sharp wind that had picked up as the sun set.

Her shoulders ached from her last beating, although that had been...how many days? She'd lost count. One eye was half-shut, and she knew there would be a bruise flowering around it, courtesy of the grocer who had caught her rummaging in his waste barrel that morning and had backhanded her hard, making her ears ring.

"Git orf," he'd shouted. "We don' want none o' your kind thievin' round 'ere."

All she'd wanted was something to eat, to ease the pains that plagued her constantly. The gnawing agony of a stomach that had been empty for far too long.

Perhaps she should have let that old woman grab her.

She'd been alert enough to know where that would lead, though. Working long hours in a brothel, well, that just wasn't anything she could bring herself to even consider. So she'd run, stumbling along in shoes that were held together by a dirty ribbon and a prayer, cursing as the rough cobblestones bit into the soles of her feet.

But her ability to run was diminishing, and quickly.

She knew the shaking of her hands and the dizziness that crept up on her when she wasn't expecting it—these were not good signs.

And worst of all, she was tired. Tired of trying to find food or work. Tired of being cold, of sleeping wherever she could find a dark corner that offered a modicum of shelter.

She was, she realised, tired of living.

So when she rounded a corner onto a quiet street and saw a doorway deep enough and dark enough to hide her, she crumpled gratefully into it and dragged the remains of her shawl around her as best she could.

This would be it, she knew. Her last resting place. At least the porch was clean, out of the wind, the door a nice shade of dark green, and the glass at the top cleaned to a shine. All things considered, if she was about to die, then this wasn't the worst place to do it.

She barely heard the footsteps, nor felt the sudden silence as their owner stopped dead before his own home.

“Good God, what on earth...?”

Gentle hands touched her shoulders, and she winced, pulling away and making some kind of sound, not even aware she'd done so.

“Oh, my poor girl. This will never do.”

“Nooo,” she moaned, as she felt herself jostled and suddenly raised into the air. Someone had picked her up, and was carrying her, pausing to unlock that green door, and then taking her inside.

She should struggle, she knew. Run, get away, save herself before the worst happened.

But although her mind raced wildly, her body could not respond. There was no fuel to stoke the fire of self-preservation. She'd given all she had to survive this long. She had nothing left.

“It's all right, miss,” said a quiet voice. “I am not going to hurt you. But you need help, I know. So let's see what we can do.”

She longed to believe him and found her head resting on a firm shoulder as he carried her upstairs. He smelled...good. Clean. Something she definitely wasn't.

“I...” she croaked and tried to move, but found his arms strong enough to hold her fast.

“Hush. We must get you warm first. Perhaps a cup of tea ...”

Tea?

A brief shot of pain curled around her mouth as it tried to water at the thought. When had she last had tea? She couldn't recall.

“All right. Here we are.”

He opened another door and carried her upstairs into a room that looked—cosy. Firelight flickered from the hearth, and she blinked at the sight, shivering again at the mere thought of warmth.

“I’m going to put you down in this chair, all right?” He spoke quietly, not a whisper but a comforting promise, as he suited action to words and gently rested her down into *oh Heaven - a soft chair*. “And I think water would be a good idea to start. You need something to drink and ease that parched throat.”

Almost blinded by the firelight, her eyes stung, although whether with the warmth of the room or the need to shed tears she no longer possessed, she didn’t know.

He was back in a trice with a glass. To her embarrassment, she couldn’t lift her arm to take it, just shuddered beneath the ragged shawl.

“Gently now.” He held it to her cracked and sore lips and let her take a few sips.

Bliss. It was utter and complete bliss. Nothing she’d ever had to drink before tasted sweeter than this pure and simple liquid.

Awkwardly, she swallowed, then swallowed again, feeling the relief of having moisture within her body once more.

“Easy. Not too much to start with.”

He withdrew the glass and set it down beside her on a small table. Then he crossed the room, opened a wooden chest, and withdrew a large woolly blanket.

“We must get you warm. I wonder how long you’ve been like this...” He looked at her feet. “Dear God. I’m not sure I know what to do first.”

Without hesitation, he reached for the remnants of her shawl, and she didn’t have the strength to fight him for it. Nor did she need to, since he replaced it with that sumptuous thick blanket, carefully tucking it in around her. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to become aware of the luxurious feel against her skin, and the shiver she felt was one of relief, rather than chill.

He was gone, she noticed as she opened her eyes again. But then he was back, and gently raising her feet onto an ottoman. He removed what was left of her shoes and then produced a pair of thick socks, which he tugged over her toes and up toward her calves. “There,” he murmured. “At least that should offer better warmth.”

She managed a swallow, working her throat around the movement. “Th... th...thank you.” The whisper was harsh and rough, but the words clear.

He glanced up at her face, his eyes dark but gentle in the firelight. “My name is Dominic Greybrooke. I live here. Who are you? Can you tell me?”

She swallowed again, the water making the movements easier. “I am... Wren.”

~~*~*~*

Wren.

An appropriate name, thought Dom, as he surveyed her.

Her bones were showing through skin that was unnaturally pale, her cheeks lacked any colour at all and were starting to sink into her face, and she'd clearly been beaten recently.

How could she have survived? A tiny thing, probably barely coming up to his shoulder, she looked as if she had been starving for quite some time.

All valid questions, but they could wait until he'd tended to some of her most serious needs. “Well, Miss Wren, welcome to my home. I would like to see if we can make you a little more comfortable.” He frowned at her face. “Will it be all right with you if I wash away some of the blood from your eye? That must be so uncomfortable.”

She nodded weakly. “Yes.” Her head fell back against the chair as if she could barely hold the weight on her neck. “Thank you.”

“Good.” He smiled, then went back to the kitchen. She had water, but she needed more, so he set a kettle on to heat and dug out some soft cloths, thanking his lucky stars that his housekeeper was a very organised woman who insisted he know where everything was. Mrs Potts came every week to clean, occasionally cook, and otherwise make sure he was taking care of himself. He loved her dearly and if she hadn't been more than four decades older than him, he would probably have done his best to woo and wed her.

Thus, he could return to his unexpected guest with a clean cloth damp with warm water in one hand and a dry one in the other. “Now, let's see if we can do something about this.” He knelt by the chair, noting Wren had closed her eyes.

Was she asleep? It was entirely possible. But she flinched slightly as he sponged away the worst of the blood. It had come from a cut just beneath her

eyebrow, so he cleaned that as well. The bruising was vivid against her pale skin, and the more he cleaned, the more curious he became.

She had fine bones, delicately arched brows, and a nose that would have entranced an artist. He spared a moment to wonder what Nick would make of her. God knew what colour her hair was, because the room was lit by firelight, and she was probably carrying weeks of dirt in it. It might have been shorn at one point, but now it looked as if it might come down to her ears.

Her feet...he had to make sure her feet weren't torn or cut. That was a real problem, since infections could set in so easily and result in the loss of a limb. She was too young to suffer such an indignity, so he carefully removed one sock and wiped away some of the grime.

To his surprise, he held a beautifully arched foot in his hand, revealing more fine, delicate bones, and toes that followed a gentle curve from one side to the other.

He dried them and slipped the sock back on, repeating the process with the other foot.

As he did so, he became more and more convinced that this wasn't some lost maid, starving prostitute, or homeless waif thrown out onto the streets.

"May I tend to your hands, Wren?" He glanced at her, noting the eyelids flickering as she watched him. "I'm sure you'll feel better with them clean."

She nodded and slowly managed to untangle one from the blanket. He was happy to see a tiny bit of colour dusting the white flesh of her arm. She was gradually warming up.

"Thank you." He took her hand and dipped the cloth into the warm water again, wiping around her palm and fingers. It confirmed his theory. She was indeed very finely boned, with nails that might well have been called elegant, had they not been split and broken.

The kettle rattled in the kitchen, and he tucked her hand back beneath the blanket. "I'll make us tea, and we'll see if you can manage a few sips. Then we'll decide what to do with you." A poor choice of words, apparently, since a ripple of apprehension made the blanket tremble, and her eyes opened wide in fear.

He paused, struck as the firelight flickered from pupils the colour of a fine, dark topaz. They were indeed extraordinary eyes, long, almond-shaped, and even in her current state, sensual.

Something inside him stirred, and he frowned at himself. "I meant to say that we must decide how best to care for you from now on, Miss Wren. I cannot possibly allow you back out onto the streets. It's wrong. So we have to see how to restore you to health and then talk about your future." He knelt down briefly, and put his hand on her shoulder. "You won't be allowed to starve to death. That is not going to happen. So relax, let your body warm. You are quite safe here, with me."

Her gaze lifted to his, and for a second he thought he saw hope dawn somewhere. "Is there someone I should contact? Anyone I should let know that you are well and here, safe now?"

But then she looked down and shook her head. "You must not bother, sir," she whispered, her voice croaky. "Just let me go."

"No." He stood firm. "Absolutely not."

"But..."

He held up his hand, searching for words that would reassure her. "There are no buts, Miss Wren. I found you on my doorstep. Something, or someone, had to have guided your footsteps here for a reason. I'll not turn my back on anyone in need, but these circumstances are more than unusual. I believe I was meant to be here to save your life."

The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced it was true. She could have stopped at any of the doorways along his street. They were all the same, offering the same shelter, but she'd chosen his.

"Besides," he added, smiling at her a little. "Your eyes are the colour of topaz. It's one of my favourite gems."

"But..."

"There's that annoying word again. I demand you remove it from your vocabulary." He grinned as a brilliant idea struck his brain. "You are going to finish warming up as best you can. And then we are taking a short journey across town together to visit a dear friend of mine who will be of inestimable help."

Wren simply stared at him, limp, helpless, her mouth parted in surprise. "What?"

He mentally patted himself on the back. The plan was perfect.

"Everything is going to be all right," he reassured her. "Lady Agnes Barlow will know exactly what to do."

Chapter Three



Things were happening to her. Too fast, too surprising...she was having trouble keeping her thoughts together. Instead of dying on an unknown doorstep, she'd been rescued, carried into a warm room, wrapped in a blanket, and given the first drink of fresh water she'd had in some time.

Now she was in a carriage, with the blanket still wrapped around her, but covered with a thick man's cloak, and traversing the streets of London in a style she could never have imagined in her wildest dreams, if she'd ever had any.

"Why?" She muttered the word to the man sitting across from her.

He turned his head from his perusal of the streets and met her gaze. "Because it's the right thing to do."

"Are you sure?"

"How could I not be?" His eyes were so gentle, yet his manner firm and decisive. "You have been in some trouble, that is easy to see. Is it so strange that I should wish to help?"

"Yes." Wren could answer that question immediately, and she did so as firmly as she could, although—weak as she was—it didn't exactly come out as a decidedly blunt statement.

He opened his mouth to reply, but the carriage slowed, and he shut it again, merely nodding out the window. "Barlow Place. We're here."

She glimpsed a fine mansion, lights shining from most of the windows, and an impressive front doorway with steps leading upward. Without thought, she shrank back. "No. Please. I can't. Just let me go..."

He shook his head. "Silly girl. Lady Agnes is a wonderful friend. A good person, through and through." He stared at her. "I hope you will like her as much as I do." His expression changed a little. "I would hate to think you might do something to disrupt her happy existence, Wren..."

She sighed. He had every right to say that, and she knew the implicit

warning his statement contained. But she was no thief, never had been, so his worries were for naught.

As an answer she sighed, and nodded. "I understand."

"Good. Now let's get you inside." He opened the door and stepped out to toss a few coins and his thanks to the driver, then reached in and pulled her off the seat into his arms, carefully tucking the cloak around her. "We'll have you settled in just a few moments."

"I..." Words failed her as he carried her so easily up the path to the marble steps. And almost before he rang the bell the front door opened.

"Merrihew, thank Heavens. Is Lady Agnes in?"

The butler's eyebrows rose as he observed Dominic and his burden. "She is, Mr Dominic. And I see she is needed immediately. Has there been an accident to the young lady?" He stepped back to give them room to enter.

"Not exactly."

Wren, unsure of her surroundings, somewhat awed by the beauty of the front hall, and completely intimidated by the elegant butler, hid her face in Dominic's shoulder.

"Good God, Dominic. What *have* you brought me?"

Lady Agnes Barlow hurried into the hall, silver-streaked dark hair beautifully coiffed, a gown of deep blue silk swishing around her ankles. Her face was filled with curiosity.

"Not what, my Lady, I have brought you a *who*."

Catching a glimpse of Wren's face, Lady Agnes sprang into action. "Merrihew, tell a couple of maids to start a bath in one of the guest suites, and find some suitable garments." She neared Dominic. "My poor girl." With gentle care, she pushed aside the lank hair and touched the cheek she revealed. "You have been through some trouble, haven't you?"

Wren cringed closer to Dominic.

"I found her on my doorstep, my Lady," he said quietly. "Almost frozen to death."

"Well come right into the parlour and warm up. Both of you. The bath will take a few minutes to prepare. Perhaps some tea?" She glanced at Dominic.

Wren felt him shake his head. "Right now we need to get her warm and clean, then we can assess her injuries and see what needs to be done."

Lady Agnes took her wrist and gently smoothed long fingers over the

back of her hand. “You’re starving, poor girl. I wonder when you had your last meal.” She took a shuddering sigh. “I see the signs. I remember them. Bones visible, skin dry, pale colour, and so very thin...”

Her voice tapered off and Wren wondered what she was thinking. It was unusual to find such a woman aware of the signs of starvation.

“I must put you down. Even though you weigh next to nothing, my arms are tiring.” He smiled briefly at her. “Come now. There’s naught to be afraid of. You are with friends now.”

Lady Agnes led the way into what must be the parlour, a lovely room filled with light and warmth. There were flowers here and there, a few paintings, and a bright fire crackling in the fireplace to offset the cold spring night.

It was, to Wren, the closest thing to Heaven she could ever have imagined.

Overwhelmed, she clung to Dominic and burst into tears.

~~*~*~*

Fascinated by the developments of what she’d thought would be a quiet evening at home, Agnes watched the expressions crossing Dominic’s face as he dealt with the sobbing girl in his arms.

He gently sat her in a chair near the fire, and then knelt beside her, making reassuring noises and pulling out his own handkerchief to dry what few tears dewed her cheeks. Good Lord, the poor girl was showing all the early signs of starvation, without question. It wasn’t something a Lady should know about, but Agnes had more experiences in her past than others could even begin to guess at. Tending to those who were in this young woman’s condition had been one of them.

As the sobs eased, Dominic stood. “I didn’t know where else to go, my Lady. Or who else to turn to...” He spread his hands apologetically. “I didn’t even know if you’d be here...”

“It’s lucky I was, dear, and you did just the right thing. I know how to help this poor child, and we’ll have her back on her feet as soon as we can.” She touched his arm. “Her name?”

“Wren,” he answered. “That’s all she’s told me. She was curled on my doorstep when I returned from dining with Nick. Who sends his regards, by the way.”

Agnes dismissed the aside with a nod and a wave of her hand. “Well, we shall care for Miss Wren. And once she’s recovered, I’ll send you a message and you shall come and hear what she has to say.” She shot a quick look at the bundle of bones wrapped up in front of her fireplace.

“I’ll wager that a hot bath, something warm to drink and a clean bed will put her firmly on the road to recovery.” She sighed. “You know nothing of her injuries?”

“Other than some brute’s fist made contact with her face? No.” He shook his head. “But she has lovely eyes.”

“Really.” Agnes managed to conceal a chuckle. She saw that Wren had stopped crying, and moved to her side “Dominic tells me your name is Wren, my dear. A sweet name indeed. And so I shall call you that too, if that’s acceptable?”

The girl lifted her head a little, the bruise now discolouring and spreading over her cheekbone. She raised her eyes to Agnes. “Thank you, my Lady. But I don’t wish to cause any trouble...”

Agnes paused, caught by the eyes Dominic had mentioned. They were lovely indeed, a golden brown, catching the firelight, and the delicate almond shape lent them an intriguing slant that would definitely attract attention.

“You know,” she mused, almost to herself, “I’ve seen those eyes somewhere before...”

Wren shrank even further into the corner of the chair.

“But first a bath. And that means...” Agnes turned to Dominic. “You must depart, dear boy. Leave us ladies to tend to important matters.”

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am, my Lady,” Dominic leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I was at my wits’ end until I thought of you.”

“Ah yes. I’ve heard that from more than a few men in my time,” she grinned. “Now go away. You may expect a message tomorrow about Miss Wren’s progress, but I think it will take some time. Don’t make plans to go dancing anytime soon.”

He laughed, his face lighting up with humour. “And yet the astounding Lady Agnes always works miracles for us bastards.”

“Hah.” She joined his laughter, poking him in the shoulder. “Go away, cheeky lad.”

He bowed, kissed her hand, and turned. His gaze rested for a moment on Wren. “I’ll be back. I trust you will pass a good night, Miss Wren.”

She looked scared, hungry, the bruise on her pale face showing unpleasant colours that had no business being part of a woman’s cheek.

Agnes went to her side and picked up her hand, noting that it was warm now. “Don’t be afraid, my child. We don’t hurt people here, we help them. As we shall help you. Now. Do you think you can stand? Walk a little way? Or shall I ask my butler to carry you?”

“Oh no, please...” Horrified, Wren struggled to her feet, holding the blanket around her as best she could, and swaying a little with the effort.

Mrs Dimsey peeked around the door. “Bath’s ready, my Lady.” She stared at Wren. “Oh, poor dear.” She hurried to her side, and slipped her arm around the tiny waist. “Here, lean on me, love. We’ll take our time, all right? Just one step after another...” Her gaze met her mistress’s over Wren’s head, and her eyes portrayed her concern. “Nice warm bath waiting for you, dearie. You’ll feel so much better after.”

And that way, Agnes and her housekeeper managed to get the poor girl upstairs to the bath awaiting her.

To say her appearance, when stripped of the blankets and what little clothing she had left, was appalling, didn’t come close to the shock it delivered to her hostess when she was finally resting in her bath.

Mrs Dimsey, with one sharp look at Agnes, rolled up her sleeves and announced she would bathe the young lady herself, to make sure the job was done right.

Agnes had no arguments there.

Her servants weren’t given to idle chatter outside Barlow Place, but the bruises and marks on this poor girl’s thin body might have been food for talk. So the fewer who were privy to such matters, the better.

Agnes drew a small stool close to the bath. “Wren dear. Can you tell us how you got such bruises?”

The girl seemed half-asleep as her body was cleansed with scented soap—lavender—and the worse of her bruises treated with an arnica salve. Her

hair was gently washed and rinsed, more than once, and the whole experience seemed to relax her.

“Over time, my Lady,” she answered, her voice soft but clearly educated.

“Then time has been unkind to you, I would say.”

Wren nodded a little and scratched her nose. It was an oddly normal move and reassured Agnes that death was not as near as one might have expected an hour ago. “I ran afoul of a grocer...when was it? This morning? I don’t know, to be honest. All I wanted was some of his damaged vegetables that he had thrown away.” She sighed, leaning her head back on the rim of the tub as if it was too heavy for her neck.

“I gave up after he beat me. Just gave up. So I think I’m dead and this is Heaven. I cannot possibly be alive anymore. I have nothing left.” She rolled her head to look at Mrs Dimsey and then at Lady Agnes. “No wings, but you must be angels. Thank you, God, for delivering me from my punishment, and not sending me to Hell the way I was told you would.”

Her faced creased but no tears fell.

Agnes realised the poor child’s body was starved of liquids *and* food. If Dominic hadn’t found her when he did, she might well be addressing real angels right now.

“We’re not angels, my dear. Far from it. But we are going to look after you. And our mission now is to restore your strength. You’re clean and that’s a start. Your bruises will heal, and I see no open wounds other than a sore or two on your feet, thank God. So into bed with you and I’ll have a broth prepared. You’ll drink that and then sleep, which will go a long way to starting your recovery.”

“I...”

“No more of this not wanting to be a nuisance. You are neither a nuisance, nor trouble. Your arrival has mitigated my utter boredom with my life, and given me something with which to interest myself, so let me hear no more protests.” Agnes nodded firmly.

Wren blinked, then roughly cleared her throat, her eyes full of emotion. “I have no words sufficient to thank you, my Lady.”

“When you’re better you will,” grinned Agnes. “And I want to know more about you, my dear. How you, a young woman who is apparently well-spoken, came to such dire straits. You shall tell me your story, and then we shall know how to proceed. But for now? Sleep.”

Carefully, the two women helped Wren from the tub, dried her with soft cloths and slipped a thick nightgown over her head. Tucking her into bed, Agnes rubbed a towel gently over the shorn head, noting the rich mahogany shades that appeared amidst the chestnut brown curls forming as her hair dried. “You would give that insufferable Lamb woman a run for her money.”

“I don’t understand...”

“That’s all right, child. Understanding will come with time and conversation. You have both now.”

A tap on the door brought a maid in with a small tankard of steaming broth.

“Here we are.” Mrs Dimsey came to the side of the bed. “Now be a good girl and drink this down while it’s warm.”

Agnes wanted to chuckle at the motherly tone, but held herself back, noting the wide-eyed delight at her new guest as she sipped the broth.

“Oh. Oh it almost hurts my mouth it’s so tasty,” she looked at both women. “I can’t...I don’t...”

“Stop.” Agnes held up a hand. “Just drink, dear. There’s time enough for everything else tomorrow.”

Chapter Four



In fact, it took a little more than two weeks before Wren was pronounced fit to have callers.

Lady Agnes and Mrs Dimsey watched over her like mother hens, babied her, cajoled her into eating, and ensured she rested as much as she could.

All of these things caught Wren unawares; she'd never been the focus of such loving and caring attentions in her entire life. And as she regained her strength, she had to admire the restraint everyone was exhibiting. She was not plagued with questions or given tasks or chores. Nobody scolded her or beat her for any infraction, nor threatened her in any way at all. If there was a Heaven, she thought to herself each night as she lay on a soft bed with clean linens and an increasingly full stomach, then this was it.

Realistically, she knew the time would come when she would have to leave and re-enter a life that offered little but hard work. However, a small hope began to grow that perhaps Lady Agnes might be kind enough to give her a reference to get a decent position. She wasn't afraid of the work entailed within a large household, God knew how much of it she'd already done. But to be in a place where she could move around freely, not fear a heavy hand or worse, a groping one? That would be most attractive.

So it was with some trepidation that just over a fortnight after her arrival, Wren was told she could now go downstairs to breakfast with Lady Agnes, instead of having to eat in her room. Mrs Dimsey had grinned and brought a pretty dress in with her, something she said would be ideal for a young lady. Apparently, Barlow Place had a wardrobe full of clothing for guests. Wren had no idea why, but wasn't about to ask since she was the recipient of one of them.

There were undergarments, slippers for her feet—now healed nicely—and a light blue cotton dress with little dark blue flowers on it, matching the ribbons tied beneath her breasts. Or where her breasts would be if they ever

decided to fill out.

She sighed, but shook her head, barely recognising the figure in the mirror. "That can't be me," she whispered to herself.

"It certainly is."

She'd forgotten Mrs Dimsey was still in the room. "And very charming you look too, Miss Wren. That lovely chestnut colour in your curls...so stylish. And I think the blue is a good choice for you."

"It's a beautiful gown, Mrs Dimsey." She turned to the smiling woman, choking up. "I wish I had the words to thank you, and Lady Agnes. I never imagined..." She stroked a hand over her skirts.

"There now, no crying this morning. You run along downstairs. Remember where the parlour is?"

Wren nodded. "I think so." She'd been pretty much relegated to her room for most of the past two weeks, but had ventured for walks along the passageway and to the balcony overlooking the hall as her strength returned.

"Good. Off you go then. Here, take your shawl with you. Eat a hearty breakfast, you hear me? I shall know if you don't." It was a scold, but a kind one with laughter lying beneath the words.

Daringly, Wren smiled back and dropped a little curtsey, the first she'd attempted in a long time. "Yes, Ma'am."

To her surprise, the butler, Merrihew, awaited her at the foot of the stairs. "Good morning, Miss Wren. You are looking lovely today."

She felt a blush creep up, heating her cheeks. "Thank you, Mr Merrihew. You're very kind." Her hand gripped the bannister firmly.

He raised his arm as she safely reached the last step. "I shall escort you to the parlour. Lady Agnes is already there."

"Oh. Um...yes. Well, thank you."

Caught off guard, she tentatively lifted her hand and rested it on top of his, letting him lead her on a stately stroll across the hall floor.

"Good girl." He whispered the words. "You will do just fine."

His praise lifted her spirits, and she smiled at him. "Thank you."

"Miss Wren," Merrihew announced at the door to the parlour.

"Oh good. Come along in, my dear. Breakfast is ready."

Lady Agnes's welcome rang out, and the smells encouraged Wren to walk in and take the seat opposite at the small table.

"Merrihew, give Miss Wren eggs and bacon, if you would? And we need

more toast. She must taste this blackberry jam.” She leaned forward. “It’s from our own farm at Barlow Manor, and I must say that it’s the best blackberry jam I think I’ve ever tasted.”

“I…” Bemused at the entire process, Wren sat, nodded, smiled, and said thank you where appropriate. And found herself confronting a large plate filled with more food than she’d seen at one meal in years.

Lady Agnes had already begun her breakfast, as evidenced by the crumbs, the remains of eggs and a tiny sliver of bacon left on her plate. She leaned back and sipped her tea.

“Well then, my dear. Let me first say you look much better than you did a couple of weeks ago. And I must compliment Mrs Dimsey on her choice of gowns. That one is adorable on you.”

“Thank you, my Lady,” said Wren, after swallowing a mouthful of delicious eggs. “I don’t know where to begin thanking you for all your many kindnesses.” She met Agnes’s gaze squarely. “How does one say thank you for their life? You saved mine, and there is no greater debt than that.”

Agnes brushed that aside. “We only did what any right-thinking person would do, my dear. You needed help, we gave it.”

“If things were only as simple as that,” sighed Wren. “I would that more people believed in that philosophy. There would be a good deal less pain and sorrow in this world.”

“I have to agree,” Lady Agnes nodded. “I’m glad to see your face has healed so well. Scarcely a trace of that terrible bruise.” Her eyes roamed Wren’s appearance. “And you’re starting to fill out quite nicely.”

She could feel the colour rising in her cheeks at the critique, but knew it came from kindness, a compliment to her, and the care she’d received.

“However,” continued Agnes. “I think it’s time we had a proper conversation, don’t you? If you feel well enough now?”

Wren chewed a piece of toast for a few moments, then swallowed and nodded. “Yes, my Lady.”

“Good girl.” She helped herself to a little more tea from the pot between them. “So. Tell me how someone of your evident breeding ended up starving and near death on Dominic’s doorstep.” She stirred a cube of sugar into her cup. “And I would very much like the truth, please. No matter the tale, it can be no worse than others I’ve heard.”

Wren pushed her plate aside and picked up her own tea as a distraction,

gathering her thoughts as best she could.

“I don’t lie if I can avoid it, my Lady,” she began, putting the cup back on the saucer, untouched. “I don’t know where to begin, actually...”

“How about your childhood, my dear? What are your earliest memories?”

“I...” Wren closed her eyes for a moment, trying to organise the many scattered and fractured images in her mind. “I remember soft grass under my feet. Running, barefoot I suppose. It was sunny.” She paused. “I don’t know where it was, but there were kind people there.”

She missed the quick flash of concern that crossed Agnes’s face at her words. She couldn’t know the woman was bracing herself for what might be revealed.

“You must have been very young.”

“I suppose so.” Wren shrugged. “But after that, all I remember is the school I attended. It was...” she took a breath, “a foundling school.”

“Ah,” Agnes sighed.

“I was there, with many other girls, until I was ten or eleven, perhaps.” She glanced across the table. “Would it sound very stupid of me to say I have no idea of my actual age? Merely what I was told.”

“No, not stupid at all. I understand.”

“I was fed, clothed, cared for in a distant manner. There were perhaps fifteen or twenty of us, I think, and we received a very basic education. Mostly it had to do with serving in a house, cleaning, laundering, all the things a good maid would know how to do. Because that’s what we were trained for.”

“To be a maid.”

“Yes.”

Agnes looked thoughtful. “And yet here you are, conversing in a manner which is far from that of a simple housemaid.”

Wren nodded. “I was lucky, my Lady. So very lucky.” She settled a little in her chair as the memories flooded back. “Of course, like the little flock we must have resembled, we were shepherded to church on Sundays. And the Vicar was a gentle soul, as kind as could be to all of us foundlings. I think he liked to hear our voices singing along with the parishioners.” She let a faint smile curve her lips. “As it happened, I enjoyed the experience very much, and he asked my school mistress if I might be allowed to join the choir. She said yes. I still don’t know why to this day, but it was a wonderful chance for

me.”

“Let me guess,” said Agnes. “The Vicar is the one who taught you to read, perhaps?”

“And to write,” agreed Wren. “I discovered a hunger for such things and devoured all the material he loaned me.” She stared at her hands folded on the table. “It wasn’t an easy time, balancing my chores at the school and my choir rehearsal time, as we called it. But I cannot begin to describe the joy of making sense out of the marks on a page. Of making those marks myself on a slate and realising I had written my name.”

“And so your desire for education was born?”

“Indeed yes. And I will say, modestly, I sang my heart out for that man every Sunday.”

Agnes chuckled. “A suitable reward, I’m sure.”

“But of course it couldn’t last.”

“A moment.” Agnes raised her hand. “Your name. How did you get your name? It’s quite unusual...”

Wren shook her head. “A random choice, I believe. The rule was that if an infant arrived without a name, the teachers would draw lots to select one themselves. And the letters of the alphabet were used in order, so that there weren’t too many Janes or Marys. It was, in some ways, quite logical. But when I arrived, I’m told that the teacher who drew the lot was forced to choose a name beginning with the letter W. Since Wilhelmina was considered too long, and there weren’t too many other options, the woman glanced out the window and spied a family of wrens.”

“And that’s how it happened?”

“That’s how it happened.”

“It was a fortunate coincidence then, since I don’t think Woodpecker would have done you justice.”

Wren looked at Lady Agnes, saw the twinkle in her eye, and amazed herself by bursting out laughing. “How very true.”

Both women took a moment to enjoy the humour, and catch their breaths.

“And now the rest,” Agnes said gently. “I know it cannot be good, but it must be revealed, my dear.”

“I know.” Wren nodded and took a breath. “And some of it isn’t too bad...but there are some matters...”

A hand reached across the table and patted Wren’s. “They will hurt less

after the telling, child. Trust me.”

“I do, believe me, my Lady. It’s just that I’ve tried so hard to forget some of the things that have happened to me, and yet they still stay in my mind, raw and agonising, dark shadows that will not fade.”

“Share them with me, and together we will put them where they belong. In your past.”

After a long moment, Wren nodded. “Very well.” She took a breath. “I was placed as a maid from the foundling school, as we all were. It wasn’t bad—I was fed, had clothes provided for me, a room with two other maids—so other than long hours and hard work, I managed quite well. It was not too far from the school, so I didn’t feel too out of place, and I was even able to continue my visits to the Vicar. I had one afternoon off every week, and he kindly agreed to allow me into his library, as well as loaning me a book now and again. I hid them, of course, but he understood I wanted and needed to learn.” She took a breath. “Nobody bothered to wonder if someone like me could have any interest in books, so I continued my learning, with the Vicar’s help.”

“A kind man indeed.”

“I owe him more than I can ever repay. He was, in essence, my education.” Then her eyes stung as the tears rose. “He died,” she said bluntly. “I think it must have been four or five Christmases after I started working with him.” She sucked down a sob and absently put a hand to her heart. “A part of me died with him, I think, but I shall be forever grateful for those years of his friendship and his teachings.”

“How sad. I am so sorry. A terrible blow.”

Wren nodded. “It was. I know now how blessed I was to be able to learn so much, given my humble position. Looking back on his passing, it seems, in many ways, the beginning of the downturn in my life. As if a light had gone out.” She squared her shoulders and gazed across the table. “It never returned.”

Chapter Five



“Good day to you, Merrihew.” Dominic strolled up the front steps of Barlow Place where the butler was industriously polishing the door knocker. “Are the ladies receiving this morning?”

Merrihew raised a sceptical eyebrow. “I’m not sure, Mr Dominic. I might be more certain if you told me whether it was Lady Agnes or Miss Wren you have come to visit.”

“Good point.” He grinned. “I’ve done as she asked, you know. Given Miss Wren time to recover herself from her terrible state. And I hoped that a fortnight would be adequate since I’ve received no notes as to her progress in the last few days. But if you tell me she’s still indisposed, then I won’t trouble Lady A, since I’m sure she has enough on her plate without me cadging breakfast.”

Turning an approving eye on him, Merrihew nodded. “Well, I’m happy to be able to tell you that Miss Wren has joined her Ladyship for her breakfast this morning. A first, and something we’re all celebrating.”

Dominic beamed. “Excellent news indeed. Do you think I might go in?”

Merrihew paused for a moment, frowning. Then he sighed. “They’re talking, Mr Dominic. As you know, none of us make a habit of eavesdropping. But I will allow that I caught some of their conversation. Miss Wren is talking of her past, something I know her Ladyship is eager to learn. So I’m unsure as to whether your presence will stem the flow of Miss Wren’s revelations. If that happens, her Ladyship will have my guts for garters, as you may imagine.”

Dominic nodded. “How about this? I shall quietly make my way to the parlour, and then go no further if their conversation seems intense. I too would like to know of Miss Wren’s history, but she might well speak more freely to another woman. She barely knows me.”

“Hmm.” Merrihew narrowed his eyes beneath his bushy brows. “Very

well.” He moved aside and allowed Dominic to enter. “You may use the library if you decide not to enter, and I shall inform her Ladyship of your arrival at an appropriate moment.”

“Thank you, Merrihew. I appreciate your consideration.”

That said, Dominic walked silently into the hall, leaving the butler to his cloths and tin of polish.

Two voices could be heard quite clearly, since the parlour door was half open, and he slowed his pace as he approached, glad to hear Wren speaking, firmly now, with no traces of tears or weakness. Two weeks with Lady Agnes would put anyone to rights, he thought. She really was an amazing woman.

“It wasn’t a bad house, in fact it was a quite large and elegant estate.” Wren sounded calm and collected. “And at least we weren’t in danger of losing our positions on someone’s whim, since the size of the house required a large staff.”

“So you would have been...perhaps fourteen?” Lady Agnes was asking questions. Even better.

“It’s possible. As I said, foundlings have no knowledge of their birth dates or parents, nor are they encouraged to find out. They—we—just do as we’re told.”

Dominic blinked. *A foundling*. He supposed it was possible, but her words, her appearance, the natural grace she seemed to possess, even while starving...all these things would not have registered in his mind as belonging to a foundling.

“So you were a maid?”

“A lower housemaid, yes. Cleaning out fireplaces and setting the wood and coals for the next day. Then, later, after the household had risen, we’d be responsible for tidying the bedrooms, emptying chamber pots, and so on.”

He heard her sigh. “There was no lack of things for us to do.”

“I can well believe it.”

“I didn’t mind the work. The family provided for their staff quite well. We were paid every month, and had clean linens, uniforms, and the food was often leftovers from the upstairs meals, which meant it was quite tasty. So it wasn’t a bad time. Although tiring now and again. For several years I worked quite diligently, and thought myself well situated.” Her voice tapered off.

“Until?” Lady Agnes prompted.

“Until I was raped.”

Dominic couldn't restrain the gasp of surprise at the blunt statement, but slapped his hand over his mouth, hoping that the sound hadn't penetrated the parlour.

"My dear girl." Agnes's voice was horrified. "My dear, *dear* girl."

"I had been warned that there were occasional drunken parties. The young master and his friends enjoyed what their parents referred to as *high spirits*. And there were plenty of spirits that night—of the liquid kind. The Lord and his wife were in London for the weekend, so a party was planned. Our butler did his best to keep us maids out of sight, but..." she paused.

"Where there's a will, there's a way, as they say."

"Indeed yes. Another maid and I were finishing up our last round of cleaning, and hoping to escape up the back stairs with nobody noticing. But just by chance, one of the young men caught sight of us, and the game was up."

"I can't begin to imagine," Lady Agnes said in hushed tones.

"It was...not pleasant, I can assure you." Wren continued her tale, her voice growing stronger as she related the details. "There were several of them, and the other girl shrieked and cried out and made a great fuss, which seemed to encourage them. I...I did the opposite. I said nothing because I knew I was helpless to stop them, so I made not a sound, and after it was done, I heard one of them say I hadn't been worth the effort."

Agnes remained silent, and Dominic's heart was thudding as his fists clenched involuntarily.

"Unfortunately, they had injured my friend." She paused. "I never saw her after that night. But nothing was said in the household, and I was ignored by everyone after that. If there was food on the table for the servants, I had to wait until the others had had their fill. I was given the dirtiest and most unpleasant jobs."

"I find that so hard to believe. What was the matter with those people?"

"When it comes to such things," Wren replied, her voice cool, "it seems that the perpetrator is never wrong. An entitled man can do what he likes, and when he does, the woman gets the blame. From that night on, I was viewed as ruined. And shunned by more than a few staff members as someone who had enticed the young Master and his friends into bad behaviour."

"How ridiculous. How utterly *absurd*."

Dominic could hear—and share—the outrage in Lady Agnes's voice.

And he could almost sense Wren's shrug.

"I learned a hard lesson from it, my Lady. Thankfully, I did not fall with child; that would have been disastrous. My descent on the social scale was the only direct result, until the family decided to sell their property in order to purchase a new home. Someone such as myself was not required."

"They threw you out?" Lady Agnes sputtered.

"You could say that, yes. A less-than enthusiastic reference eliminated positions in most of the houses I applied to, and I ended up in one of the workhouses in London."

"Oh *Wren*."

"Yes." Her voice remained steady, although Dominic swore he could hear a slight tremble. "It was...not pleasant."

"Those marks on your back..."

"Such places believe that punishment inspires hard work. One of the overseers had a heavy stick and didn't hesitate to use it."

