

A man in a blue suit and white shirt is embracing a woman in a pink dress. The man's hands are on the woman's waist and chest. The background is a light-colored wall with a doorway.

# THE DEVIL TO PAY

EMMA V. JEECH

WICKED SONS ~ BOOK 1

# The Devil to Pay

*Wicked Sons Book 1*

By Emma V. Leech

Published by Emma V. Leech.

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## About Me!



I started this incredible journey way back in 2010 with *The Key to Erebus* but didn't summon the courage to hit publish until October 2012. For anyone who's done it, you'll know publishing your first title is a terribly scary thing! I still get butterflies on the morning a new title releases, but the terror has subsided at least. Now I just live in dread of the day my daughters are old enough to read them.

*The horror!* (On both sides I suspect.)

2017 marked the year that I made my first foray into Historical Romance and the world of the Regency Romance, and my word what a year! I was delighted by the response to this series and can't wait to add more titles. Paranormal Romance readers need not despair, however, as there is much more to come there too. Writing has become an addiction and as soon as one book is over, I'm hugely excited to start the next so you can expect plenty more in the future.

As many of my works reflect, I am greatly influenced by the beautiful French countryside in which I live. I've been here in the Southwest since 1998, though I was born and raised in England. My three gorgeous girls are all bilingual and my husband Pat, myself, and our four cats consider ourselves very fortunate to have made such a lovely place our home.

**KEEP READING TO DISCOVER MY OTHER BOOKS!**

# Other Works by Emma V. Leech

## Wicked Sons



## Wicked Sons Series

## Daring Daughters



## Daring Daughters Series

## Girls Who Dare



## Girls Who Dare Series

## Rogues & Gentlemen



[Regues & Gentlemen Series](#)

*The Regency Romance Mysteries*



[The Regency Romance Mysteries Series](#)

*The French Vampire Legend*



[The French Vampire Legend Series](#)

*The French Fae Legend*



## [The French Fae Legend Series](#)

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# *chirp*



# Acknowledgements

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To Victoria Cooper for all your hard work, amazing artwork and above all your unending patience!!! Thank you so much. You are amazing!

To my BFF, PA, personal cheerleader and bringer of chocolate, Varsi Appel, for moral support, confidence boosting and for reading my work more times than I have. I love you loads!

A huge thank you to all of Emma's Book Club members! You guys are the best!

I'm always so happy to hear from you so do email or message me :)

[emmavleech@orange.fr](mailto:emmavleech@orange.fr)

To my husband Pat and my family ... For always being proud of me.



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## Author's Note



*Dear Reader,*

*Welcome to Book 1 of Wicked Sons, The Devil to Pay.*

*Please note that our story begins in February 1845. Alana Cadogan has just married the Reverend Harry Martin while Emmeline Knight has eloped with the Marquess of Wrexham, and Lady Catherine Barrington, known to all as Cat... well, I think you must remember that.*

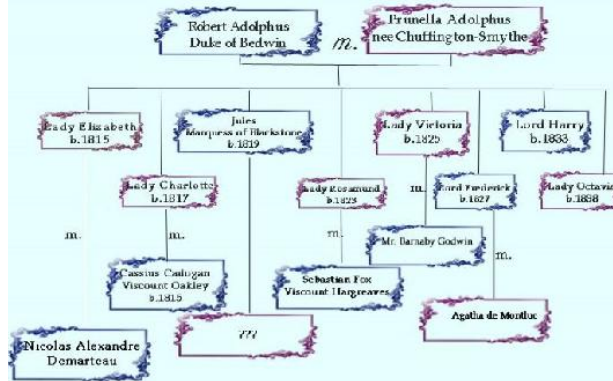
*So, if you are ready, let us begin...*

*Emma x*

# Family Trees

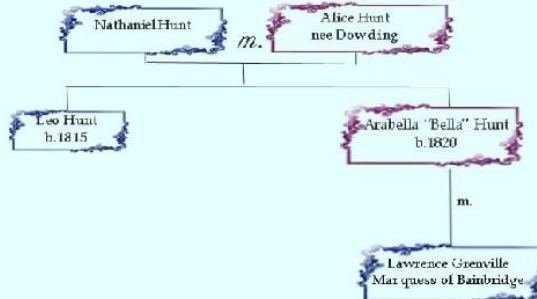
## HOUSE OF BEDWIN

*To Dare a Duke*



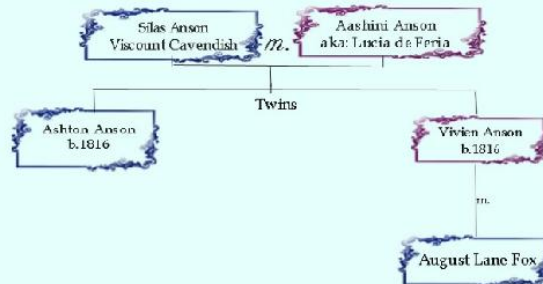
## HOUSE OF HUNT

*To Steal a Kiss*



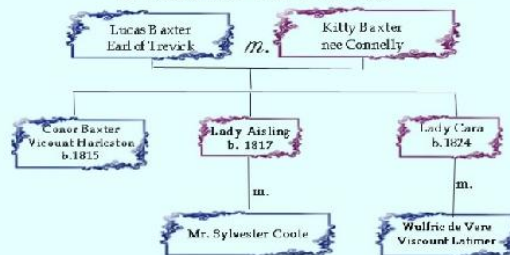
# HOUSE OF CAVENDISH

*To Break the Rules*



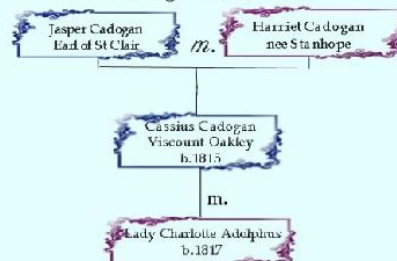
# HOUSE OF TREVICK

*To Follow her Heart*



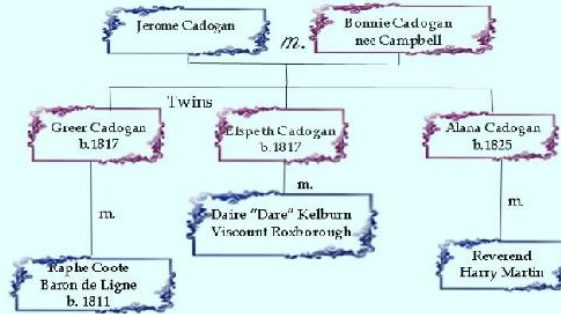
# HOUSE OF ST CLAIR

*To Wager with Love*



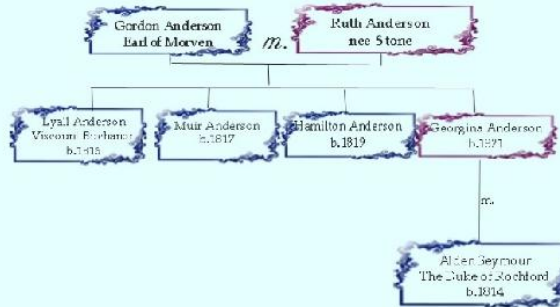
# HOUSE OF CADOGAN

*To Dance with a Devil*



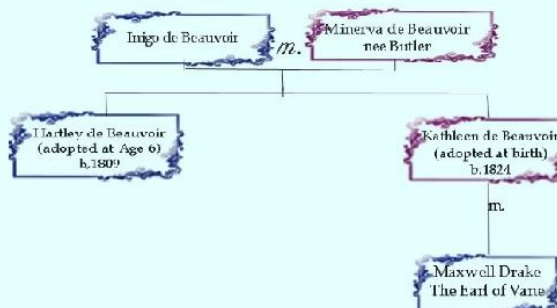
# HOUSE OF MORVEN

*To Winter at Wildsyde*



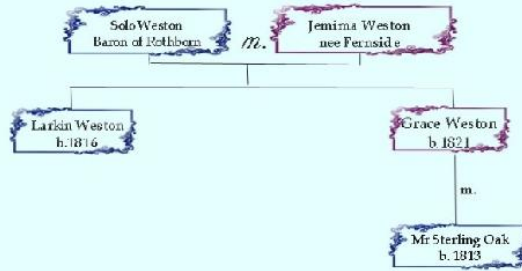
# HOUSE OF DE BEAUVOIR

*To Experiment with Desire*



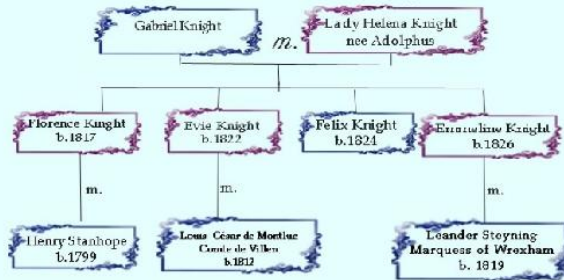
# HOUSE OF ROTHBORN

*To Bed the Baron*



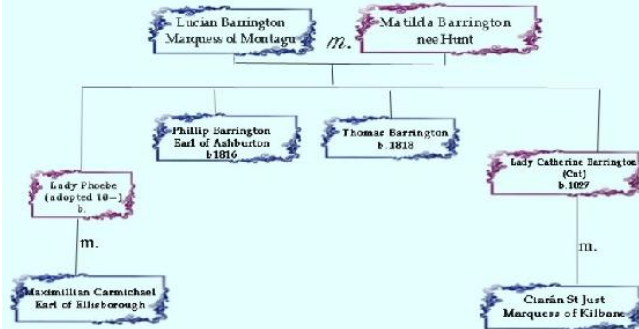
# HOUSE OF KNIGHT

*To Ride with the Knight*



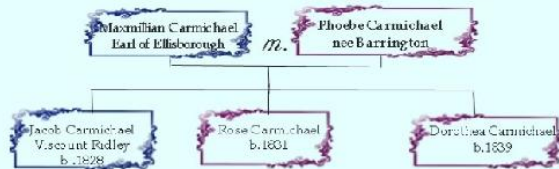
# HOUSE OF MONTAGU

*To Hunt the Hunter*



# HOUSE OF ELLISBOROUGH

*To Dance until Dawn*





# Chapter 1



*How disappointing that our mystery writer seems to have developed a character about which he or she knows nothing at all. Perhaps they come from an elevated position in life and have never experienced what it is to work for a living, for I found the blacksmith entirely unconvincing, and as for the housekeeper...*

*— A review of the recently published novel, “The Jewel and the Iron Key” by Anon. Review submitted to The Lady’s Gazette by Miss Selina Davenport.*

**15<sup>th</sup> February 1845, Goshen Court, Monmouthshire.**

Jules Adolphus, Marquess of Blackstone, peered out of the window as the carriage jolted up the pitted driveway, and grimaced.

“You’ve made a mistake, old chap. It can’t possibly be this pile of mouldering stone.”

Briggs, a most superior valet and the envy of every man of fashion among the *ton*, looked down his long nose at his master and gave a little sniff. “This is Goshen Court, I assure you, my lord, and I might remind you that I warned you as how you would live to regret this little jaunt.”