The clink of a teacup told Dominic that Wren was taking a sip and collecting her thoughts.

"You may well guess that from then on, my world began to slip away from me. Food was scarce, I wasn't as big and strong as some of the other girls, and soon I was out on my ear."

"On the streets," murmured Agnes. "I cannot believe it."

"I managed, my Lady. It was not easy, but I managed. I scavenged, I worked for a day here and there to get a few pennies, found places with a little warmth, even stole some old rags to use for a shawl. I wasn't too proud to do that, but there was one road I would never, have never, and will never take. I could have had food and a room, but what I would have to do for it... well, I just couldn't." She took a breath. "I never set foot inside a brothel."

~~*~*~*

Dominic nearly jumped out of his skin at the tap on his shoulder.

Merrihew was frowning at him, gesturing with his head toward the study. He nodded, and the two of them made their way to the room across the hall.

“You were eavesdropping, Mr Dominic,” he scolded. “I did not expect it of you.”

“Neither did I, but I’m glad I did, Merrihew. I learned things that I doubt I would have ever been told.” He looked directly into the older man’s eyes. “Can you understand that? This girl, Wren, is my responsibility. I found her, and Lady Agnes has restored her to health. Now I must see what can be done for her, and if I hadn’t heard what I did just now...” He bit down on the lick of fury that coursed up his spine at the thought of what she had endured at that house party and afterwards. “Well, let’s just say I am even more empowered and eager to help her in the right way.”

The butler returned his gaze. “Very well. You’ve never given me cause for concern, Mr Dominic. And your devotion to her Ladyship has been unwavering. In view of this, I shall overlook your transgression this morning. But I am going to announce you now. No more listening at doorways.”

Suitably chastened, Dominic nodded. “Thank you.”

They walked in tandem to the parlour door, where Merrihew tapped lightly, and then peered around it into the room. “My Lady, forgive the intrusion. Mr Dominic Greybrooke is here and wonders if you are free to receive him?”

A moment of silence—Dominic guessed that the two women were exchanging glances—and then the response.

“Of course, Merrihew. Show him in. Oh, and another cup, if you would? He can have tea with us.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“Good morning, Lady Agnes.” Dominic walked past Merrihew, smiling at his hostess and crossing the room to drop his customary kiss on her cheek. “You are looking prettier than the spring flowers I saw on my way here this morning.”

“Silly boy,” chuckled Agnes. “But don’t stop.” She put her hand on his arm. “And say good morning to my guest.” She directed her gaze across the table.

He turned—and stopped dead in his tracks, his jaw dropping, and eyes widening at the vision rising to her feet. “Wren? Is it *you*?”

She was incredibly lovely.

Short mahogany curls rioted over her head, threaded through with a blue ribbon, the ties of which cascaded over one shoulder. Her gown, something in blue, contrasted beautifully with the pale tones of her skin, and although she was still in need of some flesh, her bones no longer protruded so prominently. There was a delicate flush on her cheeks, which today bore no signs of the ugly marks from a man's fist.

"Good morning, Mr Greybrooke." She dipped into a polite curtsy, her eyes lowering respectfully. When she rose and looked at him, he was stunned anew at the lights twinkling from the dark gold depths, and the faint smile creasing her lips, fuller now, and a delicate rosy hue.

"I..."

"Yes, she is fully recovered, Dominic, as I'm sure you're happy to hear." Lady Agnes's voice was ripe with amusement. "So why don't you both sit, we'll refill the teacups and enjoy some polite conversation."

Dominic and Wren stared at each other.

Lady Agnes gave Dominic a pinch on his buttocks. "Sit."

"Ow, er...yes, of course. Sorry. My manners..." Stuttering like a callow youth, he pulled up a chair and sat, dragging his gaze to the teacup that had appeared before him and was now being filled by one of the maids. "Thank you," he smiled absently, and took a sip, letting the hot liquid steady the parts of him that were still vibrating with shock at the vision he'd confronted only moments ago.

He cleared his throat. "Um, you look...well recovered, Miss Wren."

Lady Agnes burst out laughing.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "What?"

"Is that all you can say? This young woman has returned practically from the brink of death. In little over two weeks. Attributable, of course, to my excellent care, combined with an inner determination that has quite astonished me at times..."

"My Lady," Wren moved awkwardly, an embarrassed blush rising to her cheeks.

"Hush. You know I'm right." She turned back to Dominic. "So yes, she's looking well, but she's also looking beautiful, don't you think?"

It was hard to draw his attention away from those eyes, the rich glowing topaz, the intriguing slant...he'd heard Nick talk about drowning in a woman's gaze, but had scoffed at the notion. Now? He was about to go under

for the third time.

He swallowed more tea. “She is indeed. Very beautiful. I cannot see a wren anymore. I see a beautiful kingfisher.”

Wren chuckled and shook her head. “Such gallantry, Mr Greybrooke. I don’t deserve it. Instead, I should be on my knees thanking you, because I wouldn’t be here had you not taken me in, and delivered me to Lady Agnes, whose kindness knows no bounds.” She sighed. “I owe you both my life, and I shall never be able to find the right words to thank you for it.”

Agnes brushed that aside. “The past is the past,” she announced. “What we must do now is decide what lies ahead in your future. It’s a big decision and deserves some careful and sensible consideration.”

Dominic vaguely heard the following conversation, but almost his entire focus was riveted on the beautiful young woman at the table. When she turned to him with that shy smile and fixed him with her magical gaze, his surroundings completely disappeared. All he could think of was her; all he could see was her.

And the only thought in his mind leaped directly out of his mouth.

“Marry me.”

Chapter Six



“What?” Agnes’s jaw dropped.

“What?” Merrihew, who had just entered the room, stopped dead in his tracks.

“*What?*” Nick Polbury, who had followed Merrihew, bumped into him and choked out the word at the same time.

Dominic stared at Wren.

Wren, speechless, her heart racing, stared back.

Then finally found her voice. “Surely...surely you’re jesting, Mr Greybrooke.” She had to clear her throat a couple of times, but her words appeared to break the sudden paralysis affecting the rest of those gathered in the parlour.

The babble rose as everyone said something at once, and continued until Agnes grabbed a large spoon and thwacked it onto the table with great force.

“Quiet. All of you. Sit down.” She glared around. “Merrihew, you may stay if you wish, but if you leave, close the damn door behind you and don’t let anyone else in without my permission.”

The butler bowed and took himself off. Rapidly.

“Right.” Happy to have silence reign, Agnes’s gaze encompassed everyone at the table. “Dominic.” Her eyes landed on him. “You have just made a very public proposal. Was it impromptu? Spur of the moment? Something you’d now like to retract?”

Wren held her breath, wondering if this was all a dream and she was still curled up in some cold doorway. Or perhaps she was dead at last and this was the gateway to Heaven. Or something.

He was looking at her, his dark eyes roaming her face. She wished she knew him well enough to read his expression, but on the surface, it seemed gentle. Affectionate even.

“I...” His throat moved as he swallowed. Then he shifted his attention to Lady Agnes. “I believe marriage would be an excellent solution to both Miss Wren’s problems and my own.” His chin rose a little in defiance.

“So you meant it?” she murmured.

“I did.” He nodded. “I do.”

“She’s supposed to say that,” Nick grinned.

“Be quiet.” Dominic spared a quick annoyed glance at his friend. “This is important.”

“It certainly is. Coming from a man who swore he’d not wed, I’d say it’s a *huge* statement.”

Dominic rolled his eyes. “You’re not helping matters, Nick.”

“He’s right. You hush.” Lady Agnes punched him in the arm.

Wren did her best to ignore the by-play and focus on the matter at hand. *Marriage. To Dominic.* She shook her head a little to clear her thoughts, then turned fully to face him, resting her hands on her knees. “Mr Greybrooke. You have done me an enormous honour by suggesting marriage. But surely you must understand how impossible such a thing would be.”

He leaned back a little, a tiny smile curving his lips. “I don’t. Educate me.”

She sighed. “As you know, I’m a foundling. A *foundling*, sir. Someone with no name except that of a tiny bird. No relatives at all. No family history. A non-person in our society, who has lived amongst the lowest of the low. Whereas you are a craftsman of renown, according to my Lady. You have clients from the *Ton*, eager for your beautiful creations, and your reputation is growing fast.” She gulped in a breath of air. “How would those clients feel were you to wed a nothing? A nobody? Even I could easily hazard a guess that it would be disastrous.”

“Well put, Miss Wren. A clear argument.” Nick turned to Dominic. “How answer you *that*, my friend?”

“By knocking you unconscious if you don’t pipe down.”

“All right, all right.” Nick held his hands up, palms out in front of him, and grinned. “I’ll be quiet.”

“That would be a first,” muttered Dominic, turning his attention back to Wren. “I have to agree with Nick, though. He’s right. It was a clear and coherent argument. And one which only serves to convince me of the rightness of my proposal. Your ability to converse far exceeds mine, Miss

Wren. I'm not known as a social person, and yes I do have clients from the *Ton*. But I loathe dealing with them. Had I someone of your charm and grace to assume the mantle of those social duties I dislike so much, it would be a godsend."

"So you want to wed me for lack of a hostess? Not the best word, but one that seems to fit what I'm hearing..."

"Um...well, that would be one reason, yes."

"I see." She frowned. "But suppose your high-born clients learned of my origins? Wouldn't they be concerned that their jewellery was in the vicinity of a nobody like myself?"

Oddly enough, this made Dominic laugh, and he glanced at Nick, who was also smiling and nodding.

"Tell her, Dom. It will help, I think."

"I agree, Dominic." Lady Agnes chimed in, surprising Wren. "Tell her."

"Tell me what?"

Silence fell as Dominic looked away from her for a moment, as if gathering his thoughts. Then he turned back to her.

"Wren, you talk of your lack of background, and I understand. More than you might think." He took a breath. "Have you ever heard of Ballinger Priory?"

She shook her head. "No."

"I'm not surprised. There would be little to no reason for you to hear that name." He rested an arm on the table. "The Priory is known for the children raised there. A good education provided by people who care deeply for each one. A chance to become part of a large family—a chance that would otherwise have been denied them."

"Do you mean orphans? Is Ballinger Priory an orphanage?" She wasn't sure where this conversation was leading, but she could tell that it was important to him.

"No, not an orphanage. Well, not exactly. Ballinger Priory is a unique home for bastards, Wren. Illegitimate children who, for one reason or another, cannot live with either parent. Many are from families whose reputations would be forever blighted were their existence to be known. Others from situations where a parent dies, and the child cannot be acknowledged. In all cases, however, someone cares enough about that child to take them to the Priory and cover the costs. They are raised with affection,

attention, and lack for nothing. Except a name.”

She heard the mix of joy and pain in his voice. “And you are a graduate of Ballinger Priory.” She sighed. “You are a bastard. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Yes.”

“As am I,” Nick chimed in.

Brushing that aside, Wren leaned back in her chair, watching Dominic’s face. His eyes, so gentle, always. His manners were polished but genuine, and his delight in his friendship with Nick demonstrated his ability to care. Yes, he’d had an upbringing that might have branded him as unacceptable in many circumstances, but the foundations of a good man were there and already showing themselves.

He’d be kind to her, she had no doubts on that score. And there could easily be more than just friendship between them. He was the most attractive man she’d ever met, and already she felt aware of him in ways that surprised her. But...

“I thank you for your honesty, Mr Greybrooke. You do indeed have an interesting and challenging background. However, I still believe that my complete lack of any background at all other than a foundling home, would be seriously detrimental to your life.”

“You’re turning me *down*?” His voice quavered just a tiny bit.

And her heart turned over. “I...I don’t...” She turned her gaze on Lady Agnes, a silent plea for help.

“Listen to your heart, child. Trust yourself. You can be a great deal more than you believe at this moment. Give yourself that chance.”

Wren closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and did just that. She asked herself what *she* wanted. What she really wanted above all. And in that instant, she knew.

“Very well then. Mr Greybrooke, I am honoured to accept your proposal of marriage.” She opened her eyes, looked into his, and everything fell into place.

~~*~*~*

He could see that light in her gaze again, the one that illuminated those golden topaz eyes. It warmed him, reassured him that she was accepting his offer because she wanted to. Because it made her happy.

And by God, it made him happy too.

Which was, when he thought about it, quite strange, since the last thing he'd imagined when he rose that morning was to find himself engaged to wed before lunchtime.

However, it was done, and he didn't regret it one tiny bit.

He stood and held out his hand to her. "You and I need to talk, Wren. And somewhere where we won't be interrupted every other second." He shot a quick admonishing glance at Nick, who was grinning from ear to ear.

"Lady Agnes, if you'll excuse us, we could use a little while alone together. May we have the library?"

She nodded, looking complacent, as if this entire matter was her doing. "Of course. Now that you are engaged, it is quite proper for you to spend time with each other unchaperoned. Not too long, though, because we shall have to begin arranging matters. There will be a licence to procure, and I anticipate a few difficulties as to Wren's details. But I shall work on that for you, my dear, so don't worry your head about it."

Wren looked quite overwhelmed. "Um, thank you my Lady. I'm a bit at sixes and sevens at the moment."

"Come along then." Dominic led her hurriedly from the room, barely pausing as she nearly tripped over her slippers.

"Wait, slow down."

"I can't. If I do, someone—probably Nick—is going to come up to us and start talking about things of little or no interest to me at this particular moment."

"Ah..." She clung to his hand as he almost dragged her across the hall and into the library, where he pushed her inside and then turned to firmly shut the door. And lock it.

"Is that necessary?" She straightened her skirts and blinked at him.

"I know them. You don't. Yes, it's necessary." He sighed. "I love them both. Lady Agnes is unique and wonderful, and Nick is not only a great artist

but an amazing and valuable friend. However...there are times when I just need space to think, and this is one of them.”

She slid her hand free and walked to a chair, seating herself and nodding. “I understand.”

She was so graceful, he realised. Petite, yes, but each movement seemed natural and unaffected. How that had happened, given her upbringing, he had no idea.

Taking the chair across from hers, he too sat, and leaned back with a sigh. “Are you sure, Wren? You didn’t just say yes to keep everyone happy?”

She chuckled. “I’m sure. And I will admit it was lovely to see everyone so pleased.” She lifted a hand as if to forestall any reply. “However, this has all happened very quickly. If you’d rather withdraw your offer...”

“No.” The response was quick, firm, and true. He would not withdraw his offer, no matter what.

“Very well then. We must discuss the details, I suppose. Where to live, how we shall manage a wedding with my lack of a name...what my duties will be as your wife...” she glanced at him, then lowered her gaze. “May I assume that you are proposing a *mariage de convenance*? Since I shall be your hostess, and greeting your clients in whatever way is most beneficial to your work, I believe such a marital arrangement would serve?”

Caught by surprise at her blunt speech, Dominic found it a challenge to not immediately shout out “no” in a very loud voice. His instinctive reaction was to declare that once they were wed, he’d want her as his wife. In every way there was, and maybe a few he’d invent on the spur of the moment.

But in the time it took to breathe in and out, he realised how foolish that would be. If he wanted this woman, which it appeared he *did*—and didn’t *that* come as a bit of a shock—he would have to go about encouraging her to view him as her real husband. He’d have to woo her into their bed.

Which, now he thought about it, was a rather enticing prospect.

“I believe we shall deal well together, Wren. Let’s put any other considerations aside for the moment, since we’ve only been engaged for ten minutes, if that.” He straightened in the chair. “But you are quite correct in that I shall depend on you to meet with clients. It’s the part of my job I like the least. They seem to want to tell me everything about themselves, rather than giving me the details about the piece they want commissioned.”

“Does it help at all? Knowing who they are? How they think? Does any

of that influence your design?”

An interesting and valid question that made Dominic consider his answer. “Sometimes, I suppose,” he replied, turning the idea over in his mind. “But most often my major concerns are with the stones I’ll need. Of course, the nature of the event, the time I have to produce a preliminary picture, and what the recipient looks like—is she young or mature, going to Court or simply to a grand ball—all these things matter. But I dislike wasting time hearing about them *ad nauseam*.”

“Which would be where I come in?”

“Precisely.” He grinned. “Oh. And can you cook too?”

She huffed out a laugh. “Yes.”

“Then we are indeed a match made in Heaven.” He chuckled. “But you do need a surname. Do you have any preferences?”

“I’ve never thought about it, really...” She looked slightly taken aback. “How does one choose one’s own surname? I have no idea...”

Dominic tilted his head to one side as he considered the matter. “Well, do you have any memories from your childhood that might help?”

“Not good ones,” she sighed.

“Any friends with names you liked?”

She shook her head.

“How about places?”

That made her pause, he noted, and he waited, watching her face, the expressions that perhaps mirrored her thoughts as she turned the matter over in her mind.

“I once had chance to read about the Battle of Hastings. I thought about how much I’d like to see where it happened.”

“You read? I hadn’t thought to ask...”

“I do. A fortunate acquaintance with a cleric who believed everyone’s mind should be expanded where possible.” A noise from the hall distracted her. “I think we are about to lose our privacy, sir. I will be happy to tell the story of my learning at another, more appropriate, time?”

Dominic agreed, making a mental note to find out more about her past. “Hastings, you said? I think the name Wren Hastings has a nicely melodic sound to it, don’t you?”

“I...er...well, I suppose so?”

He stood. “Very well then, Miss Hastings.” He extended his arm. “Would

you accompany me back to the parlour and help plan our wedding?”

Wren couldn't find her voice to answer, just nodded and rose, linking her arm with his, scarcely able to believe what had just happened.

She finally had a name.

And a fiancé.

Chapter Seven



Dominic seemed to have entered a completely different world after uttering those two fateful words to Wren in Lady Agnes's parlour.

All of a sudden, he had people asking him questions to which he had no answer. Things like "What church do you go to?", "Do you have any preference for a wedding service?" and "Have you picked a best man yet?"

Answering "I don't, no, and no—but Nick will probably do it," didn't seem to satisfy questioners, though, which was a nuisance, since he had a commission to complete. It had completely escaped him that once he set sail on the sea of matrimony, the waves weren't going to be as smooth as he'd hoped.

After several days of what felt like life in a particularly active anthill, he managed to escape to his own workshop, and dragged his new fiancée with him.

"I'm supposed to have a fitting with Lady Agnes and Mrs Dimsey," she protested as he bundled her into the carriage he'd summoned. "The dressmaker is coming today."

"And you will. Later. By the time the two of them have finished dissecting everything the poor woman's brought for their approval, the day will be half over, anyway. And I need to do some work on the Linton necklace. So I thought we might both enjoy a bit of an escape, especially since there's no reason in the world for me to be at Barlow Place."

Wren smiled tentatively. "I enjoy having you there, Dominic. Your presence is very reassuring."

He smiled back at her comfortable use of his Christian name and casually took her gloved hand in his. "I'm glad." He glanced down at her fingers curled around his. "I think this will all work out, don't you?"

"I hope so."

Her quiet response drew his attention. "Worries?"

“A few,” she answered honestly. “What woman in my situation wouldn’t be a little worried? There’s the business of my history which…” she nudged him with her elbow, “far outweighs yours, sir. And you know it.”

“So you say,” he snorted, “and it doesn’t matter to me at all, as *you* know.”

“We’ll not argue the point today.” She sighed. “But I am still concerned. We barely know each other. It’s been mere weeks since you first set eyes on me and saved my life. I might be a terrible person for all you know, because two weeks of that time I was recovering, and after that we’ve been caught up in a whirlwind.”

He squeezed her hand. “So you do understand why I brought you with me today.”

She laughed. “You are quite a manipulator, Dominic.”

He nodded. “Guilty as charged. But I agree with much of what you’ve said, Wren. We do barely know each other, and although I believe a union between us will be successful, it would be an excellent idea for you to see where I work, and of course, my lodgings, where we shall be living.” He released her hand as the carriage slowed. “And we can spend some time together without interruptions, which right at this moment will be a miracle indeed. There are advantages to being engaged, and having the chance for this kind of privacy is one of them.”

As they drew to a halt outside his building, Dominic opened the door, jumped down, and then released the steps for Wren to follow. They exchanged thanks with Lady Agnes’s driver, and then he led her to that fateful doorstep where she’d curled up and prepared to take her last breath what seemed now like years ago.

She paused. “I was so cold,” she muttered, staring at the corner. “So very cold.”

He slipped an arm around her shoulder. “Not cold now.”

She turned and met his eyes. “No, not cold now.” In fact, quite the opposite, since his touch and his smile ignited flickers deep within her that sent waves of heat throughout her body.

Nervous that he might sense such things, she straightened and smiled politely. “So you live permanently above your business?”

He accepted the change of subject, fiddled with keys and unlocked the door. “In a way. I don’t really have a shop where I sell things, but I will

accept commissions, meet with customers and clients, and do some general business here in this room. I prefer working here, but I've had space assigned to me at various jewellers' houses when they had something commissioned that they wanted me to make. I did so at Rundell and Bridge a little while ago."

She stepped into a comfortable area, with a shining counter, a pretty carpet on the floor, and one table and chairs. A vase rested on the high windowsill, and the only thing that differentiated the space from a normal shop was the large chandelier hanging over the counter, and the equally large sconces on either side of a painting on the wall behind it. A mastiff by the looks of it.

"Nice dog," she commented.

"I like dogs," he answered absently, checking through the letters that he'd found on the floor behind the front door.

She strolled around for a moment—the room was small enough that three steps took her from one end to the other. Yes, she could see him sitting down at the table with pen and paper, taking notes from someone needing a special piece of jewellery. Or standing at the counter and spreading out a cloth upon which to display some stones the customer might find appealing.

Everything was spotless, unobtrusive. Few passers-by would even know what Dominic did here, since there was no name on the high windows at all. She'd been here that terrible night, but she remembered nothing of any of this.

Yet the locks were shining and heavy, and she could see the shutters were strongly made and reinforced with a mesh of thin iron bars.

It was a good place for him, and he clearly enjoyed his workspace.

"Come along. Let's go up."

"I can't recall seeing this," she voiced her thoughts aloud. "That night, when you found me, you brought me in here, didn't you?"

"I did. But I took you upstairs. Come...let's see if you remember any of that." He tucked his letters under his arm and reached for her hand, drawing her up a flight of stairs that twisted back on itself in the middle with a small landing.

"Oh." She stopped short. "Yes, this I do recall." She glanced at him. "You had a low fire burning, didn't you?"

He nodded.

“And you...you washed my hands and feet.” She shivered now, remembering.

“Wren,” he came to her and gently put his arms around her, letting her lean against him. “It’s over. Done with. Forget that terrible night and think only of your future.”

“I’m not sure I can do that,” she mumbled. “It’s who I was. And who I am, I suppose.”

“We’re all made of bits and pieces, dear girl.” He spoke quietly. “Our pasts, our present—lead to the future us. And if we’re smart enough, we become the people we’re supposed to be. Both you and I have unacceptable histories as far as Society is concerned. But we’re not bad people. We’ve been less fortunate than others, especially you. But you’re not like the ones who hurt you. I don’t know my parents, and neither do you. That doesn’t mean we can’t build new families of close friends, and care for them, as we live our lives, does it?”

She raised her head and stared into his dark, gentle eyes, so near she could breathe in his scent, warm, male, and very attractive. A little sigh escaped. “I don’t know, Dom,” she answered, absently using the nickname she’d heard on the lips of his friends. “I’d like to think you’re right.”

“Then trust me, Wren. Let me prove to you that we can build a happy future together, regardless of our pasts.”

She nodded and smiled a little as his gaze fell to her lips. “All right.”

“Good girl.”

He surprised her by dropping a soft kiss on her mouth. “Now come and see my treasures.”

~~*~*~*

It took all the self-control he had not to follow that light peck with a much more enthusiastic embrace. She was warm and slender in his arms, fitting his body in the most perfect way.

And he was an absolute idiot for even thinking about such things. They weren't man and wife yet, so beginning his plan to woo her would have to wait. He wanted to secure her first, so there would be no danger of losing her, should she react poorly to his advances.

He sighed inwardly. This was all bloody confusing.

Pushing it to the back of his mind as best he could, Dominic led her to his workshop. "This is where I spend most of my time." He opened the shutters.

"I can see why." She glanced at the windows. As he tucked the shutters away to one side, the sun poured in. "You close those when you're done for the day?"

"I do. Always. Even though nobody can see in up here, I like the security."

She followed his glance to the safe, and he felt her watching as he unlocked it.

"That's quite a large one," she breathed, moving back a little as he withdrew a shelf covered with soft leather.

"It needs to be." He shut the door with a clang, a sound as familiar to him as his own heartbeat. "And here's why,"

He laid out the shelf gently on his desk in the sunlight. Removing the delicate coverings, he revealed his current commission, and allowed himself a moment to enjoy her gasp of surprise.

The Linton necklace shot fire into the room, covering parts of the walls with sparkling rainbows from the facets of the many brilliant gems.

"Oh, *Dom*," Wren breathed.

"Come and look. It won't bite," he teased her gently and held out his hand.

She took it, unaware of the shudder of pleasure he got from the sensation of her palm sliding across his.

"Diamonds?" She pointed carefully at the clear stones. "And rubies, I would guess?" Her finger moved to the rich glow of the flower petals.

He nodded. "Yes indeed. The diamonds are from older pieces. I cleaned them up and I think they work well with the rubies. Those came from the Far East."

She leaned in. "Perhaps it's my eyes, but I almost see a pink tinge in some of these diamonds."

He frowned, shocked by her words. *How on earth...* "Which ones?"

“Umm...this one, this one, and...yes, this one? Although it’s pointing the other way.”

“Damn.”

Dominic swore softly under his breath, knowing she was right. That one final diamond needed to be reversed. The feeling that he’d had, the suspicion that it was just a little bit off...Wren had walked in, taken one look, and found it.

“Did I say something wrong?”

He shook his head. “Sit for a minute. I need to try this...”

His attention locked onto the necklace, and he shifted it a little to expose the section he was frowning over to the maximum amount of sunlight. If it had been any other time of day, or cloudier, he would have lit all the candles to illuminate his workbench. But right now was the perfect moment for him to reach for his tools, gently extract the offending diamond, and rotate it to the right spot so that the colour variation matched the others.

He was barely aware she was in the room as he eased up slender gold swirls to free the stone, and then urge them back down once the manoeuvre was complete. He leaned back. “There. Better?”

She rose and came to his side. In silence, she turned her head, leaned in, then away to one side. Finally, she nodded. “I think so, don’t you?”

He met her gaze and all thoughts of rubies and diamonds fled as he once again felt himself drowning in the magic depths of a pair of topaz eyes.

“Dominic?” She blinked. “Is everything all right? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, no...” He dragged himself back from the brink. “Of course not. I’m just completely astounded at your ability to read the gems like that.”

“Read gems?”

“That’s the only way I can describe it. The ability to look within a jewel and see its secrets. To find what lies at its heart and take that, use that to enhance the entire creation.”

“Is it a good thing?” She hesitated, and he noticed her hands clasped nervously together, shifting a little.

“It is an extraordinary thing, Wren. A wonderful thing.” He stood and took those cool fingers, warming them with his own. “And it makes me convinced that Fate brought you into my life. What more could a jeweller ask than to have a wife as gifted with gems as you are?”

A shiver ran over her, so violently that he could feel it. “What is it, Wren? What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know.” Her breath caught on a sob. “All this. You. Us. It’s... overwhelming...”

“It is a little, isn’t it?”

It was the most natural thing in the world to put his arms around her and cuddle her into his chest. And it was the most wonderful thing in the world when she sighed and nestled there, tucking her head beneath his chin, letting him hold her and soothe her emotions.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I’m an idiot.”

“It’s all right,” he tightened his grip a little. “Sometimes, so am I.”

Chapter Eight



Lady Agnes Barlow considered herself somewhat of a miracle-maker and allowed several self-congratulatory thoughts to cross her mind as she stood near the fireplace in the formal Barlow Place drawing room and watched the newly christened Miss Wren Hastings wed Mr Dominic Greybrooke.

There was no need to inform anyone other than the officiating cleric that Miss Hastings had been “adopted” by a distant branch of the Barlow family, all of whom had sadly passed on some time ago, leaving the young lady without relatives. Thus, Merrihew stood as a substitute father and gave the bride away, looking unusually emotional as he did so.

The vicar, an old friend of Agnes’s, had been persuaded to perform the ceremony in private, due, she had told him, “to the singular nature of the couple’s backgrounds”.

Knowing Agnes as well as he did, the Very Reverend Horace Whittle simply sighed, nodded, procured the necessary documents, and arrived on time to unite Dominic and Wren in Holy Matrimony.

Her Ladyship had already arranged for his compensation, a case of Chillendale Ale, to be tucked into the boot of his carriage, and she knew he looked forward to participating in the wedding breakfast. He’d earned it, because he’d most certainly worked up a hearty appetite on his journey into London from the small village where he enjoyed his retirement.

The guests were few, but enthusiastic in their applause as the groom gently kissed the bride on her cheek, and after the brief moments it took to sign the papers, the business was concluded. They were officially man and wife.

She smiled as the party moved into the dining room, and waited for the happy couple to enter last, once again to a round of applause and cheers.

FitzAllan Wilde and his wife Lavinia were smiling and laughing, looking as contented and as happy as a married couple should, in her opinion. Their

daughter was upstairs, charming the apron off Mrs Dimsey, and doubtless would be in the kitchen soon, where she would give that dimpled smile of hers and have every member of the Barlow Manor staff eating out of her little hand.

She had her father's charm and already showed signs of inheriting her mother's beauty as she grew up. Agnes eagerly awaited the adventures she'd have and wondered how her Papa, an adventurer himself, would manage it all.

John Ashgate was also there, but without his wife.

It seemed that her "boys" as Agnes liked to think of them, were a fecund lot, since Mrs Caroline Ashgate had discovered quite quickly after her marriage that she was indeed *enceinte*, despite being convinced she was too old for such matters. Not only was she expecting, but she was suffering all the indignities of morning sickness so, with much sadness, John had been forced to come to his friend's wedding without her. He would be leaving quite soon after their meal, though, eager to see if his wife had survived yet another day in close companionship with the chamber pot.

And then there was Nick. Of course there was Nick. Unmarried, unattached, and enjoying himself to the hilt.

Agnes couldn't miss the spark of amusement as he surveyed his friends from the perspective of the last one of them yet to find a wife. She knew his determination to remain a single and adventurous lad, eager to explore the limits of his artistic talent. His popularity was growing, his brilliance more in demand these days, and his reputation for exquisite portraits bringing more and more of the affluent to his door.

It was only a matter of time before the Ton "discovered" him, and would have to decide whether to shun him because of his birth, or embrace him and ignore it. The Upper Ten Thousand were fickle beasts, in her opinion. It could go either way.

A burst of laughter distracted her from her thoughts, and she saw that John was rising to say a few words.

"My dear Lady Agnes," he bowed low. "As always, every one of us here to celebrate this auspicious occasion owes you a debt that none of us will ever be able to repay."

There were murmurs of "*hear hear*" around the table. Agnes smiled and nodded and left it at that.

“The fact that we are gathered to witness the marriage of yet another of our dear friends? Well, what greater joy can there be than seeing Dominic and his newest jewel.” John nodded to Wren, who blushed.

“Of course, it is to be hoped that he brings the finest of his skills to the forefront for such a treasured gem...”

Dominic’s eyebrows rose.

“After all, the best way to reveal the inner beauty of any jewel is by creating an ideal setting. No out of the way hidey-hole for this diamond.”

There was laughter at this comment, while Wren looked puzzled.

Agnes leaned over toward her. “You must know that Dominic’s first studio was in a tiny room in a terrible part of town. He thought it was wonderful. The others had a different view of it.”

“However,” continued John with a grin, “I am happily confident that now Dominic has the responsibility of a wife, he’ll finally discover the pleasures of not only a comfortable home, but a woman by his side who will remind him of his worth, rather than relieve him of it.”

Again, laughter rang out at the good-natured teasing.

Dominic blushed as Wren shot him an inquiring look with one eyebrow raised. “I’ll explain later,” he murmured.

The morning wore on, an informal and enjoyable few hours spent around a table where everyone liked each other, laughed without hesitation, and celebrated something that was good. Agnes drank the moments in like fine wine, knowing she was most likely the only one to fully appreciate the pleasure of this time.

But all was as it should be. The others would look back on the day with smiles and warm memories. That alone was enough.

Wren handled herself brilliantly, too. She had been nervous, without question, but once the formalities were done, and Dominic took her hand as her husband for the first time, she seemed to relax, to begin to understand that she was—finally—not alone.

Would the marriage be successful? Who could predict such things? Certainly not Agnes, nor would she try. But she cherished high hopes for the happy couple, since the light in Dominic’s eye was new; she’d not seen it before. And his precipitate proposal? Out of character and completely enchanting.

Yes, there was something there, something that had surprised him as

much as anyone else.

The speeches, the jokes, the humour—lasted into the early afternoon, long after the meal was done. Everyone seemed loth to move from their chairs, just relaxed and continued whatever conversation struck them at the time.

Agnes leaned comfortably in her chair, a wineglass near, a smile on her lips.

This, she thought to herself, was a most excellent morning. And a devout little silent prayer followed that it would lead to an excellent life for the newlyweds.

~~*~*~*

Wren found it quite difficult not to keep looking at the slender band of gold that now encircled the third finger of her left hand.

She was married. A wife. She had a *husband*.

Her gown was the palest shade of pink, silk and lace, and she wore the finest and softest chemise beneath it that she'd ever known.

It was all a dream...the fine food, the smiling faces, her new husband next to her, laughing at something his friends were saying.

She was now Mrs Dominic Greybrooke.

And she was no longer alone.

For the very first time in her life, she actually *belonged*. She belonged to Dominic now, and he would provide for her needs and her wants. No more going hungry because there were no scraps left in alleys, and no more cold nights because she didn't have a place to sleep.

No more trying to find the meanest work, or beg for pennies here and there. And most of all, no more *fear*.

She would not be beaten today, or scolded, or pushed aside. Dominic was now there to protect her, and she turned to look at him, still astounded that he had chosen her as his bride.

He must have sensed her movement, as he shot her a smiling glance, continuing his amusement at Nick's dramatic and embarrassing stories. Almost without thought, his hand came up toward her, and she took it. A new and satisfying connection that she'd not made with anyone before this moment.

She sighed, and on that breath many of her nerves settled. For now, she was safe, warm, well fed, and clean. Would it last? She'd work her fingers to the bone for this man if that was what it took. He was her rescuer, her saviour. And she literally owed him her life, since she wouldn't have survived to experience this day had he not picked her up from that doorstep.

Her private vow of commitment was sincere and unquestioning. She belonged to him, and she'd not let him regret a moment of their lives together if she could help it.

"You look very beautiful."

He whispered the words, leaning a little closer as the conversation around the table continued unabated.

"I'd thank you, but it was all Lady Agnes," she whispered back, glancing down at the folds of silk across her lap. "Without her...well, I have no idea what I'd be wearing."

"You'd be lovely no matter if it was sackcloth and ashes," he smiled. "And no blushing. I speak nothing but the truth, Wren."

"It must be that ale," she teased, glancing at the tankard. "Chillendale, I think you called it?"

"Nothing but the best for Lady A," he nodded. "Try some?"

"Um, maybe some other time," she demurred. "I feel a little drunk with happiness, to be quite honest. And that's enough for me."

"Wise girl."

She looked at their clasped hands. "I'll do my best to be a good wife, Dominic," she shot a quick look around to make sure her words were private. "But you must help me, if you would..."

"I don't know what to say to that," he answered, "I've never been a wife." His lips twitched into a smile. "So perhaps we should help each other? That way, we'll both learn together."

"All right. I think I'd like that."

"Good." He squeezed her hand and then looked up in surprise as Merrihew tapped on the door and entered without waiting for an invitation.

“My Lady,” he bowed. “An urgent message for Mr Greybrooke. The carriage driver apparently tried him at his place of residence, and, not finding him there, eventually learned he might be here.”

“Well, if it’s that urgent, Merrihew, best you deliver it without further ado.”

“My Lady.” He bowed and brought the platter to Dominic, who took the letter on top with a slight frown.

“I apologise, Ma’am,” he said absently, as he broke the seal. “I wasn’t expecting anything...”

Wren saw the frown begin to crease his eyebrows as he scanned the note. “Damn it all,” he swore gently.

“Bad news?” She touched his arm.

He sighed and folded the paper. “Not really, but very bad timing.”

“Dom?” John tipped his head to one side. “You’re concerned.”

“I am,” he answered. “This note is from the Earl of Linton. He wants the necklace I’ve just finished for his daughter’s wedding. And he wants it *now*.”

“Well, you can pack it up tonight and have it couriered to him tomorrow, can’t you?” Nick asked.

“Apparently, the need is urgent. He’s sent his carriage, and it awaits me outside.”

“He wants *you* to go now? Right this minute?” Lady Agnes’s eyes opened wide. “That is quite demanding of him...”

“It is. But for what he’s paying for the darn thing, I suppose he feels entitled to make such a demand. And in all fairness, he doesn’t know it’s our wedding day.”

“Then we must go.” Wren rose, and rested her hand on her new husband’s shoulder. “I will change at once, before we go to your—*our*—home and collect the necklace. Then we can be on our way to...er...wherever it is you have to go to deliver the piece.” Pleased that she’d caught herself up and referred to Dominic’s residence as *their* home now, she waited for a response.

It was all she could have hoped for, and more.

He looked up at her, nodded, and then rose to stand beside her. “My wife is right. Of all the days I would have chosen to make this trip, today is not one of them. But it’s the most important commission I’ve had, and could well lead to many more. I dare not run the risk of incurring the wrath of such a

prestigious client. Especially when he's sent a carriage all the way from Fairmeadows to pick me up."

"And, yes, I'll agree he had no way of knowing you were married this morning," Agnes sighed. "I suppose we must bid you both farewell."

"Some honeymoon," grumbled Nick. "A long drive out into the middle of nowhere to give an overblown earl a piece of jewellery for his daughter, who probably won't even appreciate the magnificence of it, but end up pawning it to pay her husband's gambling debts."