Jules waved this observation away with irritation.

“No one likes a know-it-all, Briggs,” Jules muttered darkly, staring with increasing apprehension through the window. “Hell, and the devil! I know he said the place was in disorder, but I thought he was exaggerating.”

“It would appear not. He’s probably not even here.”  
Briggs replied, in Cassandra-like tones.

Jules glared at him. “Stop sulking. I’m sure he is, and more to the point, *we’re* here now. The inside can’t be as dismal as the outside. Pip would never stand it. Likes his creature comforts, does Ashburton.”

“So you say, my lord.” Briggs heaved a heavy sigh, resigned to his fate, and awaited a footman to let down the steps.

As there were no obvious signs of life from the house, Jules opened the door himself, jumped down, and stretched his long limbs, which were ill-suited to the confines of a carriage. Briggs made his way to the front door with the air of one climbing the Tyburn steps. Stamping his feet, which had lost all feeling about ten miles previous, Jules looked around with disfavour. Goshen Court, seen on a freezing winter afternoon, with the sun already having decided the day was best over and done with, was hardly an inviting prospect.

Briggs seemed to have no luck at the front door, the heavy pounding of the knocker only disturbing the crows who had settled to roost in a nearby oak tree. They rose into the sky with a great flapping of wings and ominous caws of irritation that sent chills of foreboding skittering down Jules’ spine.

“What in the name of everything holy would Ashburton be doing, hiding himself out here in this crumbling old pile of sh—”

Jules broke off as a tall figure rounded the building, his shock of platinum blond hair startling against the twilit gloom. It could be none other than Ashburton. If the hair weren’t a dead giveaway, the height, the broad shoulders, and that impossibly handsome, aristocratic face would have settled it. Yet Jules still blinked and stared, for never in his life before had he seen the haughty Earl of Ashburton with a grubby blond urchin perched upon his shoulders. The child’s muddy boots swung heedlessly against an impeccably tailored coat in a way that would have had Briggs throwing himself into the closest body of water with cries of anguish. What really gave

Jules a turn, though, and made him wonder if his last brandy-fuelled bender had done him more damage than he'd realised was the singing. Ashburton was *singing*.

Jules had heard Pip sing on a few memorable occasions, but only when the fellow had been as drunk as an emperor, and those songs had certainly not been suitable for the ears of innocent babes. But now... *now* he was not bellowing out a bawdy ditty for the entertainment of his friends but singing nursery rhymes.

What the bloody hell was going on?

"Pip?" Jules called across the considerable expanse of weed-riddled gravel that may once have been a driveway.

Ashburton froze, his eyes widening in a manner that might have been amusing if the setting sun hadn't just cast a final golden shaft of light across the dim landscape before disappearing for the day. It shone on the earl's white-blond hair, and upon the child. It was a girl child, Jules saw now, enchantingly pretty, with silver glinting eyes, the fairest of fair skin, and the extraordinary bone structure Pip and his brother and sister had all inherited from their father, the Marquess of Montagu.

Jules sucked in a breath of shock and spoke before he could think. "Christ almighty."

That the child was Pip's was too obvious to deny, not that he attempted it. He only glared at Jules with indignation glittering in his eyes.

"What in dam— What are you doing here?" Pip demanded, his tone far from welcoming.

Jules quirked an eyebrow. "I came to pay my old friend a visit and discover why he'd buried himself in the middle of nowhere for so long. But I suppose I have an answer to that question."

"Who dat, Papa?" piped up the little girl, who was holding onto Pip's blond hair with small, chubby hands.

"I'm Jules," Jules said cheerfully, walking closer and executing a very formal bow for the little girl. "I am enchanted

to make your acquaintance, Miss...?"

"Tilly," the girl said with a shy smile.

"Ah, like your grandmama," Jules replied, darting a look at Pip, who looked rather green.

Oh, there was a story here and no mistake. Poor old Ashburton had been caught out and, if Jules was any judge, he hadn't told his parents. Not that he could blame the fellow; the idea of telling Montagu he'd sired a child out of wedlock made Jules sweat on Pip's behalf. Poor devil.

"Down!" demanded the child, and so Pip swung her down from his shoulders. She stood, staring up at Jules, her tiny blonde brows furrowed. "Jules?"

"Yes, that's me."

Tilly took hold of his hand, her warm little fingers curling around his much larger and much colder ones. "Come inside. It's teatime."

"Oh, excellent. I'm glad someone around here has some manners," he added, shooting Pip a defiant grin as the little girl led him indoors.

Briggs' eyes widened slightly as he looked between Tilly and the earl, but he was far too well trained to betray himself by showing the shock he was undoubtedly experiencing.

"If you go downstairs, you'll find my housekeeper, she'll show you where to go," Pip told Briggs, though he hardly sounded enthusiastic about the idea.

The inside of the house was hardly more encouraging than the outside, but Tilly led them through the gloomy hall and down a corridor, finally arriving in a small parlour. It looked to have been recently decorated and, after a chilly and uncomfortable journey, very welcoming. A fire was blazing in the hearth and Jules sighed with relief.

"Civilisation, at last," he remarked. "I knew you couldn't be living in this backwater without some creature comforts."

Pip snorted. "I ought to throw you out on your ear, you meddling devil. What on earth possessed you to come all the

way out here?”

Jules shrugged. “It seemed politic to make myself scarce for a bit and this was the furthest I could reasonably go without looking as if I was running away.”

“But you are running away,” Pip said dryly.

“Well, obviously, but there’s no need to be an arse and illustrate the point.” Jules glared at him, nettled.

“Language,” Pip scolded, meeting his glare with an icy one of his own as Jules belatedly remembered the little girl.

She had let go of his hand and was sitting on the floor, methodically taking the dress off a fabulously outfitted china doll. A soft knock at the door heralded the appearance of a woman Jules supposed must be the child’s nanny.

“You’re back,” she said, disapproval dripping from the words, and looked at Pip as if he’d just crawled out of cheese.

“Yes, a little late, I realise, but Tilly wished to visit the stables before we came home.”

There was an almost apologetic tone to Pip’s voice that staggered Jules, who was too used to Ashburton’s autocratic ways to let it pass without remark.

The nurse, who might have been anywhere from twenty to forty years of age as she stood deep in shadow, gave a sniff of disdain. “Otilie, *viens ma chérie*. You must wash your hands before you have your tea, oh, and you’re still wearing your muddy boots. Good heavens. Do come now.”

Obediently, Tilly ran to her nurse, the doll forgotten on the carpet.

“Jules is here,” she said, pointing to him as she went.

The nurse cast a scathing glance at Jules and looked away again. “How nice,” she replied, with more insincerity than Jules could credit, before bearing Tilly away.

“Well, she’s charming,” Jules replied with a bark of laughter. “No wonder you’re terrified of her.”

Pip rolled his eyes. “She loathes me,” he said with a sigh. “Not that I can blame her. I rather loathe myself.”

“Oh, she sees you as a vile seducer of innocents, I suppose?”

Pip shrugged. “Something of the sort.”

“Who is the girl’s mother?”

With a look that might have shrivelled a man with less audacity than Jules, Pip went to the tantalus set out on a side table and poured them both a drink. “You are a pain in the arse, Jules. When will you learn to keep your nose out of other people’s affairs?”

“When their affairs become less interesting than mine,” Jules replied, accepting the drink. “So, who was it?”

Pip glared at him, but with resignation this time. He knew better than to think Jules would give up and leave him be.

“Jenny,” he said with a sigh. “And before you ask, no, I didn’t know a bloody thing about it. She made me believe she had another protector in mind, and we parted on good terms. I realise now she’d discovered she was with child. She knew very well what my father would do to me if he found I’d been so damned careless, and she cared enough to protect me, the little pea-wit. She ought to have told me at once and made me face the consequences, it was the least I deserved. The poor darling died not long after the birth but thank God she sent the child to me. I shudder to think what might have become of her else.”

“Bloody hell, Pip. They still don’t know?”

Pip shook his head, looking like a man with the weight of the world upon his shoulders.

“Why not? I mean, he’ll find out. Assuming he doesn’t know already. Hell, she’s over two years old, is she not?”

“Yes, and my father is well aware something is amiss, but he’s giving me the space to sort myself out and not making enquiries.”

“So you think,” Jules replied with a snort. “His grace puts the fear of God into me, but he’s got nothing on Montagu. The man’s omniscient, I swear it.”

“Christ, Jules, are you trying to give me a heart attack? I hardly sleep as it is,” Pip said crossly. “I’ve kept my distance and put all my energy into raising Tilly and getting Goshen Court back on its feet.”

Jules raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“You should have seen it when I got here,” Pip retorted. “You’ve no idea of the energy and effort I’ve put into this place, never mind sinking near every penny I have.”

“All right, I take your point, but how does that help?”

Pip ran a hand through his hair, leaving it standing all on end. “I don’t know. I just feel that if they see I’ve made a success of this god-awful place, and a home for my daughter, they might not feel so... so disappointed in me.”

“Ah, yes, that’s the thing, isn’t it?” Jules said, a familiar sinking feeling in the pit of his belly. “They can rant and rage and get as furious as they like and that’s all fine, but when you disappoint them...”

He shuddered and Pip nodded.

“I can’t bear it,” he said with feeling. “And this... in my father’s eyes, this is about the worst thing I could possibly have done. He’d have been happier if I’d murdered someone, I swear.”

“Bloody hell, no wonder you ran for the hills,” Jules said, with real sympathy this time. “Ah well. Least I can do is keep you company for a while.”

Pip sent him a jaundiced look. “How kind,” he said dryly.

“Well, I like that!” Jules scowled at him, affronted. “Anyone would think you don’t care for me above half.”

Pip let out a huff of laughter and sat down in an armchair by the fire, arranging his long legs in an untidy sprawl as he regarded Jules over the rim of his glass. “You realise we are in the middle of nowhere? There are no pretty females anywhere



close by, no entertainments, it's dark by four o'clock, and it rains most of the time."

"Sounds perfect," Jules said stubbornly. "But if you don't want me...." "Stow it," Pip replied, sounding amused. "What exactly did you do to make this seem such an inviting prospect?"

Jules rubbed the back of his neck as heat prickled up his spine. He felt vaguely sick. "There's a fair chance I might be named in a crimcon," he admitted, darting a glance at Pip, whose eyes had widened in shock.

"*No!*" he breathed, so horrified Jules knew he had done right in fleeing before the story broke.

Being named as the other party in a criminal conversation where a husband accused his wife of adultery and sued her lover in the courts was about as scandalous as it got. Jules supposed he could congratulate himself on not having sired a bastard, but that was hardly consoling. His father had recently delivered him 'yet another' speech about his profligate way of life and his need to grow up and become a responsible human being. He would be the Duke of Bedwin one day, after all... words guaranteed to make him want to curl up in a ball and sob.

Pip let out a low whistle and shook his head.

"And I thought *I* was in it up to my neck," he replied, a wry smile quirking his lips.