John stared at his friend. "You have the most negative outlook on people sometimes."

"Most of the time, they've earned it, believe me." Nick's mouth twisted into a wry grin.

"I can't disagree with that."

Chapter Nine



“At least we have comfortable transportation,” said Wren, settling herself on the thickly padded squabs.

Dominic did the same, nodding his thanks to the postboy, who folded away the steps and shut the door behind him. Their small bags had been tucked into the carriage boot, and the necklace had been wrapped carefully and stowed away in one of his inner vest pockets. He’d secured his home, and they were now making slow progress down one of London’s narrower cobbled streets toward the wider road out of town.

“It’ll be a drive of several hours, I think,” he said.

“You’ve not visited Fairmeadows?”

He shook his head. “No. The Earl himself was in London when he placed the commission. His secretary came to my studio with the gems and the concept they wanted, I did some preliminary designs, and within two weeks the final design was settled upon.”

“And yet you’re frowning,” Wren observed, gripping the strap as the carriage picked up speed.

She was right, he was indeed frowning, although he’d not realised he was doing it quite so obviously.

“I...” he hesitated.

“If you’d rather not speak of it, Dominic, that is acceptable.” Her voice was calm, soothing. But her words troubled him.

“I would wish to share my concerns, Wren. Would that also be acceptable?” He thought for a moment. “I hope to be the kind of husband who does such things with his wife. I’ve seen too many marriages that are nothing more than a legal agreement to live in the same house, raise the prescribed number of offspring, and stand together when greeting guests. I don’t want that.”

“I can’t even imagine that,” she answered. “And I don’t know what sort

of wife I want to be because I have no idea at all of what wives do that is either right *or* wrong.” She took a breath. “All I’m hoping for at the moment is a chance to make you happy. And, in that way, to show you how very grateful I am to you for saving my life and then giving me a new one.”

Dominic smiled at her statement, then once again spoke words that surprised him. “I don’t know if I want your gratitude…”

“Then what do you want? Ask it. If it is within my abilities, you shall have it.”

Her topaz eyes gleamed in the afternoon sunlight, and her somewhat ethereal beauty tugged and awoke everything that was male inside him.

“Let me think about that,” he replied. “We’re both in the same sort of situation, Wren. I have no idea how to be a husband, and you have no experience of any kind upon which to base your assumptions of wifely behaviour.”

“We are, then, walking a new road together, aren’t we?”

He leaned forward and delved into the small carpet bag Nick had slipped into the carriage just before they left. Sure enough, there was a little bottle of brandy inside, which he produced with all the flamboyance of a magician finishing his final trick.

“Let us drink to that, wife.” The cork popped free. “It appears we’ll have to do without glasses. I hope you don’t mind.” He carefully wiped the rim and passed it to her, noting her hesitant smile. “Since we find ourselves in a unique situation, I propose a toast. To our marriage, Wren. May we work out the best way for the two of us, and be damned to the rest of the world.”

She smiled, raised the bottle and took a sip, coughing a little as the strong liquor hit her throat. “To our marriage, Dominic.”

She passed it back, and he followed her lead, although without the cough. The brandy warmed him as he swallowed, and he took the liberty of an extra swig, since that soothing heat was just what he needed.

Apparently, Wren shared his feelings; she too happily enjoyed a second drink.

The first stop on their journey found them both relaxed and smiling, glad to avail themselves of the chance to stretch their legs, and also make use of the facilities at the posting house, where the horses were changed.

There was still a couple of hours to go, Dominic was informed, but they should arrive at their destination before full dark.

The driver was optimistic about that, since the weather had been good thus far, allowing the team to maintain an excellent pace. The Earl always demanded the finest pairs, said the man chattily. Nothing but the best for his Lordship.

“Ah.” Dominic listened as he waited for Wren to return to the carriage. “Is Fairmeadows a pleasant estate?” He asked the question out of idle curiosity.

“Oh definitely, sir. Most magnificent, it is. His Lordship makes sure to have the newest and most stylish things surrounding him. No matter the cost.”

“His carriage is certainly very comfortable.” Wren came up to Dominic’s side, making the comment as she settled her shawl around her shoulders and tapped her bonnet to make sure it was straight.

Her husband smiled at the colour in her cheeks, knowing it was more a side effect of the brandy, rather than the enticement of soft cushions.

“Glad you think so, Ma’am,” the driver replied politely. “I believe we’re ready to leave, if you are, sir?”

“Let’s be on our way, then.”

Dominic helped Wren back into the carriage and once again took his seat beside her. Already he was finding the sensation of sitting next to a woman who was now his wife most pleasant. He couldn’t help the grin as the vehicle jerked, shuddered, and then ran smoothly as the horses found sure footing on the main road.

It was even better when she began to lean against him a little.

“Do you mind if I take off my bonnet?” She gave him a tentative glance. “I worry that I shall crush it if the roads get bumpy and rattle us around.”

He simply reached beneath her chin and tugged on one strand of ribbon, loosening the entire thing.

“Much better,” she sighed, carefully putting the bonnet on the opposite seat. “Now I can sit back a little.”

“You can lean on me if you like,” he patted his shoulder. “’Tis the wifely thing to do.”

Her answering giggle surprised and charmed him. “And how would you know, sir, since you’ve already expressed the conviction that you’ve no idea how wives go on?”

Appreciating her wit, he dipped his head to her, grinning widely. “A hit,

Ma'am. And an accurate one at that." He settled himself comfortably. "But come, rest your head. I shan't mind at all."

"Neither shall I," she answered, letting her body close the gap between them, and then tilting her neck to find a comfortable spot.

Within a minute Dominic realised that he had married a wife who was, compared to him, short. He had no problem with that, except that it made leaning against each other a trifle more complicated.

He moved. "Come, this won't work. You'll have a crick in your neck for a week, Mrs Greybrooke." He pushed her forward a little, raised his arm to encircle her shoulders, and pulled her back against him, this time bringing her head to his chest and snuggling them both together in a warm lump. He could almost see her entire body ease as she settled.

"Nice," she sighed. "Thank you."

"It is my pleasure," he answered softly.

Her head turned, and she looked up at him. "Is it?"

His gaze fell to her lips, soft, pink, and partially apart. "Oh yes, Wren. It is. It really is..."

He lowered his head and kissed her.

~~*~*~*

She couldn't breathe for a moment or two, stunned and then entranced by the touch of his lips to hers. So warm and firm. His scent surrounded her and for the first time in her life, she found herself melting into a man's arms and eager to explore his embrace.

He opened his mouth a little and his tongue slicked its way over hers, teasing, encouraging, and what else could she do but answer by welcoming him inside?

Ahh...his taste. Unique, sweet, she'd not known that a kiss could be so mesmerising. Eyes closed, her focus narrowed down to the man holding her; there was nothing else at that moment, no carriage, no journey, no world. Just

the two of them, entwined now as he easily lifted her onto his lap.

She never even thought about objecting, but willingly slipped her free arm around his neck as he deepened the kiss, taking possession of her mouth, teasing her tongue into a response, learning her and teaching her in return. His arms were strong, warm, and in a moment of revelation, she understood the sensation of protection, rather than fear.

There had been arms around her before, but not like this. Not tender and gentle, not loving, not caressing her with all the care of someone holding something precious.

She moaned a little, the sound surprising her. He responded, shifting even closer, kissing her into a state of what had to be bliss, although she'd not believed such a thing existed before now. Her fingers threaded through the hair at the back of his neck, making her glad she'd removed her gloves. His fragrance filled her nostrils, and she inhaled him as her tongue dared to tease his.

He held her tightly, crushed against his chest, then slowly eased back, giving both of them the chance to catch their breaths.

"God, Wren." He lowered his forehead to hers. "I'm sorry. I wouldn't frighten you for the world."

She blinked. "Frighten me? You didn't frighten me, Dom." Cupping his cheek with her free hand, she managed a trembling smile. "Quite the contrary."

The carriage lurched, forcing her to cling to him or be dumped onto the floor. She chuckled as he tightened his grip in response.

"This is silly. A moving carriage is not the proper place for such matters, would you agree?"

Sighing, he let her slide back into her seat, taking her hand again as she settled. "You're right." He nodded, then looked at her, heat still lingering in his gaze. "But I want you to know that kissing you was an experience I'd very much like to repeat in a more appropriate place at a more appropriate time."

She felt the heat rise in her cheeks at his words, but kept her eyes on his face. "I think I would like that as well."

He intertwined their arms comfortably as the sun lowered toward the horizon. "I don't want to...to...make you uncomfortable in any way, Wren." His words were quiet and measured. "But I must be honest and tell you I

overheard some of your conversation with Lady Agnes about your past. So...

“Ah.” She bit her lip, thinking. “You are aware, then, that I am not...that I was...”

He stopped her by lifting her hand to his lips and pressing a warm kiss on the back of it. “Hush. Yes, I’m aware. And I’d willingly kill the men who did that to you.” His grip tightened almost to the point of pain. “It is unspeakable, brutish, and cannot be excused in any way at all.” He cleared his throat awkwardly. “And what followed, your ostracism and dismissal? Every bit as bad, if not worse.”

While his statements brought back memories she’d tried to put behind her, this time they did not come hand-in-hand with shame or self-disgust. What Dom said was true; she’d finally accepted that she had not been at fault, nor did she deserve such cruelty.

“Thank you.” She squeezed his hand. “I believe that is what I needed to hear. And my mind is relieved that you have wed me, even knowing my history. Not many other men would have.”

He smiled at her, a gentle and warm gaze that nearly took her breath away. “Their loss, Mrs Greybrooke. And my gain.”

“I hope you never change your opinion,” she answered, feeling the sting of tears at the back of her eyes.

“I’m a constant sort of fellow, I’m told. Quite dull, actually.”

The laugh that bubbled up blew away the tears. “I would guess, albeit on a very brief acquaintance, that Mr Nick Polbury made that declaration.”

Dominic laughed back. “And you’d be completely correct.”

“He is a good artist?”

“He is a magnificent artist. No question there at all.” He glanced at her. “I would willingly wager on the likelihood that he’ll be having his own exhibition before too long. If he doesn’t go and do something outrageous to ruin his reputation.”

Wren considered that statement for a few minutes. “It does seem a little strange,” she began.

“What does?” Dominic tilted his head to one side and watched her.

“That you and your friends, are...so comfortable in town. With Lady Agnes. And you have your clients, and Nick his portraits...”

“And we’re bastards?”

She lowered her head, even while nodding. “Yes, forgive me...”

“Nothing to forgive.” He nudged her affectionately. “I’m glad you feel you can talk openly to me, Wren. Please, don’t ever stop. And in answer to your unspoken question as to why we’re not shunned as untouchable? Honestly, I’m not sure myself.” He paused and thought for a moment, something Wren found most appealing. He wasn’t one to spit out whatever was on the front of his tongue, which—in her experience—could only lead to trouble.

“I think it might be because of our history. Our upbringing at Ballinger Priory.” He sighed and leaned back, stretching his spine a little. “I realise now that it was a very privileged time for us. We had excellent teachers, loving hands helping to raise us, and the environment encouraged us all to be ourselves, expose our strengths, all the time while enjoying the others who were with us. It was, truly, as much of a family as one might imagine, and we’re all blessed because of it.”

“All boys?” she asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

“There were a few girls,” he said, “but not many. After all,” he shrugged, “an illegitimate son poses a much greater threat to the line of inheritance than an illegitimate daughter.”

“Wars have been fought for less, haven’t they?” She shot him a quick grin. “The Battle of Hastings?”

He grinned. “Of course. The Bastard Duke of Normandy. You are always going to surprise me, aren’t you?”

“I hope so, Dom. I really hope so.”

Chapter Ten



The last rays of the sun had disappeared into the twilight as the carriage turned into the lane leading to Fairmeadows.

Dominic couldn't say he was displeased, since the carriage ride—although pleasant enough with Wren—was taxing, especially as the roads in this part of the country could have used some improvement.

So it was with a muted groan of relief that he stepped out onto gravel and turned to help Wren disembark. She made a sound not unlike his as she straightened, a hand to her back, stretching with a sigh.

“It looks as if someone's awaiting our arrival,” she said quietly, her eyes on the front door which was opening, light shining down the impressive marble staircase.

Dominic took his wife's hand and tucked it into his arm, walking her up and across the elegant tiles to where someone stood, silhouetted by the many candles burning within.

“Mr Greybrooke?”

“I believe we're expected?” Dom nodded to the bowing personage, obviously a butler.

“You are indeed, sir. But...” He glanced at Wren.

“My wife. Mrs Greybrooke.”

The man widened his eyes in surprise. “My goodness. We weren't expecting...”

“Neither were we,” Dominic smiled.

“It is our wedding day,” added Wren gently. “A date we'd not made publicly known, for...er...family reasons.”

“I...” Clearly taken aback, the butler waved them inside. “We shall make suitable arrangements then,” he said. “I will have our housekeeper...oh, here she is. Thank heavens.”

A tall woman walked quietly to his side.

“Mrs Collins. A surprise guest. Mr Greybrooke has brought his wife. This is their wedding day, they tell me.”

She too stared at them, and Dominic couldn't help noticing the air of worry that seemed to cross her face as she did so. “Congratulations,” she managed, her eyes wide and surprised as she glanced at Wren. “I'm not certain that Fairmeadows is your usual destination for a honeymoon, but I will certainly have the maids prepare a more suitable room than the one we'd originally intended for your use, Mr Greybrooke.”

Wren smiled. “I'm sure every room is delightful, Mrs Collins. I cannot help but admire the shining loveliness of this foyer, and can only imagine the beauty of the rest of the house.”

“I trust we've not kept his Grace waiting?” Dominic asked.

“Er...”

“Come in, come in, both of you. No sense in conversing here in the hall with the door open.” Mrs Collins beckoned them. “There's tea in the small parlour.” She threw a pointed glance at the butler. “You'd better come too, Mr Ludlow.”

Dominic held onto Wren's arm and raised his eyebrows in surprise at her. She shrugged back, also clearly at a loss as to what was happening, and together they walked over polished wood flooring behind Ludlow, who led them to a comfortable little parlour where a fire burned, and several branches of candles illuminated a table. The furnishings included a sofa, a few chairs, and a sideboard featuring a tea service.

“How lovely,” remarked Wren. “This must be very cosy in the winter.”

Mrs Collins nodded as she waved them to chairs and fussed over the teapot. “It's one of her Ladyship's favourite spots for afternoon tea, and it still gets cool after sunset,” she confirmed.

Silence fell as Ludlow looked slightly ill at ease, but accepted a cup anyway, resting it carefully on the side of the table as he perched on the very edge of a chair.

Dominic and Wren also took a cup of tea, having settled next to each other on the sofa. Given Dominic's position as a craftsman who worked for the Earl, being offered tea at all was a pleasant courtesy, and sharing it with the two persons who were at the top of the downstairs social status...quite an unexpected honour.

“Oh my,” Mrs Collins clasped her bosom. “There were to be biscuits.”

She turned horrified eyes on Ludlow. “Where are the biscuits?”

Dominic had had enough.

“Mrs Collins, please. My wife and I are very content with tea after our journey. We had a large meal earlier. What we’d really like is to understand what’s happening...why you both seem rather concerned this evening. And whether we shall meet his Grace tonight or in the morning.” He touched his jacket. “You must know I am delivering an item of importance for Lady Helen Perrin to her father?”

Ludlow closed his eyes and sighed.

“You’ll have to tell them,” Mrs Collins muttered. “’Tis no good trying to pretend.”

“Pretend what?” Wren leaned forward.

Ludlow nodded and stood, returning his still-brimming teacup to the tray. “I suppose it is up to me then,” he said quietly. “Much as it pains me, I have to be honest.” He turned to look at Dominic and Wren, his countenance sombre. “Their Graces aren’t here. They left hurriedly early this evening.”

Dominic blinked. “Left? As in went away? For the evening? An event elsewhere?”

Ludlow shook his head. “No, Mr Greybrooke. Left, as in packed up some clothing, stacked a trunk onto the travelling carriage, and departed.”

“Where were they going?” Wren frowned.

“That’s the trouble,” replied Mrs Collins. “We have no idea.”

“No idea?” Dominic struggled.

“Not a clue.”

“They should, of course, have informed us of their destination.”

“Millie, hush now.”

Realising that Ludlow was extremely concerned, enough that he forgot himself sufficiently to address Mrs Collins by her first name, Dominic leaned back and sipped his tea, giving the matter some thought.

“Well,” he said, after a moment or two. “This is quite an unusual situation, to be sure.”

Wren managed a small snort. “One could say that, I suppose. Or one could also describe it as a puzzling and concerning situation that might have a damaging impact on the household.” She glanced at Mrs Collins. “Would I be correct in that assessment?”

The older woman sighed and nodded. “You would, Mrs Greybrooke.

Leaving a house like this in the lurch, without any sort of warning...well, it's just not done."

Ludlow was clearly fighting a battle with himself. "Now, now, Mrs Collins."

"Don't you *now now* me, Arthur Ludlow. You know right well that if their Graces don't return...well, things will go from bad to worse for Fairmeadows, and then where will we be, I ask you?"

Dominic glanced at Wren, then rose from his seat and took both their teacups back to the tray. He turned to look at the two worried faces.

"Why don't we leave this discussion for tonight? My wife and I have had a long journey here, and you've both found yourselves in a difficult position, which is causing you a lot of concern. Perhaps by morning you'll have a message from his Lordship, and everything will be resolved, so I suggest we retire and see what happens tomorrow. If there are still no answers at that time, we can make a plan and go on from there. How does that sound?"

Shoulders sagging, Ludlow nodded. "It sounds very sensible, Mr Greybrooke, and something I should have suggested myself. I can only offer my apologies for letting my nerves get the better of me."

"I'm still very concerned," said Mrs Collins, "but you're right. I'll have your room prepared immediately. Mrs Greybrooke, if you'd like to accompany me, your bags should have been brought in from the carriage by now, so you can start to unpack if you'd like."

Wren smiled. "Thank you. That will be wonderful. As was the tea...I didn't realise how thirsty I was after the journey."

"Our pleasure, Mrs Greybrooke." Ludlow managed a weak smile as the two women left the room.

"Tomorrow, Ludlow," said Dominic, "I think you and I need to have a quiet and private chat, don't you?"

The older man bit his lip, then nodded. "I'm afraid so."

~~*~*~*

“Well.” Wren opened her small valise and removed a nightgown. “What on earth do you think is going on, Dominic?”

“Nothing good, that’s for sure.” He delved into his bag. “The fact that the staff here have no clue what’s happening is not comforting at all.” He frowned down at the garment laying on the bed. “I heard rumours, Wren, before I left town. Nick mentioned that there was perhaps something in the way of trouble surrounding the Linton family.”

“Trouble?” She glanced at him, her face worried.

“Financial trouble,” he clarified.

“Hmm.” She turned away. “Might I ask your assistance with my buttons? Mrs Dimsey did them up for me, and there’s no way I can reach them.”

“Of course.”

It felt quite unusual to have a man’s hands unfastening her bodice, thought Wren, as she stood quietly waiting for him to complete his chore.

“There. How’s that?”

She felt him ease the two portions of her bodice apart.

“Perfect. Thank you.” Gown in her hand, she whisked herself behind the dressing screen. She was going to have to spend the night in the one large bed with her new husband. And while the problems and confusion with the Linton family had certainly taken precedence in her mind for a while, she was now facing her wedding night. Alone. With Dominic.

She heard two thumps as his boots fell to the floor, and gulped.

Then he yawned and stretched, the sounds quite clear through the flimsy screen.

“I say. Do you know we have a complete dressing closet here?”

She peered at him over the top of the carved wood. “We do?”

He stood at a door she’d barely noticed when she came in. “It’s in here. There’s a pitcher, ewer, a...er...necessary, cloths, soap...very nice indeed.”

“How pleasant.” She emerged, her gown neatly folded over one arm, along with her chemise and stockings. Trying to be as calm and casual as she could, she hung her garments up and tucked her undergarments back into her bag, closing it and putting it aside.

“Come see...”

Obediently, she went to him and peeked in. “Oh...this is lovely. What a nice idea.”

“I’ll finish getting undressed. Why don’t you do whatever you have to do in here while I do that?”

She couldn’t quite meet his eyes. “Thank you. I’ll accept that offer. It will be nice to wash away some of the dirt and dust from the journey.”

He smiled and tapped her nose. “Make sure to wash behind your ears.”

She blinked. “Why?”

He closed his eyes for a moment. “I’m sorry. I forgot. That was one thing our aunts used to tell us at the Priory. It was sort of a joke...a reminder to do a good job of washing ourselves. Apparently, mothers say it all the time.” He shook his head. “And that’s something neither of us would know, really, isn’t it?”

“You had aunts?”

A smile crossed his face. “When you’re done, come to bed, and I’ll tell you about aunts, and games, and the Ballinger Priory.”

“All right.” She closed the door as he moved away.

Should she be nervous? She asked herself that question as she poured water into the bowl and washed with the scented soap. This was her first night as a married woman, and there was a husband waiting for her in that rather lovely bed. It would have been a nerve-wracking moment for any girl, let alone one with a past that included something as life-shattering as rape.

But for some reason, Wren wasn’t afraid.

Dominic had a gentle side to him, she was learning, and all she could do was hope he’d use some of that gentility upon herself. If not, she’d do her best not to make a fuss about it. After all, she was now his wife, and he could use her as he pleased.

So when she left the little dressing room a few minutes later, it was with a certain amount of apprehension. Which changed to confusion when she saw the bed empty.

“Dominic?”

There was a movement by the curtains. “I wondered if we could see anything from here. But I have no idea when moonrise is, so the answer to that is no.” He grinned. “Besides, I’d like a quick wash, too.”

“Oh, of course.” She hurried to the bed and stared at it. “Do you...um...I mean which side...” She waved her hand helplessly.

“I don’t care,” he chuckled. “Pick one. I’ll take the other.”

As the door closed behind him, Wren rolled her eyes. “Pick one, the man

says. I'd wager anything that the one I pick will be the one he wants." But since there was no way she could possibly solve that dilemma, she simply pulled back the covers and slid beneath, enjoying the feel of soft sheets and a warm feather quilt.

Staying at Barlow Manor had introduced her to the luxury of a decent bed, but she'd not yet become so accustomed to it that something like this—at least twice the size of the one she'd used in town—went without notice.

The quilt reflected her body heat back to her and by the time Dominic emerged, she was already cosy, snuggled down amidst the linens.

"All right, then. I'll take this side."

"Oh...did you want this one?" She blinked at him.

He chuckled. "No, Wren. I was teasing. This is fine." He blew out the candles and slid beneath the covers, just as she'd done, sighing as he turned on his side to look at her. "An odd wedding night, Mrs Greybrooke," he observed.

"Since I've never had one before, Mr Greybrooke, I cannot judge this one," she countered.

"A valid point." He raised himself up on one elbow. "You are so well spoken. Your language is that of a lady, Wren, not a foundling. And yet your history..."

She shifted, tucking the sheets up around her shoulders, relishing the softness. "I enjoy words, Dom," she said quietly. "As soon as I began to talk, and, I suppose, listen, I found I liked the way my betters spoke. It seemed more natural than the expressions of my counterparts. At least to my ears."

"Do you know how old you were when you had this...revelation?"

She shook her head. "No. I have vague memories of a birthday. A party. But I don't know where or anything other than running across a lawn to a woman with flowers in her hand. That's all." Sighing, she closed her eyes. "Perhaps it was a dream."

"Perhaps."

"You were going to tell me about your childhood."

He smiled and made himself comfortable, laying back down onto the pillow and settling on one side so that he could see her face. "Well, the Priory was indeed a special place. We had birthdays, of course. They were random, though, parties that everyone enjoyed. So nobody ever felt left out for not having a family to celebrate with. Since there were no parents to arrange such

things, the women who lived and worked and cared for us at the Priory were our ‘aunts’. And they seemed to enjoy the title...”

Wren smiled. It must have been so nice to have aunts. And a birthday party...

Her eyelids drooped, then closed as Dom shared some of his story, watching her face relax into sleep.

It wasn’t the traditional wedding night, by any means, but as he slid his arm beneath his sleeping wife and tucked her into his side, he thought—all things considered—it wasn’t a bad way to start his unexpected marriage.

Chapter Eleven



Waking in a warm bed, with an equally warm armful of woman...well, it was a wonderful thing.

Dominic lay still, listening to the soft breaths emanating from his wife, who slept with her back snugly fitted into his front. He closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation, and hoping his morning arousal wasn't digging into her too uncomfortably. Yes, he would have loved to be able to slide himself over her and wake her with kisses, then strip off that fussy and frilly nightgown and explore the unknown territory that was her body.

But not today.

They still had much to learn about each other, and while he was strongly attracted to her, both physically and emotionally, he possessed enough patience to know waiting was the best course of action. In the meantime, there was nothing to prevent him from cuddling her closer and simply deriving pleasure from the contact.

He knew his friends would probably snort in disbelief were he to reveal that he'd not yet made Wren truly his wife. But ever since he could remember, Dominic had always held back, preferring to wait and see rather than rush into anything without due consideration.

Perhaps that was why he enjoyed his chosen career. He could take his time with each piece of jewellery he designed, selecting only the perfect stones, no matter how long it took him. Commissions from people like the Earl of Linton and his ilk kept him comfortably housed, and he had already tucked away a fairly substantial nest egg that grew nicely under the skilled hands of another of his Ballinger Priory "brothers". Griffith Hempstead had opted for banking, a choice for which Dominic was forever grateful.

So he could easily provide for a wife, even look at a new home if it came to that, although he would prefer to remain where he was for the time being, at least.

Blinking at himself for his train of thought—not one he'd ever imagined himself pursuing—he shifted a little as he noticed that Wren's breathing had changed. She was awake.

“Good morning,” he murmured, not moving a muscle.

“Er...good morning,” she muttered back, clearly still half asleep, but aware of where she was and who she was cuddled into.

Before more words could be exchanged, there was a loud tap on the door, making them both jump.

Wren drew the linens up to her chin.

Managing not to chuckle, Dominic simply called for whoever was there to enter.

“Good morning Mr Greybrooke, Mrs Greybrooke.”

A maid, grinning from ear to ear, entered the bedroom bearing a large tray. “Mrs Collins thought you might fancy a cup of tea first thing. Breakfast will be in about an hour. Just go down to the hall, someone will show you where to go.”

“Thank you. That's very thoughtful. Please extend our gratitude to Mrs Collins and tell her we'll see her shortly?”

“Yes sir. I'll just put this right here.” She manoeuvred the tray onto a side table, then dropped a polite curtsy. “Tea's hot and steeping, sir and madam, so best pour soon.”

Whisking herself out, the door closed behind her with a firm click, leaving Dominic and Wren staring at the teapot.

“Well, that was unexpected.” Dominic sighed and slid from the bed, regretfully leaving his warm and almost mummified wife to extricate herself from the linens. He glanced over at her. “How do you take your tea, Madam? Milk? Sugar?”

She recovered her composure, straightened her nightgown, and emerged from beneath the quilt looking a bit ruffled, but otherwise rested and grinning at the unusual formalities. “Just milk please, Sir. In fact, I think I should do that, don't you? Part of my wifely duties?”

“Hmmm. We haven't really discussed those yet, have we?” His gaze drifted to her nightgown-covered body.

She blushed, pointedly ignored his comment, and accepted the tea. “How long d'you think we should remain here, Dom?”

He shook his head and puffed out a breath of frustration, then took his

own tea and joined her at the little table by the window. “I have no idea. It can’t be too long because I have other work awaiting my return. But this particular necklace was one of my largest commissions, and without sounding too mercenary, I’d rather like to be paid for it.”

“As well you should,” she endorsed. As he remained silent, she narrowed her eyes at him. “What is it? Something’s worrying you...”

He nodded. “Given what Nick told me, I’m trying hard not to jump to the conclusion that the Earl has left the country to avoid his debts.”

Wren hissed in a breath. “Thus leaving you with an expensive piece on your hands and no profits at all.”

“Indeed.”

“I think it’s time we had a very blunt conversation with Mr Ludlow, don’t you? After all, in my experience, there are few—if any—secrets from the staff of a house like this. They would know if there were financial problems, I’ll wager, and most likely could tell us if they’ve sensed any plans their masters had to go abroad...”

Dominic looked at her. “Logical and flawless.” He grinned. “I think I’ve managed to find myself a rather brilliant wife.”

“Nonsense,” she scolded, colour rising in her cheeks. “That’s not brilliance, that’s common sense.”

“Whatever it is, it surprises me, Wren. Constantly.” He leaned back in his chair and gazed at her. “How you, a foundling, can be so clear-headed, composed, and informed...not to mention literate, attentive, and possessed of a surprising amount of what seems like natural comprehension...well, I’m truly stunned by you sometimes.” He blinked. “Make that all the time.”

She dipped her head in embarrassment. “That’s just silly.”

“How did you learn, Wren? How did you come by your knowledge?” He stretched his hand across the table and brushed his fingers over her hand as she held her teacup. “Tell me?”

“There’s not much to tell. You already know I was fortunate to spend time with Reverend Simmons. He saw something in me, I suppose. And he never hesitated to answer my questions, give me books, help me learn anything and everything. If I possess a tenth of the qualities you’ve just listed, it is entirely due to his teachings.” She sipped, then looked up at him. “He helped me with my speech, even though he knew what I was. He believed everyone should be able to converse with anyone at any time, and

learning to speak properly made such a thing possible. He taught me that truly great people can address a Duke or a farmer with the same respect, and he impressed upon me that the ability to *think* was crucial to all facets of life, even that of a foundling maid, which I was at that time.”

“He was a great influence, it seems. I would like to have met him.”

“I believe he would have liked you, Dom. I certainly liked him very much. Looking back...” Her gaze turned to the window as she sought for words, “looking back on that time, I think I cast him in the role of a father figure. He brought some happiness into my life and gave me what my mind apparently craved. Knowledge.”

“Were you able to put that knowledge to good use?”

She shrugged. “I read whenever possible. Nobody notices a maid with a basket of dust cloths who might have a book tucked beneath. So I continued to improve myself as best I could, but then...”

Her voice tapered off and Dominic knew that those memories should remain buried.

“It’s time we dressed, Wren. Breakfast awaits us and I don’t know about you, but I’m quite sharp set. D’you think there will be bacon? Eggs, perhaps? Maybe a fresh bun or two?”

She grinned at him, the expression warming his heart. “I shall ensure that your breakfast meets with your approval, husband, even if I have to kill the pig and cook the bacon myself.”

He laughed back. “There. Now I know I have exactly the right wife.”

~~*~*~*

Wren wasn’t completely certain she was the right wife for anyone, let alone Dominic, but she put on a brave face as she dressed, and managed not to blush as she requested he re-fasten the buttons he’d opened so casually last night.

Waking in a strange bed was still an unusual experience; waking with a

man tucked around her keeping her warm? Well, that was unique.

And she wasn't ashamed to admit to herself that she rather liked it.

However, theirs was no ordinary marriage, and she would not embarrass him in any way with displays of any kind of unusual or more intense affection.

She would, she decided, take her cues from Dominic when it came to marriage. Thus far, it had been friendly, warm, and surprisingly comfortable. None of which she was about to disturb by pursuing other matters. Although privately she confessed to herself that those "other matters" were starting to raise their heads a little more often than she would have imagined.

However, none of those meandering notions were discernible as they made their way downstairs to the hall.

"Good morning, Mr Greybrooke. Mrs Greybrooke." Ludlow awaited them with a courteous bow. "If you will follow me?" He led them to a breakfast room where sunshine illuminated the lovely carpets and chairs, and sparkled off the china set on the sideboard and the small dining table. It probably could have seated a dozen people, but—in a house this size—that was quite small and intimate.

Ludlow pulled out a chair for Wren, and she thanked him with a smile as her husband took the one opposite.

"There's plenty of food," the butler nodded at the covered dishes. "And tea, of course." He beckoned a maid with a pot, who poured into the cup beside Wren's plate. Another smile thanked the girl, and Dominic did the same, adding sugar, as was his wont, to his cup.

"We've fresh eggs and bacon." Mrs Collins arrived, somewhat breathless. "And the rolls are just coming out of the oven."

"It all sounds delicious, Mrs Collins." Dominic heaved in a breath. "I declare I can smell that bread from here." His eyes lit up as the promised rolls appeared on another dish borne by yet another maid.

He looked at Ludlow. "I see you are still fully staffed, even in the absence of their Graces," he commented quietly.

"A house this size, Mr Greybrooke, requires a full complement below stairs. There are always duties that need to be done, regardless of who is currently in residence."

"Naturally." Dominic nodded sagely. "Er...you mentioned bacon?"

"Of course, sir." Ludlow gestured to the sideboard.

Wren hid a chuckle as Dominic helped himself to a lavish breakfast, then took her turn, modestly spooning eggs next to the fresh rolls and limiting herself to only two rashers of bacon, lest her husband should want more.

The butler dismissed the maids once the two of them had their food. “Once you’ve finished your meal, sir, Mrs Collins and I would welcome a chance to...to...discuss matters of importance to us both.”

“Of course,” nodded Dominic. “In the room where we sat last night?”

“If that is convenient.” He and the housekeeper left the two of them to enjoy their meal in privacy.

Wren found the warm rolls mouthwateringly excellent, and said so.

“The bacon is also very good,” Dominic agreed, demolishing his fifth rasher. “So at least there are no concerns about feeding the household at the moment.”

His wife touched her napkin to her lips and then lifted her teacup, regarding her husband over the top of it. “What are the concerns, then, Dominic? I have no idea where to even begin when it comes to a house this size.” She shot him a wry grin. “My experiences have been entirely below stairs, so this is all terribly new to me, but I will say that the fireplaces are very clean. And that *is* something I know about...”

He grinned back. “You’ll never have to worry about such a thing again, my dear. I can promise you that, at least.”

She sighed, then found herself shivering a little at the heat in his eyes. “Thank you. That is most reassuring. But should the occasion ever arise...”

“I’ll be sure to call on your fireplace expertise.” His gaze drifted to the window as he fell silent.

“What is it?”

“I was wondering if we should send a message to Lady Agnes. She’ll be expecting to hear from us when we get home.”

Wren considered the matter. “We didn’t say exactly when we were returning, did we? I understood that we would be expected to be here for a day at least, while your business with the Earl was concluded.”

“That was my expectation, yes. If all had gone as planned, we’d probably be on our way back to town this afternoon. But to be honest, with the looks on Ludlow’s and Mrs Collins’s faces, I’m not sure we can leave today.” He sipped his tea. “I should rephrase that. We could leave today, but I have the distinct feeling that something is not right, and it would go against the grain

for me to walk away if this household and the people in it are in trouble.”

Wren obeyed her impulse and smiled at him across the table. “There. Now I know *I* have exactly the right husband.”

Chapter Twelve



Breakfast was soon concluded, and Dominic offered his arm to his wife as they walked to the small parlour.

“I confess to some nerves about this,” he said quietly.

“I can’t say I like it, either,” she replied. “It just doesn’t seem right for an Earl and his wife to just disappear, with barely a word to their household.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” He pushed the door open for Wren.

The couple already in the room rose to greet them with a bow and a curtsy.

“Please sit, Mrs Greybrooke.” Mrs Collins gestured to one of the larger chairs.

Obediently, Wren sat, and watched as her husband took his place near her. Once they were all settled, Dom crossed his legs and looked at Ludlow.

“Now’s the time, Mr Ludlow. If there’s anything you can tell us about this current situation, we’d be pleased to hear it.”

The butler nodded. “It is indeed time, sir. And first, my gratitude to you and your lovely wife for your patience.”

“We’re grateful for the welcome and attention we’ve received.” Wren smiled at both Ludlow and Mrs Collins. “But we are quite ready to listen to whatever you can tell us.”

“We don’t know where the Earl is, nor whether he plans on returning.” Ludlow spoke bluntly. “He said nothing at all when he left, refusing to answer our questions, and we’ve heard nothing since.”

“Her Ladyship looked nervous, I’ll tell you that,” Mrs Collins added. “Had me pack just a few of her basics, but most of her jewellery.”

“Oh dear.” Wren frowned. “That would be of some concern, I should imagine.”

“Indeed it was, Mrs Greybrooke. What’s a body to think when the valuables are packed, but no ballgowns to go with ‘em?”

Dominic looked at the worried face of the man across from him. "Your thoughts, Ludlow?"

"I expect they are much as yours at this moment, Mr Greybrooke." He sighed. "It would seem that the Earl and Countess of Linton have flown the nest, you might say."

"And they left no instructions at all?"

"Barely even said goodbye. Loaded up their smallest carriage, and the Earl took the reins. Refused a driver or outrider, and just took off without saying another word."

"The letter to my husband," said Wren quietly. "The one requesting his presence. When was that written? Yesterday morning?"

Ludlow shook his head. "I believe he'd written that the day before. He gave it to me that evening, and asked that I send it right off at first light."

"So at that time, there was no indication that they were going to leave?"

"Not at that time, sir, no."

"It was that message," said Mrs Collins. "Yesterday morning, not long after the letter was sent off to you, sir, a message arrived for his Lordship. And that's when the trouble started."

"And before you ask, Mr Greybrooke," said Ludlow, "I was not made privy to its contents. I recognised the seal, though. The legal firm that is holding the estate in trust. As I understand it..."

Dominic held up his hand. "No need to go further, Ludlow. Murmurs of the situation as regards his Lordship and the title, not to mention the property, have already reached London."

Ludlow hissed out a breath and frowned. "Well, be that as it may, as soon as his Lordship had read it, he threw it in the fire."

Dominic thought about that, as did Wren

"So we are to assume, then, that the message caused both his Lordship and Lady Linton to pack up and leave without notice?"

"It's the only thing that makes sense," said Mrs Collins.

"What of their daughter, Lady Helen Perrin?"