"Well, you needn't sound so pleased about it," Jules replied tersely. "But yes, brothers in arms, I reckon. I can stay, can't I, Pip? I won't be any trouble, I swear it."

Pip gave a bark of laughter and rubbed a weary hand over his eyes. "Yes, yes, do as you please, though the idea of you not being any trouble... good God. Make yourself at home, though. I'll be glad of your company, for Mrs Harris certainly doesn't trouble herself with conversing with me. Little Tilly is an absolute darling, but her vocabulary is a tad limited for the moment."

"You adore her," Jules observed with a smile.

Pip's rather harsh features softened at the observation about his daughter, and he nodded, turning to look at Jules. "She is my world."

## Chapter 2



*Jules,*

*Still no headline in the news sheets, though the ton is humming with gossip that Lord Haversham has discovered the identity of his wife's lover and is out for blood. I have it on good authority his friends are trying to talk sense into him before he commits to suing you and making a spectacle of himself and his wife alongside you in the courts. I'd pray if I were you, for it's going to be a damned nasty business if he goes through with it.*

***—Excerpt of a letter to The Most Hon'ble Jules Adolphus, The Marquess of Blackstone (eldest son of Their Graces Robert and Prunella Adolphus, The Duke and Duchess of Bedwin) from Mr Leo Hunt (son of Mr and Mrs Nathaniel and Alice Hunt).***

**18<sup>th</sup> February 1845, Goshen Court, Monmouthshire.**

“Good God!”

Jules looked up from his plate of eggs and bacon at Pip's exclamation as the latter set down his teacup abruptly. They had fallen into a reasonably comfortable routine over the past few days and only really spent time together at mealtimes, each man giving the other space to do as he pleased. As far as Jules could tell, Pip divided his time equally between his daughter and his estate manager. During daylight hours, the place was a hive of activity, with workmen thronging the place like ants, and only now did Jules understand what Pip had

meant about the amount of work that had gone into the place already.

“Something amiss, old man?” he enquired, eyeing the pile of letters in the centre of the table with misgiving, for at least one was addressed to him, and he had been studiously ignoring it.

Pip was staring at the letter he’d just opened with astonishment. Jules’ stomach clenched.

“Emmeline Knight has eloped with the Marquess of Wrexham,” Pip replied.

“*What?* No!” Jules said, understanding why Pip looked so shocked. “That can’t be right.”

“See for yourself.” Pip handed him the letter and Jules scanned the contents.

“At Aunt Harry’s ball!” Jules said with a bark of laughter. Not that Lady St Clair was really his aunt, but they all referred to her as such, since they’d spent so much time at Holbrook House growing up. “Good Lord, but those parties are becoming notorious for goings on.”

“Why on earth would she do such a thing? I didn’t think she even knew him.” Pip frowned into his coffee cup as he considered this.

“Oh, yes, in fact, that’s down to me. I suggested Mother invite Emmeline to sit with Wrexham at that dinner party she threw for Lord Latimer.”

“So, it’s your fault. I might have known,” Pip said with a shake of his head.

“For all you know, they’re in love!” Jules shot back, indignant at the accusation.

“Then why elope? It’s a wonderful match for Emmeline in terms of rank and fortune. If they cared for each other, I don’t see that Gabriel would object.”

“Not Gabriel, no,” Jules said thoughtfully. “Sefton might, though.”

“Oh.” Pip nodded, conceding the point. “Miserable old goat.”

“Quite.”

Pip poured himself another cup of coffee and reached for the next letter. “For you,” he said, handing it over.

Jules groaned but took it, recognising Leo’s handwriting. It was little more than a few scrawled lines, but Jules let out a breath of relief. “Nothing yet,” he said, casting Pip a look of reproach as the man chuckled. He looked up as Briggs came in, bearing a copy of the Morning Post, neatly ironed.

“Thank you, Briggs,” he said, accepting the paper.

“Are you still intending to ride out this morning, my lord?” Briggs enquired.

Jules looked up from the paper to observe the weather outside. The sky was white and promised a freezing day, but there was no sign of rain, and he needed some exercise. As much as he had well earned a reputation for being an idle aristocrat, he enjoyed physical activity and was remarkably fit, considering his indulgent lifestyle. “Yes, I think so.”

“Very good, I shall instruct the stables to have your horse made ready.”

Briggs went out again and Jules finished his breakfast in peace. He was just setting down his knife and fork as Pip handed him another letter.

“A lady’s handwriting,” Pip observed, quirking one eyebrow. “Who knows you’re here?”

Jules frowned. Only one lady knew where he’d gone, one of the few people who knew his secret. Not that he’d told her, the wretch had figured it out and confronted him. She’d sworn to hold her tongue, and to keep him apprised of any information about his work in his absence. Having to leave the capital so soon after the release of his latest novel had been a blow, but he’d not had any option. Not that Lady Rose was old enough to be reading his work, and so he’d told her. She’d just laughed and told him her mama loved his novels and read

them out to the family after dinner, acting out many of the parts.

How Rose had figured out he was the author of the bestselling titles, he still hadn't fathomed. His mother, the duchess, knew. Of course. As she was an author herself, Jules could not have kept from telling her after his first success, but to his knowledge, outside of her and Rose, only Pip and Leo—and inevitably Briggs, for it was impossible to keep secrets from one's valet—knew of his success. Impatiently, Jules cracked the seal and opened the letter. A small cutting from a newspaper drifted out and he set it aside for a moment, reading the letter first.

*My Lord Blackstone,*

*Your nemesis has been at work again. I enclose her review of "The Jewel and the Iron Key" submitted to The Lady's Gazette. I think she is too critical. We thoroughly enjoyed the story and raced through it far too quickly. Please don't take it to heart.*

*Yrs etc,*

*Lady Rose Carmichael.*

Jules muttered a curse and snatched up the newspaper cutting. So, Miss Selina Davenport had been at it again, had she? Why her comments riled him so much, he could not fathom. He'd received hundreds—*thousands*—of positive reviews for his work, yet her prickly little digs at things she'd thought less than perfect never failed to get under his skin.

*How disappointing that our mystery writer seems to have developed a character about which he or she knows nothing at all. Perhaps they come from an elevated position in life and have never experienced what it is to work for a living, for I found the blacksmith entirely unconvincing, and as for the housekeeper...*

Jules read on, becoming increasingly incensed as she highlighted how he had failed to capture the lives of the servants and lower-class characters in his novel.

“I’ll murder her!” he exclaimed, screwing the cutting up into a tiny ball and lobbing it across the table. Pip caught it before it could fall to the floor and carefully smoothed it out again, reading it through.

“Oh dear,” he said, amusement in his voice as he shot Jules a look of mingled sympathy and far too much enjoyment at his annoyance. “She’s got your measure, old fellow.”

“Take it back!” Jules said, bristling. “I am always careful to observe the lives of those around me and illustrate them faithfully.”

“Observation is not the same as experiencing, I suspect,” Pip replied, sounding so damn smug that Jules’ temper lit.

“Well, do you seriously expect me to take the position of housekeeper for a few months to understand the role?”

Pip laughed and shook his head. “No, but you might speak to a housekeeper or two.”

“Oh, yes, because they’re going to give the Marquess of Blackstone honest answers about their lives, aren’t they?” Jules said with a sneer, throwing down his napkin in disgust. “Be reasonable. They’d tell me everything was wonderful, and their lives were filled with sunshine and roses, for fear I’d get them dismissed if they complained.”

“Perhaps, but it’s the kind of thing you ought to figure out if you’re serious about your work.”

“I am serious!” Jules replied, stung by the comment. “It’s the one bloody thing I’m actually good at! Or at least I thought I was,” he added mulishly, folding his arms.

“Oh, grow up!” Pip stood suddenly, apparently no longer entertained. “You’re spoiled, Jules, and you’ve spent your entire life indulging yourself. Yes, you’re a damned good writer, but this woman’s comments would not get to you so badly if there wasn’t a little truth in them, and you know it.”



“*I’m* spoiled?” Jules shot back at him, ignoring the other comment which had hit rather too close to home for comfort. “Well, if that’s not the pot calling the kettle black!”

“Yes! But I at least know it,” Pip retorted, angry now. “Perhaps if you allowed yourself a bit of time in the real world and just occasionally removed your head from under whatever petticoat you’ve tucked it, you might see the lady had a point.”

Jules glared at him. “So you agree with her?”

“Miss Davenport is an intelligent young woman with more good sense and capability than most men I know,” Pip said, shocking Jules to his bones.

“You *know* her!” he said, outraged.

Pip sent him an impatient glare. “Well, if you thought about it for above a moment, you’d realise her father is General Davenport,” he snapped.

Jules considered this and brought to mind a fit, red headed military man who could talk a man to death. “Not that prosy old bore who’s always in his cups, rambling on about hunting?”

“The very same, and the marvellous hunting country he is always bleating about, is where?” Pip suggested, quirking an eyebrow.

“I don’t know, somewhere in the back end of beyond and... Oh, bloody hell. Monmouthshire!” he exclaimed, clapping a hand to his forehead. “You don’t mean to say she’s somewhere here?”

“She’s one of my bloody neighbours, you halfwit!”

Jules gaped, too stunned to speak for a moment. Finally, he summoned a terse, “Where?”

Pip’s eyes narrowed. “Why? What do you intend to do?”

“I don’t know yet,” Jules replied with dignity. “I’m just curious to meet the woman who so enjoys tearing my work to shreds and discover what literary talent she owns that puts her in a place to criticise.”

Pip groaned and rubbed a hand over his face. “I ought never to have told you.”

“Too late now,” Jules said savagely.

“Jules.” Pip stared at him, his expression deadly serious. “She’s a good sort, and she has enough to contend with, so don’t—”

“Don’t *what?*” Jules demanded testily.

“Don’t cause her trouble to soothe your own ego.”

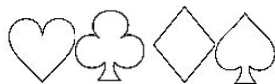
“Oh, so that’s what you think of me, is it?” Jules admitted himself shocked Pip should say such a thing about him.

Pip sighed, shaking his head. “Perhaps not on purpose, no, but... but you know how you get when faced with a challenge.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Pip returned a pitying look but said nothing more. “Her father’s property is on the far side of Goshen Village, on the southern border of the estate. It’s a good hour’s ride from here cross country. Longer if you take the roads.”

“Thank you so much,” Jules said with icy politeness, and took himself off.



Jules glowered down into his pint of ale, the noise of the busy pub doing little to alleviate his mood. He’d ridden off in a towering rage only to realise before he’d gone half a mile that he could hardly present himself at the woman’s front door when they’d never been introduced. Even if they had, she didn’t know him from Adam, she certainly didn’t know he was the author she so enjoyed plaguing. Cross and out of sorts, Jules decided he’d not bother returning to Goshen Court for lunch and would eat at the pub. No doubt Pip would enjoy a respite from his company, he thought bitterly.

Lunch was excellent, a hearty beef stew with plenty of potatoes. An exceptionally good apple pie, and a tangy, crumbly lump of cheddar with some wonderfully dense brown

bread followed it. Combined with another pint or two, it went a long way to soothing his ruffled feathers and he was feeling almost mellow as he relaxed back in his chair and let the conversation of his fellow diners wash over him. The name Davenport, therefore, spoken by a man at the table beside his, leapt out at him and made him prick up his ears.