"She is visiting friends for the next few weeks. A trip that has been in the planning for some time." Mrs Collins frowned. "Her fiancé's family. They extended the invitation a while ago and only recently was it convenient for Lady Helen to leave Fairmeadows for their estate. Now that summer's almost here, London is growing thin of company, so the Earl brought his wife and

daughter home.”

“And thus my summons, I suppose,” said Dominic thoughtfully. “The necklace would be here awaiting Lady Helen when she returned...a lovely surprise for the bride-to-be.”

“Although why in such a hurry, I don’t know,” Ludlow pursed his lips. “It wasn’t necessary to have the piece immediately. But then again, so many things don’t make sense that I suppose I should just give up trying to wrap my mind around it all.”

“All right then.” Dominic glanced at Wren. “It might be the moment to ask indelicate questions, but we need answers, I’m afraid.” He turned to Ludlow. “Is the Earl in financial trouble, d’you know?”

Both servants were quiet for a moment, exchanging a speaking glance that told Dominic the answer.

“I’m afraid so.” Ludlow nodded.

“Poor management? Estate problems? Crop failures?” Wren ventured a guess or two.

“None of those, Mrs Greybrooke.” Mrs Collins squared her shoulders and stared at her, pausing briefly as if losing her train of thought. Then she recalled herself. “Gambling.” She spat out the word as if she had a mouthful of something most distasteful.

“In town?”

“No, Mr Greybrooke. Here. In our very own drawing room.” She took a breath. “It began quite a while ago. Just a few evenings now and again, with the neighbours. A casual game of cards or two. Nothing of concern.”

“But it became more frequent.” Ludlow took up the tale. “A regular sort of thing when the Earl was in residence. And this year, over the winter? We could see that the losses he suffered were growing. Consequently, things weren’t as well-managed here at Fairmeadows as they should be.”

“There wasn’t as much money for the estate as there should have been.” Mrs Collins frowned again. “Our salaries were short, we had to settle for inferior foods...it got to the point that we knew if he’d won or lost.”

“If he won, we would have a little extra, thanks to her Ladyship.” Ludlow glanced at Mrs Collins. “But if he lost...”

“And most recently, I’m guessing, he lost.” Dominic looked for, and received, a confirming nod from Ludlow.

“Enough so that he decided to take his wife, her jewels, and flee?”

“I cannot tell, sir, to be honest.” The butler stopped short of wringing his hands, but it was a near thing. “There is another game scheduled for this evening. If his Lordship has lost enough that the players demand payment tonight...then yes. It would be logical for him t-t-to not be here.”

The anguished stutter was a hard thing to hear, and an even harder thing to watch, realised Dominic, as the man in front of him faced the fact that the employer who had had his loyalty for so long had possibly returned it by running away, and leaving those who had served him to fend for themselves.

He leaned back in his chair and glanced at Wren. “Well, there goes my commission,” he said quietly. “Fortunately, rubies never go out of style.”

She reached out and touched his hand. “We’ll overcome this setback, Dom.”

He covered hers with his own, forgetting for a few moments that they were not alone. “You’re right, my dear. We will.”

But before anyone could say anything else, a loud clatter echoed through the house as someone seriously mistreated the front door knocker.

“Good grief,” Ludlow sprang to his feet. “What on earth...”

The other three rose and followed him, Dominic hoping against hope that it wasn’t a set of bill-collectors, since that was an eventuality he was not at all prepared to deal with.

But as Ludlow hurriedly opened the door, they saw not a group of irate men, but one attractive young woman, with her hands on her hips, staring at the butler.

“What the devil, Ludlow? Why weren’t you at the door?” Her gaze travelled into the hall. “And who the *hell* are these people?”

Mrs Collins rushed forward and dropped a quick curtsey. “Oh my goodness. We weren’t expecting you today.” She gestured toward Dominic and Wren. “This is Mr and Mrs Greybrooke, my Lady.” Then she moved to the young woman’s side and gave them a warning look. “Please pay your respects to Lady Helen Perrin, daughter of the Earl of Linton.”

~~*~*~*

Wren found herself eyeing the newcomer with a great deal of curiosity.

Bold, unafraid to voice her opinions in the bluntest of terms, Lady Helen was nothing if not unique. Her bonnet, lushly trimmed with feathers, now lay on a small table in the hall, along with the gloves she'd torn off as she entered, and the travelling cloak flung in the same direction.

Her gown was creased, but still revealed a provocative set of curves, covered this morning by a modest affair of lace and muslin. The delicate shade of lilac was the perfect complement to Lady Helen's head of pale blonde hair and eyes that were pure blue.

At the present time, however, they were narrowed into a frown beneath light brown brows as she stared at Ludlow. "What do you mean, they've vanished?"

"Gone, my Lady." He waved his hands vaguely toward the door. "They left yesterday afternoon, and would not tell me where they were going, nor how long they expected to remain there. Wherever it was." He sighed audibly. "Would you like tea?"

"No. I need a brandy." Lady Helen marched into the parlour and straight to the bureau, where a decanter and glasses sat quietly in the sunshine.

Wren heard the clink as her Ladyship suited words to action. She leaned to Dominic. "Bit of a handful, I should imagine, wouldn't you?"

He bit his lips against a grin and nodded.

"We must tell her all," Mrs Collins whispered to Ludlow. "She has to know."

"Go ahead then," he whispered back.

Her eyes widened in shock. "Not me. You."

"You must be jesting." Ludlow's countenance paled.

"Come along." Dominic encouraged. "Let's get this over with, shall we?"

All four trooped into the parlour just as Lady Helen tossed off a healthy serving of brandy, and sighed. "That's better." She stalked to a chair, sat down, and stared at them. "Now." She looked at Dominic. "You. Tell me who you are again, why you're here, and what you know about this chaotic mess that seems to have caused some temporary insanity in two of Linton's most devoted retainers." She shot a scorching glance at Ludlow and Mrs Collins.

Dominic raised an eyebrow. “You know, you may be Lady Helen Linton, daughter of an Earl, but from where I stand, your manners could use some adjustments.”

Lady Helen blinked.

Dominic ignored it. “Ludlow and Mrs Collins have been all that is kind and gracious since we arrived. Summoned, I might add, by your Papa. We answered his call, even though it was our wedding day.” He held out his hand to Wren, who took it. “My wife and I made the journey from London, only to find your parents had departed, leaving the entire Fairmeadows property ignorant of their destination or their timetable.”

He let the girl digest that for a moment as he moved Wren to the couch and took a seat beside her. His actions seemed to free Mrs Collins and Ludlow from their temporary paralysis, as they too seated themselves.

“I...” Helen frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do we, my Lady.” Ludlow took a breath. “It is just as Mr Greybrooke said. Your Mama and Papa decided at some point yesterday to leave the premises. They packed quickly...” He glanced at Mrs Collins, “took your Mama’s jewellery, and drove themselves away. Mr and Mrs Greybrooke arrived later yesterday evening.”

Lady Helen held up her hand to stem the flow of words. “A moment.” She looked at Dominic and Wren. “Why were you summoned?”

“My husband is a jeweller of some renown, Lady Helen. Your Papa had commissioned a piece, and he wished it delivered yesterday. We brought it with us.”

“What sort of piece?”

Dominic sighed. “It was to be a surprise,” he answered. “For your wedding to Sir Marmaduke Gadstone-Riggley.”

She snorted. “Well, that’s a shame, Mr Greybrooke. Since the wedding’s off.”

“What?” Ludlow’s eyebrows nearly shot off the top of his head.

“Oh my word...” Mrs Collins turned sheet white and grasped her bosom in shock.

“A sudden decision, I take it?” Wren kept her voice level, although the urge to laugh at what was turning into a well-choreographed farce threatened to overtake her.”

Helen nodded. “Sir Marmaduke, my *fiancé*, and I use the word guardedly

since he was apparently unaware of its meaning, is no longer a person of interest in my life.”

Wren let a gentle smile curve her lips. “You gave him his *congé*?”

“If you call emptying a tureen of turtle soup over his head and walloping him with the ladle ‘giving him his *congé*’ then yes. I did indeed.” Lady Helen nodded firmly.

“And this would be because...” Wren encouraged.

“Well, the soup was horrible, for one thing. But the other was that he’d been quite obvious about his attentions to one or two of the other guests. Up to and including touching one of them none too subtly as he passed her in the doorway, and whispering to her that he’d see her later.” Her eyes shot dangerous sparks. “While he was walking in to dinner with *me*, if you can imagine it.”

“And yet you let him off with a soup bath?” Wren shook her head. “I think I would have shot him, myself. That kind of behaviour is downright appalling.”

Dominic pulled out a small piece of paper.

“What are you doing?”

“Making a note, my dear. I don’t want to be shot, nor do I ever want a turtle soup bath.”

“Don’t fondle any other women, and you’ll be quite safe.”

Helen snorted. “You may jest, but I can tell you it was a horrid shock. I’m not a child, and I know men can behave atrociously, but this was beyond the pale. I had no other choice, especially when he announced at dinner that he was considering anticipating his wedding vows and bedding me sooner, because why should he wait for a ceremony? I was ripe for the picking, and he was eager to *harvest my fruit*. A turn of phrase I did not find at all amusing.”

“How appalling.”

“Hence the soup?” Dominic raised an eyebrow.

“It was closer than the gravy boat.”

“I’m rather glad there was no carving knife within reach,” observed Wren. “I take it your actions ended the meal?”

Helen gulped, and for a second or two betrayed her true state of mind. “I don’t know, because I walked out.” She shook her head. “I ran upstairs, had the maid pack for me and summon my carriage for this morning, early. I

didn't see or speak to anyone else until just before I left, when Lady Gadstone-Riggley came into the hall and tried to make light of the whole thing in an effort to persuade me to stay." Her lips firmed. "She tried to persuade me that it was all a silly attempt at humour, and that I had misunderstood everything because of my youth and innocence."

Wren frowned. "A mistake, that."

"Indeed, as I so informed her." Helen's eyes began to shine with unshed tears. "I didn't love the man, but it was a good match as far as social status and money were concerned. Mama and Papa..." she swallowed roughly. "They wanted it. And I thought being married would be nice."

"My dear girl." Mrs Collins rose and went to her, gently putting an arm around her shoulders. "It's going to be all right. You did exactly the right thing, because you deserve a husband who is worthy of you, not some nasty cad."

Helen pulled herself together, with what Wren viewed as a great deal of courage. "Well, Collins, I hate to tell you this, but if my parents have indeed absconded with everything of value, I doubt I'll ever find a husband at all, worthy or not."

Chapter Thirteen



“I am forced to wonder what unexpected event is going to erupt next,” observed Dominic, as he and Wren strolled the grounds of Fairmeadows after a rather hurried and informal lunch.

“I cannot but agree,” she replied. “I do feel quite sorry for Lady Helen, though. She was thoroughly misled about her fiancé’s disposition, wasn’t she?”

Dominic shrugged. “It was clearly an arranged marriage. And I’m sure it’s not the first time something like this has happened.”

“Probably not, but even so...”

“Even so.”

“We have to tell her about the debts, Dom. And what are we to do about these guests arriving for more gaming today?”

“Should we do anything at all? We could just pack up our belongings and leave. We’re under no obligation to remain here and shoulder the problems of people we don’t know. And who, I might add, have cost me considerably in terms of time and money.”

Wren paused and turned to stare at him. “You couldn’t do that. I couldn’t do that.” She shook her head. “No, we cannot abandon Lady Helen—or Ludlow and Mrs Collins—in the middle of such a mess, Dominic. You said so yourself, last night.”

He smiled. “No, we can’t, love. And I’m glad to hear you agree.”

She narrowed her gaze. “You were testing me.”

“Not really, because I knew what your answer would be. But I did have to present that option, because we may well be sticking our heads into a hornet’s nest of other people’s problems.”

“True, but I doubt either of us could forgive ourselves if we just walked away.”

They resumed their walk, and Dominic found himself noticing that the

gardens needed a bit of tending. There were weeds beginning to show on the gravel driveway, and some of the windows on the side of the house were more than a little grimy.

Apparently, what they'd been told was nothing more nor less than the truth. The Earl of Linton was running low on funds.

"I have to assume that what precipitated all this was the letter," he observed. "I'll wager it was letting the Earl know there would be no support from the estate funds the lawyers have been sitting on."

"Why would they do that?" Wren shot a puzzled glance at him.

"Apparently there has been some question as to the legitimacy of the Earl's assuming the title. He was a very distant relative, to say the least. But no one has challenged him. Yet. There's probably a time constraint, or something, so I'm sure he will finally be fully recognised, but until that point...minimal financial support."

"Ahh." She digested that. "Difficult to maintain an estate like this with one's hands tied by legalities, I should imagine."

He turned their steps back toward the building as he nodded in agreement. "We need a plan, Wren. A plan to deal with these gentlemen arriving for a card game. They'll not be pleased to find that their pigeon is not only not ready to be plucked, but not even present. And I would not want them to take out their ire on Lady Helen, any of the staff, or the house itself."

Wren's face paled a little. "I couldn't agree more." She squared her shoulders and stared straight ahead. "The first thing would be to hide all the brandy and bury the wine as deeply as possible."

He drew her closer, their arms linked warmly. "We'll not resurrect any bad memories for you, my dear. You have my word on that."

"I believe you. And I've learned much since that time, a lot of which I would not hesitate to put to use should the occasion arise."

"Really?"

"Give me a poker and find out." Her voice was steady, her eyes cool.

Dominic took a breath. "It is my sincere hope that no pokers will be necessary this evening, but we may need to employ a few other methods of distraction."

"Good," she relaxed a little. "Let's find Lady Helen and discuss what needs to be done."

That task was speedily accomplished, since as soon as they returned to

the house, Ludlow met them and informed them that their presence was much needed. Mrs Collins had given Lady Helen the bad news about the Linton finances, and she had not taken it well.

“Crockery was shattered, Mr Greybrooke,” he said, horror-stricken. “A *Meissen teacup*.”

Dominic struggled. “Oh. Well then. That’s...um...”

“A tragedy indeed,” Wren saved him. “But we must also sympathise with Lady Helen’s youth and the shock she must have received, wouldn’t you agree?”

The butler shook his head. “I don’t know anymore, Mrs Greybrooke. I just don’t know what to think anymore.”

Dominic gave the man a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. “Why don’t we all have a chat about this, Ludlow? We agree something has to be done, and quickly, so let’s put our minds to it.”

“Oh yes, sir. An excellent idea.”

Heaving a sigh of relief that someone else was now in charge, albeit briefly, Ludlow escorted them into what Dominic was coming to think of as the main room in the entire Fairmeadows building. The small parlour.

“Here you are.” Lady Helen leaped to her feet. “What do you think of this madness, may I ask? My parents? Horridly in debt? Running away with everything and leaving not a single word?”

“Lady Helen,” began Wren in a soothing tone. “Please, sit. Nothing to be gained by going off at half-cock.”

Dominic bit his lip, but kept his countenance as he moved to Helen’s side. “My wife is right, my Lady. Let’s talk about this in a rational manner, shall we? There are immediate decisions to be made before any sort of discussion about the future can take place.”

“Immediate?”

“We have not yet informed her ladyship about today’s guests,” said Ludlow, who had taken up a strategic position in front of the tea table. He was obviously not going to risk another *Meissen teacup*.

Helen glared at him. “Then perhaps I should be informed. Right now.” She sat down without any grace, and fixed her gaze on Dominic. “You, sir. Please explain.”

He nodded. “These are trying times, Lady Helen. And, to be blunt, your parents have left you, and Fairmeadows, in a difficult situation.” He took the

chair next to her. “Apparently there are guests expected today. Your Papa had a regular card game with these men, weekly or monthly or something...”

“It depended on the weather, among other things, sir,” Ludlow helped.

“And of course the gambling stakes would have been high,” observed Helen, her lips curling in distaste. “Why did I never see it before? My Papa is a fool. Forgive my bluntness, but how else can you describe his behaviour?”

“Many gentlemen are, Lady Helen,” soothed Wren. “It is a weakness of character, I believe. But it does not mean he cares nothing for his family, especially you. Both he and your Mama believed you to be safe with your fiancé and his family.”

“Hah.” She snorted. “Shows how wrong they were in their thinking.”

“Well, right or wrong, there will be three gentlemen arriving this evening. Not for dinner, apparently...am I correct in that, Ludlow? There’s no way to get a message to them to postpone?” Dominic glanced at him.

“You are correct, Mr Greybrooke. Three gentlemen, usually. Sir Talbot Caldwell, who lives not far from here, invites the guests to dine with him, and then they travel together to Fairmeadows for an evening of cards. If we send a message, they may want to know where the Earl is...”

“I know Sir Talbot,” exclaimed Helen, interrupting. “I cannot possibly imagine him taking vast amounts of money from my father. He seems to be a charming gentleman, with always a kind word for me after he moved in to Caldwell Manor.”

“He is accompanied by Mr Royal Singleton,” continued Ludlow, “and Lord Timothy Hardwicke.”

Dominic felt more than saw Wren’s reaction to that name, and goosebumps broke out on his skin as the colour drained from her cheeks, leaving her quite white.

~~*~*~*

It couldn't be...

She closed her eyes for a brief moment, praying she'd misheard Ludlow's words.

"Wren," Dominic had her hand in his. "Are you well?" His eyes were fixed on her face, missing nothing.

She pulled herself together. "Yes, yes, of course. Just a moment's dizziness." She managed a smile. "Probably because I have no idea how we are going to manage these gentlemen when they arrive, only to find there is no game. Or indeed any Earl to welcome them."

Her husband sat beside her on the couch, leaving Helen's side. His grip was firm, and Wren found herself taking comfort in the warmth of his touch.

"What I don't understand," said Helen, her brow wrinkling into a frown, "is how Papa lost so much money. I knew he played regularly here, but he was never silly with money. Mama and I always stayed away from him on those evenings, because we preferred to read or go upstairs and fuss with Mama's clothes. We made a point of leaving them alone. I don't even recall seeing Sir Talbot, or anyone else, to be honest." She pursed her lips and then shrugged. "But if what you're all saying is true, Papa must have lost considerable sums over time, and that's not like him. He always prided himself on his ability to play cards well, and to keep the money end of it on the modest side."

Mrs Collins nodded. "That's quite true, my Lady. As long as I've been here, I've heard of how clever his Lordship was in the handling of games of chance, and how he enjoyed a good hand with friends. We never thought he would play for large sums of money. It was a surprise to all of us that the debts mounted up the way they did."

Dominic glanced at Ludlow. "Would you agree?"

"I would." He nodded. "I suppose we all began to feel as though his Lordship's skill had deserted him." He bit his lip. "I would never betray a confidence, certainly not of my Master, but I will say that conversations about the depth of his losses had grown to be...emphatic, quite emphatic, especially over the last few months."

"Yelled at by Lady Linton, was he?" Dominic quirked an eyebrow.

"Quite often, sir."

"I never heard a thing about it," said Helen defiantly. "Not a peep from anyone."

“Well, you wouldn’t, my Lady,” soothed Mrs Collins. “Such things are certainly not meant for young ears, especially tender ones like yours.”

Helen made an odd noise, not unlike a steam engine about to release pressure.

Wren squeezed Dominic’s hand and released it. “I’m sure your parents did not wish you to worry, Lady Helen. A mark of their concern for you.”

“But where was their concern for Fairmeadows? And the people living here?” She looked around. “Can anyone tell me that? This is our *home*. I cannot, simply *cannot* believe my father would gamble to the point of losing it.”

“That is a question you must ask him when you next see him,” said Dominic calmly. “In the meantime, should we send a message to Sir Talbot Caldwell postponing the game this evening?”

“I’m not sure that would work, Mr Greybrooke,” answered Ludlow. “The appeal of Fairmeadows, its brandy, and a good game of cards has apparently struck a chord with these gentlemen. Sir Talbot does not have the ability to put on an evening of elegance such as we offer here. I’d be prepared to wager that they would come anyway and instruct me to set up the table as usual, regardless of the Earl’s presence.”

Dominic frowned. “That seems rather intrusive...”

“They are *gentlemen*, sir. The type that do as they please.”

Wren managed to repress a shudder at Ludlow’s dry comment, although she fully understood exactly what he meant.

Dominic was quiet for a few moments. “And of course he owes them money.” He turned in his chair and looked at the butler. “How about if we give them a game, Ludlow?”

“You would play, sir?” Ludlow’s eyebrows rose.

“Probably not as myself, of course. Heaven knows what an insult it would be for an *ordinary* fellow like me to consider playing cards with gentlemen of superior pedigrees.”

“But if you were someone else, say a Viscount or something...” Lady Helen narrowed her gaze. “You could engage them and learn more of my father’s situation.”

“They certainly would not recognise you, Mr Greybrooke. I doubt your paths have ever crossed.”

“They haven’t,” assured Dominic. He turned to Wren. “What do you

think, my dear?"

"I think it is risky," she began. "There is the matter of a stake for the game. And although I have not met the gentlemen, I have heard of...of... Lord Hardwicke. Unfortunately, what I heard was not of a positive nature."

"Wren," murmured Dominic, "are you sure?"

She gazed into his eyes, so dark and caring. Somehow, he knew. All she had to do was nod her head.

He straightened. "I believe that perhaps it's time these card players tasted some of their own medicine." He turned to Ludlow. "I have some skill at cards. And I believe I can assume the mantle of some unknown Viscount for a few hours." He turned back to Wren. "Perhaps we can teach them a lesson or two about gambling debts and their payment."

"Oh, Mr Greybrooke, that is a risky course of action," Mrs Collins wrung her hands. "Suppose they should find out that you're not who you say you are?"

"Then you shall act as astounded and horrified as you please, Mrs Collins. And my wife and I will slink away as the villains of the piece." He shrugged. "It won't matter to us at all. But my hope is that we can turn the tide of these games, and discover what happened between Lord Linton and his opponents at the card table."

"Well then..." Ludlow gulped. "If Lady Helen approves..."

"I certainly do," she responded tartly. "If you can best them at a hand or two, perhaps puncturing their high opinion of themselves, then I am in favour."

"Do they have a high opinion of themselves?" Wren shot a look at the young woman.

"Most men of their type usually do. Especially when they're winning large sums of money."

That surprisingly dry and sarcastic statement hung in the air for a moment as everyone realised the uncomfortable truth. Lady Helen was absolutely right.

Chapter Fourteen



“I’m still not sure about all this.” Wren smoothed her hands down over her gown.

“You make a wonderful Viscountess, my dear.” Dominic grinned as he attempted to tie his cravat in the very latest fashion.

“Easier for me, I think.” She turned to the pier glass and surveyed her reflection. “A fancy gown, a few beads and bobs, not to mention a feather or two, and all of a sudden I’m a Viscountess.” She grinned. “I don’t have to worry about a cravat.”

With a curse, Dominic tore the thing open and began again. “These breeches are a bit loose,” he complained.

“You won’t be dancing in them, and perhaps we can beg a pin from Mrs Collins.” She sighed. “I don’t know, Dom. Are we completely insane? Two nobodies pretending to be somebodies in order to preserve the reputation and honour of a pair of important bodies who have run away from their debts?”

“When you put it like that,” he huffed out a laugh. “Yes, we probably are insane.” He turned to her. “But you know something? We’re having an adventure, Wren. You and I. Certainly not anything I could have ever imagined, that’s certain. And perhaps in years to come, we’ll look back on it and have a good laugh about it.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I thought having an adventure might be taking a ferry to the Isle of Wight. Travelling through the Lake District. Seeing sheep in Scotland, or something.” She shook her head. “This wasn’t the sort of thing I’d imagined, I must confess.”

A tap on the door interrupted her words, and Mrs Collins peered inside the room. “Do you need anything? Any help at all?”

“How are you on cravats, Mrs Collins?” Dominic flicked the ends of the fabric around his neck. “I’m finding this one deucedly hard to tie properly.”

“It’s probably the starch, Mr Greybrooke. His Lordship insists they be

highly stiffened. Here, let me try..."

"I'd have thought Ludlow, perhaps," began Wren.

That comment made the woman grin. "Oh no, Mrs Greybrooke. He's all thumbs. It's sort of a jest really, between him and his Lordship, that when it comes to cravats, the women in the house tie them better than the gentlemen."

To prove her point, her nimble fingers quickly pleated, curved, and folded the fabric around his neck, producing a delightfully formal arrangement that had Wren applauding.

"Oh well done," she grinned, staring at Dominic. "That looks magnificent."

"Indeed, it does." He stared at the mirror. "Is it all right for me to move my head?" He stood stiffly in front of the ladies.

"Just be careful when you look down."

"Gentlemen never look down, Mrs Collins," chuckled Wren. "They observe their world over the top of their noses without moving their heads."

She laughed. "You're quite correct about that."

Dominic joined their laughter, then straightened his shoulders, tugging gently on his lapels. "Is Ludlow preparing the card game?"

"He is." Mrs Collins sobered. "The table is set as always, his Lordship's brandy and the glasses are already put out, and there are dishes for those horrid cigars Mr Singleton likes to smoke sometimes." She shuddered. "Awfully smelly things."

"We can only hope he will refrain from that this evening," said Wren soothingly. "Perhaps since Lady Helen and I will be present, he'll be deterred."

"Are you sure about this?" Mrs Collins frowned. "His Lordship always plays with the gentlemen alone."

"I understand," nodded Dominic. "But since the Earl isn't here, and Lady Helen is, I think we can probably talk our way into having the players accept the presence of two ladies, especially when one is my wife."

"It would be difficult for them to refuse outright, wouldn't it?" added Wren. "They are, after all, guests of Fairmeadows."

"What's the worst they could do? Leave without a game?" Dominic moved to the door. "And that would defeat the whole point of their visit."

"I hope you're right, Mr Greybrooke. I really do."

“Don’t worry, Mrs Collins. It will probably be a shorter evening with his Lordship being absent, and they’ll be leaving before you know it.”

The housekeeper looked a bit more cheerful at that comment, but Wren knew that she was still unconvinced that this entire plan would work. Which was pretty much her own state of mind as well, since trying to pass off a foundling and a bastard as a Viscount and Viscountess was preposterous enough. Let alone the fact that neither possessed the kind of funds these gamblers were probably used to.

She said so to Dominic as they walked together along the hall.

“How about a stake, Dom? What shall you do for money?”

He shot her a quick smile. “I’m a jeweller, sweetheart. I shall have an adequate stake, believe me.”

“But…”

He took her hand. “Don’t worry, Wren. I’m not about to lose what little fortune I have. And besides, there wasn’t a boy in the Priory who could best me at cards. I don’t want to sound immodest, but I know my way around a deck. Will I win? I hope so. These are experienced gamblers, but the turn of a card always evens out the deal, and the players themselves will tell me a lot as well, just by their actions.”

“Hmm.” She let it go, but wished she could share Dom’s confidence.

He led her downstairs, holding her hand up as if they were entering the finest ballroom in London. She couldn’t help the tiny thrill of excitement as she glimpsed their reflections in the polished wooden panels of the hall, and the many mirrored surfaces.

He seemed taller in his dress clothes, the dark evening breeches set off by a rich green coat embroidered with darker green designs. The waistcoat matched; ivory jacquard with green embroidery, over an ivory silk shirt with elegant lace ruffles at the sleeve. The cravat finished off the ensemble.

“You are so handsome,” murmured Wren, scarcely aware she spoke aloud.

Dominic almost missed a step. “*What?*”

“Well, look at you. At us.” She paused in front of a huge gold-framed mirror. “Anyone would think we actually lived here.”

“Thus proving Shakespeare was correct when he said something about apparel and the man.”

“*Apparel oft proclaims the man,*” Wren quoted. “Hamlet.”

He stared at her. "You continually surprise me, dear girl."

"I find I remember things quite well." She felt her cheeks flush at his comment.

"Would that I could recall things like that," he blinked. "Sometimes I can't even remember what I had for breakfast."

Her laugh rang out and the two reflections smiled at each other, then vanished as the couple walked on to where Ludlow held the door.

"Are you ready?" His voice hesitant, he gave them both an appraising perusal. "You look the parts, Mr and Mrs Greybrooke, that I can say with no question in my mind."

"That would be Viscount Dominic DeBurgh, and the lovely Viscountess Wren DeBurgh."

"Are you sure that's a good name?" Mrs Collins hurried up.

"It belongs to a character in a popular romance novel," grinned Wren. "So you tell me. Are this evening's guests the sort of men you think would spend time reading a novel written by a woman?"

Snorts of incredulous amusement answered the question.

~~*~*~*

Dominic cast an appreciative gaze around the small drawing room. There was a fire burning, although it wasn't absolutely necessary, but the glow from it drew attention to the many gold-framed paintings adorning the walls. Mostly landscapes, there were one or two portraits of people with horses, dogs, and even a cow and sheep.

Centrally arranged, a finely carved card table was set up with four chairs, and the various accoutrements considered necessary when gentlemen sat down to engage in an evening's game.

Nearby stood a bureau, on top of which were decanters, trays, glistening crystal glasses, again ready to accommodate the thirsts of the players.

Wren walked over to the green baize table, noting the fully lit sconces on

the walls nearby, which would illuminate the games very well indeed.

The table itself was beautifully made, with intricately carved slender legs.

Ludlow came to her side. "A lovely piece, isn't it?"

"Indeed yes."

"I believe his Lordship once mentioned that it had been commissioned for Fairmeadows by his grandfather. It's been in the family for many years now, and always here in this room."

She peered beneath. "And I see no mechanism here by which anyone could cheat. No card storage spots or anything like that."

Ludlow looked quite shocked. "Good Heavens," he expostulated. "Of course not, Mrs Greybrooke. How could you possibly..." His voice tapered off as he caught her meaning. "You think one of the players might have been *cheating*?"

"One must consider everything pertaining to his Lordship's losses, Mr Ludlow, would you not agree?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so..." the man stuttered a little. "But surely amongst such gentlemen, the matter of one's honour is of prime importance?"

"It should be," said Dominic, joining them. "But sadly, Mr Ludlow, the world is not as perfectly ordered as many of us would wish."

The butler simply shook his head. "I must fetch the cards."

Dominic stayed at Wren's side. "It's not the table."

"I know, but I had to check." She leaned toward him a little, keeping her moves natural, wife to husband. "But you suspect something."

"If the Earl really is as good a player as the household believes, then his losses should be subject to scrutiny. At least they would be were I in his shoes."

They moved apart a little as Ludlow returned with a tray covered by a silk handkerchief. "I must set out the decks," he said. "It's tradition to have the table ready for play before the guests arrive."

Carefully he removed the covering, and Wren took a quick audible breath at the cards his action revealed.

"Oh, how beautiful."

Dominic couldn't help but agree. They were quite unusual, but in near pristine condition. The colours on the front were bright, and he found himself fascinated by the design on the backs. "This is different?" He pointed to it.

“One of the very first decks with that, sir, comes from France, I believe,” nodded Ludlow. “You’ll find more and more with designs on the back nowadays. It certainly helps keep the cards clean, and...” he shot a pointed look at Wren, “makes learning the markings on the reverse almost impossible.”

Knowing that many a fortune had been won or lost because an observant player had noticed a slight thumbprint or smudge on the blank back of a playing card, he had to agree with Ludlow’s assessment.

“French, you say?” Wren touched them softly.

“I believe so, Mrs Greybrooke. But these are the ones his Lordship uses. They were a gift from Lord Hardwicke to his Lordship last Christmas.” He set them out carefully, and then moved away to where the glasses were waiting, checking on this and that, and ensuring the guests would have everything they needed.

Wren leaned over the table, apparently fascinated by the cards.

Dominic was surprised when she bent forward, frowned, and then began moving them, spreading them out beneath the bright candlelight of the sconces.

“Dom,” a quiet whisper. “Come here. Stand in this spot.”

He obeyed, puzzled at her tone and her behaviour. “What is it?”

“These cards.” She fanned out half a dozen, frowning. “What do you see?”

He blinked and stared. “I see the backs of the cards. A pleasant and simple design in blue, sort of a Fleur de Lis shape, with a white border around the edge.”

She shook her head. “Look again. Closely.”

He did, but still could find nothing.

She sighed. “Perhaps it’s just me.” She picked up two cards, then beckoned him and moved directly underneath a sconce. Holding them next to each other, she turned her head toward him. “Now take a long look. A close and careful look.”

He did. Then shook his head. “I’m not seeing anything...”

She hissed out an impatient breath. “Wait a moment.” Looking around, her gaze landed on a quizzing glass that rested on the bureau. It looked as if it was purely for decorative purposes, but nonetheless, she picked it up and brought it to the cards, holding it over them.

“Now look.”

He did, and began to frown as he drew his head nearer. Then he took the glass from her hand, held it even higher, and turned it this way and that.

“Do you see it?” She asked.

“Damn.” He put them back on the table and met her gaze. “They’re marked, aren’t they?”

She sighed. “Yes.”

“Now we know why his fortune turned,” muttered Dominic. “And I have another question.” He left her side and went to Ludlow. “I need to know if any of the players, his Lordship included, wear spectacles, or use a quizzing glass?”

The butler blinked. “Well, now, let me see.” He thought for a moment. “Sir Talbot occasionally uses a quizzing glass. Mostly in the spring. He says the flowers make his eyes itch.”

“Hmm,” Dominic thought for a moment. “But not all the time?”

“No. But now you mention it, Lord Hardwicke wears spectacles sometimes. Very unassuming, gold rimmed, if I recall correctly.”

“When did he start wearing them, Ludlow? Do you happen to remember?” Wren joined the conversation.

“Well now, Mrs Greybrooke. That’s a question, isn’t it? I’ll have to give it some thought, because I cannot say definitely.”

“All right,” Dominic nodded. “You’ve been a big help, Ludlow.”

“I have?”

“Oh most certainly.” Wren looked at her husband. “Now all we have to do is work out how to move forward.”

Looking somewhat puzzle, Ludlow nodded. “That’s good then. I have to light the rest of the candles.”

Dominic watched him walk away, then turned to Wren. “And we have to make a plan, my dear wife.”

“We do indeed.”

Chapter Fifteen



Armed with the knowledge that the evening's game would be played with a marked deck of cards, both the Greybrookes huddled near the table, tossing out suggestions willy-nilly.

"We know the quizzing glass works," said Wren. "You could easily use that to gain an edge?"

Dominic chewed that over for a moment or two, then shook his head. "I'm not familiar enough with the markings. I might be able to memorise an ace, for example, but a whole deck?"

She had been toying with the cards as he spoke, turning them over and back. "It's only one suit," she said suddenly. "Look, Dom. Only the hearts are marked. The rest of the suits are untouched."

She fanned them out and handed him the glass, watching as he took it and flipped the cards back and forth.

"Damn, you're right. Only the hearts."

"Only the hearts what?" Lady Helen marched in and approached the table. "You have come up with something, haven't you?" She pointed at the glass. "Something to do with that."

Wren sighed. "You are very astute, my Lady." She shot a quick look at Dominic, who gave a brief approving nod in answer to her unspoken question. "It seems we must reveal what we've discovered." She glanced over her shoulder. "Ludlow, Mrs Collins? If you have a moment..."

As the small party gathered around the table, she proceeded to demonstrate what she had discovered. Lady Helen could see some of the markings, but neither the butler nor the housekeeper could clearly distinguish the difference in the colours on the backs of the cards.

The evidence, however, was irrefutable. Dominic correctly identified six of the cards Wren held up by using the quizzing glass. Lady Helen identified three by eyes alone.

“I’ll be damned,” murmured Ludlow. “That’s how it was done.” He glanced at Lady Helen. “Apologies for my language, Ma’am.”

“I’ve said worse,” she grinned. “But how clever of Mrs Greybrooke to see it, and Mr Greybrooke to understand the implications. And how clever to set up a game with three gentlemen who might well have eyesight that is less acute.” She folded her arms defiantly beneath her bosom. “So our challenge now is to thwart Lord Hardwicke’s plans.”

“Easier said than done,” Wren observed. “The man is obviously convinced that he will walk away tonight a winner.”

“And we must ensure that doesn’t happen without arousing his suspicions. If he thinks we know of his cheating, and can guess how long it’s been going on...”

“He’ll not be happy if he loses, Mr Greybrooke. Of that, I can assure you.” Ludlow looked troubled.

“And in the overall scheme of things, he shouldn’t be,” replied Dominic. “But what will he do?” He spread his hands wide and raised his eyebrows. “The man’s been *cheating*, ladies and gentlemen. How can he possibly express outrage if he suffers a considerable loss tonight? It’s all in the turn of the cards, yes?”

“Absolutely.” Lady Helen nodded firmly.

“Of course,” agreed Wren. “But stopping him is our biggest challenge, I believe. We can worry about his reactions later.” She glanced at Dominic. “He won’t be above some physical altercation if he loses badly, I believe. My sense is that he has little self-control.”

“You know him?” Lady Helen asked, looking curiously at Wren.

“I...” she paused, considering her words. “Our paths crossed a long time ago.”

The young woman’s eyes narrowed. “I take that to mean you don’t like him.”

“I loathe the ground he walks on,” replied Wren calmly. “But that is neither here nor there. Our job here, tonight, is to stop him from cheating at cards.” She turned her attention to her husband. “And that, Dominic, will be your job.”

He stared at her, silent, and it was as if the room itself held its breath, waiting for his response.

“Umm...”

“You have a plan?” Lady Helen raised an eyebrow. “You must have a plan.”

“Why? Why should I have a plan?”

“You’re a man. Men have plans.”

“My Lady, I hate to disabuse you, but not all men have plans within minute of being presented with a problem of this nature.”

“You are letting down the reputation of your gender, sir.”

Dominic took a breath, but Wren stepped in and forestalled whatever it was he was about to retort. “I’m sure if we all put our heads together, we can come up with a plan that will exceed anything any single one of us could generate.” She glanced around. “After all, everyone here has something to gain by our success, correct?”

There were murmurs of agreement.

“Right then.” She walked around the card table. “Ludlow, does Lord Hardwicke have a favourite seat at the table? Can you tell us where everyone usually sits?”

“An excellent start, Mrs Greybrooke. Yes, indeed.”