“Wantin’ a gardener, is she?”

“Aye, old Llewellyn finally turned up his toes, and she’s promoted Will Dixey to head gardener. So, she’s looking for another to take his place. Miss Davenport’s got big plans for a rose garden, so as I hear.”

“Oh, aye? She’d do better to find herself a man, rather than bothering about roses. Wants sommat planting in her, I reckon. Might sweeten her temper some.”

There was a deal of ribald laughter at this and, though he felt a twinge of guilt, Jules was not above enjoying their crass words as it was at his nemesis’ expense. He was hardly surprised to discover her workmen thought her ill-tempered.

“Well, there’ll be a bit of interest once she puts the notice up, I reckon, for she’s fair to work for. Pays reasonable, though she don’t suffer fools and God help you if she finds you sittin’ on your arse end.”

“Suffer fools? I should say not. She’s up to all the tricks and then some. Speakin’ of, I’d best be off, or I’ll be in the basket.”

Jules watched the man go, the germ of an idea taking root as the conversation circled his mind. Perhaps it was the ale, which was rather stronger than he’d given it credit for, or perhaps it was just that he had a maggot in his brain regarding Miss Davenport, which meant anything resembling good sense flew out the window.

Either way, he believed his moment had come and Miss Davenport would be sorry she’d ever taken up her pen to criticise him.



“I beg your pardon, my lord,” Briggs said, with as much offended dignity as any man could muster. “But have you taken leave of your senses?”

“Don’t take that tone with me,” Jules said crossly, allowing Briggs to help him out of his riding coat. “I don’t see why I can’t do it. It can’t be that difficult.”

Briggs regarded him with a look of such stoic endurance, Jules blushed.

“Well, I know I’m only a useless nobleman, but I know one end of a shovel from the other.”

Briggs snorted. “Excuse me for mentioning it, my lord, but with the exception of your writing, which I admit you labour over, and for some studying at university, but you’ve never done a day’s work in your life. Certainly no physical labour.”

“I know it,” Jules replied impatiently. “But I’m fit. I box and fence and ride. It’s not like I spend my days on my arse. Well, not all of them.”

“You cannot pass as a gardener,” Briggs said firmly. “You don’t look like a gardener, you look like a man who’s going to be a duke.”

“Well, I can change my clothes! I wasn’t proposing to go in evening blacks, you lunatic.”

“My lord,” Briggs said, with growing impatience. “You could stand stark naked in the street, and everyone would know you’re a nobleman.”

“How?” Jules demanded indignantly.

“I don’t know,” Briggs admitted. “Your profile, for one, a look of being well nourished and clean, but I reckon more the way you carry yourself, as if you own the bloody place and know it.”

“I don’t do that, do I?” Jules asked, horrified by the suggestion.

“I don’t mean it to disparage you,” Briggs said hurriedly. “I perhaps put it too harshly. It’s more an air of supreme

confidence, the knowledge that if you speak, everyone listens. Your father has it, and so do you.”

“Oh,” Jules replied, marginally mollified by this.

“But quite apart from anything else, the moment you open your mouth, you’re sunk.”

“I did wonder about that,” Jules admitted. “I thought perhaps an accent, but—”

“No!” Briggs exclaimed, looking appalled at the suggestion.

“All right, keep your wig on. I rejected the idea, but that’s why I figured out how I can make it work, you see. It’s quite brilliant.”

Briggs eyed him with increasing alarm. “Oh?” he said with obvious foreboding.

“Yes,” Jules said cheerfully. “For you know, we’re not so very different. You’re tall and dark and well built. We might not pass for brothers... but cousins should work well enough for the purpose.”

“Cousins?” Briggs said faintly, paling as his employer’s words sank in.

“Yes, cousins. For I remember very clearly you telling me when your father became head gardener at Mitcham Priory a year or two back, which means you must know a thing or two about gardening too.”

Briggs stared at him in bewilderment. “I don’t understand, my lord. How on earth does that help you get a job as a gardener?”

“It doesn’t. It helps *you* get a job as a gardener, and you need only say that I’m a long-lost relation staying with you for a few weeks and I’m hard-working and more importantly *free* labour who would be happy to pitch in while I’m here. It’s only we’ve not seen each other in forever and don’t wish to miss a moment before I’m shipped off to... to Canada, or something of the sort.”

Jules regarded Briggs, who'd gone an odd shade somewhere between alabaster and a sickly green.

"Well?" he demanded, grinning. "Doesn't it sound like a lark?"

Briggs groaned.

"I'll pay double your wages to do it," Jules said desperately. "And you'll keep your wages for the gardening job, too."

Silence.

"How about I say an extra fifty pounds on top to make it worth your while?"

Briggs groaned again and sank into the nearest chair, clutching his head.

"A hundred pounds."

There was a soft sobbing sound.

"Two hundred, you manipulative devil, which is daylight robbery, and you jolly well know it."

Briggs' hand shot out. "Done."

"I have been," Jules muttered.

"But there's a proviso," Briggs added, giving Jules a grin he could not quite like.

"What?" he asked dubiously.

"I'm the only one who knows a damn thing about gardening, so I'm in charge."

"Fine," Jules said, waving off. After all, how hard could it be?

## Chapter 3



*Dearest Pip,*

*How I wish you were here today. I need your steady presence, your kindness, and even your scolding would be welcome. That must show you what a sorry state I am in. I don't know why it is you are keeping away, but if it is because you fear you have let Mama and Papa down, please know that I understand.*

*You will hear soon enough what a monumental fix I have got myself into, and there's no one to blame but myself. Please don't get on your high horse and come back hell bent on vengeance, for you must take your frustration out on me. By the time you read this, I shall be the Marchioness of Kilbane.*

*I can almost hear your shout of horror, but it truly was not his fault. Even Papa has accepted that much. I pursued him and... well, never mind the details, suffice to say we were seen in an innocent but outwardly compromising position. So, our fates are sealed.*

*If you want the truth, I am not entirely displeased, for I have had every intention of marrying Kilbane, though I did not expect it so quickly or in such a manner. What I cannot bear is the heartbreak in Papa's eyes, the sorrow in Mama's. I wish you would come back so at least they might*

*have something to take their minds from  
their wayward daughter.*

*I miss you.*

**—Excerpt of a letter from Lady Catherine  
'Cat' Barrington to her older brother The  
Right Hon'ble Philip Barrington, Earl of  
Ashburton. (Children of The Most  
Hon'ble Lucian and Matilda Barrington,  
Marquess and Marchioness of Montagu).**

**19<sup>th</sup> February 1845, Goshen Court, Monmouthshire.**

The explosion of wrath emanating from the breakfast room made Jules stop in his tracks halfway down the stairs. A footman, who had been about to carry in a basket of freshly baked rolls, hesitated outside the door and sent Jules a look of sheer panic. Jules hurried down and plucked the basket from the fellow's hands.

"I'll deal with this. Off you go," he instructed.

The footman fled with a murmur of thanks and Jules opened the door to find Pip white with rage, a crumpled letter in his hands.

"Pip?" Jules said carefully. "Bad news?"

Pip sent him an incendiary look. "That bastard Kilbane," he growled, a savage glint in his eyes. "I'm going to cut him up into tiny pieces and feed them to the pigs."

Jules blinked, never having heard Pip speak with quite so much violence. "Righty ho. I'm sure anyone would feel the urge, devilish fellow, but any *particular* reason?"

"He's ruined my sister."

Jules sucked in a breath of shock. "Show me," he demanded.

Pip handed him the letter, which was nigh on illegible, it was so crumpled. Jules smoothed it out and read it through. Pip paced as he did, muttering under his breath and



punctuating his plans to head south with grisly illustrations of what the wicked marquess had in store when he got his hands on him.

“Er... Did you read all of it?” Jules asked hesitantly, having got to the end of Cat’s bombshell.

“No, just the salient part,” Pip growled. “Damn him! It will upset Tilly if I go, I could murder him for that alone, and the workmen are finally getting on and making progress and —”

“Pip, I think you should read it all,” Jules said, interrupting this tirade and holding the letter out to him.

“Why?” Pip asked suspiciously, taking the letter as if it might explode in his face.

“Don’t murder me too, Pip, but the fellow didn’t ruin her, he married her. *And...*” Jules said, holding out his hands when Pip turned purple with rage. “She says even your father has accepted she trapped Kilbane, not the other way around. You’ve not been around these past months, so you don’t know, but it’s been clear to me she’d set her sights on having him. Lord, she says as much.”

“She’s just a child!” Pip raged. “She doesn’t have the slightest idea what she wants, what kind of man he is.”

Jules sent him a pitying look. “I know you want to think that, but the truth is she’s a lot older and wiser than you realise. You’ve been a tad preoccupied of late, old man, and I think your sister has grown up a good deal whilst you weren’t looking.” Pip looked so miserable Jules softened his words. “Read the letter Pip. Write back to her and be *kind*. She’s feeling wretched for having upset everyone, but not for having married the fellow. You must see the difference. Don’t let her think you’re angry with her, or disappointed. She needs someone to support her. It ought to be you.”

Pip glowered but gave a taut nod and marched off, letter in hand. Jules sat down with a sigh and served himself breakfast, wondering how Briggs was getting on. The man had ridden

over to *Llun-y-mynydd* the lair of the infernal Miss Davenport, to enquire about a job as a gardener.

Briggs had grumbled and whinged about having to dress in old clothes bought from a bewildered workman and in which he'd dare show his face in London, but Jules had told him two hundred pounds was enough to soothe any injured feelings and to buck up.

To be fair, he had done, and had ridden off at first light to do his best. Not that he was above predicting doom and catastrophe before he went, but Briggs was pessimistic by nature and Jules had paid no heed.

It was close to midday before the man returned, riding up the overgrown driveway, his face flushed from the cold and a satisfied look in his eyes which Jules did not entirely trust. Hurrying out to meet him, he took hold of the horse's bridle.

"Well?" he demanded as Briggs leapt down from his borrowed mount.

"I got the job," Briggs said with a grin.

"Of course you did!" Jules said, slapping him on the back and feeling like a proud father. "Best fellow for the job by miles, I reckon."

Briggs snorted. "Only fellow. She's not advertised it yet, but she seemed happy enough with my credentials, though it's a good job I wrote to my father to warn him first thing, because she's going to contact to him for confirmation I'm who I say I am. He'll think I've taken leave of my senses."

"Yes, yes, never mind that," Jules said impatiently as they walked the horse back to the stables. "What's she like?"

"Like?" Briggs said absently, giving a nonchalant shrug. "Oh, I don't know."

"Briggs! Damn you, tell me what she's like. Is she a bitter old spinster with a face like a horse?"

Briggs chuckled maliciously. "Reckon as how I might let you discover for yourself."

Jules glowered at him. “Fine. Have your little joke. See if I care. When do we start?”

“Tomorrow at six.”

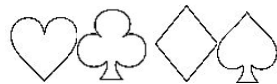
“Six?” Jules repeated, horrified. “But it will take us an hour at least to ride over there. In the dark!”

“Yes, which is why I took the liberty of renting a little cottage close by. It’s not much, seeing as how we’re lowly gardeners, but it’s a short walk from the house. Hopefully, living like a less elevated human being, combined with the early hours, not to mention the work, will bring you to your senses in a day or two and we can return to civilisation.”

“We’re certainly not going back to London anytime soon,” Jules retorted. “I suggest you rid yourself of that notion. As for giving up, I’m not so spoiled and indulged as everyone seems to think I am,” he added with dignity.

“So you say, my lord,” Briggs said, apparently much amused. “So you say.”

Jules gave him his most haughty and reproving look and stalked off.



Their new lodging was one of a row of identical cottages, made of heavy brown stone and so tiny Jules had to stamp down a sudden sense of claustrophobia. He was not so spoiled he could not endure a bit of rough living, he scolded himself. Other men lived like this their whole lives. So, he gave the cottage his stamp of approval, though in truth he was somewhat daunted by the rude little dwelling. There was only one bedroom with a tiny window that in daylight looked out upon a wilderness of tangled brambles and bare trees, and the bed sagged in the middle. By the light of a single candle, it was less than welcoming. Briggs was crouched by the fireplace, doing his best to coax the thing to light and filling the room with smoke as he did so.

“There’s a cot bed which I’ll put up downstairs,” Briggs told him cheerfully, holding a sheet of newspaper across the

opening to encourage it to draw.

“You seem mighty pleased with yourself,” Jules remarked suspiciously.

“It’ll be warmer down there,” Briggs said, flashing him a grin as the fire finally sparked into life. “And I am enjoying myself. I’ll admit I’m not looking forward to the work. I became a valet to avoid getting my hands dirty, but there’ll be compensations, I reckon.”

Jules narrowed his eyes. “For example?”

“Seeing *you* get your hands dirty, for one.”

Jules snorted. “I thought as much. Well, just remember, I do it for art. No one will be able to say I don’t take my work seriously.”

“Twaddle,” Briggs replied, shaking his head. “You’re doing it to get back at Miss Davenport, and I tell you now, my lord, you’ll not have an easy time of it. You’ll need to be up early and bright if you’re thinking of getting the better of her.”

Jules decided not to rise to this bait.

“Oh, and there is one more little detail I perhaps ought to apprise your lordship of,” Briggs added, with far too much nonchalance.

“Oh?” Jules looked at his valet with foreboding. He’d had the distinct feeling the man was a deal too smug since his visit to Miss Davenport, like a fellow hiding an ace up his sleeve. “And what might that be?”

“Well, it seemed to me, you need to keep quiet, for like I told you, the moment you open your mouth, we’re sunk.”

“Yes, yes, cut line, Briggs. What have you done?” Jules demanded.

“Well, I told her as how you were my cousin, like you said, but I also told her you, er... needed a bit of looking after, seeing as how you didn’t talk and never had.”

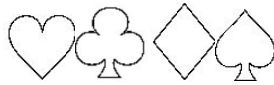
“You did what?” Jules exploded, rounding on him and nearly knocking himself out as he forgot about the low beam

in the middle of the room. He yelped, holding a hand to his throbbing temple.

“Well, it seemed best, or she’d think it suspicious,” Briggs went on with a shrug. “So I told her you was kicked in the head by a horse when you was a lad and how you don’t talk.”

“You... you...*utter*...” Jules growled, unable to find an expletive forceful enough to vent his feelings.

“I’ll put the supper on,” Briggs said hastily, and hurried back down the stairs.



Jules had to wonder at his own sanity as they trudged through the dark to the big house on the hill early the next morning. It was perishing cold, and a fine damp rain glittered in the light of the lamp Briggs carried as they made their way up the steeply rising lane. Though he had grumbled about being served a large bowl of porridge for breakfast, Jules was glad enough of it now as it stuck to his ribs and helped keep the cold from his bones. He was going to be out in this all day, he reflected bitterly, when he might have been tucked up snug in his own bed.

Then he remembered one of the many little digs Miss Davenport had delivered him since he began writing, especially the scathing words of her last review, and steeled his spine.

Will Dixey was a short, wiry fellow with bristling side whiskers and an air of suppressed energy. There was no conversation, just a terse instruction to grab a shovel and a barrow and follow him.

Llun-y-mynydd—which Jules had since learned translated as The Mountain’s Picture—loomed over them like a gentle giant as dawn broke, an imposing manor house that looked beneficently down upon the undulating farmland of the Welsh marches. It appeared Miss Davenport took her gardens seriously, for even in the dim light of a grim February morning, Jules had to admire the series of vistas and lovely walks that had been created about the house. Though

compared to the mighty Beverwyck or any of his father's or his own properties, it was hardly on the same scale, it was a large, handsome building, and obviously well maintained and run.

Mr Dixey led them to a piece of ground about an acre in size and surrounded by walls, one of which was opened with archways that led to other parts of the garden, and on the opposite side, a wrought iron doorway. The walls looked to be newly built, and everything inside them was bare, save for a surface of scrubby grass and weed. The patch of unprepossessing ground had been stuck all over with small wooden stakes. Strings ran between them, marking out shapes on the ground.

“Right. This is the layout of the mistress' new rose garden. All the sections within the shapes need to be stripped of turf and dug over. If you go through that arch and turn right, follow the path and you'll see where the turf is being disposed of. When you're done, there's a pile of well-rotted manure you'll need to dig in too. Got it?”

Briggs touched a finger to his cap and nodded. “Got it, sir.”

Dixey glanced at Jules, then back at Briggs. “Does he understand?”

Briggs cleared his throat and nodded as Jules seethed inwardly but managed to hold his tongue.

“Oh, yes, sir. He understands, all right. I'll keep a close eye on him, though, don't worry.”

Dixey nodded and strode off as Briggs turned back to regard Jules.

“Want to go home yet?” he asked mildly.

Jules picked up the shovel, cast Briggs an unloving look, and set to work.

## Chapter 4



*General Davenport,*

*Please find below the outstanding balance for the two hunters recently purchased at Tattersalls. Payment is due by the end of the month.*

*We are, Sir,*

*Yours faithfully,*

*H, Butler & Co.*

***—Excerpt of a bill (one of many) made out to General R. Davenport, care of his daughter, Miss Selina Davenport.***

**20<sup>th</sup> February 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

Selina tapped the edge of her teacup with the spoon, silencing the raucous breakfast table as no one was fool enough to make her raise her voice. Freshly scrubbed faces turned in her direction and she gave a nod of approval.

Jacob, at eighteen, was the eldest of her younger siblings, and a studious, fiercely intelligent boy who would spend all day with his head in a book if given the chance. He ought to have been at university by now, but a severe bout of whooping cough two years earlier had weakened his lungs, leaving him susceptible to all manner of ills and chills, and it had been thought best if he remains at home for another year.

“Jacob, you’ll go through the accounts with me this morning, if you please,” she said, in a tone that brooked no argument.

She was perfectly capable of keeping and balancing the accounts herself, but a bit of real-life experience was essential for a boy who lived with his head in the clouds.

“Yes, Lina,” he said gloomily, poking disconsolately at his porridge.

“Don’t sulk,” she instructed. “We’ll be done in an hour if you don’t get distracted. Abigail, put the book down. How many times must I tell you, not at the breakfast table?”

“Oh, but Lina, the hero has just—”

“I don’t care what the hero has just done,” she said severely, though she knew full well, having read the book herself the previous week. At sixteen, Abigail was an adorable little widgeon and fancied herself a Gothic heroine in the making. “You will pay attention. Mrs Parry is sorting the linen today. You will help her and share anything that needs mending between the three of us.”

“Oh, but...” The protest died on Abigail’s pretty face. “Yes, Lina,” she said, satisfying her indignation by scowling into her cup of chocolate.

Selina sighed. She really ought to confiscate that novel, for Abigail was daft enough to believe such lurid tales could really happen in real life, but there was little enough fun to be had in these remote parts, especially at such a dismal time of year. She did not like to be such a killjoy, nor to spend her days rallying them all into busying themselves, but the place would fall to wrack and ruin, and the children run wild if someone didn’t take them in hand.

It wasn’t as if anyone else was going to do it. Lord knew they couldn’t have another governess, not with Hubert about. Her older brother was far too familiar with pretty girls and had no compunction about seducing the staff. Selina guarded all her servants and slept ill whenever he was home. More than anything, though, she did not wish for them all to think her such a wretched nag, even if she felt it more often than not. So, Abigail could keep the book. Besides, it would be hypocritical as Selina had thoroughly enjoyed the story herself and did not wish to deny Abigail the pleasure of reading it.



The only difference being, Selina knew full well, it was all entirely fantastical. There was no such thing as happy ever afters.

“What about me?” Charlie piped up.

Selina smiled at him. Charlie was thirteen and, like both her and little Julia, who was ten, had inherited their father’s shock of unruly red hair and freckles. Julia was dreadfully touchy about her vivid red curls and convinced she would die an old maid because of them. Selina did her best to reassure her but found the task somewhat challenging in the circumstances.

“Charlie, you may ride into town and fetch the items on the shopping list I’ve left on my desk.”

Charlie gave a little yip of pleasure at the thought of a few hours of freedom.

“That’s not fair! I want to go too,” Julia protested.

“No, you’ve schoolwork, madam,” Selina told her firmly. “But if you get those sums right this time, I might add a bag of barley sugar to the list, if that will sweeten your temper.”

“I suppose,” Julia said reluctantly, but stuck out her tongue at Charlie, who was looking appallingly smug.

“Jammy go too?”

Selina turned her attention to the baby, Benjamin, who had just turned three years old. “No, sweet. You will stay with Nurse this morning, and then we shall go out for a walk and feed the ducks.”

“Feed duck sweeties?” he said hopefully.

“No. The barley sugar is for Julia if she gets her sums right, but I shall ask Mrs Parry if we might have scones for tea, with jam,” she added, for this was his favourite thing in the entire world.

“Stawburry jam?” he demanded eagerly.

“Certainly,” she agreed, deftly wiping his sticky hand before he could grab hold of the sleeve of her dress. Selina

looked up as the nurse, Hilly, came into the breakfast parlour.

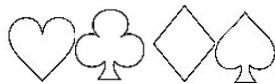
“Where’s my little man then?” Hilly demanded, her sweet face crinkling with pleasure as she saw her favourite person.

“Here! I’m here, Hilly!” he said, as if he could be missed, and stretched up his chubby arms.

Selina laughed and got to her feet, picking the robust little boy up out of his seat before Hilly attempted it, for she was not as young as she’d once been. Benjamin ran to her, and she swept him up all the same, planting a big kiss on his cheek.

“Did you have a nice egg for breakfast?” she enquired with apparently genuine interest.

“Yes!” Benjamin agreed, and went out of the room with her, deep in discussion about just how good the egg had been.



As she had expected, Selina’s relatively peaceful morning was not to last.