The butler moved to her side. “His Lordship always sits here, in the large chair, with Mr Singleton on his left and Sir Talbot on his right. That puts Lord Hardwicke here, directly across from him.”

Dominic hissed out an irritated breath. “Exactly the right spot to read whatever hearts Linton has in his hand.”

“You’re right,” agreed Wren. “The perfect arrangement.”

“Well, let’s change that immediately.” Lady Helen moved to her father’s chair. “Ludlow, you have just noticed a crack in this magnificent chair that needs repairing. With my father having been called away on family business, you are taking the opportunity to have it attended to.”

“Ah. Er, yes, my Lady.” A faint smile curved his ordinarily rigid expression. “I’m very glad you approve of my actions.” He pushed the chair to one side. “I will have a footman remove it from the room and replace it with another.”

“That means,” mused Dominic, “that I should sit here.” He took the chair customarily assigned to Mr Singleton. “In fact, I shall seat myself here in advance. My snifter of brandy will signify that I have selected this position.” He glanced around. “It is the best spot for lighting. The light from the candles will fall on Hardwicke the strongest.”

“And he will be less able to discern the others’ cards.” Wren nodded. “Good idea.”

“I’m assuming whist is the game of choice?” Dominic glanced at Ludlow and Mrs Collins, who stood nervously beside him.

“Yes, sir.” Ludlow swallowed. “I’m still quite upset at all these revelations, Mr Greybrooke. All those games. All played dishonestly.” He sighed.

“Right then,” Wren said, her voice filled with positive cheer. “The one way to stop this nonsense is to not use the marked cards. That’s quite obvious.”

“Oh dear. That might prove difficult,” Ludlow’s face and voice demonstrated that he was two seconds away from wringing his hands in distress.

She patted his shoulder, which made him blink. “Just a thought, Ludlow. But...” she turned to her husband. “Are you a good whist player, Dominic?”

“I can hold my own,” he answered.

“So if, by any chance, we were able to accomplish a change of decks, you could—in theory—beat Lord Hardwicke?”

“If the game was straight, no cheating, then I would hope so. Given a solid partner, of course.”

“You want Sir Talbot,” interrupted Lady Helen. “He’s an excellent player. My Papa always said he was the best of them.”

“There we are, then.” Wren nodded. “I shall take it upon myself to ensure that at some point this evening, the cards will have to be removed and replaced with one of the Earl’s decks.”

“You will?” Dominic’s voice reflected his surprise.

“Leave it to me.” She squared her shoulders. “There will be little chance for Hardwicke to cheat tonight. And with luck, it will stop any further such unscrupulous behaviour.”

“You’re going to reveal his perfidy,” said Lady Helen, with a dramatically out-flung arm. “I knew it. As soon as I saw you, I thought to myself, now *there’s* a woman who isn’t afraid of taking on anything.”

“You did not.” Wren grinned at her. “But I applaud your sentiment. And I’m not sure about revealing any perfidy...”

Everyone froze as the sound of carriage wheels outside brought the seriousness of the situation home to them.

“Well, then, let’s see how it goes.” Dominic poured himself a glass of brandy sat down at the card table. “Ludlow, I believe Fairmeadows has guests.”

“Oh dear. Indeed, sir. I must...must welcome them.” He shook his head and took himself off to the hall, muttering beneath his breath. The word “*disaster*” was quite clear.

Wren grinned at Dominic. He grinned back.
Oddly enough, he was having fun.

~~*~*~*

If asked, Wren would have been the first to admit her knowledge of whist was abysmal. It was, for her, just another game played with cards, where gentlemen were stupid enough to wager large sums of money, losing as often as winning, and apparently enjoying the experience so much they would do it all over again as soon as possible.

Sometimes, men were completely cork-brained.

However, in this particular game, her husband was a major player, so Wren found herself with a vested interest in the outcome. She also had an interest in the players, and watched them as Ludlow led them into the room and introduced them to Dominic, who presented her as his wife.

“Mr Singleton, may I present Viscount DeBurgh? A guest of Lady Helen’s.”

The gentlemen bowed and murmured the usual polite nothings to each other as the butler explained Lord Linton’s absence.

“Sir Talbot Caldwell,” announced Ludlow, initiating the same courteous, meaningless comments.

Wren’s skin chilled as the last player was ushered in. “Lord Timothy Hardwicke.”

She wouldn’t have recognised him had she not heard his name. He’d aged badly, his hair already showing signs of grey, and his face hard, wrinkles

between his eyebrows indicating his most common expression would be a frown. He'd gained weight, and the buttons on his waistcoat were struggling to maintain their hold.

But she remembered his voice, and fought down a mix of fear and fury as he barked out his first words.

"Where's the Earl?" Hardwicke's gaze passed frostily over the assembled group.

"His Lordship has been called away on business, my Lord," said Ludlow smoothly. "Unexpected, of course, or he would have immediately notified you all."

"However, since my dear friends are here visiting, the Viscount immediately offered to replace him," glowed Lady Helen, with her best innocent face shining in a sweet smile. "Such lovely people. I'm blessed with their affection."

Mr Singleton and Sir Talbot made appropriate noises, while Hardwicke frowned.

"I'm not sure this is proper," he said, a brusque dismissal of the courtesies. "Without the Earl here..."

"Oh, come along, Timothy. You know how much I enjoy our evenings. Would you deny me that pleasure, even though we have the necessary four players?"

Hardwicke looked down his nose at Dominic. "You do play, I assume."

"I do." He met Hardwicke's glare with a calm and unexpressive gaze. The man had no idea that Dom was imagining how satisfying it would be to twist his head off his neck.

"And you have the ready to bet, I hope? This isn't a poor man's game, you know."

"I say, Hardwicke." Singleton frowned. "A bit much, that, old chap. DeBurgh expressed himself willing to play. No need to cast doubt on his presence. I'll be happy to play at the same table."

"You are most kind, Mr Singleton." Dominic bowed gracefully. "But I shall understand if Lord Hardwicke doesn't care for the notion of playing with a new opponent...?"

All heads turned to Hardwicke.

"Well...I suppose I shall have to accept the situation." He frowned again. "Where's the Earl's chair?"

Ludlow trotted out their excuse about the broken seat, as the others took theirs casually, nodding at each other, ready to play.

“Demmed awkward, if you ask me.” He took the available chair next to Dominic and glanced at him as he set his spectacles down beside him. “You’ve the ready, then, have you?”

Wren held her breath.

“Although I did not arrive expecting a game, sir, I can assure you I can meet any consequent obligations.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bag, which he opened and upended on the table. A stream of jewels cascaded onto the green, turning it into a glittering fire beneath the candles. “And I shall not be offended that you inquired.” He stared at Hardwicke.

“I say.” Sir Talbot’s eyes widened.

“Good Lord.” Mr Singleton blinked. “That is quite a hoard.”

“Indeed yes,” Dominic scooped up the gems and returned them to his pouch. “I plan on having them set into some jewellery for my wife. Mere baubles, of course, compared to our family’s legacy pieces. But I believe she will enjoy wearing something unique of her own. We were on the way to her favourite jeweller when we decided to stop and visit our dear Lady Helen.”

He glanced at Wren, and she saw the humour in his gaze. Her returning smile was one of warmth and amusement.

“Not used to ladies present,” grumbled Singleton.

“Oh, Mr Singleton,” Lady Helen piped up. “Since Papa is not available, we all thought it should be slightly more informal this evening. And, since the Viscount and Viscountess have not been wed for very long, I hated to separate them. Besides,” she fluttered her lashes at Sir Talbot. “I know you all quite well, and firmly believe you’ll not be bothered by my presence.”

“Of course, my dear,” responded Singleton, as Wren guessed he would. “Your charm and beauty add so much to any room that it must be declared quite empty without you in it.”

“How kind you are.” Helen managed a blush and hid behind her fan, rolling her eyes at Wren.

“Well then, let’s get to it.” Hardwicke, not bothering to hide his annoyance, picked up the cards.

“I note you use spectacles, sir,” said Dominic mildly. “Vision problems?”

“An infection in my youth weakened my eyes,” he replied glibly. “I use them for reading, for cards, and writing my correspondence. Other than that, I

don't really need them." He glanced away. "Opening bids, gentlemen?"

From that point on, Wren declared herself at a loss.

There were bids, things called trump cards, some discussion about suits and so on, but since her previous exposure to such games had been to clean the rooms after all was said and done, she truly had very little clue as to the actual process involved.

She did note Hardwicke relaxing a little, a smug grin on his face as he put a card down with barely hidden glee.

"Got you there, DeBurgh."

"Indeed, my Lord. Well played." Dominic's face was a picture of gentlemanly tranquillity.

"Do something." Lady Helen leaned over to Wren and hissed in her ear.

"Such as?" she hissed back.

"I don't know. Just do something before your husband loses all those jewels."

Wren watched carefully. "Do they ever stop for refreshments?"

"I don't know, but I'll find out." The girl rose gracefully and moved to Ludlow under the pretence of asking for tea. She returned quickly and took her seat next to Wren. "In about half an hour," she whispered.

"Good."

"You have an idea?"

"I might. Let me think about it."

Lady Helen nodded, a movement that was just short of a bounce of excitement. Wren silently gulped down nerves. If she could pull this off, it would save the day. But if she couldn't...Dominic might be in trouble.

Chapter Sixteen



Dominic pulled out every memory he had about the game, took his time over his bids and discards, and was happy to find that he and his partner, Sir Talbot, were holding their own.

“A different style of play, sir,” said Singleton approvingly. “But effective. Perhaps this is what we needed...a breath of fresh air.” He glanced at Lady Helen. “No disrespect to the Earl, of course.”

She smiled. “Of course. I quite understand.”

The four of them were evenly matched, realised Dominic, and if Hardwicke hadn't been cheating and there weren't large sums of money involved, he would have actually enjoyed the game. Singleton considered his bids carefully, Talbot clearly calculated the odds before each play, and Hardwicke...well, his quizzing glass was in use for every hand, damn him.

And as the evening progressed, it was easy to see the triumph in his smile as he played the perfect card to win the hand.

“I say, I believe you've brought me luck, DeBurgh.”

“It would appear so, my Lord,” answered Dominic quietly.

“Gentlemen, if I may?” Ludlow approached the table. “Would you care for refreshments? There is tea, and brandy of course, should you fancy it.”

“A good point to take a breather, I'd say, wouldn't you, Talbot?” Singleton glanced at him.

“Indeed. A brandy would be most welcome.”

“Brandy for me as well,” said Hardwicke, sprawling in his chair. “Tea is wishy washy stuff, fit only for ladies.”

“An opinion many of us do not share, sir,” Wren observed quietly, unable to keep her mouth shut at the man's arrogance.

“Pshaw,” he shrugged. “Men know what's what, my dear. You will learn that soon enough, since you've got one of your own.”

Dominic saw Wren's jaw clench and hastened to intervene. He didn't

know his wife as well as he should, but he was absolutely convinced that something unwise was about to come out of her mouth.

“Do recall, your Lordship, we are newlyweds. Let us enjoy the first months of discovery about each other. We have a lifetime to learn everything there is to know.”

Hardwicke guffawed as he pushed his chair back and rose, walking to the brandy tray. “Best get a move on, sir. Women need to be trained properly to appreciate their good fortune.”

Dominic managed to near his wife and touch her shoulder. “Let it be,” he whispered.

She took a ragged breath and nodded, and he wondered if Hardwicke’s words hurt as much as he feared they did. Then she shot him a look.

It was one of utter fury, and relieved him, since he would rather have her angry than hurt any day.

“I am trying, Dominic,” she muttered. “But it is not easy.”

A burst of laughter interrupted their moment, as Lady Helen fluttered her fan and giggled behind it. “Oh, Mr Singleton. Such a wit, such clever inferences. I declare I’d blush if it wasn’t so amusing.”

“You flatter me, sweet lady,” grinned Singleton.

“Of course.” She shot a look at Hardwicke that should, by rights, have seared him into a little greasy spot on the floor. “I’m well trained.”

“Bravo.” Sir Talbot applauded.

Ignoring the conversation, Wren wandered around the card table, looking at the cards and noticing the delicate spectacles.

They just so happened to be on the very edge of the table.

She shot a quick look around, seeing everyone engaged around the brandy tray.

It took only a moment.

A step too close to the table and the spectacles fell to the floor. One more step, and a satisfying crunch emerged from beneath her foot.

“Oh dear,” she said loudly. “Oh my goodness, what have I done?”

Digging for every ounce of shock and horror she could find, she pasted an expression on her face that indicated some severe disaster had just occurred.

“Darling, are you all right?” Dominic hurried over to where Wren stood, staring at the carpet.

“Yes, yes, I’m quite well. But...” She bent down and retrieved Lord

Hardwicke's mangled and shattered belongings. "I'm afraid the same cannot be said for your spectacles, my Lord. My sincerest apologies. They fell off the table as I walked past, unbeknownst to me, and I trod on them. I am so sorry."

"You didn't cut your foot, did you?" Dominic was all concern, shutting down Hardwicke's immediate response.

"No, I don't think so."

"Let me see."

"Oh dear, I hope you're not injured, dear Lady Wren." Helen rushed to her side and under the pretext of examining Wren's foot, whispered "Nicely done."

By this time, Hardwicke himself looked ready to explode, and Wren waited for the tirade she knew would ensue.

"Stupid chit," he cursed, hurrying to the table and picking up his now useless and crumpled spectacles. "How could you be such a clumsy *fool*? Don't you realise that these are expensive?"

"Lord Hardwicke." Dominic straightened, a frown on his face. "It was clearly an accident. I see no cause for you to insult my wife because of it."

"I agree. Catch your breath, Hardwicke. This sort of thing is quite a natural occurrence. No point in getting upset." Singleton added his mite, but if anything, it incensed the other man more.

"Upset? Do you think I'm *upset*? I'm bloody *furious*."

"Really?" Dominic leaned against a chair, staring at Hardwicke. "Why?"

"Why?" He responded, his colour high. "Why do you think? Your fancy woman here has just destroyed a very valuable piece of Hardwicke property, that's why. I cannot possibly take such a thing likely."

Dominic straightened, anger surging through his veins. "Sir, I must tell you I take grave offence at you referring to my wife in that fashion."

"As would I," said Lord Talbot, a deep frown creasing his brows.

"Hardwicke, what the devil are you thinking? The Viscount has every right to call you out over that insult."

Wren watched as Hardwicke shot a look at Dominic. She wondered if he was truly aware of the risk he was taking. Something told her that her husband was not a man to back down from a fight, especially where an insult such as had just been given was concerned. Calling a man's wife a woman of ill repute was not a trivial or throwaway phrase.

“I...I...” he stuttered.

Wren stepped forward, her hand resting on her husband’s. “I shall overlook your words, Lord Hardwicke, since I can see they were spoken at the height of your emotions. However, I cannot forget them, nor will anyone else here, I believe.” She looked around and saw the truth on the faces of Sir Talbot and Mr Singleton.

“I won’t, that’s for sure.” Singleton stared at Hardwicke. “Very bad form. Very bad form indeed.”

Sir Talbot looked grave. “There are things that are tolerated, Hardwicke. What you just said is not one of them.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Hardwicke sputtered, waving his arms around the room. “We don’t know these people. Why are you determined to defend them? We’ve played so many games here at this table, I would’ve thought you’d come to know me better by now. A phrase spoken in the heat of the moment shouldn’t have everyone so upset. Bag of moonshine, if you ask me.”

“But it’s possible they have not come to know you as well as they might, Lord Hardwicke.” Wren managed to keep the pleasure of what she was about to do out of her voice. “Perhaps we should enlighten them?”

~~*~*~*

Dominic watched her, enjoying the gleam of sheer joy in her amazing eyes as she held the shattered spectacles aloft.

“I have no idea what you mean,” Hardwicke replied abruptly.

“Then allow me to clarify.” She turned to her husband. “Dominic, if you would?” She passed him the now-useless glasses. “I believe there is enough in one eyepiece to demonstrate.”

“Now look here. Those are mine...” Hardwicke moved towards them,

surprised when Ludlow stepped into his path.

“I believe you would be best served by remaining where you are, my Lord.” The butler’s tone left no room for argument.

Shocked, Hardwicke froze, a look of utter astonishment crossing his face. When Dominic held up the glass, he remained silent.

“Sir Talbot, if you would come to the table and hold up a card for me?”

Wren moved to his side and found a heart. She passed it to Sir Talbot without showing the face to anyone.

“Now hold it up, facing you. Just the back facing me.” Dominic lifted the damaged spectacles to his eye.

Sir Talbot did as he was told, a troubled look on his face. “Like this?”

“Perfect.”

Dominic squinted through the lens. “The five of hearts.”

The silence was overwhelming as Sir Talbot laid the card down on the table, revealing the five hearts nicely placed on the front.

“A cheat.” Mr Singleton whispered the words. “I cannot believe it. All these months, all these games...and you were cheating.” His gaze was not the only one focussed on Lord Hardwicke.

The man shifted uncomfortably. “Nonsense. That was just a piece of luck. I have no need of cheating, since I’m an acknowledged master of whist.” He raised his chin.

Wren silently withdrew another card from the pack and passed it to Mr Singleton this time. He repeated the movements, holding the card with its back toward Dominic, who raised the glass once more to his eye.

“Jack of hearts.”

Singleton laid the card quietly on the table. It was indeed the jack of hearts.

“*Damn.*”

Dominic wasn’t sure who breathed the word, but Hardwicke’s face was paling as all eyes turned to him. There was no way he could bluster his way out of this predicament, surely.

“You are a cheat, Lord Hardwicke, and worse cannot be said about any gentleman.” Sir Talbot drew himself up, no longer the charming and friendly gamester. He was now the haughty landowner, a man who would not be pleased to find himself in a less than honest game.

“To say I’m disgusted is to put a far too narrow a description on this

situation. How much have you fleeced from all of us? I cannot begin to think, since I'm sure there have been other such ruses practised on unsuspecting victims." He sighed. "Good God, man. Are you that desperate for money you would descend to such depths? Or is it for the sheer pleasure of gulling those of us who looked upon you as a friend?"

"This is all a plot against me," Hardwicke whined. "These people must have some sort of quarrel with me or my family. They've set up this absurd nonsense to make me look guilty."

"Oh dear, no, that won't fly." Sir Talbot shook his head. "You gave those cards to the Earl last Christmas, didn't you? About the time you started complaining about needing spectacles for that eye problem you told us about."

Wren moved a little closer to Dominic. "If you'd like to see for yourself, gentlemen..." She offered the twisted glass to Singleton, who was nearest. "'Tis only the hearts that are marked. But I believe that would give a player a substantial advantage. But perhaps not enough for the others to notice?" She glanced around. "Forgive me. My knowledge of whist is minimal."

Singleton riffled through the cards on the table, turning them face down. "Here's one. I can see it plainly. Two little darker spots in the corner." He turned the card and moved the glass away from his face. "The two of hearts. I'll be damned."

"Makes me nervous to play any card games," muttered Sir Talbot.

"Don't give up, sir," Lady Helen came to his side. "I'm sure that every other player you might find at your table will be a true gentleman, unlike this...this..." She waved her hand in Hardwicke's direction. "Words fail me."

"How dare you..."

A firm hand pressed Hardwicke down into a chair. "Please remain seated, sir, until the gentlemen and ladies have spoken their piece." Ludlow's voice was deceptively calm, but Wren could see the pressure he was exerting on Hardwicke's shoulder.

"Take your hands off me, you insolent..."

"Hardwicke." Sir Talbot glared at him, his voice cold as ice. "At this moment, I suggest you remain perfectly silent. Do you understand?"

Thus addressed, Hardwicke subsided.

"What on earth do we do now?" Singleton looked at Dominic. "Besides

thanking you, sir, for revealing this...this perfidy, this disgusting behaviour by one of our own.”

“It was an accident, Mr Singleton. And you have my wife to thank. She has quite amazing eyes and was able to see the markings on the backs of the cards. Otherwise, I doubt I would have noticed.”

“Then you have our most profound thanks, Lady DeBurgh. I shudder to imagine the depth of our losses should this atrocity have continued unchecked.”

Wren smiled. “I’m only too glad I was able to be of some assistance, sir.”

“The Earl must be informed, of course,” said Ludlow, keeping a firm hand on Hardwicke. “He will be most upset, I’m sure, and eager to settle the debts that are now outstanding.”

“Indeed yes. All of us have lost considerable amounts to this...this...I can’t call him a gentleman any more.” Sir Talbot turned away from Hardwicke to look at Singleton. “I believe you and I should take a close look at our accounting, Royal. Find out exactly how much we’ve been cheated out of over the last months.”

“I knew my playing wasn’t *that* bad,” mused Singleton. “But come the new year, it did seem to take a turn for the worse.” He flicked a gaze of distaste at Hardwicke. “Of course, I had no idea we had a cheat in our midst.”

“And there are others who must know.” Sir Talbot frowned. “A member of White’s, isn’t he?”

“He couldn’t get the marked cards into play there, could he?” Lady Helen asked curiously.

“No, my Lady, he couldn’t. But the fact that he is now a proven cheat will disbar him from every decent club in London.”

“As well it should.” Singleton’s nod was quite decisive. “I’ll make sure my club is informed as soon as I can.”

“In the meantime, I would like this man out of my father’s house.” Lady Helen lifted her chin and put her hands on her hips. “Ludlow, would you please have two of our footmen escort Lord Hardwicke to the door? And then boot him out on his arse?”

“My *Lady*...”

Ludlow’s words of shock went almost unheard beneath the burst of laughter that her command engendered.

Even Sir Talbot and Mr Singleton guffawed, and Dominic watched Wren

try to control herself and then fail, letting a rich deep laugh loose to mingle with the rest.

“An excellent idea,” endorsed Sir Talbot when he got his breath back. He turned to Lady Helen. “And I won’t tell your Papa it was yours.”

She grinned back. “*You* are a true gentleman, sir.” And then she hugged him.

Chapter Seventeen



After a silent and sulking Hardwicke had been somewhat roughly escorted from Fairmeadows Hall, both Mr Singleton, and Sir Talbot accepted a glass of brandy, and spent a little time with Dominic, Wren, and Lady Helen, discussing the situation.

“A sad day,” mused Sir Talbot, swirling his brandy in the glass. “A very sad day.”

“We know these sorts of things happen, it’s human nature,” agreed Singleton. “But to find it happening amongst friends...well, it’s quite hard to accept, really.”

“I cannot imagine, sir,” said Dominic quietly. “It would seem to be the sort of betrayal one never expects.”

“Well put, Mr Greybrooke. Well put.”

“I have to say I never liked him, you know.” Lady Helen sat on the sofa next to Wren, a small glass of brandy at her side. It was rather shocking, but she declared it was the only thing that might stop her from fainting.

She ignored the looks of amusement and sipped at the liquor. “He had something in his gaze. Something...*unsettling*.” She shrugged. “I can’t really say what it was, but I think Mama felt it too. She never lingered when he arrived for the game.”

Wren bit her lip. “I have to agree with your assessment, Lady Helen. I have...heard things about Lord Hardwicke. None of them to his advantage, I’m afraid. From years past. His behaviour toward ladies has been...” she paused, “how shall I put it? Less than what might be considered acceptable.” She raised her chin. “Especially to those in the lower orders.”

“Oh dear God.” Singleton’s mouth curved into a moue of disgust. “At the maids, was he? One of those?”

Wren merely lowered her eyes.

“Faugh. Disgusting.” Sir Talbot shuddered. “I only wish the Earl were

here. He needs to know how badly he's been cheated, and by what kind of man."

"Will he be returning soon?" Mr Singleton asked.

"We don't know," answered Lady Helen bluntly. "His departure was somewhat unexpected. But I am certainly hoping to see both him and Mama home soon."

"Of course." Sir Talbot finished his brandy. "And we must leave you to it, then." He rose. "Viscount, Lady De Burgh...you have been of enormous assistance in this matter." He looked at them, a sombre expression crossing his face. "I trust we can rely upon your discretion? This matter needs to be handled with delicacy."

"Of course, Sir Talbot. My wife and I would not dream of discussing such matters in public."

"Thank you. Come Royal. We have some decisions to make before returning to London, although return we must. A matter of seriousness such as this cannot be allowed to languish in the country, even though I know both you and I prefer the quiet privacy of our estates to the hustle and bustle of the Metropolis." He sighed. "If we can keep this matter quiet until we've spoken to our solicitors..."

"I agree." Singleton rose too. "We need a plan. I'll not tolerate Hardwicke's presence another moment, and London must be warned of his abysmal behaviour here. We should do so as soon as we can elicit some information about our next moves."

Watching the gentlemen take their leave, Wren found herself fascinated by the entire business. There were hands to be shaken, curtsies to be made, jackets and hats to be collected, all while the carriage was called to the front steps. The whole process could have easily taken half an hour had there been two more people present. As it was, fifteen minutes passed before the front door closed and she could at last heave a sigh of relief.

Dominic came to her side. "What an evening."

"That's the understatement of the year," she managed a weak grin.

"Let's finish our brandy," said Lady Helen. "I might not get anymore for months, and I rather like the taste of it. Makes one feel quite warm inside."

That made all of them chuckle, and Mrs Collins joined them as they returned to the parlour.

"All's well, then?" she asked. "The business of the Earl's debts?"

“I told her,” apologised Ludlow. “I trust you aren’t cross.”

Lady Helen walked over to her housekeeper and hugged her. “Of course not.”

Wren nodded. “This was a matter that affected every single resident of Fairmeadows. So it’s only right that everyone should know of Hardwicke’s cheating and how the Earl was a victim of it.” She glanced at Dominic. “I only hope he gets to hear about it and perhaps can reclaim some of his losses, but I have no idea how that would happen.”

“There are probably more people who would like to ask the same question,” mused Dominic. “Once a man cheats, there’s no stopping him from doing it everywhere.” He thought for a moment. “His properties could well be forfeit, I suppose, and whatever funds he has placed in some kind of trust? I don’t know.”

“He’ll not be as fortunate as Wellington, that’s certain.” Ludlow nodded emphatically. “Lord Camden isn’t about to pay off Hardwicke’s debts.”

“Good heavens,” Lady Helen stared at him. “The Duke gambles?”

“Did,” he replied. “When he was younger. Got in over his head, they say. But Camden took care of the matter and shipped him off to Europe. Good thing, too.”

After a brief period of respectful silence, wherein everyone spent a moment or two reflecting on the brilliance of the Duke of Wellington and where they’d be without it, Dominic finished his brandy.

“Well, this has been a most fascinating and adventuresome evening, ladies and gentlemen.” He stood and held out his hand to Wren. “But I’m afraid I am fast approaching the moment when my eyes will close for the night. ‘Tis past time the Viscount and Lady DeBurgh made their excuses and disappeared.”

“Indeed.” Lady Helen yawned quite inelegantly. “I am of the same opinion.”

“Then we should say goodnight.” Wren took her husband’s hand. “I’m sure tomorrow will bring some sort of resolution to what we’ve accomplished here this evening,” she said, looking at Helen. “And that your parents will return very soon.”

“I hope so.”

On that positive note, the party broke up; Mrs Collins escorting Lady Helen to her chambers, Ludlow tidying the room and extinguishing the

candles, and Wren and Dominic making their way upstairs.

“Another night here, then.” She almost managed to hide her yawn.

“It would seem so, yes.” Dominic leaned toward her. “Is that to your liking?”

“We have little choice,” she answered, but smiled at him. “As long as we’re together, I have no objections.”

“It’s not quite what anyone would call a honeymoon,” he said tentatively.

“True. But we’ve foiled a villainous plot, we’re staying in a lovely country manor, and we’ve met some very nice people, and even assumed new identities for a few hours. Isn’t that the best substitute?”

“When you put it like that...” He opened the door and stepped back to let Wren walk past.

She sighed. “I’m tired, Dom. I think it must have been all the tension. I was so afraid my idea wouldn’t work. My heart was in my mouth when I knocked the quizzing glass off the table.”

“You, Lady DeBurgh, were quite magnificent. I was as shocked as anyone else when you held them up, and then I realised what you’d done. It was brilliant, just brilliant.”

“You really think so?”

He closed the distance between them. “Yes, dear wife. I really think so.” And then he kissed her.

~~*~*~*

He’s kissing me. He’s really kissing me.

Wren’s mind struggled with the words as Dominic’s mouth claimed hers. This was no sweet embrace, no gentle caress, but more of an “I want to devour you” kind of thing.

Instead of being afraid, or scared of the heat building inside her, Wren seized the opportunity to show him how she felt. Parting her lips, she

welcomed his tongue, opening for him, knowing he'd kiss her like she'd always wanted to be kissed.

Somebody made a sound, a soft moan. It could well have been her, but since he was presently drawing her closer and closer, the heat of him searing her through her gown, she wasn't about to stop and inquire as to the source of any sounds she might hear.

Her blood began to course hotly through her body.

"Wren," he whispered, tearing his mouth away for terrible empty seconds. "I want you, Wren."

"You have me," she murmured, raising her hands and grabbing his hair, pulling him back to her lips.

Her world narrowed to this man, his taste filling her, his scent teasing her nostrils, his hands...oh God, his hands, roaming over her now, pressing her bottom tight against him.

She was holding onto him for dear life, her legs weak as his kisses plundered their way into a place she'd never imagined she held within her.

Her stomach clenched, her breasts aching and sensitive, and her fingers delved into his hair, clasping his head against hers as she moved, unable to stay still. It was as if someone had struck a spark near a pile of dry kindling that had lain inside her body, unseen and unknown, until Dominic.

Until this night, the idea of being with a man had been abhorrent, an experience stained by her past ordeal with Hardwicke and his friend. But now? There was nothing in the world she wanted more than to have her husband lay claim to his wife in the bed that was so very close. It was almost unimaginable, this desire, this overwhelming need to join with another in the most intimate of ways. It was also completely out of character for her.

But it was there, and it was wonderful.

"Wren," Dominic drew back and whispered her name again. "Wren, I won't hurt you. Scare you." He tenderly brushed a lock of hair from her face. "I can wait if you want me to. Just say the word. But please know that I desire you in every way a man can want a woman. More, I think, than I've ever desired anyone before." He rested his forehead on hers. "You've cast a spell on me, love. I'm lost in you."

Tears stung the back of her eyes. There was nothing he could have said that would have touched her more, or shown her what kind of man he was.

"Dominic," she whispered back, pulling away a little and meeting his

gaze. “I’m not afraid. Not with you. I’m feeling...things, things I never expected to. I...” Words failed her.

She ran her hand down his arm and pulled at it, raising it between them. Then, on a shaky breath, she turned his palm and pressed it to her breast. “I desire you too.”

His fingers flexed, then cupped her, delicately rubbing a nipple that was firm, hardening beneath the silk.

“Ohhh...” Her head fell back, and her eyes closed as darts of lightning arrowed through her body to her loins. “Ohhh...”

He struggled out of his jacket, and that seemed to be some sort of sign, since she instinctively kicked off her shoes and reached for his waistcoat buttons as his arms worked their way around her and untied the laces of her gown.

With a brief pause for undergarments, interspersed with caresses and kisses—and yes, some of the kisses were hers as she uncovered more of her husband and found his chest intriguing—they eventually tumbled onto the bed, fighting the quilt and linens, then at last coming to rest in each other’s arms.

“I like you like this.” Dominic grinned and ran his hand over one bare shoulder, down to her breast.

“I like you touching me,” she smiled back. “I never imagined anything like this, Dom. Ever. But I...I want...”

“What do you want, sweetheart? Tell me, and it’s yours.”

“I want you.”

In case that wasn’t clear enough, Wren slid her hand down from his chest, over his flat stomach, until she found him, hard flesh covered by soft skin.

She felt that strange muscle flex, almost ripple as she grasped him.

“God,” he murmured, his breath quickening. “You have it, love. Everything I have, including that, is yours for the asking.”

“Then I’m asking,” she replied, in barely a whisper.

“First things first, though.” He moved over her. “There are things I want as well.”

Settling beneath him, she looked at his face, his eyelids heavy, his eyes roaming over her body. “Such as?”

“A taste of this, perhaps...” Lowering his head, he kissed his way down her neck, little nibbles that made her giggle. “And some of this...”

Her chest, licks from his tongue that left cool trails and raised goosebumps as she shivered with pleasure. When he found her breast and suckled her, she arched up into his mouth.

“Dominic...”

The touch of his hand had fired her, but now the touch of his tongue, his lips, his mouth pulling and teasing the sensitive bud, it pushed the limits of what she could ever have imagined experiencing.

She writhed beneath him, drowning all these wonderful sensations. The brush of his thigh, naked, against hers. His hands roaming over her waist and hips, the gentle scratch of his chest as he rubbed against her skin, even the sound of his breathing and the little pop as he released her nipple, everything he did contributed to her exploding arousal.

And when his fingers moved down to find her woman’s curls and the hot, wet folds hidden beneath—she fully expected to die from the pleasure of it.

This time, it wasn’t a soft moan drifting over the bed. It was a cry of passion, of joy, the sound of a woman finally learning what it was to love and be loved.

Wren surrendered to the urges of her body, knowing that the man awakening her was one she could trust. His touches, his caresses, his gentle but firm insistence that she rise to the heights of ecstasy with him, all spoke of his care and his unselfish nature.

He was freeing her to enjoy all the wonderful parts of making love. He had opened a door she thought would be sealed tight forever.

And willingly, she walked through it—to find him waiting.

Chapter Eighteen



Dominic prided himself on few things, since he was not a man given to boasting or showing off, or even thinking much about anything that would come close to those character flaws.

But he had always held to a strong belief that making love should be an activity equally shared by both parties. He took care and time to bring his partner pleasure, and felt that such a thing increased his own. After all, he'd thought to himself, there were two people involved, therefore it made sense that those two people should enjoy themselves as much as possible.

But tonight, with Wren...everything seemed new, different. Each touch, every caress, the sound of their bodies sliding over each other, all were heightened and special, beyond anything he'd experience before.

When she moaned, he rejoiced, and when he murmured something low, she kissed whatever bit of him was near. He couldn't get enough of her body; silky soft, delicate yet vibrant, she moved beneath him like a wave of desire, rippling and sighing with each and every thing they did.

He'd been so afraid to touch her this way; her history had stood between them and held him back as thoroughly as a warrior's iron shield. The faint discolorations on her skin, the ripple of an old scar on her lower back, reminded him of that history, and increased his need to erase as much of it as he could.

He prayed that the barrier was weakening, thrown far away by the eagerness she revealed with a simple touch. His hand on her breast had told him everything he needed to know, and now her nude body was echoing those sentiments.

God, how he wanted to be inside her.

But he promised himself that even though she was as needy and passionate as he was, he'd take his time. It might kill him, but he had nothing to lose, and she had everything to gain from his detailed and loving

attentions.

Nakedness seemed not to bother her, and she'd run her hands over him, learning him, without any kind of hesitation. She'd found his buttocks and held them, cupping them much as he'd cupped her breasts.

Her hand on his cock had nearly undone him, but she'd shifted to investigate other parts she found fascinating. And it was a tooth clenching moment of desperate control when she explored his balls with thorough attention.

He'd moaned, and she'd immediately moved her hands. "I'm sorry...did that hurt you?"

"Nooo," he muttered. "Lord, no. Just so...so good."

"Ahh."

He swore he could almost hear her smile, but when he finally focussed on her face, she was intently studying his belly and back to running her hands over it. "Your skin feels so wonderful. And yet so different to mine."

"That's the pleasure of it, sweetheart. Touching, learning, finding out everything about each other." He touched her face. "Let me show you."

She rolled onto her back and nodded. "All right."

He kissed his way down between her breasts to her navel, ringing it with his tongue and making her laugh again.

"I adore that sound," he murmured.

"What sound?"

"You, laughing. Naked beneath me and laughing with pleasure."

"I adore what you're doing to me. It makes me happy," she sighed. "So very happy."

"Then you might find this enjoyable too..."

He lowered himself between her legs and, in spite of the fact that she'd stilled in surprise, let his mouth drift to the swollen folds that lured him. This was something he loved doing to a woman, especially one who had most probably never even considered it.

Bringing pleasure this way, perhaps a release...to him it was somehow the most intimate of acts, a gift from him to his lover.

"*D-D-Dominic?*"

"Shhh." He breathed on her, sensing the shivers he drew with this delicate touch. Then he dropped his head and licked her, slow and soft, learning the nooks and crannies of her womanhood and hanging on to her hips, holding

her right where he wanted her.

“God,” a strangled cry echoed around his ears. “Oh *God...*”

It didn't take too long. Her legs locked tight around him, her hands were scrabbling at the linens as if to anchor herself to the ground, and her breath came harsh as every muscle in her body tensed.

“I can't...Dominic what are you...oh *sweet Jesus Christ...*”

She let go, and he plunged his tongue deep, desperate to catch the first spasms of her release. It was joyous, sharing this unique moment, listening to her muted cries and then holding her tight as she rode the waves.

By now he was hard as steel, and there was no better time than the present to see if she could take him.

Levering himself up and over her, he saw her face still taut with the sensation of her orgasm, eyes wide and glowing with emotions.

“Now, Wren. Take me.”

“Yes, oh *yessss...*”

Thighs wide, she watched him as he gently found the right spot and began to push. Wet, hot as fire, her body opened, bloomed for him, welcoming him home.

Still trembling, he took a deep breath as he buried himself to the balls inside his wife. “Look at me, Wren.”

“I can't see anything else but you,” she answered.

His heart filled, his body responded, and he began to move, slowly at first, relishing the sensations of the velvet heat and slick skin abrading his cock and arousing him beyond comprehension.

“I can't wait, love,” he groaned, knowing that this was one time when he could not hope for much in the way of control.

“I don't want you to,” she answered. “Give me everything, Dom. Please.”

As if those words shattered what was left of his restraint, he obeyed too, shifting his position to maximise the thrusts he could not hold back

Driving into her, lost in her gaze, drowning in her scent and burning in her heat, Dom claimed his wife, releasing his seed in one cataclysmic orgasm inside her welcoming body.

She cried out as his movements stimulated another release within her, and he caught his breath as her inner muscles added to his own pleasure.