“Oh! How could he?” she raged in frustration, staring down at the invoice for two more shockingly expensive horses they neither needed nor could afford.

They already had a dozen purebred eating machines that her heedless father was hardly ever around to exercise. Then he would descend upon the family, bringing a horde of his loathsome cronies to murder the wildlife, deplete the larder and the wine cellar, and fill the house with bawdy stories and language of the kind impressionable children ought never to hear. Selina thought that if she were a man, she might very well have knocked him down long ago. As it was, she railed at him as best she could and was labelled a harpy and a shrew for her trouble, though he never minded leaving his household in ‘that shrewish creature’s hands.’

“Because it would never occur to him not to,” Jacob replied blithely, not taking his nose out of *The Philosophy of Inductive Sciences*, whatever that was. “He’s selfish, that’s all.”

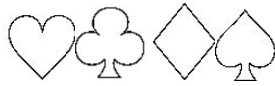
Selina cast an affectionate if despairing glance at her brother. In his own way, Jacob was selfish too, though not purposefully. Unlike Hubert, the oldest of their clan and her senior by three years, he did not waste his money and time on wine, women, and song. He was just entirely oblivious to anything outside of his books and his studies. But at least he was doing *something*, not just indulging his baser instincts, a pastime which made Selina wild with frustration and anger. Oh, if she had been a man, the things she would have done! As it was, she was stuck here, managing a house that would pass to her indolent brother when her father died, leaving her with a very limited income. But she would not think of that.

Instead, she added the invoice to the discouraging pile on her left and wrote out a draft from her father's bank. They were far from destitute; she knew that. Indeed, if her father would not spend quite so lavishly on horses and entertaining his cronies, they'd do very nicely. Hubert had his own income, inherited from his uncle—thanks be to Providence—though at the rate he was running through it, he too would become a burden on the estate before very much longer. But she wouldn't think about that either.

Passing the draft to Jacob so he could note it down in the accounts, she gave a loud cough to regain his attention and force him to put the book down. Duly noting the date of payment on the irritating invoice, she moved it to the right, and the pile for paid invoices. As she did so, her eye snagged on a recent copy of *La Belle Assembly*, left open at a page revealing a lilac taffeta morning dress. It was feminine and frivolous, with little silk tassels and very tight sleeves, and entirely impractical for the life Selina led. She'd had a season once, long ago it seemed, with pretty dresses and her very own maid, but that had been before Mama died and... Well, she just wouldn't think about that.

She picked up the next invoice, staring at it in alarm. "How many books, Jacob?" she asked faintly.

Jacob grew very red about the ears. "Ah, yes, Lina, about that...."



Jules stared down at his hands in frustration. They were chapped from the cold and sore from the rough handle of the spade, and he had a blister on his right palm.

“Want to go home yet?” Briggs asked in an undertone.

Jules glared at him and sank the shovel into the thick turf again, glad he’d worn sturdy boots as he jammed his foot against it, pushing it farther in. His breath clouded on the freezing air, but he had long since rid himself of his coat and scarf and rolled up his sleeves. Sweat was trickling down his back, an unpleasant sensation that seemed very different to a vigorous workout at a boxing salon. If Briggs thought he was going to throw in the towel so quickly, however... well, he was wrong.

A clear if strident voice reached him from across the garden and he looked up to see Mr Dixey had returned, but this time he was not alone. Beside him stood a woman. Statuesque, she stood a full head taller than Dixey, who had to angle his head to look up at her. She wore a hideous gown, which might once have been a rich brown, but had faded to something muddy and unflattering, though the figure it embraced was... impressive. Full hips and a fuller bust bracketed a remarkably slender waist. Jules leant on his spade and followed the natural inclination of his gaze. Her neck was slender and elegant, her profile the kind that ought to be stamped on a coin, with an imperious nose and a jaw that spoke of a stubborn streak a mile wide. She held a steel-tipped umbrella in one hand and, though she leaned on it nonchalantly enough, she looked as if she wouldn’t hesitate to use it should the need arise. If that were not enough of a clue, the fiery red hair confirmed his suspicions. This, then, was she: his nemesis. Miss Selina Davenport was a woman built for warfare. She was Boadicea made flesh, and Jules’ instincts all fired with the desire for combat... or something of the sort.

Perhaps sensing his critical gaze, the woman turned her sharp blue eyes in his direction, and he felt burned by the contact. She stiffened as she saw him staring and Jules was

about to touch his cap and give her the benefit of a crooked grin, he was well aware women regarded as a lethal weapon, when Briggs barged into him so hard, he fell over on his arse in the mud.

Jules glared up at him in outrage and opened his mouth to demand what the bloody hell he was playing at, when Briggs put a finger to his lips, silencing him.

“You. Don’t. Talk,” he whispered furiously. “And you don’t stare at your betters, neither!”

Jules swallowed an impatient comment and allowed Briggs to help him up.

“Carry on digging and keep your stupid head down,” his suddenly bossy valet instructed, before striding off to speak to Mr Dixey and Miss Davenport.

Jules could feel Davenport staring at him, the back of his neck hot and prickling at the indignity of her seeing him sprawled on his arse. His only comfort was that she did not know who he really was.

“Your cousin, I collect, Mr Briggs.” Her clear, carrying voice was easily audible as Jules listened to the conversation. “I hope he is settling in. You’ve rented the cottage I suggested near Mill Farm?”

“Yes, Miss Davenport. Mark is settling in very well, though I do apologise. He’s not used to being around ladies, so I hope you’ll not mind his manners, for he has none.”

Jules gritted his teeth. Cheeky blighter.

“Not at all,” Davenport replied easily. “I am no highbred lady to swoon at the slightest provocation, I assure you. I do not suffer with my nerves.”

*No, thought Jules irritably, you make everyone else suffer instead.*

“You’ve made reasonable progress today,” she said.

Such grudging approval, when his back was breaking! Jules was close to giving up his disguise for the pleasure of

demanding she dig a few shovelfuls herself and see how she liked it.

“Thank you, miss. We aim to please,” Briggs said politely, the damned toady.

“Carry on,” she barked, her tone reminding Jules forcibly of his own father’s imperious tone before she walked off without a backwards glance.

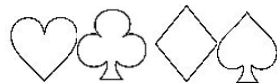
“I’ll hope you’ll not mind his manners for he has none,” Jules parroted, in a high-pitched whiny voice once they were alone again.

“Well, maybe you can get away with looking at a lady like that when you’re the handsome son of a duke, but the rest of us would get our faces slapped,” Briggs told him bluntly.

Jules huffed, still indignant. “And, Mark? Seriously, that’s the best you could come up with?”

“Well, you’re a marquess, seemed sensible to keep to something I wouldn’t forget,” Briggs replied with a shrug.

Jules rolled his eyes and hoped the day would soon be at an end.



Selina walked to the arched walkway and hesitated, just out of sight of what she intended to be her new rose garden and, more importantly, her new gardeners. She had liked Briggs on sight when he came to the interview. He was a neat, clean, and well-featured man with an open manner, and she thought he would do very well. His cousin, however... She lingered behind the wall, watching surreptitiously. If that man was a gardener, she’d eat her umbrella.

Lord, but he was handsome, with thick black hair and dark slashing eyebrows that highlighted eyes of intense green. Oh, and the way he had looked at her! She had felt that look to her marrow. If his cousin had not knocked him to the ground—and certainly on purpose—she felt sure he would have smiled, and a wicked look it would have been too. A twinge of regret struck deep, for men did not smile at Selina as a rule. They

found her voice too strident, her manner too authoritative, though they did not put it so politely. Men especially disliked it when she pointed out when they were wrong and corrected them, no matter how politely, and took offense when she declined their help in climbing over stiles or getting out of carriages when she could manage perfectly well by herself. They also made disparaging remarks about her hair and her... size.

Her first season had been a disaster, as her father had jovially predicted. He was a handsome fellow and had once been known as a dreadful flirt, but these days, horses and gambling took all his attention. Selina's mother had been delicate and lovely, and Selina had never understood why she could not have taken after her instead. Papa said she took after his grandfather, who had been a great ox of a man with blazing red hair... she had not imagined he meant it as a compliment.

During her one miserable failure of a season, she'd attended balls thronged with tiny waiflike creatures who blushed if a gentleman so much as looked in their direction and then fainted because the idiotic creatures had laced themselves up so tightly. They also cried when Selina tried to gently point the fact out to them, but that was by the by.

The man Mr Briggs had called Mark picked up his shovel and began digging once more, and Selina's eyes drifted to powerful forearms, dusted with dark hair. A jolt of something hot and unsettling shot through her and she sucked in a breath. Her instincts prickled with the certainty that Mark Briggs was not what he purported to be. Mr Archibald Briggs had intimated his cousin needed looking after, protecting even, a sentiment which had tugged at Selina's maternal instincts, and of which she had fully approved. But those glittering green eyes had been sharp with intelligence and the kind of proud arrogance she had only ever come across in a certain breed of gentleman. That man did not need protecting. Quite the reverse was true, if she had her guess. The havoc a fellow like that could wreak among womankind boggled the mind.

Oh, here was a mystery, and one she had every intention of unravelling.

## Chapter 5



*Dear Bella,*

*How are you, Sis? Rumour has it you're as big as a house. Don't tell me it's twins again? I am uncertain the world is ready for the number of Grenvilles you seem determined to populate it with.*

*Anyway, it seems an age since I saw you last, and all your various brats. How many are there now? I appear to have lost count. I think I might need a bit of rustivating, and as the next addition to your brood is due in the spring, I thought I might give you the benefit of my delightful self for a few weeks from mid-May through June. There's no need to thank me, I know you'll be delighted at the prospect.*

***—Excerpt of a letter from Mr Leo Hunt to his sister, The Most Hon'ble Lady Arabella Grenville, Marchioness of Bainbridge (Children of Mr Nathaniel Hunt and Mrs Alice Hunt).***

**24<sup>th</sup> February 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

Jules looked down at his hands and winced. They were in a bad way and, although Briggs tended to them at night, he was too stubborn to allow the man to let him off his duties or give him an easier time of it. He'd dragged Briggs into this mad situation, the least Jules could do was to share his portion of the workload. The weather was not helping. The temperature had dropped steadily, and the mizzling rain



gradually soaked their clothing until the cold seeped into their bones.

Not for the first time, Jules wondered what the devil he was playing at. Except that he really was serious about his writing and, as much as Davenport's words had stung, he'd feared there might be some truth in her words. What he'd told Pip had been true, too: no gardener or housekeeper would ever speak to him directly, even if he hadn't been at pains to keep his identity a secret. His mother might be a celebrated authoress, but she was a woman.

For the future Duke of Bedwin to be discovered as the author of sensational romance novels would damage the dignity of the title, and Jules would rather die than have that happen. The only time he'd almost fallen out with his mother was when he had begged her to keep his secret, which she had not wanted to do. But he could not bear the idea of his father reading his work and thinking him even more frivolous than he already did. In some more sensible part of his mind, he knew his father respected his mother's work, but somehow, he could not envisage the Duke of Bedwin being so sanguine about his heir having written *The Jewel and the Iron Key* or any of his other titles.

Jules' entire life had been a prelude to becoming the duke, a circumstance that made him entirely miserable. It wasn't so much that he objected to the title. It would be an honour as well as his duty to become the next duke and to carry on his father's legacy, but his father would need to be dead for it to happen, and that he could not bear to think of.

His father was the greatest man he had ever known. Somehow, he combined the role of loving father with that of commanding one of the most demanding titles of the peerage. He never shirked his duty, never failed to listen to the needs of the people who relied upon him, and yet always seemed to be around for important family events, never missed one of his many children's birthdays, or a prize giving at school, and had read bedtime stories and kissed scraped knees whenever the occasion arose. In Jules' mind he was a paragon of everything a man ought to be: strong but fair, confident but gentle, clever

and wise and endlessly patient... except Jules had been pushing that patience to the limits for some time and he knew it.

He didn't even know why he did it, except that if he were unfit to be the next duke, perhaps his father would simply not grow old. A stupid, childish impulse to be sure, but his father had accused him of immaturity so often of late the explanation had finally come to him and he'd not dismissed it as he might once have done. Jules was not oblivious to his own faults, much as he might dislike having them brought to his attention.

"Is something amiss?"

The sharply worded query had Jules leaping out of his reverie and spinning around to see a pair of piercing blue eyes regarding him with something like suspicion.

Jules opened his mouth and then hastily closed it again, remembering just in time that he couldn't talk. He firmed his lips and shook his head, picking up the shovel again but unable to hide a wince of pain.

"Show me."

He looked around again, startled by the peremptory demand.

"Your hand," Davenport ordered briskly, holding out her own, covered in worn brown kidskin gloves.

Jules shook his head again, sensing danger, but she just gave an impatient tsk. "Don't be difficult, I've not got all day and you've clearly hurt yourself. Come along," she added, with the tone of a woman used to being heeded without question.

Reluctantly, Jules held his blistered hand out. She sucked in a sharp breath.

"Well, that needs dealing with at once, before it becomes infected. Come with me."

Jules shook his head, glancing around in the vain hope that Briggs might appear, but he'd gone off to get another barrowful of manure and was nowhere in sight.

“Mark, is it?” she asked, her voice softening a degree.

Jules nodded.

“Well, Mark, I am only going to treat your hand and then you may return to your cousin. You’ve nothing to fear, I promise, but if that wound gets infected you might be very ill indeed, and I cannot have that on my conscience. Please, come with me.”

With no other option, Jules abandoned the spade and followed her back to the house. Trying to remember his manners, he attempted to keep his eyes from the sway of her hips as she strode back across the garden. No ladylike, meandering stroll for Miss Boadicea, and Jules discovered he did not need to adjust his stride to make allowances for her. She walked like a man, covering the distance with ground eating strides that made him wonder just how long her legs were, and if they were as shapely as the rest of her. Irritated to discover his mind kept finding far too many positive aspects about his nemesis and was continually wandering in such a direction, he made himself remember the words of one of her more caustic reviews and was feeling thoroughly nettled again by the time they reached the manor.

She led him to a small still room at the back of the house that seemed to be used for drying herbs and flowers and was filled with shelves, all of which were crammed with bottles and jars. Arranged with meticulous precision, each was clearly labelled as to their contents and the date on which they’d been made.

“Sit down.”

It was an order rather than a suggestion and Jules glowered with annoyance as he made use of a high stool beside the workbench. A maid appeared as if by magic. No doubt Boadicea had put a curse on the entire staff, and they were all in her thrall, forced to appear at her slightest whim.

“A jug of warm water, if you please, Milly.”

“Yes, miss,” the maid said, casting a curious glance at Jules and then disappearing again.

“Don’t you feel the cold?” Boadicea—Davenport—demanded, regarding his bare forearms without so much as a blush, though her gaze lingered a fraction longer than it ought.

Jules bit back a smug smile and shook his head, daring to hold her gaze far too boldly. She looked away first, which was satisfying, and then Milly reappeared with the jug of warm water and a basin.

“Thank you, that will be all.”

The maid bobbed a curtsey and departed, and Jules watched as Davenport poured the water into the basin and added a few drops of something that clouded the liquid.

“Soak your hands in that for a few minutes,” she ordered him.

Desperate to tell her to go to the devil, Jules swallowed down an exclamation of indignation at being ordered about and did as he was told. The water stung his torn flesh and he hissed, gaining a glance of concern from the woman beside him.

“It will only sting for a moment,” she said kindly.

He bore it stoically and then relaxed as the sensation dissipated and the warm water eased his freezing fingers.

After a few moments, Davenport drew up a stool beside him and draped her lap with a piece of soft, clean linen. Without a by your leave, she took his right hand from the water and placed it in her lap.

“You’ve never done this kind of work before,” she said.

As ever, it was a statement, not a question, and Jules felt no need to answer it, even if he could have. She looked up, obviously expecting at least a shake of his head, but Jules just stared obdurately at her. The ghost of a smile touched her lips, and she returned her attention to his hand, gently patting it dry.

“I’ll speak to Dixey about giving you lighter duties for a few days to let your hands heal.”

Jules scowled and shook his head. As much as he wanted to stop digging, for the pain was becoming hard to endure, he

was damned if she would be the one to see him fail.

She noted his scowl with interest. “Don’t be stubborn,” she said, and her tone was soft now, sending a thrill of something most peculiar down his spine. “No one is doubting your strength or endurance, I assure you, but you must not make your hands worse, or you’ll regret it. Such lovely fine hands, too. Long fingers. One would almost think you a gentleman.”

Jules barely resisted the temptation to tug his hand away from hers, knowing this would only make her suspicious. He’d make sure Briggs gave her an explanation that would justify his lack of calluses and signs of manual labour. No doubt the irritating devil could think of something that would humiliate Jules enough to satisfy him and Davenport both.

Having dried both hands, she reached for a small glass pot and took off the lid. A sweet, flowery scent reached his nose as she warmed a small amount between her hands. Then she took hold of his right hand again and began working the balm gently into his skin, carefully avoiding the sore spots. Jules swallowed, an odd sensation building inside him as she applied the balm to first one hand, then the other. Her hands were elegant, but strong and capable, with long fingers and clean, blunt fingernails. He raised his eyes for a moment, watching her. She was absorbed in her work, oblivious to the moment’s intimacy. A niggle of irritation worked at him. Jules was not used to being ignored, nor to his proximity being dismissed as irrelevant, but she finished her work and reached for his other hand, heedless of the effect she was having on his equilibrium and his temper.

It annoyed him that her touch stirred him, making his skin thrum and his blood surge through his veins. He considered her dispassionately, trying to make himself believe that any man would react to such a touch from a female of any stamp. She was not beautiful, he told himself. Her nose was too large, her mouth too wide. She was altogether too much, and yet... and yet... his heart was crashing about like something small and panicked caught in a trap.

He stood suddenly, unable to take another moment of it.

“Where are you going?” she demanded crossly. “I’ve not finished.”

Incensed with his inability to tell her, he just jerked his head tersely towards the door.

“Oh, no. Not until I’ve bandaged those blisters, and you’ll not return to digging today. If your hands are not protected, they’ll get infected, and I’ll not have your death on my conscience when you get blood poisoning. Not when it could so easily be avoided. And don’t look like that. A man in the village died a few years ago because of an untreated splinter, of all things. Don’t you be so pigheaded as he was.”

Jules set his jaw, determined that Briggs could see to any bandaging for him, and went to walk out.

“Is it usual for you to ignore your employer’s wishes?” she asked mildly.

Jules hesitated as he remembered this was not his life. He was not the son of a duke here and he did not get to do as he pleased and tell people he didn’t like to go to the devil. This was the lot of a working man, he reminded himself: to do as he was told. Her demand was not unreasonable. Indeed, she was doing her best to care for him. It was not her fault she made him feel like a coiled spring. Except he was not feeling especially reasonable. Still, this was valuable information. His emotions, those of frustration and anger and indignation at not being able to do as he pleased, were valuable and would aid him next time he wrote a character who *was* subject to the whims of a cruel master or mistress.

Jules forced himself to return to the stool and sit down, stoically holding his hands out for her.

She regarded him with interest, a considering gleam in her eyes that made him feel like an odd species of newt caught in a jam jar.

“You are not used to being told what to do,” she said, curiosity in her tone. “Indeed, I think you would rather like to murder me.”

Jules forced himself to ease the taut line of his jaw and shook his head, though she was entirely correct on both points.

She snorted and selected a different jar, applying a thick cream to the torn skin on his right palm before deftly binding it.

“There, all done,” she said, her tone brisk, striding out of the room before he had figured out how to thank her without speaking.

Jules hurried after her, assuming she was going to speak to Dixey on his behalf and feeling unaccountably embarrassed that she should do so. No doubt she’d make a drama out of his blisters and leave him feeling a fool.

Except, when they returned to the garden, she did nothing of the sort. She congratulated Dixey on the progress they had made and suggested that, as the weather was becoming increasingly inclement and she suspected they might have snow in the next few days, they ought to turn their attention to the hot houses, which needed cleaning and preparing for the new season’s fruit and flowers.

“Oh, another day and a half and the digging will be done though, miss,” Dixey protested.

“Yes, but we have not even ordered the roses yet, and it will be some weeks before we can plant them, so there is no rush.”

“But there’s the edging to be done and the pathways to be laid and—”

“Yes, yes, I do remember what I asked you to provide, Mr Dixey, I assure you,” she said, a look in her eyes that was at once calm but resolute. She would have her way, and that was an end to it. “But I do not believe a day or two’s delay will have a serious impact on the schedule. I do know that General Davenport will be gravely disappointed if there are no grapes, however, and I noticed several broken panes of glass that need urgent attention.”

“Ah,” Dixey said, colouring a little. “Mr Llewellyn did mention as how they needed dealing with. Truth be told, it

went clean out of my mind.”

Jules wondered if the man was about to be raked over the coals, but Davenport only returned a brisk nod.

“Well, and hardly surprising when you were so forcibly thrust into his shoes with no notice whatsoever. It has been a difficult time for you, I have no doubt, but we are going on splendidly so do not trouble yourself. Just get those glasshouses in order while the weather is so wretchedly cold and wet, and the roses will wait their turn. Good day to you, Mr Dixey, Mark.”

She gave Jules a politely indifferent nod and strode off, leaving him feeling a mixture of gratitude and irritation that sat uneasily in his guts.