It was unlike anything he'd ever experienced, almost magical in its wondrous and erotic delight.

She lay beneath him, panting, dewed with tiny sparkles of sweat, those amazing topaz eyes fixed on his face and filled with the pleasure they'd given each other.

The sensation of his cock softening made him want to cry. He didn't want to leave her body, instead he would stay inside her all night, if he could. But, Mother Nature being the cruel bitch she was, his arousal gave way to exhaustion, and he slid free, tired but satisfied.

"Are you well, sweetheart?" He moved over her to her side and caught her up tightly, resting her head on his chest. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Worried now that he might have resurrected memories she would prefer to forget, he tucked the blankets around them both and waited for her response.

"You didn't hurt me, Dom. Not at all. In fact..." she paused and moved a little, settling even more comfortably into his arms. "In fact, that was the most beautiful experience I could ever have. I never imagined I'd find such pleasure, but you showed me how it should be between people who...who..."

"Who what, Wren?"

"I'm afraid to say it."

"Don't be."

She remained silent, her body tightening a little next to him.

"You want to say between two people who love each other, don't you?" He whispered the words. "At least I hope that's what you want to say, because that's how I feel, Wren. I think I fell in love with you when I found you on my doorstep. So for me, it's the absolute truth." He paused. "How about you, darling?"

She nodded. "I couldn't *not* love you, Dom. Not because you saved my life, but because of the kind of man you are. The kind I dreamed might be out there, but never thought I'd meet."

He sighed then, a burden lifting from his shoulders. "That's exactly the right thing to say, sweetheart. We found each other, Wren. Perhaps it was fate, or just a simple accident, but whatever it was, it has changed both our lives. For the better."

"Yes," she said simply. "Oh yes."

They held tightly to each other, knowing there would be many times in the future they'd express their emotions, but at this time, in this place, they'd said everything that needed to be said.

And thus entangled, they fell asleep.

~~*~*~*

Morning came far too early for Wren.

Wrapped warmly in her husband's arms, she stayed still, relishing the comfort of his heartbeat against her back, and the snuffling sounds of his breath as he slept on.

It seemed a dream, the most wonderful dream, filling her heart with astonishment that it could actually be happening to her. Everything she'd suffered, the pain, the agonies, the utter and complete loss of faith in people, in life, in God...all that swept away by one man with a wonderfully giving heart.

A rattle and the sound of voices outside their chamber reminded her that it was indeed morning, and they must stir. Today they would return to London, and she was ready to begin her life in her new home.

She turned over, gently, smiling as she met Dom's sleepy gaze.

"Where are you going, wife?" He stretched and rubbed her shin with his toes.

"To rise, husband. I hear the house wakening, and we must prepare ourselves to leave. Don't you want to go home?"

"Lord yes." He rubbed a hand over his face, waking himself up. "Far too many dramatics in the countryside, it seems."

She chuckled as she slid sadly from his embrace, shivering a little as her naked body met the cool air of their bedroom. "And it will be so quiet in town, I'll wager."

He dropped a quick kiss on her shoulder and threw back the linens. "I certainly hope so."

"It will be good to see Lady Agnes again," she commented, making her way to their dressing closet. "I won't be but a minute."

Yawning and stretching his arms above his head, Dominic grunted in agreement.

Dressing with a husband in attendance turned out to be quite efficient; he fastened her gown, she tied his cravat as best she could.

So her prediction was close to coming true, and they emerged from their room shortly after rising. There was no tea-in-bed this morning, since they'd be leaving as soon as they could.

"You'll have a little breakfast, surely," Mrs Collins urged as they met in the parlour.

"It's a long drive, Ma'am," Dominic said kindly. "We appreciate the thought, but perhaps if you have a small basket, we might take a little bread or something to break the journey? Starting off with a full meal might make both of us uncomfortable. And you're being very kind to loan us the carriage for our trip. We cannot impose upon you for more than that."

"After what you two have done for his Lordship and Fairmeadows, Mr Greybrooke, we owe you far more than a picnic lunch and a ride home." Ludlow joined the conversation. "But I do understand." He glanced at the housekeeper to see her nod and smile.

"They'll be taken care of, Mr Ludlow. Rest assured of that."

Ready to depart, Wren was about to tie her bonnet over her head when a commotion outside caught everyone's attention, and caused a rush to the front hall.

"Good heavens." Ludlow gasped as the door burst open. "My Lord, you're *home*." He rushed forward, managing to stop himself from hugging his master, but it had to have been a close thing.

The Earl looked tired, thought Wren. Pale and exhausted, he turned to offer his arm to his wife, who also looked as though she'd not slept in some time. Both were travel-stained, and barely recognisable as wealthy members of the Ton.

"Ludlow," the Earl sighed. "'Tis good to be home." He stared at the Greybrookes. "Who are these people? Have they come to collect a debt?"

"No, my Lord, quite the opposite." Dominic bowed. "I am Greybrooke, your jeweller. And this is my wife, Mrs Greybrooke."

Wren dropped a deep curtsy. "It is a pleasure, my Lord. And a relief to your household that you and her Ladyship have returned safely."

"Indeed yes, my Lord," Ludlow's voice carried a warmth that had been missing until now. "We were all most concerned as to your safety. Welcome home."

Lady Constance leaned against her husband. "It is good to be back," she said. "I would like to change, Mrs Collins. It was a long journey. A long couple of days."

"Of course, Ma'am. You come right upstairs with me and I'll take care of everything."

Galvanised into action, the group in the foyer separated, with the ladies retiring to the Countess's chambers, and the rest staring at each other as if unsure what to do.

Wren mentally rolled her eyes at the men standing somewhat helplessly, heads swivelling.

"Gentlemen. His Lordship has no idea of the events that have taken place. And I'm quite sure that to him, they will be of prime importance. Perhaps we should have that breakfast laid out in case someone might like sustenance at this point."

"An excellent and practical notion," nodded the Earl. "Mrs Greybrooke, is it? Sensible woman indeed. I need a cup of tea and a chair in my own house," he sighed. "Ludlow, there is a case beneath the seat in the carriage. Please have a footman bring it in directly? Its contents are valuable."

"Of course, my Lord. I will see to everything."

Wren looked at Dominic. "Should we depart and leave the family to settle?"

Ludlow turned quickly. "Please stay, if you would? I believe you are the best person to tell his Lordship of the events that took place last night, since you and Mrs Greybrooke played such a crucial role."

"What's this?" The Earl blinked. "Last night? Something happened?"

At this moment, Lady Helen, clearly awoken by the goings on in the hall, tripped merrily down the stairs, hair ribbons barely tied. "Papa," she called. "I just saw Mama." She rushed across the hall and hugged him. "You cannot imagine how glad I am to see you both."

He frowned. "But shouldn't you be..."

She laid her hand over his mouth. "No. I shouldn't. It's quite a tale, and not the only one."

"We're going to have breakfast and tell your father all about everything," said Wren calmly. "And your story is an important part of it."

"Not nearly as much as yours."

The Earl shook his head. "I think I might need something stronger than

tea, Ludlow.”

“I am forced to agree, my Lord. I think you probably will.”

Chapter Nineteen



Dominic felt slightly uncomfortable. Having breakfast with an Earl was well out of his range of experiences, although he knew his manners would pass inspection. Lady Agnes was a stickler for the proprieties, and he was glad of it.

Wren was naturally elegant, it seemed, but he noticed her shifting a little awkwardly on her seat, as if she too was unsettled by this completely unexpected development.

“Right then.” The Earl leaned back in his chair after enjoying his fill. “Who should start, I wonder?” His gaze drifted to his daughter. “Helen, you may begin. Explain why you’re here and not at the Gadstone-Riggleys with your fiancé? Your Mama and I would very much like to hear that tale.”

Lady Constance, eating toast, nodded.

She had recovered some of her strength, though, noticed Dominic. And her gaze on her daughter was quite intense as Lady Helen began her tale of woe.

“So there you have it, Mama. The man was unspeakably awful. Had you been present, you would have seen for yourself how abominable his actions were. And the affront to my person? Beyond redemption.”

Her father shook his head. “I find such behaviour hard to accept, Helen. If what you say is true, and I know you for an honest, if dramatic, daughter, then you did quite the right thing by breaking your engagement.” He sighed. “I’m not sure what to do now, though.”

“You’re right, my dear.” Lady Constance nodded. “But don’t concern yourself overmuch. We need not rush to find Helen a good and worthy husband. And this time, I shall not listen to my neighbours.” She snorted. “Clearly, they wanted that horrid man gone, and marriage to Helen would have accomplished that easily. They would have removed to London, of course.”

“I’m just glad he’s out of my life,” said Lady Helen firmly. “So let’s not worry about my matrimonial prospects at this moment. There are more important matters.” Her gaze landed on her father. “Such as where you both have been, and why you left without a word to anyone.” She sipped her tea. “We were all quite worried, you know.”

Dominic managed not to chuckle. Her cool demeanour belied her words, and her eyes were sparkling with humour. He wondered if her parents had any idea of the true nature of this enchanting young lady.

“Forgive me, my Lord,” said Wren quietly. “Before you continue, I have to ask if my husband and I should be present when family matters are discussed?”

The Earl turned his gaze on her, a curious look from beneath thick and heavy brows. “I have been given to understand, Mrs Greybrooke, that you and your husband have had a significant impact on Fairmeadows over the last day or so. Perhaps it might behoove us to discuss your contributions at this point?”

“Of course.” She glanced at Dominic. “Would you like to tell his Lordship what happened?” Her eyes pleaded for his help.

“I’d be happy to.” He could almost hear her sigh of relief. “It is not a pleasant tale, my Lord, and it distresses me to relate the circumstances that occurred at your card table last night.”

The Earl blinked. “Good God. I’d forgotten about the game.”

“Your opponents hadn’t.” Dominic took a breath and began the story, keeping it factual and unemotional.

Lady Constance gasped at the revelations, and the Earl himself found his jaw dropping as the bit where Wren had broken the quizzing glass shocked him.

“Thus his cheating was revealed most clearly,” continued Dominic. “He could not refute the charges, although he did his best to bluster his way out of them.”

“And at that point, we suggested he leave,” concluded Wren. “He was not best pleased, my Lord.” She gave a wry grin at the Earl’s chuckle.

“I’m not surprised,” he answered.

“We made him go, though, Papa. And I’m afraid I resorted to language more suitable to the stable when I told Ludlow to toss him out on his arse.”

“*Helen.*”

Almost doubled over with laughter, the Earl held up a hand to forestall his wife's shocked rebuke. "No, Constance. We'll have to let this one pass, because it's exactly what I would have said myself." He caught his breath, then shot a stern look at his unrepentant daughter. "But don't ever let me hear you say that again."

"No, Papa. Of course not."

"*Cheating*," said Lady Constance, dabbing a napkin to her lips. "I would never have imagined such a thing in this house, would you, Bertram?"

He shook his head. "No, indeed. Although I suppose I should have been more suspicious, instead of thinking I had lost my touch."

"What can you do, Papa?" Helen tipped her head to one side. "Will you be able to get any of your losses back from Hardwicke?"

"I'd like to take all of them out of his hide right at this moment," sighed the Earl. "But the first thing I must do is talk to my lawyer about my options. Then I must get the word spread about this entire unpleasant business."

"I believe Mr Singleton and Sir Talbot Caldwell had the same program in mind, my Lord," added Dominic.

"I'm sure they did." Linton nodded, biting his lip, an unexpected display of his concern. "You still have the cards?" He took a breath of relief at Dominic's nod.

Although whispers about his actual right to inherit his title might abound, Lord Linton seemed to be taking matters seriously.

"I believe I must be frank with you all at this point." He squared his shoulders. "Helen, your Mama and I have been in London. We left in a hurry because we realised if we waited, we would face the dreadful possibility of losing Fairmeadows. And this is completely my fault."

"Papa," Helen whispered. "It is that bad?"

"I'm afraid so, yes."

She sat up straight, a fierce frown creasing her smooth brow. "Is *that* why you tried to marry me off to that ignorant and uncouth oaf?"

"No, dear girl, of *course* not." Lady Linton did her best to soothe her irate daughter.

"Mama?" Helen's narrowed gaze landed squarely on her mother's face.

"Well...perhaps there was a hope or two involved...he did have a comfortable income," the woman winced. "But now we know his true nature, of course, nothing of the sort would *ever* be countenanced."

“Hmph.” Lady Helen sat back and folded her arms, looking undecided whether to be placated or irritated.

“I had hoped that there might be some assistance from the Fairmeadows trustees, but that matter is still pending. Although I have hopes that by the end of the summer we might see a resolution that will end that business in my favour.”

“Excellent news,” said Helen. “I would be so happy for you, Papa.”

Dominic nodded in agreement. “To put matters in a nutshell, my Lord, you and your friends have been systematically cheated out of considerable amounts of money since at least Christmas. We understand that to be around the time you received the gift of those marked decks from Lord Hardwicke. I believe that the losses from that date onward must be viewed as suspicious. With luck you should be able recoup something...”

“And they were significant enough to send us to London,” said the Earl, his features reflecting his embarrassment. “We have just parted company with many of the Fairmeadows jewels,” he announced. “It seemed the only way to buy ourselves some time to recoup some of my losses.”

He squared his shoulders. “I take the entire blame for this matter. It was my foolishness that brought us to this point. My absurd belief that I could reverse my ill fortunes.”

“I suggested the jewellery,” Lady Constance said firmly. “I knew Helen wasn’t particularly interested in the pieces, so I thought it would be a start.”

“May I ask, in my capacity as a jeweller, where you sold them, my Lady?”

“Rundell and Bridge, Mr Greybrooke. We trust them.”

“An excellent choice. They are the soul of discretion and known for their fair evaluations. I’ve worked for them myself.”

“Well, we came home with enough to keep the wolf from the door for quite some time,” the Earl said, relaxing a little. “Although the piece you made for Helen, Mr Greybrooke...”

Dominic politely waved his hand dismissively. “I shall return the rubies, of course. I doubt Lady Helen would wish for anything to remind her of such an unpleasant experience.”

“You have that quite right,” the young woman muttered.

“Perhaps I might ask you to hold on to those rubies, but redesign something for my wife with them?”

“Really?” Dominic glanced at the Countess. “I would be honoured to do so if it is your wish...”

“It is. And I shall pay you for the work you’ve already done. I can at least do that much. As I said, what we sold brought a fair price, and with the possibility of reclaiming some considerable sums from Hardwicke, not to mention a few other economic measures, I believe we shall see our fortunes restored quite rapidly.”

“That, my Lord, is excellent news indeed.” Wren smiled. “A happy ending, one might say.”

“I’ll be happier when Hardwicke’s in the Fleet or wherever they send such villains,” muttered Helen. “All this trouble, thanks to one greedy man.”

“It’s the way of the world, darling,” sighed the Countess. “Best accustom yourself to it.”

Dominic watched her gaze drift to Wren. He’d noticed she had paid more than a little attention to his wife, but he wasn’t sure quite why.

One thing he *was* sure of. It was time to bid farewell to Fairmeadows Manor.

~~*~*~*

Wren shared her husband’s desire to leave, but it wasn’t quite as easy as she’d hoped.

“Mrs Greybrooke.” The Countess came to her side in the hall as they were getting ready to gather their belongings for the carriage. “Might I have one moment of your time?”

Wren nodded. “Of course, Ma’am.”

“Come this way, if you would.” She gestured to a small corridor. “It’ll be a little longer before everything is ready for your departure, and this will not take long.”

Curious now, Wren followed the woman, down the corridor and into a small room which looked like it could have been a sitting room for a lady

once upon a time. Now it held some covered items, boxes, and had been relegated to what seemed to be convenient storage space.

“I never used this room,” said the Countess. “I understand previous residents liked to meet with staff here, but Mrs Collins has her own room, as do I. So...” She spread her arms, “it is as you see. Useful, but not used.”

“Ah.” Wren blinked, confused.

“I wanted you to see something.” Lady Linton crossed the room to a wall where several miniatures hung in an attractive arrangement. Some were of landscapes, skies, gardens...and some were of people.

“This one.” She pointed to one oval frame, delicately carved.

Wren’s eyes widened. “Good Lord.”

“Exactly.”

“I...I...”

The face looking back at her could have been her own.

The hair was the wrong colour, and the style one from years past, as was the gown that barely showed at the bottom of the little painting. But the eyes...

“She has my eyes,” murmured Wren, astounded.

“Or rather you have hers,” chuckled Lady Constance. “I couldn’t help noticing the similarity the moment we met. Do you recognise her?”

“No, I...” she took a ragged breath. “I know nothing of my forbears, Ma’am. We...we were not at all close, unfortunately. And I lost both parents very early in my life.” It was almost true, in some ways, but the saying of it did not sit easily on Wren’s shoulders. It was closer to a lie than she was comfortable with.

“I’m sorry to hear that, my dear. But it would seem that you will be making up for that with your husband, now that you’re wed. I’m sure you’ll be starting your own family.”

“Er, yes. Yes of course.”

“I’d like you to have this.” Lady Constance removed the miniature from the wall. “Neither his Lordship or myself have any idea who she might be, but since she has your distinct features, I believe she belongs with you. Perhaps at some point, you might be able to identify her. I don’t want to say we have no use for her, but that is essentially the truth. So if you would accept this as a small wedding gift and token of our appreciation for your contributions here over the last day or so, I would be most happy.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Overwhelmed, Wren stared at the small painting barely covering the palm of her hand. “Thank you seems too little for such a kind gift.”

“But it works very well,” smiled the Countess. “Now I hear Ludlow calling, which means the carriage is ready.” She led Wren back to the hall. “I hope you have a pleasant ride back to your home, Mrs Greybrooke.”

Wren curtsied low. “I am so happy to have made your acquaintance, my Lady. And thank you again for the lovely gift.”

She clutched it tightly as Dominic handed her her bonnet and gloves, slipping it into the pocket of her gown as soon as she could.

Farewells were finally made, and Lady Helen stayed on the doorstep waving to them as the driver clicked up the team. “I’ll be in London soon,” she promised. “I shall see you there.”

“We’ll look forward to it,” Wren called from the window. “Take care of yourself until then. Good bye.” She waved back until the Fairmeadows front door was out of sight, then leaned back with a sigh. “I am looking forward to going home, Dom.”

“I agree.” He took her hand. “What did Lady Constance want?”

“Oh, yes. I must show you. The strangest thing...” She shifted and found her pocket, pulling out the small frame and passing it to Dominic. “What do you think of this?”

He held it up, catching the light from the carriage windows, then turning it this way and that, leaning even closer to the sun shining in.

“It has to be someone related to you, Wren. The eyes. They could be yours, and since I’ve never seen any quite like yours, the shape of them, that unusual colour? She has to be an ancestor.”

Wren took a breath. “I thought so, too. But since I know nothing whatsoever about my family...”

Dominic’s smile was wry. “At least now you know you have one.”

“Oh...oh please, I didn’t mean to...”

“You didn’t.” He carefully pulled out a handkerchief and wrapped the tiny portrait snugly into the folds, returning it to Wren. “We shall treasure this, love. We’re a family now, you and I. And sometime soon we should ask Nick to do a couple of miniatures of us. Then we can start a tiny gallery of our own. Something to hand down to our children.”

He paused. “We really haven’t had chance to talk about any of these

things, have we? Families, children, that sort of thing.”

She shook her head as she chuckled. “Truly, I forget we’ve only been wed a couple of days, Dom. With our recent adventures, it now seems I’m quite accustomed to being your wife.”

“Good.” He leaned toward her. “Then you’ll be used to me doing this...” He kissed her, gently, lovingly, taking his time about it, his hand touching her cheek.

She caught her breath as he moved away. “I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to it,” she smiled. “But I will always be happy to return the favour.” Mimicking his movements, she kissed him back.

Chapter Twenty



Life in London, in what was now their real home, got off to a surprisingly smooth start, realised Dominic, as he looked at his appointment book and saw that he was ahead of his tasks.

Having a wife, and one he was falling more deeply in love with every day, was definitely the best thing that had ever happened to him.

She seemed to slide into the pattern of his life without any difficulties at all, and when he mentioned this, she simply smiled. "I've never had a routine of my own, Dom. So it's quite easy for me to adapt to yours."

"But..."

"I do not care for shopping unless we need something. I enjoy meeting your clients, and find keeping your schedule very satisfying. You know I have a good eye for your gems, so sorting them is a pleasure for me, and if it makes your work easier, then it is a double blessing."

"We could go out for a meal now and again..." he offered.

"Why? Is my cooking that awful?"

"No, noooo..." he protested. "I just wondered if you might like a break from kitchen duties."

"Dom," she came to him then, and put her arms around him. "I am your wife. The things you're speaking of aren't duties to me. They are pleasures. I enjoy cooking, especially for my husband." She dropped a light kiss on his lips. "You are worrying about silly things. I am happier now than I have ever been in my entire life, and that is all because of you."

He held her tightly and relaxed. "It is the same for me, love. As if I've found something I didn't know I was looking for."

She laughed and shook her head. "What a pair of newlyweds we are. Your friends are going to tease you quite mercilessly if you make such an observation around them, you know."

"We'll find out tonight. I am looking forward to seeing Lady Agnes again

and hearing about her trip to the country.”

“She’ll have plenty to tell us, I’m sure,” agreed Wren. “Should we share the Fairmeadows business with her, do you think?”

“If I know her, she probably has all that information already. Not much remains secret in London, and Lady A always seems to get the hottest news first.”

A knock on the downstairs door interrupted their conversation.

Wren glanced at the clock. “That will be Mr Trevithick, I believe. He has an appointment to review a gem for a ring he’s thinking of having made.” She kissed her husband once more, then moved away. “I’ll let him in and get him settled.”

Dominic smiled and nodded, once again wondering how he had become so lucky.

He worked on for a little, focussing on his current project, which entailed matching some lovely pearls and setting them into flowers that were destined to be aigrettes for an elegant lady’s coiffure. The earrings, already complete, lay to one side, and he glanced at them now and again, just to make sure his designs maintained their continuity.

His mind absently absorbed the sound of the conversation in the room below, where Wren was doing the initial interview with Mr Trevithick.

As the sound picked up, Dom stopped what he was doing. Yes, there were definitely raised voices, and that could mean trouble.

He covered his work, left the room, locking the door behind him before he went downstairs.

“And I’m telling you, young woman, you have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Wren looked as if she was barely managing to contain her temper and shot Dominic a look of relief as he walked in and immediately came to her side.

“Good afternoon. You must be Mr Trevithick?” He gave the man a firm glance, noting his heightened colour and the frown creasing his brow. He wasn’t young, by any means, so a certain amount of respect was due to his age, but Dom didn’t intend to let him bully Wren.

“You’re Greybrooke, are you?”

Dominic bowed. “I am. And this, as you must know, is my wife.”

“She’s telling Banbury tales,” he muttered, glaring at her. “Thinks I don’t

know what I have here.” He pointed at a large blue gem. “It’s a diamond, Greybrooke. A bloody blue diamond. You can’t tell me otherwise.”

Wren touched his arm. “Would you care to examine it, Dominic?” She offered him the small tool with double lenses which magnified the stone and revealed so much to experienced eyes.

He nodded. “Yes, I’d like a look.” His gaze drifted to Trevithick. “Tell me about this gem, sir. The provenance—as much as you know. How did you obtain it?”

“Well, I...uh...” He looked aside, huffing a little, clearing his throat. “I won it, d’you see. Card game at my club. All above board, of course.”

“From a friend, then?” Dominic picked up the stone and first held it up toward the light coming in from the window.

“Well...friend of a friend. But guaranteed by the best of our club, d’you see. Nothing havey-cavey there, at all.” He shot a look at Wren. “Got several members who know their gems. Lord Ariston, for one. Then Sir Henry Foldemere. Well-known for his family’s pieces. I’ll wager you’ve heard of them, Greybrooke.”

Dom nodded, his eyes fixed on the stone in his hand. “Some magnificent emeralds, I understand. I’ve not seen them myself, but I have heard of them, yes.”

“Well then.” Trevithick leaned back, considering himself well-validated. “So what do you think, eh? Lovely diamond, ain’t it?”

“It’s a cut,” observed Dominic. “Cut from another larger stone, I would say.”

“Possible.” Trevithick acknowledged, grudgingly. “The man was in France. I have to believe there’s plenty of jewellery being broken down there right now. I’d be happy to think it might have been cut from that Tavern Blue one we’ve heard about?”

“Ah yes. You’re speaking of the Tavernier Blue.” Dom glanced at Wren. “One of the Golconda diamonds, a huge blue one discovered in India a couple of hundred years ago. Ended up in France, with King Louis the fifteenth, if memory serves me. But it was stolen and cut. After that, nobody has heard very much.”

“I suppose it’s still out there somewhere?” asked Wren curiously.

“I’m sure it will reappear. Far too special a gem to lie hidden for long.”

He put the blue stone back on the table and bent over it with his lens,

taking his time, turning it, moving it, diving past its outside walls to take a deep and penetrating look into its heart.

Finally, he straightened and looked Trevithick squarely in the eye. "It's a sapphire, Mr Trevithick, not a diamond. A very fine sapphire indeed; the inclusions are slender and just what one would expect from a stone of this quality. But they are definitely there. Were this to be part of the Tavernier Blue? It would be free of any inclusions at all."

Trevithick sat back, stunned. "But... but..."

"I'm sorry, sir. I hope you were not urged to part with a fortune for this stone. I will say that for a sapphire, it is one of the highest quality I've ever seen. And many would have been convinced that it was indeed a diamond. But my wife is right." He rested a hand on her shoulder. "It is not the gem you were given to believe."

Trevithick gulped. "Would you estimate a value?"

"Considerable," replied Dominic. Thinking for a moment or two, he named a sum that made Wren suck in her breath.

"Oh." Trevithick blinked, surprised. "Well, that's not so terrible, then, is it?"

"I don't believe it's terrible at all, sir. You have one of the best sapphires I've ever seen here in your possession. Would you like to continue your discussion as to its future? A ring, I believe?"

"For my wife," he muttered. "Yes, I still want that ring. But perhaps not so fancy as I'd originally planned."

"We can certainly do that for you, sir. And I believe Mrs Trevithick will be very happy with whatever you choose in the way of a design. You can be sure Dominic will do this stone proud with his setting." Wren smiled at him.

"My wife is correct. I value the beauty and uniqueness of each and every gem, sir. They deserve the best I can give them."

"Heard that," said Trevithick. "That's why I'm here." He looked at Wren. "I owe you an apology, Mrs Greybrooke."

"No sir, not at all." She spoke kindly. "You were led to believe one thing and I told you another. We have resolved the issue. No apology is necessary and I look forward to hearing your thoughts about what is going to be a beautiful piece, and an outstanding heirloom for the Trevithick family."

Dominic could have plucked her out of her seat and kissed the breath out of her for that, but all he did was rest a hand on her shoulder. "My wife is

quite right,” he smiled. “Something I’m coming to depend upon every day.”

~~*~*~*

“How did you know?”

Wren didn’t need her husband to explain, since she knew exactly what he was asking.

“The colours. They were...wrong.” She shifted in her chair. “There are blues and then there are blues. And this stone had an inner light that was more violet than it should have been. At least that’s how it seemed to me.”

“Interesting.”

“And it didn’t sparkle as much as I’d have expected.” She shrugged. “It was just...just a *feeling*, Dom. But it was strong enough for me to tell Mr Trevithick. I will confess that I held my breath when you were evaluating it, in case I was wrong.”

“But you knew you weren’t,” he grinned.

She nodded. “I knew I wasn’t.”

He hugged her. Hard. “I have a treasure beyond price as my wife. It might have been a terrible day for you when you ended up on my doorstep, love, but it was the best day of my life up to that point.”

“You will have to teach me about these inclusion things,” she commented. “You said that diamonds don’t have them?”

“Well, they do, but they’re different in different stones...” He shook his head. “You are a fascinating woman, my dear. Just fascinating.”

She rolled her eyes. “Stop, you’re making me blush. And we have to go and visit Lady Agnes soon. I have things to do, and if you keep looking at me like that, they may not get done.”

He kept holding her, his gaze on her lips. “Mmm. I like the sound of that.”

With difficulty, she extricated herself. “Later, husband. Duties first.”

He sighed.

True to her word, Wren accomplished those duties she'd set for herself in short order, and they were on their way to Lady Agnes's home on time.

"It will be lovely to see her," said Dominic, smiling at his wife across the carriage. "We left our wedding breakfast rather rapidly."

"That seems so long ago, but it's barely a couple of weeks," mused Wren. "How strangely time moves, doesn't it?"

Lady Agnes herself said the same thing as she welcomed them into Barlow Place. "It's been an age, darlings. How wonderful to have you back."

The welcome was as warm as Wren had hoped; obviously there were no hard feelings about the hurried departure on their wedding day.

"Come tell me everything," Lady Agnes led them into the parlour. "I want to know all about what happened at Fairmeadows Hall."

"Have there been any rumours, my Lady?" Wren seated herself.

"Should there have been?" Lady Agnes grinned.

"This is London, Lady A." Dominic chuckled. "When are there *not* rumours?"

"Well..." Agnes laughed. "I will say that some whispers made the rounds, but nothing has been confirmed. It was said that the Earl of Linton and his wife paid a very hurried visit to some *friends* here in London, and jewellery was involved."

Wren glanced at Dominic before responding. "This is a little difficult, my Lady. I'm not sure where this conversation might go, or if—indeed—it should go anywhere." She sighed. "I hate gossip. I truly do. But in this case, whispers might absolve the Earl and focus attention on where it needs to be. On the villain of the piece."

Lady Agnes leaned forward. "There's a *villain*?"

Dominic nodded. "A dyed-in-the-wool villain, Ma'am. Someone who thought nothing of acting in the most ungentlemanly way possible." He glanced at Wren. "And not just recently. He has a history of despicable behaviour."

"You can't leave it at that," begged Lady Agnes. "I assure you, I can indeed be the soul of discretion. But if matters are this serious, perhaps word *should* get out about this individual's behaviour."

Once again Wren glanced at Dominic. "She has a valid point."

"I know." Dominic frowned, then took a breath. "Very well. I cannot see where the Earl's reputation could be damaged by the tale. In fact it might

help him live down the rumours that he was not entitled to his present position.” He looked at Wren. “I think we’d both agree that he is the right man for Fairmeadows. And the Countess is an excellent match.”

“Go on, then.” Agnes made a slight beckoning movement with her hands. “Tell me all.”

So they did, beginning at the moment they arrived at Fairmeadows Hall, their conversations with Mrs Collins and the revelations from both her and Ludlow.

They detailed their actions, the discovery of the cheating, and the matter of Lord Hardwicke. Dominic paused at the end of the recital, glancing at his wife. “Hardwicke will be in for some serious trouble now, here in London, if he’s not already,” he said quietly. “But Wren knew his potential for villainy before I did.”

Lady Agnes’s eyebrows drew together as she looked across the carpet at Wren. “You did?”

“He was one of the men who attacked us housemaids,” she answered coolly. “One cannot forget the face of a man who is engaging in the act of rape.”

“Oh, my poor child.” Lady Agnes leapt from her chair and rushed to the couch, enveloping Wren in a massive hug. “How terribly horrid for you.” She leaned back a little. “Did you punch him in the nose?”

Wren sputtered out a laugh. “No, but now you mention it, I should have, I suppose.”

“Yes, darling girl, you certainly should have. But even so, this must have been quite dreadful for you.”

“Well,” Wren thought about it. “Actually it was rather satisfying to play a role in exposing his perfidy. I was very pleased to think that I had something to do with stopping him from cheating anyone else.”

“I wonder if he’s in London,” said Dominic. “Have you heard anything of his presence, Lady A?”

She shook her head. “I doubt that I would, since I think I’ve only met the man twice perhaps, if that.” She thought for a moment. “But there is a large musicale set for tomorrow night in Mayfair. Serena Tately is a friend of mine and I have an invitation. I’m sure she’s not going to mind my bringing two friends along with me.” She chuckled. “I doubt she’ll even notice, because the rest of London will be there too. If this Hardwicke fellow wants any kind

of attention, he'll be there, I have no doubt."

"A musicale? I don't think..." Wren began.

"Of course you do. You'll love it. We'll see if I have a dress that fits, since I doubt you've replenished your wardrobe with fancy gowns since your wedding, have you?" asked Agnes

"Well, no, I..."

"Say no more. We shall attend tomorrow night and see about putting this Lord Hardwicke down into the mud where he belongs."

Dominic sighed. "Very well." He glanced at Wren. "I'd like to see him finished, wouldn't you?"

Wren shot him a determined look. "More than *anything*."

Chapter Twenty-One



Lady Agnes led Wren upstairs to her chambers, leaving Dominic to chat with Merrihew and indulge in a cup of tea. Knowing the butler, there were probably biscuits involved, since the man had a soft heart for the gentlemen his mistress “mothered”.

Wren thought to herself that she’d rather share those biscuits than follow her Ladyship toward a giant wardrobe, where more dresses hung than any one woman would need in a lifetime. But this little excursion gave her chance to do something she’d been hoping to do since they got home from Fairmeadows Meadows.

“My Lady,” she began.

“Hmm?” Agnes was rummaging energetically in the cupboard. “Ah. This might serve. And this.”

Dresses began to appear willy-nilly, and within moments Wren found herself with her arms full of silks and satins, laces, and muslins. All delightful, all elegant, and all quite overwhelming.

“There are shoes and fripperies to match, of course,” said Lady Agnes, emerging a bit ruffled from the depths of the garment hoard.

“Lady Agnes,” said Wren more firmly. “I have something I’d like to show you.”

“Oh?” Agnes blinked. “Well, of course, dear. What is it?”

Wren moved to the window and reached into the pocket of her practical dress, pulling out the small wrapped package containing the miniature she’d been given by the Countess of Linton.

“Here. This. Lady Linton kindly gave it to me at Fairmeadows.”
Delicately, Wren removed the coverings and passed it to Lady Agnes.

“She told me I looked like this woman. She didn’t know who she was, or any details at all, and it certainly wasn’t anyone from the Linton family. So she said I could have it, and perhaps find out who sat for it. Because, as you

can see...”

“You have her eyes.” Agnes nodded and took a seat on the bench beneath the window. “You definitely have the look of her, Wren. The shape of the jawline, the way she holds her head. It’s not just the eyes, although they are as similar to yours as can be.”

“I wondered if...perhaps you’ve seen someone like her? Or maybe...I don’t know...something?”

Wren’s nerves threatened to choke her as she murmured her question. If this was indeed someone related to her, perhaps this was a big step toward finding out who she was.

But that raised another matter altogether. Did she *want* to find out who she was? Would learning about the family who had apparently abandoned her make any difference to her life, other than probably making her very sad indeed?

It wasn’t something she’d discussed with Dominic yet, because such things would be difficult to talk about, given his background. Being a bastard might slant his views on finding out about families. He could be enthusiastic, or quite the opposite.

The topic of family was indeed a touchy one for both of them. So for now, she contented herself by watching a look of intense interest cross Lady Agnes’s face as she peered at the miniature.

“You know,” she said slowly, “I believe I might know who this is.”

Wren gulped down shock. “You do?” she croaked.

Agnes nodded. “If I’m right, this is a young Julia Hobart. Probably before she married Lord Nicholas Simmons.”

“Simmons,” said Wren. “She would have been Lady Julia Simmons?”

“That’s right, yes. She married early, in her late teens, I think. Oh, wait.” Agnes’s eyebrows rose as she pulled out memories. “She died bearing her first child, poor thing. Very sad. Her niece...and you won’t believe this... Julia Simmons’ niece is Mrs Dorothea Hampton. And she, Wren, is the featured pianist at tomorrow’s musicale.”

“Good God.”

Wren’s legs gave out and she plopped down rather hastily on the side of the bed, in the middle of the pile of gowns. “That is a huge coincidence, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is.” Agnes stared at the miniature again. “I have to say that

Mrs Hampton doesn't resemble this painting. She doesn't have the eyes, you know. Must have her Papa's, I suppose."

"Indeed." Wren's thoughts were anywhere but on this woman's eyes. All she could think of was that name—*Simmons*. Could the family be related to her very own Reverend Francis Simmons? The man who had shown her one of the few kindnesses as she was growing up? Did he do so because he knew who she was?

If so, why hadn't he said anything?

She closed her eyes for a few moments, trying to control all the tumbled thoughts running through her mind like a river in flood.

"Dear girl, this is a very interesting development." Lady Agnes sat down beside her and put her arm around her, heedless of the silks and satins beneath them. "But what you do about it is entirely up to you."

Wren opened her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"You can choose to pursue this matter, to see if it leads to any information about your past, or even if it leads to a family. Or you can simply put it all down to coincidence, and let it alone. You are beginning your own family now, with Dominic. Will knowing more about these people make any difference to that?"

"No." Wren was emphatic. "Not one bit. I am Wren Greybrooke now, and happy to call myself the wife of a good man."

"That is the perfect answer as far as I'm concerned." Lady Agnes hugged her. "Now. Let's pick an ideal gown for you, and then rejoin your husband to make sure he's not eaten all those biscuits Merrihew doubtless provided. Everything else can wait until tomorrow night."

After settling on a bronze silk that Agnes swore made Wren's eyes look magnificent—and also fit extremely well, needing no alterations whatsoever—the two women returned to the parlour, satisfied with their endeavours.

"It's a beautiful dress, Dom," said Wren. "I am so blessed. I hope you'll like it."

"You'll be wearing it, so of course I will," grinned Dominic.

"Oh, well played," laughed Lady Agnes. "That was an excellent response."

Dom gave her an exaggerated and playful bow. "I rather hoped you'd approve." He straightened. "But all joking aside, is it possible Hardwicke will have the nerve to attend?" He paused for a moment in thought. "What are the

odds that news of his appalling behaviour toward the Earl of Linton have percolated to the hallowed halls of the Duke and Duchess of Eventyde?”

“Rumours abound everywhere,” said Agnes thoughtfully. “About anyone and everyone, of course. It is the way of the *Ton*, which would probably die a miserable death without them.”

“But?” Wren folded her hands in her lap. “I believe there is a ‘but’ following that statement, my Lady...”

“Astute girl,” grinned Agnes. “Rumours often make people more interesting. A hint of impropriety and everyone suddenly wants to be able to say they got the information directly from the source. In some minds, the whisper of scandal is rather like an apple to a horse. Something to be savoured, and enjoyed.”

Dominic sighed. “People are, for the most part, idiots. Present company excepted, of course.”

“Of course, and I agree.” Agnes nodded. “So, all things considered, I’d say it was a good chance that Hardwicke will attend tomorrow night. Since nobody has been to my door with news of the charges from Linton, he may still be *persona grata*, and the Eventydes are not known for their fastidious attention to their guest lists.”

“But not for long?”

“No, Wren, not for long. Cheating at cards is about the worst sin a gentleman can commit. And yet it takes time to prove it. I wouldn’t be surprised if he still knows a few gentlemen who would sit down to a game with him. Worst case could be that it comes down to our word against his.”

“Oh dear.” She sighed. “Life can be quite complicated at times, can’t it? Should we just let it all go, and stay home tomorrow night?”

“And miss the chance to wear that gown?” Agnes’s eyebrows rose. “I’d be so disappointed, darling. It’s been too long since I’ve had chance to stir things up in town. I think I’m overdue, and you two have handed me the perfect opportunity to make sure a villain gets his just desserts.” She rang the bell for Ludlow. “Speaking of desserts, I really would like one of those biscuits I know you had.” Her grin landed on Dominic.

“They were very good.”

“I hope there are some left, young man. We’ve worked up an appetite.”

Dominic met Wren’s eyes and smiled, warming her heart, and sending her worries out of her mind. For the moment.

~~*~*~*

“I can’t quite believe we’re actually doing this.”

Light was fading from the London sky as the Greybrookes prepared for the evening’s entertainment by getting dressed in their own bedroom at home.

Dominic looked away from the mirror and at his wife. “Doing what?”

“Getting ourselves all dressed up for an event we haven’t been invited to, where someone who is most definitely not a friend of ours may be present, and Heaven only knows what else.” She rolled her eyes. “Although since we pretended to be the Viscount and Viscountess DeBurgh, I suppose there is some minor precedent.”

“Worried?”

“Of course.” She blew air out from between her lips. “Only a fool wouldn’t be.”

“That makes me a fool then, I suppose.”

“You know what I meant, Dominic. And you are certainly no fool. Don’t try to convince me that you’re looking forward to this evening, because it won’t fly.”

“All right,” he smothered a chuckle. “It’s more that I’m not terribly concerned. My best hope is that Hardwicke would show a little common sense and lay low for a while, if there are rumours circulating.”

Wren snorted in derision.

Dominic nodded. “Yes, that’s my opinion too. But I said it was my best *hope*, not my belief. Because it’s more than likely he’ll decide that if he circulates as if nothing has happened, then people will assume that of course he’s innocent because how could he possibly have the gall to appear in public with such shocking charges laid at his door?”

“Are people really that...stupid?”

Dominic walked over to her, and gently took her chin in his fingers. “Can

you doubt it?”

Her beautiful eyes darkened, and she sighed. “No.”

“Well then. Help me tie this blasted cravat if you would? And I’ll finish the buttons on that lovely gown.”

It was a moment of utter domesticity, and Dominic found himself marvelling at how natural it was to turn to his wife for such things.

She had truly opened a new door in his life; one that led to the quiet joys of sharing that life with another. He couldn’t imagine anything that he wouldn’t discuss with her now, and waking with her at his side had become not only natural, but a decided pleasure.

They were still strangers in some ways, but the intimacy between them grew daily, and the ease with which they dealt with each other was proof that the decision to wed had been not only right, but the smartest thing he’d ever done.

However, his lovely bride was clearly not ruminating upon the pleasures of their marriage. “Besides Hardwicke, what do you know of this Mrs Hampton? The pianist we’re to hear this evening?”

“Not much,” he nodded at his reflection and tugged on his waistcoat. “I’ve heard the name. But I’ve never heard her play.” He grinned at Wren. “I’m not in the habit of attending elegant soirees, you know. It’s more a case of a meat pie and a tankard of ale at the Book and Barrel with Nick.”

She laughed. “Not elegant perhaps, but more fun, I’ll wager.”

“You’d be right,” he grinned back. “Which brings to mind the thought that maybe Nick might attend tonight. He has one or two portraits on the go of some of those elegant attendees. And being that he’s what some might call charming, I know he’s had invitations to such things in the past.”

“He is such a good friend to you, is he not?”

“He is. Why do you ask?”

“You speak of him in the affectionately dismissive way only men seem to have. The more dismissive, the closer the friend.”

“Well of course.” Dominic blinked. “That’s...that’s just how it is.”

Wren smiled, her eyes holding the secrets and the wisdom of eternity. “I know.”

He wondered for a brief moment if he’d ever fully understand women. Then he brushed the thought aside. “I haven’t mentioned it, but I happen to be in possession of a lovely pendant that I believe will go very nicely with

that gown.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I make some pieces when I have time and spare stones, just for the pleasure of it. And occasionally a customer might find one or two of them suiting his needs.” He finished fastening Wren’s gown, turned her, and smiled. “Would you like to see?”

“I would. Very much.”

“Come on then. It’s downstairs in my safe.”

Taking her hand, he walked her from their bedroom toward the narrow stairs that led from their living quarters to his workshop.

It was a matter of moments to unlock the safe and withdraw a long velvet box. It didn’t look new, but as if it had held jewellery for many years. The brown leather covering showed signs of use, and when Dominic opened it, he knew exactly what he’d see.

Turning to Wren, he held out the box. “What do you think?”

Her wide-eyed gasp was appreciation enough, and he smiled. “Yes, the box is an old one, which is why the velvet has darkened from a pale cream to this deep golden brown. But it does show off the pendant nicely, doesn’t it?”

“Dom,” she whispered, tentatively holding out a finger and touching the piece. “You want me to wear this? I can’t. I couldn’t possibly. It’s far too valuable...”

“You’re my wife, Wren. Mrs Greybrooke. Since your husband is renowned for his talent with jewels, I think it’s only right that the woman on his arm should be wearing something special.” He removed the pendant and walked behind her, slipping it around her neck and working the clasp at the back. “Think of it as being the perfect advertisement for my skills.”

He dropped a quick kiss on her shoulder, and then looked past to where a mirror on the wall reflected their image. She was staring at herself, her eyes wide and focussed on the lovely teardrop shaped topaz surrounded by fine gold lacework. It was a solid piece, yet delicate, and one Dom was very proud of. He was even prouder as he adjusted the slender chain so that everything aligned with the bodice of her gown and the shadow between her breasts.

Tonight, he promised himself, he’d take full advantage. He wanted her naked, wearing nothing but his jewel against her skin.

As if she read his thoughts, her gaze met his in the mirror. “Magnificent,

Dom. Just magnificent.”

“Yes,” he answered, running his lips over her skin, and noting the flush rising in her cheeks. “You are.”

Chapter Twenty-Two



“This is so exciting.”

Wren couldn't contain her nerves as she sat next to Lady Agnes in the grand carriage her Ladyship had ordered out for the occasion.

“It's probably going to bore you to tears,” said Nick with a chuckle. “But I'm thrilled to be here, Lady A. And honoured. That's the truth.” He leaned over, took her hand, and dropped a light kiss on it.

“Oh go on with you. Save the flirtations for the beauties who deserve it.” Agnes shook her head.

Nick and Dominic sat side by side across from the ladies, with their backs to the horses, leaving Wren free to stare at the lights of London as they drove through glittering streets to their destination.

“It all looks so grand from this vantage point,” she murmured.

“To many, it is grand,” agreed Agnes. “But there are many of us who are well aware that beneath the shine lies a murkier and darker layer.”

“Which is invisible to most of those you'll meet tonight,” Nick added. “'Tis the way of our world, Wren. Those that have, ignore. Those that have not, suffer.”

“I cannot fault your logic, Nick. I suppose I'm one of the rare birds who has experienced one side and is now about to experience the other.” Wren bit her lip. “And I confess I'm more nervous about a musicale than having to clean out six fireplaces before dawn.”

Agnes chuckled. “You'll find the musicale easier on the hands, dear girl. And, probably, the guests a great deal more dirty than the hearths.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “We'll make sure you don't see much of that,” he said.

Wren met his gaze. “I will avoid it. I've learned how over the years.”

“And you're a married woman now, thus you will be one step above the layer of females pursued by the unscrupulous.” Dominic's tone was

reassuring. “And you can also be assured that your husband will be at your side. We’re still newlyweds, so it won’t be anything out of the ordinary.”

“Isn’t that a strange thought?” Wren smiled at him. “We’ve certainly had an interesting honeymoon so far. It feels as if our wedding was quite some time ago, not a matter of weeks.”

“You’ve certainly managed to have an adventure,” Agnes laughed. “Marriage itself is supposed to be enough of one, but you two had to go and find another.”

“Overachievers,” snorted Nick.

“Jealous?” grinned Dominic.

“Of your adventures, yes. And the fact that you’ve married the most beautiful woman? Of course. But overall...I’m content the way I am, thank you.” He glanced at Wren. “I really do have to paint you though. In that gown, with that pendant. The eyes alone...” His eyes turned cool and professional as he stared at Wren.

“Sometime, perhaps,” she said gently. “You would honour me, Nick, and I’m humbled. But I’ll wager there will be other more interesting faces at the musicale tonight.”

The carriage slowed before Nick could respond, and Wren drew a breath as she saw the brightly lit facade of Eventyde Hall, carved columns soaring over a multitude of carriages, many disgorging their passengers, others trying to move out or move into the chaos.

“Oh my goodness,” she whispered. “This is going to take hours...”

Agnes chuckled. “They’re quite good at it, you know. The footmen on the steps. We’ll have no more than a fifteen minute or so wait I’d guess.”

“And that, dear Wren, is so that the Duchess will be able to declare her event a sad crush, and tomorrow’s papers will be absolutely full of descriptions of who did and didn’t attend, who wore what, who flirted with whom, and what scandalous behaviour was noted—and enjoyed—by the attendees.”

Dominic looked at his friend. “So sad,” he shook his head. “So jaded and yet so young.”

“Can you honestly admit I’m wrong?” Nick raised his eyebrows.

“No.”

“Well then,” Agnes grinned. “It should be a wonderful evening.”

“As long as we’re not the scandal,” muttered Wren, clasping her gloved

hands tightly in her lap. “I can’t imagine it would do Dominic’s business any good to be linked with Hardwicke’s cheating ways.”

“You’d be surprised,” Nick commented, a wry twist to his mouth. “People are odd, Wren. Stranger things have happened and I’m sure there will be more to come.”

Finally, their carriage drew up at the steps leading into the Hall, and Wren’s eyes drifted upward past the massive columns to the carvings and decorations.

“My goodness.” She blinked as they waited in line behind several other parties.

“A bit overdone, I’d say,” whispered Dominic in her ear as he took her arm. “But then again, this is Mayfair.”

“True.” She nodded, glad for the warmth of his body next to hers. Her heart was racing, she was only too well aware that this was a long way for a housemaid to come. Even now, she could feel the fear nipping at the back of her mind. Someone would recognise her, point at her, announce that she was a fraud and should never have been admitted. And she’d be thrown out on her ear and Dominic with her.

“Stop worrying,” he said, squeezing her arm against his side. “I can almost hear it. We are just another couple in the middle of this chaos. Nobody will notice us.”

“I hope you’re right.” She swallowed, as they moved forward and finally into a massive foyer, where half a dozen maids and footmen were relieving guests of cloaks and hats.

Since she had neither, she simply clung to her husband, watching as he passed his hat and gloves to a footman, nodded politely, and then led her to the line forming for admittance to what must be the ballroom.

Lady Agnes and Nick were in front, and she noticed several people smiling at them both. Obviously, her Ladyship enjoyed Nick’s company, and they were familiar faces to more than a few other guests. Thanking her lucky stars that this was not an occasion for a grand announcement of each attendee, she held on to her husband’s arm, and walked into the largest room she’d ever seen.

It room was enormous, and filling up fast. At the far end was a dais upon which stood a gleaming, beautiful piano. There were several large branches of candles illuminating the area, standing tall on columns, and adding to the

light from the magnificent chandeliers in the rest of the room.

There was a moment when Wren found herself wondering how long it would take to clean what must be over a thousand crystals. Then she took a breath and cleared her mind of such things. She was no longer in a position to worry about that, or the number of fireplaces, or whether each guest room chamber pot needed emptying.

Casting a relieved glance at Dominic, she leaned gently against him. “I’m so glad I married you.”

He blinked, and shot her a surprised glance. “Well that’s very nice to hear. What, may I ask, brought that on?”

“Nothing really. Perhaps just the crystals in the chandeliers.”

“Oh.” Puzzled, he looked upward. “I’ll wager they’re an absolute horror to clean.”

She managed to stifle her laugh, and not mention she’d had the same thought. “I’m sure you’re right.”

~~*~*~*

They found seats on the end of a row in the middle of the ballroom, and Dominic gallantly took the very last chair, even though he knew he’d be called upon to rise more often than he cared to think about. But on the positive side, he could stretch his legs out beneath the chair in front, and by angling them manage a relatively comfortable position, without offending the person sitting there.

There was much chatter, laughter—from both ladies and gentlemen—and the usual shuffling, fidgeting, fluttering of fans, and whispering.

He caught several people curiously looking at both himself and Wren, and more than a few gentlemen allowing their gaze to linger on his wife. He wasn’t surprised, since he considered her one of the most striking and beautiful women in the room.

But then again, he was seriously biased in her favour.

She seemed unaware, simply sitting quietly beside him, and gazing around the room.

“Would you like to attend a ball here?” He leaned over and whispered in her ear.

She shook her head. “I think not. Much too grand for me.”

He had to agree. “Me too. But I’m glad we’re getting the chance to see it.”

The seats were almost full when a portly, but very elegantly dressed, gentleman strode to the dais and walked up the steps to stand by the piano.

A rustling sort of silence fell.

“My Lords, Ladies, and gentlemen,” said the speaker in jovial tones. “It is my pleasure to welcome you all here to Eventyde Hall this evening.” He looked around. “For those of you who don’t know, I’m Eventyde.”

Gentle and polite laughter greeted this comment.

“We have managed to coax one of the finest performers on the pianoforte to join us tonight, and we are most honoured by her presence. Please welcome Mrs Dorothea Hampton, who will be playing a Haydn concerto, I understand. I don’t know which one...damn fellow wrote so many of ‘em. If you absolutely have to know, you can ask her or m’wife afterwards.”

More laughter greeted this smiling and honest comment, and that was followed by applause as the lady herself walked to the dais and accepted Lord Eventyde’s hand as she walked up the steps. She was followed by a younger woman holding a sheaf of music.

“She doesn’t look like you,” murmured Dominic, almost beneath his breath.

Wren simply held her finger to her lips.

He sighed, leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms, and prepared for the next however-much-of-it there was of music, hoping his arse wouldn’t go numb before it was done. The important guests were seated on upholstered furniture, whereas he and the rest of the *hoi polloi*, had to make do with hard ones.

However, the time passed quite quickly, since Mrs Hampton was indeed a brilliant pianist, and he found himself enjoying the performance more than he’d expected.

Both he and Wren joined everyone else in standing and applauding at the

end of it, an extended period of approval that was well-deserved.

And then, of course, after that came the real business of the evening.

A surge of guests headed for the rooms set aside for refreshments, while others wandered the expansive spaces and made themselves comfortable on sofas or chairs, scattered for the evening over most of the first floor of Eventyde Hall.

“They’ve done this sort of thing before, haven’t they?” Wren’s tone was amused as they paused, halfway up a massive staircase, to watch the colourful throng.

“The *Ton* at play,” answered Dominic. “Reputations will be made or lost, fortunes will change hands in the card room, and scandals will be whispered here that will fill columns in tomorrow’s newspapers. There may be a mention of music, but that would depend on how frightful any of the above scandals are.”

“Speaking of cards,” she moved closer. “Have you seen Hardwicke?”

He shook his head. “No, not yet. But if he’s here you can be sure he’ll be in the card room already.” His gaze narrowed. “I wonder if he’s gifted Eventyde with a deck or two of his special “French” cards.”

“Would he be so foolish?”

“He’s arrogant enough to try.”

“I say, Greybrooke, isn’t it?” A jovial voice spoke behind them. “You made a splendid set of the sparkles for my Mama.”

Dom turned. “Sir Charles. How kind of you to remember. May I present my wife?” He turned to Wren. “Darling, this is Sir Charles Houghton. I was honoured to work with Lady Houghton early this year. It was a pleasure.” He turned to the man. “I trust your Mama is in good health and enjoying the parure?”

“Probably wearing it tonight, actually,” answered Sir Charles with a casual wave of his hand. His eyes were fixed on Wren. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mrs Greybrooke. Delightful. Just delightful.”

She dropped a politely correct curtsy. “The pleasure is mine, Sir Charles.”

“Didn’t know you were acquainted with the Eventydes?”

He glanced down his nose at Dominic, who managed to ignore the implied insult. “We are here under the aegis of Lady Agnes Barlow, a good friend to our family. I believe she’s known the Eventydes for years, and also

calls Mrs Dorothea Hampton a friend.” He turned back to Wren. “Which reminds me. We promised to rendezvous with her, darling.” A glance at Houghton. “I trust you will excuse us, Sir Charles?”

“Of course, of course.”

Bows were exchanged, but Dominic felt an itch of annoyance at the way the man’s eyes still lingered on Wren.

“Damned nuisance.”

“He seemed quite charming,” Wren linked her arm in Dominic’s as they walked on up the staircase.

“Far too interested in you. You’re my wife, for God’s sake.”

Her lips curved. “You and I know that. We’re the only ones that matter.” She squeezed his arm. “And to be honest, I’m flattered at the attention. It reassures me that you’re not regretting bringing me.”

“As if that would happen.” He looked down at her with a frown.

“I mean it, Dom. I would be a credit to you in every way possible. But I cannot tell if I succeed without some sort of unbiased reaction.” She grinned. “I just got one. It was very nice.”

“Women.” Dominic sighed and led her to the top of the stairs.

Chapter Twenty-Three



As the Greybrookes reached the top of the staircase and turned to the right, where various kinds of sounds were emanating from open double doors, a voice hailed them.

“There you are. I lost you and Lady A in the crowd.” Nick carefully wound his way around a few guests and arrived at their side. “Blasted crush, if you ask me.”

“That means it’s a success, though, Nick. So we shouldn’t complain.”

“I’ll complain all night if I can’t even get a glass of wine,” he sighed. “Still I knew what I was in for, so you’re right, Wren. I shouldn’t complain.”

“But you will anyway,” Dominic clapped his friend on the shoulder. “That’s what we love about you.”

Nick rolled his eyes. Then froze, his head jerking suddenly to the right.

“What?” Wren frowned and followed his gaze.

A tall woman stood alone, her hands resting on the balcony, surveying the hall below with its jostling and chattering crowd. Her gown was exquisite, something glittering in blue and silver, a perfect contrast to her masses of shining chestnut curls.

“Who is she, Nick?”

He shook his head at Wren’s question. “I don’t know. But I’m going to.” He straightened. “I’m going to paint her.”

The tone of his voice surprised her, and she glanced at Dominic with a little frown. He shrugged and raised his hands either side in a way that expressed his puzzlement.

“We can find out who she is. I’m sure Lady Agnes would know.” Wren gently touched his sleeve.

He almost jumped, as if surprised to find himself where he was. “No need. I can do that myself.” He took a step away. “And I’m going to start now.” He grinned, dark eyes alight. “By God, I’m glad I came.”

With that unexpected comment, he moved away, heading toward the mystery woman who was, herself, walking toward the end of the corridor.

“Well.” Wren blinked. “I haven’t known Nick as long as you, Dom, but from what I do know of him, I’d say that was rather out of character.”

Dominic took her arm and turned her back toward the double doors. “Nick is somewhat unpredictable. Especially about his art. If he hadn’t mentioned painting her, I’d have said he just saw a lady he’d like to...er...get to know better. But I’ve never seen him struck like that when it comes to a subject for a painting.”

“What’s that about Nick?” Lady Agnes walked up to them. “Talk to me, for heaven’s sake, because Sir Thomas Fincham is being a nuisance this evening.”

Dominic immediately offered his arm. “How much of a nuisance? Should I take him aside and have a word?”

Agnes chuckled. “No, dear. Not that much of a nuisance. Just being a fussy man, wanting to fetch me things, seat me in a chair, have a conversation with me.”

“Oh dear. He sounds quite smitten, my Lady,” Wren grinned at her.

“He’s not a bad fellow, overall. But he will treat me like I’m ancient gossamer. I want to box his ears and remind him I’m not at death’s door yet.”

“I’d be happy to take care of that little chore for you, Lady A,” Dominic gave her a stern look.

“No, Dominic. No smacking anyone. Besides if his behaviour truly warranted it, I’d have done it myself already.” She turned him away from the banister. “Now come on, both of you. We have to see if that abominable Hardwicke has dared to show his face tonight, and if he has, then we must decide what to do about it.”

“Lady Agnes,” said Wren as they made their way slowly through the crowds. “We just saw a very beautiful woman up here. She was tall, had dark hair a dash of chestnut, and a magnificent gown of blue and silver. She just sparkled. I was wondering who she was.”

Lady Agnes nodded. “I saw her earlier. I believe she is Madame Fleur Colville.”

“A member of the *Ton*, I suppose? So many here tonight.”

“Actually,” Lady Agnes slowed their progress and moved them slightly out of the idling crowds. “She isn’t a member of the *Ton*, although she could

be if she wished.”

Dominic blinked. “Really? Because I’ll wager she was wearing a royal ransom’s worth of diamonds on her wrist.”

“You noticed that?” Wren’s eyebrows rose. “I couldn’t get past her quite stunning good looks.”

“She is indeed a beauty. A legendary beauty in fact.” Agnes lowered her voice even more. “And as of this week, she is being pursued by the highest gentleman in the land.”

Wren sucked in a breath. “You mean…”

“Yes. Him. And she appears undecided, according to rumours. Her past is…spotty, one might say, but taking on the job of mistress to someone so well-known and important? That elevates her to a completely new level.”

“Oh dear.” Dominic sighed.

“What?”

“Nick is entranced. He took one look and declared he was going to paint her.” He glanced at Lady Agnes. “That, as we know, is not good.”

“Why isn’t it?” Wren gripped her husband’s arm. “Why shouldn’t he paint her?”

“He has somewhat of a history of becoming…too involved with his subjects, Wren. Especially when something about their appearance fires his muse.”

She was silent, thinking that over. Then a burst of laughter recalled them to the moment.

“Well, first things first. We have to visit the card room. I’d like to think Nick can take care of himself, especially here, in Eventyde Hall. He may find a new subject, but that’s as far as it will go at present.”

“Ever practical, and perfectly correct, my dear.” Lady Agnes nodded in approval. “Let’s go and see if that villain Hardwicke has dared to show his face tonight.”

They recommenced their progress, strolling casually as was the style, and within moments ended up at the door of a huge room, that Wren noticed was again lit with what seemed like a thousand twinkling candles in more massive chandeliers. She still felt a bit of a shudder at the thought of replacing the candles, let alone cleaning off the wax that might have accidentally spotted any of the crystals.

Some habits were hard to forget, and she gave herself a mental nudge.

She was not a housemaid anymore, but the wife of a guest. Time to put thoughts of the past aside.

“He’s here, dammit.”

Dominic’s whisper made her turn her head to see where he was looking. And there was Hardwicke, bold as brass, laughing at the man across the table from him. It was the Duke of Eventyde.

“Look at the cards,” she hissed. “They’re the same design as the ones he used on the Earl of Linton.”

“Different colour,” he replied softly, seeing the familiar pattern done in green on this deck. “But I have to believe the marks are there.”

As if to validate that statement, all three of them watched from a distance as Hardwicke made a show of producing his quizzing glass and surveying his hand through it.

“There.” Wren nearly choked with fury. “Did you see that? He’s going to read the cards with that glass.”

“Hush, darling,” Dominic smiled at her as a couple walking past glanced at her curiously. “We will surely find you a glass of ratafia. But first, let’s see how the games are going this evening. Don’t worry, I’ll explain the rules to you.”

“Thank you, dear,” she murmured, shooting him a look that threatened retribution later.

~~*~*~*

Keeping their distance, they circled the table, Lady Agnes doing her part by chatting with people she knew as they sauntered, simply part of the crowd assembled to watch the play, or waiting to return to the ballroom for the second half of the evening’s musicale.

Dominic saw immediately that Hardwicke was winning; the counters at his side made a pile considerably larger than his opponents. So the fact that he was cheating, here of all places, was clearly in evidence.

However, what to do about it was the overriding question. He could hardly walk up to the table, tap Eventyde on the shoulder and tell him he was the victim of a dishonest opponent.

Eventyde was a duke, he was a Ballinger bastard. He'd be out on his ear in two shakes of a lamb's tail.

Wren's arm was tense, he could feel the fury coursing through her as they stood back and watched Hardwicke's grin as he won yet again.

"So what do we do?" She whispered into his ear, casually so as not to draw any attention.

"I don't know," he replied, shaking his head. "I just don't know."

"Is he doing it again?" Lady Agnes came up behind them, keeping her voice low, and a smile on her face.

Wren nodded.

Agnes's fingers found Dominic's sleeve and tightened. "What's the plan?" she murmured softly.

"We don't have one yet."

"Wait. Just watch for a few moments." Wren linked arms with Dominic, keeping their appearance that of friends chatting while idly watching a game of cards.

"There. Do you see it?"

"See what?" Dom shook his head slightly.

"He puts the glass down as soon as he's determined the cards." She turned her head to whisper in his ear.

He chuckled as if sharing a joke. "You're right. But I don't..."

"Hush. Trust me."

He did, he trusted her with his life, if it came to that, but he wanted to protect her as well. Not knowing what she had up her sleeve was unsettling, to say the least. And when she released his arm, his skin chilled.

"Wren," he murmured. "Be careful."

"Of course," she answered with a quick glance. "But you know how clumsy I am..."

The look in her eyes didn't make him any more confident; in fact it worried him a great deal. He'd seen a flash of fury the likes of which he'd never imagined. But then he recalled who she had been and what Hardwicke had done to her. And he was grateful there were no weapons in the room.

His wife was unique, and at that moment he felt his love for her billow up

from his gut to his throat. She moved without any fuss and bother, walking toward the card table, keeping her head lowered, barely noticeable. Once near enough, she changed course and circled, ending up several steps behind Hardwicke, who hadn't seen her, so focussed was he on the game.

"Oh damn it to hell." Eventyde swore. "You've the devil's own luck tonight, Hardwicke. The cards are falling in your favour with every hand, it seems."

"I'm sure your turn is coming," chuckled Hardwicke, putting the quizzing glass down on the table beside him.

Suddenly, there was a squawk and a flurry of silk.

Dominic could only watch, helpless, as his wife took an accidental 'tumble', catching herself by reaching out to the card table—and grabbing the quizzing glass as she recovered her balance.

Hardwicke turned. And his face contorted with stunned fury as he recognised her. "*You. You...guttersnipe.* What the hell are you doing here? Give me back my glass."

"No," replied Wren firmly, straightening herself.

"You shouldn't even be here." Hardwicke's voice began to rise. "Your Grace, this woman is an interloper. A maid with the gall to pretend to be someone above her station. She...she...has stalked me...makes wild accusations..." He tried to reach her, but she was too fast for him. And Dominic hurried to stand behind him, his firm grip keeping him seated.

The man struggled to find the right words, and the room began to buzz with surprised conversation. The crowd's attention was all on Hardwicke—and Wren.

Eventyde frowned at her, obviously confused. "What's all this then?"

"My apologies for interrupting your game, your Grace. But if I may..." Controlled and unemotional, Wren stepped away from her target, leaving him squirming in his seat beneath Dominic's grip.

He prayed Hardwicke was too sensible to start a fight under these circumstances, but if he did...he'd find it hard going.

Wren, meanwhile, raised the glass to her eye for a moment or two. Then she put it down and stared at the Duke. "You are holding the two and seven of hearts in your hand, Your Grace. And the top card on the deck in the center of the table is the queen of hearts."

Her declaration brought a soft ripple of shock, as everyone's eyes turned

to Eventyde. He stared at Wren for a moment, then turned over the card on the deck.

It was the queen of hearts.

A gasp, a murmur, then more gasps as the Duke laid the cards in his hand on the table. There, for all to see amongst the spread, were the two and seven of hearts.

“Dear God,” muttered Eventyde, staring at Wren. “How did you know?”

“This, your Grace. Hardwicke’s quizzing glass.” She raised it high. “It reveals the marks on the back of the cards. A deck which he probably gave you as a gift. If not tonight, then some other time when you were about to engage in a game.”

“Nonsense. This woman is from the streets. Little better than a whore in a fancy dress. Pay her no heed, your Grace. She should be sent to Bedlam for making such wild accusations.”

A fierce and forbidding glare silenced the outburst, and the Duke turned his attention to Wren “Young woman. Come here. Bring the glass.”

She obeyed, rounding the table, and dropping a graceful curtsy as she reached his side. “It is only the hearts that are marked, your Grace.” She passed him the quizzing glass. “If you would observe?”

She turned his cards once more, face down on the table, and put the queen of hearts face down next to them.

The room was absolutely still as the Duke raised the quizzing glass to one eye and stared at the backs of the cards. Long seconds passed, and Dominic had to remind himself to breathe.

“She’s absolutely right.” He looked across the table at Hardwicke, who shifted beneath Dominic’s firm grip. “You’re nothing but a damned cheat, Hardwicke.”

A ripple of shock echoed around the room at the Duke’s words. Then his steely gaze met Dominic’s. “You may release him, sir. In order that that my footmen can escort him from this house. Immediately.”

On the briefest of gestures, three burly footmen appeared behind Hardwicke, replacing Dominic’s hands with their own.

Silent now, the man rose from the table, shooting a look at Wren that should have seared her into a patch of charcoal on the carpet.

“Summon the watch,” ordered the Duke. “He is to be taken to the nearest gaol. I’ll deal with him tomorrow.” Rising from his table, he glanced around

the now full to overflowing card room. “I believe we need something much more pleasant to entertain us. More music perhaps?” He waved his hand toward the doors, and his guests obeyed, the conversation level rising rapidly as they left the room.

“You.” He pointed at Wren. “And you.” The finger swung to Dominic. “Remain here.”

Agnes moved to stand beside them.

“I should have known you’d be involved in this mess somehow,” grinned the Duke. “You’ll never outgrow your ability to find trouble, will you, Agnes?”

“I hope not, your Grace,” she retorted, but with a twinkle in her eye. “I sincerely hope not.”

Chapter Twenty-Four



Wren was quite astonished at how rapidly the room cleared. After all, everyone present had just witnessed the most appalling scandal—a member of the *Ton* cheating at cards—in a game with a *Duke*, of all people. London would be wild about this story, and she couldn't even begin to imagine the headlines in the morning papers. The print presses were probably warming up right at this moment.

The Duke himself remained in the card room, and motioned to the three of them to sit at the table with him.

His gaze landed on her. “Mrs Greybrooke, is it?”

“Yes, your Grace,” she answered quietly.

“Then your husband is a lucky man,” Eventyde looked squarely at Dominic. “Your name is familiar. Jeweller, aren't you? Of some renown, I'll add, which is why I've heard of you. M'wife's after something new and wants to see you. Now that we've met, I might indulge her.”

“I would be very honoured, Your Grace.”

“Yes, you would,” the older man grinned. “And you'd be cursing me out after spending God knows how many hours listening to the Duchess trying to decide what she wanted.” He waved his hand. “But that's neither here nor there.” His gaze drifted to Agnes. “You took a risk bringing the Greybrookes here.”

“I know. As did they in coming.” She lifted her chin. “But once I'd heard the story of Hardwicke and how he had cheated the Earl of Linton for many months, I agreed with the Greybrookes. He had to be stopped somehow, and the more publicly it was done, the less likely it was that he'd be able to do it again.”

“If your plan had failed?”

“We didn't really have a plan, your Grace,” said Dominic. “It was more a question of finding some way to reveal his perfidy to you and the other

players. Simply standing up and denouncing him wouldn't have accomplished anything."

"And you, young lady. Was it your idea to take the quizzing glass?"

Wren breathed in, slowly, quelling her nerves. "We needed to get it away from him, your Grace. And into your hands so that you could see for yourself what he was doing. My little stumble seemed to be the only way to get it without making it look too obvious."

"You went along with that, Greybrooke?"

Dominic spread his hands. "I trust my wife, you Grace. I wasn't sure what she was going to do, but when she said she had a plan, I knew whatever it was, it would work." He turned and smiled at her. "She is quite brilliant."

Eventyde glanced at Lady Agnes. "Interesting friends, you have."

"I do. And I count myself fortunate."

"Your Grace," Dominic raised his chin. "We would not want to be anything other than honest with you. My wife and I are most definitely not of the *Ton*. I am a Ballinger, and I'm sure you know what that means. My wife..." he took her hand, "is, besides being the best person I know, a foundling. Between the two of us, we are certainly not the sort of people usually found in Eventyde Hall for an event such as this. But because of our prior experience with Hardwicke, and the lack of any other way to reveal his actions, we talked Lady Agnes into allowing us to accompany her. I trust this does not lower her in your esteem. We simply wanted to be able to stop a man from doing something utterly dishonest, and we had to do it in person."

Lady Agnes frowned. "Dominic is a great deal too nice in his notions. I find his and Wren's company infinitely preferable to more than a few of your guests, Eventyde. You can throw me out with them, if it's your wish to do so." She raised her chin and stared at the Duke.

"Nobody is throwing anyone out, Agnes. So you can get down off your high horse." He chuckled. "There will be whispers, of course. And my wife is going to be thrilled that her musicale was the scene of such an event. She'll dine out on this for months." He sighed. "But I caution you, Greybrooke. You have brought a great deal of attention to yourselves this evening. For better or worse, you will be the cynosure of many eyes, the subjects of much interest, and unfortunately you will be the recipients of some criticism for your audacity in attending this event." He sighed. "I'll do what I can to mitigate that, since your attendance has had a positive effect in that you've unmasked

a vile and greedy man, a member of the *Ton* himself. But even so...”

“We understand, your Grace.” Dominic nodded. “Attending such evenings is not something my wife and I plan to do in the future.”

Eventyde shrugged and sighed. “I’m sorry to hear it, you know. There are times when I’m surrounded by people I cannot say I like very much. But they are of my station in life. It’s a schism, a rift, Mr Greybrooke. An unbreachable division between classes. And one that must be narrowed or—God forbid—we might end up with our own revolution.”

“A terrible thought,” said Lady Agnes. “But one that does, unfortunately, have merit.”

Eventyde rose, as did the other three at the table. “I must return to the musicale. Some friends of m’wife’s are presenting a string quartet or something, and if I’m not there I’ll hear about it tomorrow.”

“We understand, your Grace. And thank you for your understanding and graciousness.” Wren dropped a respectful curtsey.

“I would have liked to stay and talk more,” the older man sighed. “You’ve made me realise the ease with which some people can converse, in contrast to others who must be forever uttering *bon mots*, or amusing jests.” His mouth turned down. “Gets damned annoying at times.”

Dominic nodded. “Well, your Grace, should you ever wish for a night away from such things, and you don’t mind wearing something more in the common style, I can recommend an evening at the Book and Barrel. A small establishment, but with a clientele of people who simply enjoy each other, and the finest meat pie to be found in London. They also had Chillendale ale last I was there, but please don’t spread the news of that, or the tables will be full for a month.”

Eventyde grinned. “Chillendale? I might take you up on that, lad.”

“We must go,” Agnes gathered her skirts. “You’ll deal with Hardwicke, I take it, your Grace? I am almost certain that Linton’s solicitors will already have been informed. He took a lot of money from Fairmeadows.”

“I will take care of it, Agnes. Hardwicke will never see another card table, and might end up in the Fleet.”

“A good place for him.” Wren nodded.

“Indeed yes. And we all owe you a debt, Mrs Greybrooke, for helping see he is put there.”

With a friendly smile, Eventyde turned and walked out, leaving three

exhausted people behind.

“I don’t know about you,” said Dominic, blowing out a deep breath, “but I think I’m ready to go home.”

Before either of the ladies could answer, a footman walked in and moved to Dominic. “Excuse me, sir, but Mrs Dorothea Hampton begs for a moment with your wife?”

“Oh.” Dom glanced at Wren and Agnes, both of whom betrayed their surprise.

“Really?” Wren almost whispered the word.

“Yes, Ma’am.” The footman turned. “If you’d follow me?”

~~*~*~*

Dominic felt Wren’s hand slip into his as the three of them followed the footman out of the card room and along the corridor. From the ballroom came the strains of a string quartet, and a few missed notes made all of them wince a little, even the footman. All things considered, a meeting with a brilliant pianist was infinitely preferable to a seat on a hard chair while enduring a lacklustre performance by an amateur string quartet.

As they reached the end of the corridor, the footman opened a smaller door and stood back, waiting for them to enter. It was a smaller parlour, with only one occupant.

“Mrs Hampton.” Lady Agnes smiled. “How lovely to see you again, and how brilliantly you entertained us with your Haydn.” She held out her hand. “We met some time ago. In the country I believe? Roger St Ives’ summer party?”

“Ah yes.” Mrs Hampton smiled. “Of course, how could I forget?”

Dominic watched her as she went through the usual courtesies with Agnes. An attractive woman, mature enough to have shed any public nerves, but young enough to have a lovely and appealing smile and manner about

her. Dark hair, blue eyes...Dom worked hard to find any resemblance to Wren, but couldn't put his finger on a single thing.

"May I introduce the Greybrookes, Mrs Hampton? My friends Dominic and Wren. Recently wed, they managed to cause quite a stir this evening, as I'm sure you've already heard."

Agnes stepped back and Mrs Hampton's gaze fastened fully on Wren for the first time.

Her expression changed to one of shock. "Good God," she said, voice low. "Your eyes..."

Wren blinked, then curtsied. "It is an honour to make your acquaintance, Ma'am," she said politely.

"She's like her, isn't she? About the eyes?" Agnes looked at Mrs Hampton.

"She's Julia," said the woman softly. "Almost an identical image."

"Er..." Dominic held on to Wren's hand, feeling her tremble at the other woman's words. "Might we sit down? It appears that some revelations are in order, and I might feel faint as I listen..."

Mrs Hampton looked at him in surprise, then laughed aloud. "Well done, Mr Greybrooke. Well done indeed. Yes, let's sit. This doesn't need to be any more dramatic a moment than necessary, and I'm sure you've had quite enough of those this evening."

He urged Wren into a chair, sat himself on the arm close to her, and waited for Agnes to sit next to Mrs Hampton on the small couch.

"Now, Dorothea. I shall take advantage of our previous meetings to call you that. I hope you don't mind." She waved the possibility away. "What do you mean about Julia? She was your...your aunt, if I remember rightly?"

"She was, yes. And she had those striking eyes." She turned to Wren. "Not just that shape, but that unusual colour, as well. People would forget her name, but they'd always remember her eyes." She leaned forward. "Tell me, Mrs Greybrooke. Could we be related in any way?"

Wren straightened in her chair. "I wish I could answer your question, Mrs Greybrooke. But I cannot. I am..." she took a breath, "I must be honest with you here, I am a foundling. I have no knowledge whatsoever of who my parents were, or where I was born." She frowned a little. "I do have a very faint recollection of a summer's day and a stream, but then? Nothing. Nothing until the foundling home where I was raised."

Dorothea slumped back against the cushions. “This is astounding.” She paused for a moment, as if gathering her thoughts. “I know you cannot be Julia’s child. Besides the fact you are the wrong age, she passed away far too young, giving birth to her first child, a son who did not survive. It was a great sorrow to the family. But your eyes...” She glanced at Agnes. “They are almost identical to Aunt Julia’s. It is quite uncanny.”

Dominic leaned forward a little. “Might I ask about your aunt’s background? Her parents? Did you know of them?”

Mrs Hampton thought for a moment. “If memory serves me, Aunt Julia’s papa was Sir Reginald Hobart. And her mama...oh, she was Scottish, I think. A Cameron? Goodness, I cannot exactly recall, but I’m sure the records are at home.”

“Other than Julia, do you recall anyone else with those eyes?” Agnes asked.

Dorothea shook her head. “No, I cannot. And I’m sure had I seen anyone possessing such a unique attribute, I would indeed remember them quite vividly.” She turned to Wren. “They are lovely eyes, my dear. No matter where they came from, or who passed them down to you, be proud of them.”

“I will try, Ma’am.” Wren bit her lip. “May I ask one question?”

“Of course.”

“I was very fortunate during my childhood to be taken under the wing of a local vicar. He kindly taught me to read and write, and much of what I know today, I owe to his excellent teachings.”

“How fortunate indeed,” Mrs Hampton nodded.

“His name...his name was Reverend Simmons. Francis Simmons.”

“Good God. Really?”

“Yes.” Wren sighed. “He passed away, unfortunately, but up until his untimely death, he was the Vicar of Little Tenworthy.” She looked at Dominic briefly. “I...we were wondering if there was any connection to your Simmons family line?”

Clearly taken aback, Dorothea slumped back against the cushions, her eyes wide. “I have no idea. Although I do know there were more than a few Simmonses in Papa’s family tree. He had one brother, but many uncles and aunts as well. So many cousins...” she grinned briefly. “As a child I could never keep any of them straight. And when Mama’s family visited at the same time, it was utter chaos.” Her hands, with their long elegant fingers,

flew around as she spoke. “So many Richardsons I lost count. Mind you,” she chuckled. “I wasn’t averse to the goodies and gifts all these people brought with them at Christmas. Simmons Hill was overflowing at those times. And with laughter, I’ll add. Both families seemed to get on well.”

“It sounds wonderful, Dorothea,” Agnes patted her hand. “You’re lucky to have such wonderful memories.”

“I am. And being here, speaking with you all...well it makes me especially grateful, knowing how many others, like yourselves, never had chance to create such memories.”

She rose, and as the others did so as well, walked to Wren, taking her hands. “I will research our family history, my dear, to see if there is indeed a Reverend Simmons. If there is, then possibly he took one look at your eyes and knew that you were family in some way. But that is only a supposition...”

“I’d like to think it might be true, Ma’am,” answered Wren. “I really would.”

“In the meantime,” her gaze moved to Dominic. “Make your own happy memories. You may not have many relatives, or a line that contains a large number of ancestors, but that doesn’t mean your lives cannot be every bit as wonderful, and your children will share and inherit those joyous moments, carrying them through the years in their hearts.”

Wren’s magnificent eyes filled with tears, and Dom’s arm went around her protectively, holding her against his side. “An excellent and most welcome thought, Ma’am. Thank you. We both appreciate your time and your willingness to answer our questions.”

Dorothea laughed. “Oh you haven’t seen the end of me, Mr Greybrooke. Now that I have met your wife, I shall insist she come to tea, and meet some of the family who recall Aunt Julia. You will entrance them, my dear. I guarantee it.”

“It will be an honour, Ma’am.”

Dom felt the indrawn breath and the sigh that followed. “Indeed. You are all kindness, Ma’am.” He released Wren and bowed as both Lady Agnes and Mrs Hampton walked to the door.

“Come on, you two.” Agnes glanced over her shoulder. “There’s still enough time left for us to suffer through the last portion of that dreadful string quartet’ as they completely ruin whatever unfortunate composer’s

piece they're attempting to play.”

“Of course, my Lady.” Dominic shot a quick look at Wren and rolled his eyes. “We can barely wait.”

Chapter Twenty-Five



The clock in Dom's workshop chimed twice as the weary couple clambered upstairs.

"I cannot believe how late it is," sighed Wren.

"It has indeed been a long night. And a somewhat adventurous one, too." He unfastened his cravat with a grunt of relief. "At least we were able to leave in a decent amount of time. I'll wager there are still guests awaiting their carriages even now."

Wren nodded, then turned her back to her husband. "Buttons, please? Oh, and the pendant, as well. That must go into to your safe immediately."

She felt his fingers at the fastenings of her bodice, and his lips on her bare skin as he pushed the gown apart. The tiny murmur of pleasure whispered through the silent room.

"Wren," he spoke, his breath making the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. "Keep the pendant on."

"Alright." She wondered at his command, but his voice told her he wanted her to obey.

"Are you tired?"

"Not really." Her gown slid to the floor, and she picked it up, making sure there were few creases as she hung it in her closet. It would go back to Lady Agnes as soon as possible. "I think I'm still trying to absorb it all. The business with Hardwicke and then the time with Mrs Hampton." She untied her chemise and then sat on the bed to remove her stockings. "So much to take in, Dom. And so many surprises."

He had removed his shirt and shoes, and silently walked around to her side of the bed, where he knelt and unfastened her garters for her. "How are you feeling about it all?"

Loving his attentions, she chuckled. "You mean am I about to start screaming?"

He laughed too as his hands slide one stocking slowly down over her calf, making her tingle. “I never imagined you’d do that. You’re much more controlled.”

He repeated the process with the other garter, and she shivered. “Not always, Dom.”

“No?”

He was such a fine figure of a man, she thought, watching the low candlelight flicker over his chest. “When are you not so controlled, Wren?”

Daringly, she leaned forward and cupped his face with her hands. “When you touch me.”

In response, he pushed himself back to his feet, then leaned over with his palms on her shoulders, urging her backwards onto their bed. “Show me,” he murmured.

The kiss was inevitable, her dress slid away unheeded, and Wren found herself exactly where she wanted to be—beneath her husband.

“God, Dom,” she panted, then kissed him, pouring her emotions into her movements, running her hands up and down his wonderfully warm and muscular back.

For his part, he managed to kick free of his breeches and dispose of his wife’s remaining undergarments in record time, never breaking the kiss she’d instigated.

It seemed like magic to Wren, but then again, anything he did to her fell into that category, and this was no different.

Although it was, in some ways, since she now knew how it felt to be loved. And to love back.

The urge to show him, to return as much as she could, to just surround him and let him know how profound was her desire for him—it took over, swamping her, nearly taking what breath she had left from her lungs.

With a strength she never knew she had, her arms pushed Dominic up and over onto his back.

And as he settled, she spread her legs wide and followed him, straddling him, feeling the hard length of him between her thighs and shaking with the pleasure of it.

“Ride me,” he begged. “For the love of God, put me inside you and ride me, Wren.”

He croaked out the request, and for the first time, she learned what it

meant to take the reins in bed. To control the depth, the speed, to experiment with so many things, to watch Dom's face as she began to understand what he wanted, and how it would feel.

It was—empowering, she realised. And the sensations that rose within her had no name at all. “Dominic,” she whispered, catching her breath as she discovered her rhythm. “Dominic...”

“Yes, sweetheart. Yes.” His fingers found her breasts, toying with the nipples turned hard as stone. “This is how I wanted to see you. Just skin beneath my hands, your eyes shining, and the pendant glowing.”

The topaz bounced gently against her skin as she let her instincts take over and experiment until she found a rhythm that pleased them both.

His groans and sounds of pleasure were music to her ears, and mingled with her own as she rose and fell, every part of her body shivering with desire. The feel of him inside her, moving, sliding, touching things deep within her, all combining to rip conscious thought from her mind.

Her world narrowed to this bed, this man, this moment.

His touches inflamed her even more, and she bit back a cry of pleasure as everything within her went taut. And at that precise moment, he rose up and rolled them over, resuming his plundering and letting her rest from her efforts.

As if she could rest when every single part of her shimmered and bolts of lightning arrowed down from where he had caressed her breasts to where he was touching her now.

His hands slid beneath her thighs, and he pulled her even closer onto him, kneeling so that all of her was exposed. She could not, nor would she, hide anything from him at times like these, but let him know how much she enjoyed and needed all the things they could do together.

His pace accelerated and his hand moved enough to slide his thumb between their bodies.

“Let go, Wren,” he urged, his pace forceful, his touch demanding. “Come with me, love. Let go.”

She fixed her gaze on his eyes, allowed her body free rein, and surrendered.

Shattering spasms of blinding pleasure rocked her, making her back arch from the bed and her mouth gape wide as she gasped for air and cried out his name.

He was with her, a harsh groan echoing around the room, throbbing and pulsing inside her as he spilled his seed.

Frozen for long moments, she wondered if this was what Heaven might be like. A place where love was all, a physical release the most incredibly beautiful moment of union between a man and a woman, and now—the seconds and minutes afterward—a blissful period of contentment, unmatched by anything earthly.

She fought the tears that filled her eyes as she once again tried to comprehend the joy she now experienced. And did her best to thrust away the thoughts of the misery she'd gone through before. Perhaps this was her reward for surviving, although why she deserved it, she didn't know.

Dom withdrew, gently easing them both down and pulling up the covers. "Wren," he whispered, his voice a sigh of warmth against her ear. "Are you all right?"

She smiled, even though she knew he probably wouldn't see it. "Yes, Dom. I am very much all right."

And I love you with everything I am.

She wondered when she'd be brave enough to say those words aloud.

~~*~*~*

For the next few weeks, as summer arrived in full force, Wren and Dominic found themselves establishing a comfortable routine.

Since London was thin on customers—many of their wealthy clients having retired to the country—Dominic spent a little more time purchasing items for his safe, visiting various dealers, checking with them on what might be in upcoming shipments from overseas, and putting his name down for a variety of purchases.

It was his normal procedure for this time of year; something he made a point to save up for during his busy months.

What wasn't normal for him, was coming home to a sparkling clean set of rooms and the delightful aroma of something his wife was cooking.

Her first loaves of bread made his mouth water, and she continued to astonish him with the diligence and pleasure she betrayed at being a housewife.

He had had some difficulty adapting to these circumstances, since his natural urge was to cherish and protect this woman who had become so essential to his very life. Seeing her working around his apartments worried him, and more than once he'd suggested they ask Mrs Potts to come in more often.

Wren had flat out refused, telling him she and Mrs Potts had come to an arrangement that suited them both, and if he was displeased, then she was sorry, but they knew what worked best for them and he should stick to making beautiful things for rich people.

He'd blinked at her determination, then chuckled, knowing he was rolled up, foot and guns.

Since then, laundry days involved both women, much laughter, and a lot of suds in the small kitchen. Those were the days he managed to absent himself, although hearing Wren's laugh, free and easy now, brought even more pleasure.

On this particular morning, which wasn't a laundry day, he looked at the bright sunshine outside his workshop and made a decision.

"Wren?" he called. "Where are you?"

"In the kitchen," came the response.

He climbed the stairs and found her putting away the last of the breakfast dishes. "Get your bonnet, love. We're going out."

"We are?" She untied her apron and hung it neatly behind the door. "You have a client? Is there some stock arriving?"

He grinned at her ease with his occupation. "None of those. We are going to have a little holiday today."

She blinked. "Oh."

Happy he'd caught her by surprise, he grabbed her hand. "Come on. It's a lovely day and we should take advantage of it."

"Where are we going?"

“You’ll see. Get ready and I’ll go downstairs and see if I can find a carriage.”

“Oh my.” Her eyes widened. “Well, we can’t visit Lady Agnes, because she’s at Barlow Manor, isn’t she?”

He turned on the stairs. “It’s not Lady Agnes. Hurry along now. Time’s passing.”

With wide eyes, she nodded and vanished into their bedroom to retrieve her bonnet.

It wasn’t until they were sitting in the carriage that he finally satisfied her curiosity. “Because it’s such a lovely day, and because at this time of year London isn’t too crowded, I thought it might make a nice change for us to explore some of the town’s treasures.”

“Oh.” She looked at him. “That sounds interesting?”

“And here we are.”

The carriage was pulling up in front of an impressive edifice, and he noted Wren’s eyes widen as she took in the elegant architecture.

As they left the carriage and he took her arm, she looked at him. “Dominic, where on earth are we?”

“Somerset House,” he replied, smiling at her. “You like looking at paintings, Wren. I’ve seen your eyes busy with them whenever we’re anywhere with art on the walls. I’ll wager you could tell me the exact nature of every picture at Barlow Manor...?”

“Well, yes. I do like paintings.” She took a breath. “Always have. They opened windows for me to places I never even imagined, let alone thought about visiting.”

“Well, here’s a place where you can indulge your interests to your heart’s content.”

He led them inside, past an elegantly dressed servant, and into the cool corridors, following the signs to the North Wing. “It’s called the Royal Academy,” he told her, as their footsteps echoed around them. It was indeed quiet, but they could both imagine how busy it would be during the season.

“We’re going to the exhibition room, and I believe...” they turned a corner, “it’s here.”

Stepping inside, Dominic was utterly thrilled to hear Wren’s indrawn gasp of surprise.

“Oh,” she breathed “Oh Dominic...” She clutched his arm, and he looked

at her face, a blend of astonishment and wonder.

Since the room itself was of impressive dimensions, soaring walls leading to high mullioned windows and an ornamented ceiling, he wasn't surprised.

But what probably made her mouth fall open the most was the multitude of paintings, mounted cheek by jowl, at a slight angle to allow for the best presentation to those poor mortals forced to stand on the floor beneath them.

"I can't believe it," she whispered. "Dom, I can't believe it. Oh look... look at this..." She squinted at the small identifying plaque. "It's by Sir Joshua Reynolds. I've heard of him."

"He was the first president of the Royal Academy, so you'll see a lot of his work."

The two of them began to wend their way along the walls, pausing frequently to study a particular painting. Dominic found enormous pleasure in listening to Wren's reaction; she had a way of looking at them that was uniquely her. Over halfway through, she stopped dead.

"Oh look. It's a self-portrait of Sir Joshua himself." She paused, staring at the depiction of a gentleman in a reddish caped jacket, holding rolls of what might have been paper. "I wonder why he doesn't look happier. He's created such lovely art..."

Dominic, who noticed that very few, if any, of the paintings featured 'happy' people, came up with his own conclusion. "He probably had rotten teeth."

Wren burst out laughing, the sound circling through the almost empty chamber like a cheerful little cloud. "Dominic Greybrooke. I'm ashamed of you. That is quite cruel."

"But likely true," he grinned back, unrepentant, teasing her as they wandered on.

"Yes, but he could have painted himself some good ones..." Her voiced faded as she came to a halt in front of one particular painting low on the wall.

"Dom," she clutched his arm. "Look..."

"Another set of rotten teeth?"

"No, *look*." She pointed to a certain spot.

Dominic moved closer. It wasn't a Reynolds, this time, but a painter he didn't know. The subject was an older man, sitting beside an elegantly carved desk, and in front of a wall with a window high enough that only the sill could be seen.

“What am I looking at?” He peered more closely.

“The hanging behind him. The crest, Dom.” She shook his arm. “*It’s the same as your ring.*”

Chapter Twenty-Six



Dominic's skin chilled as he followed Wren's gaze. She was right, of course; he'd never doubt her amazing visual gifts.

But to see a design which was as familiar to him as his own face, and to see it on a painting of a man clearly living generations before him? It was stunning, to say the least.

"He is Lord Hollingsworth, it says here." Wren leaned in to read the inscription. "Hollingsworth House, 1737. Painted by a George Theobald." She glanced at him. "That isn't a familiar name?"

"Somebody must have dug that painting out of an attic to fill an empty space," he muttered, still shaken to the core. "I'm surprised it's here, given the prestige of the other artists."

"Perhaps it belonged to Reynolds? Or perhaps Theobald was one of his protégées? It must matter, Dom, or it wouldn't be here."

He didn't know what to say. Or what to think. His mind, for once, was blank, bereft of any sort of rational thought.

Then a hand slipped into his. "It is quite cool. Could we go back outside into the sunshine?"

He looked down to where their hands were clasped, and nodded. "Yes. Yes, let's do that."

The sun was bright and warm on their heads as they emerged from the North Wing of Somerset House and began to stroll down the Strand toward St James's Park.

There weren't too many carriages, so it was a pleasant walk, accomplished in silence.

Apparently, his wife knew him very well, and allowed him the time to gather his thoughts, to work out the complexities and implications of what he'd just seen and learned.

He kept his hand wrapped around hers, gloves and all, as—arms linked—

they strolled in the warm breeze. She was his anchor, keeping his feet on the ground and helping to still his whirling emotions, saying nothing as they walked, but offering everything, he knew.

She was comfort and strength, common sense, and blinding passion.

How he'd been so blessed to find her, he'd never know, but if there was a saint involved, he'd make offerings every Sunday for the rest of his life.

And with that obscure thought, he realised that he'd recovered a portion of his brain, and looked around to find they'd reached the shaded walks that heralded St James's Park.

Some thoughtful soul had placed benches in convenient spots, and Dominic let Wren lead him to one, sitting herself on the wooden slat, and drawing him down beside her.

"Are you all right, Dom?"

He thought about it. "I believe I'm in shock," he answered honestly. "I don't know what to say, or think, or do. It's as if someone hit me in the head with a brick."

"Has it happened before?"

He managed a wry grin. "I have taken a few punches but never a brick."

She laughed. "I'm sure that would hurt most horridly."

"I expect so. And I'd as soon not find out. But this brick? It has robbed me of my senses."

"I think they're coming back," she offered quietly.

"Yes." He squeezed the hand he still clung to. "Thanks to you."

"I did nothing to warrant your thanks, Dom. You needed time to think it all through."

He took a breath and blew it out slowly. "Yes. You're right. But even if I did take time, turned this upside down, examined it from every angle, I would still arrive at the same place."

"And that would be?"

He thought for a long moment. "I don't know what to do." He turned to her. "Tell me what to do, Wren."

She settled herself more comfortably, angling her bonnet to keep the sun from her eyes. "Well, first we should examine the matter itself. You have discovered that the crest on the ring you've had all your life has, it would seem, belonged to someone in the past."

"Yes." When she put it like that it seemed a little clearer for some absurd

reason.

“And it has appeared on the wall of a painting done over seventy-five years ago, by an artist we’ve never heard of.”

“That’s correct too.”

“I would add that the name of the subject is unfamiliar, which you might say is not surprising, but I would then caution you to consider that you are relatively well informed about most of the important families here in London, by virtue of your career.”

He couldn’t stop a smile at her sober presentation of the facts. “I agree. You offer the facts in a very clear and precise style.”

“Thank you.” She nodded her head soberly. “I often think it’s best to eliminate any distracting emotions when one has a matter of import to consider.”

“A sound policy.”

“I believe so, yes. Especially in this case.”

“Why?”

Again, Wren took a moment to gather her thoughts. Never, in his experience, had he been able to see a woman thinking the way he could with his wife. And he adored her for it. She would give him the benefit of her wisdom and her opinions honestly and without any fuss or bother.

Being of the same character himself, he found it incredibly appealing.

She glanced around, ensuring that they spoke privately. Several birds were pecking at the grass, and in the distance another couple strolled beneath the trees. But their little spot was quite private.

“Dom,” she began, “your past, your history as a Ballinger student, with everything that entails, has—in many ways—formed much of your character, whether you realise it or not.”

“Hmm.”

“You are justifiably proud of your skills as a jeweller, and take enormous pleasure in your creations, as well you should. But there are steps you are not comfortable taking because of how Society views a bastard. Thus you have built a life that straddles both of these lines, that of the talented jeweller and the bastard, barely accepted by his clients.”

“I have, I suppose.” He nodded as he thought about it.

“And I don’t see you as anything other than content with it,” she continued. “You do not appear to be yearning for acceptance by the *Ton*...”

His snort was answer enough.

“And your business, your jewellery creations, have not suffered at all from the fact that they came from the brilliant mind of a man who has no family to call his own.”

“Again, I will agree.”

“So...with those facts in mind, can you not see a clearer path as to your direction now?”

“What I see is a woman who is making these things seem so simple, even though she is facing a very similar situation.”

Wren turned away.

“Don’t, darling. Don’t look away from me. Am I not right? You managed to survive the life you were forced to live, and now there’s a chance that you too might look for answers to your past.”

“Well then, I suppose neither of us know what to do.”

Dominic couldn’t miss the hint of tears in those amazing topaz eyes.

~~*~*~*

He’d caught her out, turned her own words against her. Of that, she had no doubt.

And yet he was right. Perhaps it was her own situation that had dictated what she had pointed out to him. There were so many differences, of course, but there were also similarities.

She sighed. “It would seem, then, that we are both faced with the same question, Dom. What do we want to do about these developments?”

He tugged her hand. “Let’s walk a little more. Perhaps I’ll think better on my feet.”

“As you wish.” She rose and straightened her gown.

As if by mutual accord, they strolled beneath the trees, relishing the cool

shade and the scent of the grass. Perhaps some magic hand kept people away, or perhaps it was merely the hour and the sunshine that sent them elsewhere, but she couldn't help but approve of their apparent isolation.

"It's not easy, Dominic," she began. "Part of me has always wanted to know about my parents. But as time progressed, that desire lessened, until now when I barely give them a passing thought now and again." She glanced up at him, knowing he was watching her intently. "Do you have the same feelings?"

He nodded. "Of course. I too have spent many hours wondering about my mother and father." His lips curved into a smile. "When I was a boy, I was convinced my father was a dashing pirate and my mama a princess he'd rescued from terrible danger."

Wren couldn't help but laugh. "Well, naturally."

He smiled then, a warm and relaxed smile that washed over her and melted her heart. "Then, on the one time when we took a summer trip to the ocean, and I actually went out on a boat, I got horridly seasick, so I abandoned the idea that I was in any way related to that dashing pirate."

"Most sensible," she grinned. "You were fortunate to be a Ballinger boy, weren't you? Trips to the shore?"

He nodded. "That's one big difference between us, Wren. I grew up amongst people who cared about me, and never let me forget I was there because whoever they might or might not have been, my parents loved me enough to make sure I had the best they could offer me."

She couldn't say anything for a moment or two, as his words sank home into a painful place within her.

"God, I didn't mean..."

"No, it's all right." She tucked her arm tightly around his. "You are correct. That is one big difference between us, and obviously accounts for the fact of my ending up on your doorstep." She held up her free hand to stop him from speaking. "I have always hoped that my parents, whoever they were, had no choice open to them. A foundling home, was, in small part, a home. I had food, a roof over my head, and although I was not loved, I was not ill-treated. Not until I grew past the stage of childhood. That's when the problems began, as you know."

It was Dominic's turn to remain silent, and as they walked, she wondered what was going through his mind.

Finally, he broke his silence. “You are right about many things, Wren. And there is one other important thing I must tell you. Now seems like the best time.”

He stopped their progress in the shade of a massive oak tree. “You are loved, Wren. Very much. By me.” He emphasized his point by dropping a quick kiss on her lips.

She swallowed down tears and managed a smile. “And you are loved, Dominic. Very much. By me.”

He sucked in a breath. “I’ve waited and hoped you might tell me that, love. And now you have...”

Within seconds she was airborne, swung in his arms, and circling him as he laughed.

“Put me down this instant, Dom. Good heavens, we’re in public.”

“I know. But we’re us, and that is them. Let them gasp and clutch their bosoms, because I’m going to kiss you right here and now.”

“But...”

Her protests were cut off by the promised kiss, and vanished seconds after his lips touched hers.

Her mind whirled.

He loves me. I told him I love him.

Everything is going to be all right.

“Let’s go home so that I can make love to you all afternoon.”

She blushed as he let her go after whispering such an improper notion in her ear. “It sounds like the perfect way to spend a summer afternoon.”

Since they both agreed, Dominic hailed a passing cab, delivered them to their front door, and spent the entire afternoon doing just what he’d promised. With his wife’s full support.

Later, after they’d slept a little, then risen in search of sustenance, Wren wrapped her hands around a glass of wine her husband had poured for her.

“Dominic, I need to say something. You know now my feelings about you.”

He grinned. “After this afternoon, I hope so. I’d have to be dumb and blind otherwise.” He sipped his wine. “I’m neither, darling.”

“Yes, well...” she blushed. “What I’m trying to say is that I have decided that I don’t want to pursue the possibility of being related to someone in Mrs Hampton’s family line.

“You don’t?” His eyebrows rose. “Why?”

“Because...” she swallowed. “Because I have everything I want right here. With you. I have a home now and when you add your friends and Lady Agnes? Well, there’s a family. I hope we can start our own family if we have children...” She felt her cheeks heating.

“If we keep repeating what we did this afternoon, then I see no concerns on that score.” Once again, that wicked grin.

Wren cocked an eyebrow at him. “Maybe there is some of that dashing pirate in there somewhere.”

He laughed back, as she knew he would. But then he sobered.

“What you’re saying, Wren, makes sense. And I have to agree. It echoes what has been going through my mind. Confusing me. For most of my life, the thought of my parents has been close to the surface of my thoughts. But now? With the discovery of the crest on that painting? The reality of it, the possibilities...they didn’t fill me with the excitement I was expecting. I found myself unwilling to dredge up the past, especially one that might bring unhappiness to people I don’t know...and mostly because I have such a bright future. Thanks to you.”

Tears threatened, but she held them back. Now was a time for joy and happiness, not maudlin reflections. This, she felt, was the very beginning of a life she could never have imagined. She was going to relish every moment of it to the fullest.

“In that case, Mr Greybrooke, I believe we should avail ourselves of the opportunity to get serious about the business of producing more Greybrookes.”

Dominic smiled, a warm and joyous expression on his handsome face. “I’ll be the dashing pirate, you be the princess.”

“This time,” she laughed. “Next time? We’ll see...”

~~*~*~*

While all this warm and wonderful loving was taking place—most improperly many might say, since the sun had yet to dip below the horizon—a man found himself thrown into a cell and shackled to the wall. It was there he would await the fulfillment of his sentence—transportation away from England forever. Without his quizzing glass, his cards, and with barely a thread on his body, Lord Hardwicke cursed the day he'd ever set eyes on the Greybrookes, and sent a few additional lurid curses their way for good measure. His future looked gloomy indeed. While that fact concerned *him*, the rest of London was quite happy to know that he was out of their lives for good.

The Greybrookes, of course, knew nothing of this at all. They were far too busy with the business of making their family. Little did they know that on that particular day they had an excellent start, since they were creating *twins!*

THE END

If you have enjoyed this tale, may I encourage you to check out the first two books in this series? You'll find information and excerpts at the series page on Amazon.com.

[The Ballinger Bastards – a series by Sahara Kelly](#)

Appendix

There are a couple of references in this story that might require clarification – and come with a little bit of their own fascinating history.

The playing cards that Lord Hardwicke used to cheat his fellow gamesters.

This was an interesting bit of research, since I learned that the cards we use today are relatively recent in design. The French seemed to hold a monopoly on playing card design and production well into the mid-1800's, so I have anticipated one of their changes by several decades (I hope you'll forgive the literary licence I took!). Until that time, the backs of cards used by both British, French, and American players were *blank*. I can't imagine what a well-used deck must have looked like, but finally—in an effort to reduce obvious wear and tear, designs were introduced, along with pictures, advertisements, and the latest technological advancement...photos!

I also learned that the “reversible” court cards, invented in 1745 by a French card maker, weren't commonly used in Britain until patented in 1800. A French pack using these designs was printed in 1802 by a chap named Thomas Wheeler.

The Blue Diamond.

Mr Trevithick is doomed to disappointment with his “blue diamond”, but the story he was given was authentic.

M. Jean Baptiste Tavernier was a French trader in the seventeenth century, who travelled extensively, and managed to get his hands on many large gems from India, one of which – a blue diamond described at the time as being almost violet in colour – was sold to Louis XIV of France.

It was cut, re-cut, given a variety of different names, and pieces of it are rumored to have ended up in jewellery created for Russian royalty. A stick pin featuring one piece is in the Alexander Palace, near St. Petersburg,

although the provenance is, now and again, disputed.

And in a more recent connection, one of the Tavernier cuts is reputed to be today's Hope Diamond. You can't keep a good gem down!

The Golconda Diamonds, of which the Tavernier Blue was one, originated in India, and still lend their name to diamonds of incomparable quality. They are indeed "diamonds of the first water" – where the use of the word "water" refers to the perfection of the gem. In fact, the "Heart of the Ocean" the necklace featured in the movie "Titanic", was inspired by Golconda diamonds.

Just some interesting trivia I picked up during my research for this story. This is why writers often take longer than expected to complete their work...there's so many enticing rabbit holes out there, luring authors into their intriguing depths!!!

SK

About the Cover Art

In my search for men that we would consider “handsome” by today’s standards, I kept taking a closer look at this one portrait. Something about the gentleness of his eyes, perhaps, or the full lips and wayward curls – he reminded me a little of a favorite actor, David Tennant, and that decided me. He became Dominic Greybrooke, my Jeweller.

I discovered the painting was titled “Carl Joseph Begas, (self-portrait of the artist) circa 1820”.

But of course, he was a real person, so here are some of the highlights of his career, if you’re interested.

Carl Joseph Begas was born in Heinsberg, Germany, in 1794. His family originally came from Belgium, and he was the last of three children. They moved to Cologne in 1802, where he studied under the miniaturist Franz Katz. His rapidly growing artistic talents took him to Paris in 1813, and his skills eventually attracted the notice of King Friedrich Wilhelm III, who bought a painting and became his patron.

He received a scholarship and lived in Italy for a while, then moved to Berlin and married. At this time his artistic endeavours moved from mostly religious themes to portraits. He and his wife became part of Berlin’s “society”, and he was named a Professor at the Prussian Academy of Arts.

His successful career took him to great heights...in 1846 he was appointed Court Painter by King Wilhelm.

He died in 1854 at the age of sixty, leaving eight children, four of whom also became artists.

I know there are more than a few of his paintings online, both at museum sites and of course art sites where this one is listed as “available” in the Public Domain. I urge you to take a look at some of his work if you’re curious.

And I hope my story, that of a character whose artistic talent lies in his vision for precious gems, might have found favour in his eyes.

About the Author

British born and bred, Sahara Kelly has enjoyed writing and reading Regency romances for many decades, beginning in her childhood with books by Jane Austen, Georgette Heyer and Barbara Cartland.

Arriving in America with her almost-complete collection of Leslie Charteris' *Saint* novels, all the original James Bonds, and a passion for Monty Python, Sahara's new life eventually expanded to include a husband, offspring, citizenship, and a certain amount of acclimation to her new surroundings.

She never quite managed to attain a level of comfort with the American way of spelling, however, and creating a Regency novel offers challenges in that regard. So you'll see words that British readers will recognize, but American readers might perhaps find unusual. It's a choice... should one write an English romance using English spelling? Sahara has come around to that belief. She can now enjoy the extra "u" which has always seemed so colourful...

After more than three decades of writing, Sahara is now enjoying the greater freedom offered to authors by the rapidly expanding self-publishing scene and looking forward to many more such experiences.

Being freed of external controlling restraints has opened doors—for Sahara and many other writers. There are now no impediments; no obstructions barring the path from writer to reader. Which is, in many ways, exactly as originally intended when that first storyteller sat on a rock outside her cave, tugged her bearskin around her shoulders and smiled at her kids across the open fire with the words "Once upon a time..." (or however it sounded several million years ago.)

To find out more about Sahara Kelly and her writing, please drop by her website and visit her at:

[Sahara Kelly's website](#)

This is where Sahara shares none of the intimate details of her life, but will present you with a list of books she'd like you to buy so that she can go do research on a beach in Aruba and be pampered with massages accompanied by drinks with umbrellas in them. She'll send you a postcard.

Thank you.

When not dreaming of lazing on tropical beaches, Sahara has a modestly active social presence on the Internet. Take a look:

[Friend her on Facebook](#)

[Follow her on BookBub](#)

Dig around on Threads – she’s there as [writersaharakelly](#), but not doing much with it yet.

Also By Sahara Kelly

HISTORICAL ROMANCES

(† - Anthology)

[The Tutor](#)

(A Ballinger Bastards Adventure, Book Two)

[The Rascal](#)

(A Ballinger Bastards Adventure, Book One)

*

[Knight Fever](#)

(Tonight's the Knight, Book One)

[Summer Knights](#)

(Tonight's the Knight, Book Two)

[Knight Flight](#)

(Tonight's the Knight, Book Three)

*

[Sin and Tonic](#)

(A 1930's Novel)

*

[My Mistletoe Mistake](#)

(A Christmas Novella)

*

[Bombs, Bustles, and Lady Barbara](#)

(Strong Women, Book One)

[Miss Elkins and the Invisible Horse](#)

(Strong Women, Book Two)

[Lady Imelda's Latest Novel](#)

(Strong Women, Book Three)

[Lady Dalrymple's Lighthouse](#)

(Strong Women, Book 4)

[Miss Winters' Flying Corset](#)

(Strong Women, Book Five)

*

[Mistletoe for Prudence, A Christmas Novella](#)

The Wednesday Club, Book Five

[A Lover for Lydia](#)

The Wednesday Club, Book Four

[A Garden for Ivy](#)

The Wednesday Club, Book Three

[A Melody for Rose](#)

The Wednesday Club, Book Two

[A Gentleman for Judith](#)

The Wednesday Club, Book One

*

[The Rightful Lord](#)

The Saga of Wolfbridge Manor, Book Three

[The Dowager Countess](#)

The Saga of Wolfbridge Manor, Book Two

[Lady Adalyn](#)

The Saga of Wolfbridge Manor, Book One

*

[The Landlocked Baron](#)

Book 1 in the Six Pearls of Baron Ridlington series

[St. Simon's Sin](#)

Book 2 in the Six Pearls of Baron Ridlington series

[Word of a Lady](#)

Book 3 in the Six Pearls of Baron Ridlington series

[The Mistress Wager](#)

Book 4 in the Six Pearls of Baron Ridlington series

[Blackmail and the Bride](#)

Book 5 in the Six Pearls of Baron Ridlington series

[Heart in Hiding](#)

Book 6 in the Six Pearls of Baron Ridlington series

[Mistletoe Masquerade](#)

A Ridlington Christmas Novella

[Music and Mistletoe](#)

A Ridlington Christmas Novella

[Visions of Mistletoe](#)

A Ridlington Christmas Novella

*

[The Mistletoe Marquess](#)

*

[Outrageous Ladies †](#)

*

[Honor and Secrets](#)

Book 1 in the Gypsy Gentlemen Series

[Control and Compassion](#)

Book 2 in the Gypsy Gentlemen Series

[Endings and Beginnings](#)

Book 3 in the Gypsy Gentlemen Series

*

[Oh My Laird!](#)

Book 4 in the Regency Rascals Series

[Deverell's Obsession](#)

Book 3 in the Regency Rascals Series

[The Fifth Wife](#)

Book 2 in the Regency Rascals Series

[Julia and the Devil](#)

Book 1 in the Regency Rascals Series

*

[Discreet Madness †](#)

*

[A Little More Discreet Madness †](#)

*

The Viscount and the Witch

CONTEMPORARY (and other genre) ROMANCES

(* - co-written with S.L. Carpenter)

(† - Anthology)

[Feels So Right* †](#)

[A Whole Lotta Love* †](#)

[Consent †](#)

[Power, Passion, and Payback †](#)

[Don't Go Breaking my Harp](#)

[Anasazi Fire †](#)

[Vampires Suck †](#)

[Don't Look Away †](#)

[Ladies, Lust, and Lipstick †](#)

[Only in my Dreams †](#)

[Game On](#)

[Seduced by the Sun God](#)

[Suite 69*](#)

[Haunted Seductions*](#)

[Happy Endings* †](#)

[My Renaissance Romance †](#)

[Steampunk Seductions †](#)

[Hired Help*](#)

[Open House](#)

[So Into You*](#)

[Faerieland needs YOU †](#)

[My Wish](#)

[My Prize](#)

[My Hero](#)

[Showing Off * †](#)

*

Happy Reading.