## Chapter 6



*Dearest Cat,*

*My first instinct on reading your letter was to leave Goshen Court to find and murder Lord Kilbane in the most painful manner I could devise.*

*However, I have since read your letter several times over, and been reminded by a good friend, that you are no longer a child. You made a mistake, a grave mistake, and now you must face the consequences. I too have made a mistake, Cat. A far worse one than you are guilty of. You are guilty only of seeing the good in a man who does not deserve your regard – no, don't rage at me, for I perhaps know a little more of your husband's exploits than do you. Either way, your sin is only one of having a romantic heart, and though Mama and Papa will weep for you, in the end, it is you that will bear the burden of your actions.*

*I wish it were I who would pay for my indiscretions, instead of a soul so sweet and innocent it makes me loathe myself for the pain I shall inflict over the coming years. Perhaps you will guess my meaning, but I shall not spell it out to you. If you wish to discover more, and perhaps come and lick your wounds in private, you are always welcome, my dear sister. Indeed, I should be glad indeed to welcome you, even if it is to rail at me for what I have done, though my hospitality will be a shabby thing*

*compared to what you are used to. For me, this self-imposed exile serves as a penance of sorts, but if you need peace and quiet, it is a wonderful escape from the world. You will do as you think best. I shall not blame you for avoiding me and my draughty old pile of stone.*

*I have invited Mama and Papa to visit me in the summer, by which time I hope I may have courage enough to face their disappointment and have made enough improvements to my inheritance to make them think me not entirely useless. Until then, only Thomas and Jules know the truth. Jules only because he's an interfering devil who turned up unannounced, as is his way. I beg, one thing, Cat, if you have read between the lines and understood my meaning, no matter how angry you may be with me, please keep it to yourself.*

**—Excerpt of a letter from *The Right Hon'ble Philip Barrington, Earl of Ashburton* to his sister, *Lady Catherine 'Cat' St Just, The Marchioness of Kilbane*. (Children of *The Most Hon'ble Lucian and Matilda Barrington, Marquess and Marchioness of Montagu*).**

**24<sup>th</sup> February 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

Selina picked at her dinner that night, her thoughts dwelling in the apothecary with a man who was taking up far too much of her time. She had too many calls on her attention to waste it wondering about the mystery that was Mark Briggs, but she did not seem to be able to stop herself. The fellow was a mystery, and that was a problem, and Selina had never encountered a problem she hadn't wanted to fix.

He had been within armslength of tearing her off a strip this afternoon, she was certain of it.

“Didn’t talk and never had, my eye,” she muttered to herself, only to look up to see identical expressions of confusion on the faces of her brothers and sisters. “Wool gathering,” she said absently, and made a determined effort upon the slice of roast beef on her plate.

When Mr Briggs had arranged with her for his cousin to work alongside him, she had assumed his cousin needed company and guidance because the world was something he found difficult to cope with. Perhaps he could not find work of his own or floundered without his cousin to steer him. She had applauded the man for his commitment to his family, and this had gone a long way to resolving her to accept the situation.

One look at those glittering green eyes, however, had told her this assumption was far and wide of the mark. So why, *why*, would a man like that be here? Was he a criminal, hiding out? A possibility, for sure, but why pretend he could not, or would not, speak? Unless doing so would give him away. This idea found favour with her, and she turned it over in her mind until the dessert course arrived. She was irritated to look up and discover both Abigail and Jacob had taken advantage of her distraction and were reading at the table.

“Put those books away at once,” she scolded, though she rather envied them their little escape from the world. “How rude you are. The dinner table is for conversation and catching up on each other’s days, not for ignoring your family.”

Somehow, she said this without so much as a blush, even though she was just as guilty of not joining in. Selina had long since discovered it was best to ignore one’s own faults before the younger members of the family, or else the realisation she was fallible would eat away at her already limited authority. If only Lewis hadn’t died, she thought with a mournful sigh, and then scolded herself mentally, for she detested those who languished with wails of *if only*, and *what if?* But he would have been four and twenty by now. The closest to her in age and temperament, Lewis had been dead these four years, but she still missed him bitterly. He would have shared her burden,

unlike Hubert, who was too busy sending himself to hell in a handcart, or Jacob, who cared for nothing except for long dead Greeks and classical allusions.

“Well, then, what have you all been up to?” she demanded, and did her best to pay attention until she sent them all to bed, reminding the younger members severely to wash behind their ears and brush their teeth, for she *would* check.

Feeling weary and far older than her five and twenty years, she made her way to the little parlour she had claimed as her own. It had been her mother’s once, a tiny room at the back of the house where Mother used to hide away from Father when she could not stand his bellowing any longer and read or embroider. She’d had a wonderful skill with a needle that Selina had not inherited. She could mend and darn well enough, but anything requiring artistic flair or imagination was beyond her ken. How she admired it in others, though. She had carefully framed much of her mother’s needlework and hung on the walls of the parlour. It reminded Selina of happier days, when she was a girl and heedless of how carefree and bright her life was.

Aware she was becoming maudlin, and growing quite impatient with herself, Selina poured herself a little tot of brandy and sat down by the fire. She had decided some months ago that if she were to be an old maid, there were certain things she had a right to indulge in, and a snifter of brandy when she felt like it had topped the list. The spirit fired her blood, a little puddle of warmth soothing her from the inside out as she put her feet up and gave a sigh of relief. Much as she loved her family, their demands were constant and draining. Trying to be mother and father to all of them at once when she had no one to help her was like wading through treacle, never feeling she was getting anywhere. If only she knew if she was doing right by them. Should she be more lenient, perhaps, and let them have more fun, or ought she to be stricter? How could she know? She thought, if they were her own children, she would have borne it easier, but she had never had the chance to be a wife and a mother and had only inherited the burdens of those happy circumstances with none of the pleasures.

Intent on getting herself out of the dismal before she became quite unbearable, she reached for a book, deciding to distract herself. The one nearest to her was a handsome binding in dark green leather with gold tooled writing. The title, *The Jewel and the Iron Key*, flashed in the firelight and she pursed her lips. It had been a wonderful story, with flashes of quite brilliant writing, but somehow there had been something missing. It did not capture the romance and excitement of the author's first title, and some of the secondary characters had been rather lacklustre. It frustrated her when she knew the person who had written it was capable of such wondrous storytelling, to find flaws she believed he or she could have overcome if they'd had someone to illustrate those points to them. She had said as much in her review, and then regretted being quite so blunt, as she truly had enjoyed the tale. As one with no talent for art or creation, she stood in awe of those who were capable, but it also made her critical, perhaps too critical, when they did not achieve the heights she felt they ought to have attained. She wondered if perhaps she had hurt the author's feelings, except no doubt whoever it was had far better things to do than consider the words of a nobody like her. After all, no one outside of her family gave a farthing for her opinion, so why should someone who had been so lauded by everyone else care a hoot?

Still, something about the review nagged at her mind and she could not relax, even after she had finished the brandy. Irritated, Selina got up and found the copy of *The Lady's Gazette* that had published her letter. She read it through.

*Perhaps they come from an elevated position in life and have never experienced what it is to work for a living, for I found the blacksmith entirely unconvincing, and as for the housekeeper, what a two-dimensional figure she was. Surely even the secondary characters require lives and stories of their own? Whilst the reader does not need to know their entire history, we need to engage with them, to have sympathy for them or*

*hate them because we suspect their motives. In The Ghosts of Castle Madruzzo this was perfectly executed, but most of the characters, except for the valet who was wonderfully drawn, were from the higher reaches of society. I believe this is telling.*

Unbidden, the image of Mark Briggs flitted behind her eyes, his broad shoulders and too handsome face, that thick dark hair and those arrogant, glittering eyes. He looked like no gardener she had ever seen in her life. Heavens, if it came to that, he looked like no *man* she had ever seen in her life. He was certainly not used to being told what to do and had clearly never done a day's labour in his life, going on the damage the spade had done to his palms. She remembered the feel of his powerful hands beneath hers. She had been viscerally aware of his discomfort, his irritation, the desire to tell her to go to the devil, but why? Unless, perhaps, *he* was used to being the one giving orders.

Selina blinked, considering. *No*. She glanced back down at her review, and at her name clearly written underneath. *Miss Selina Davenport. Monmouthshire.*

A jolt of unease shot through her, and she remembered then the thought she'd had in the moments after Archibald Briggs had knocked his cousin down... accidentally on purpose. He'd done it to stop the fellow looking at her so boldly, to halt the smile she had been certain was about to curve over that hard, wicked mouth. Selina had thought in that moment that only one kind of man would have had the temerity to look at a lady of quality so boldly. A highbred gentleman. Which was clearly ridiculous. What in the name of everything holy would a man be doing man like that be doing digging up her rose garden?

*Unless* he was the author of the books she had reviewed and had taken exception to her words. Unless he had come here to make mischief for her in retaliation for her criticism.

Startled, Selina gave a little gasp and leapt out of her chair. *No*. She told herself to get a grip, for it was ludicrous.

Surely? What kind of pig-headed fool would do such a thing? It was too silly for words. She crossed the room, pouring herself another tot of brandy, rather larger than the first one. Taking a large swallow, she coughed as it went down the wrong way, and stood for some moments gasping, her eyes watering.

“Oh, good grief, Selina, you must be mad,” she told herself breathlessly. But the more she thought about it, the more the idea stuck in her brain and refused to budge.

Mark Briggs was no gardener. Of that, she was certain. He was certainly in no need of protecting, and the likelihood of him never having spoken a word in his life seemed so preposterous when she remembered the fierce look in his eyes and the tightness in his jaw... oh, he had wanted to ring a peel over her and no mistake. How it must have rankled not to have been able to do so.

So, what if *Anonymous* really had come to take her measure? Who the devil was he? She certainly did not recognise him from her brief debut in town, but then she'd hardly mixed with the fashionable set, far less the cream of the *ton*, if that was where he belonged. Yet she could not believe any gentleman of such standing would lower himself so far as to become a gardener just to get back at her. It was utter madness. He'd need to be out of his mind to try such a thing. The scandal that would erupt if anyone found out about it would be dreadful. It would be reckless and foolish to court such disaster, and for what? To teach a woman already widely disapproved of for having too many bold opinions *and* for being an old maid a lesson? Surely not.

A foolish lark might appeal to someone with less to lose, though. So perhaps he was only on the edges of high society. She snapped her fingers as an idea occurred to her. He might be a noble bastard. That would make sense. One who had all the trappings of nobility—presuming his sire had recognised him—but was not quite respectable. Heaven knew there was something not quite respectable about Mark Briggs. Everything about him screamed *danger, beware, abandon your virtue all ye who dally here*.

Selina snorted, shaking her head. Good heavens, she was becoming ridiculous. It must be the brandy. Sighing, she decided she had better check the children had gone to bed as instructed and made proper use of their toothbrushes. What she would do about Mark Briggs—or whoever he was—she did not yet know. But she would think of something.



## Chapter 7



*Jules,*

*I suppose I ought to be thankful you at least made it to the last meeting of the Sons of Hades before you disappeared again. What is it now? Is some husband after you wielding an axe? Or were you simply your usual charming self and caused a riot somewhere and there's a warrant for your arrest? I assure you neither would surprise me. It might have been nice if you had let me know you were going out of town, however, as I've come all the way from bloody Scotland to see you, you absolute arse!*

*Now I'm stuck here with Hamilton, assuming I don't murder him before the end of the day, which is becoming increasingly likely. We came down with Georgie and Rochford. He's none too pleased either, ye ken, having thought to catch up with you. He also said to tell you - you're an arsehole.*

*So, have you at least figured out why Ashburton has buried himself in the back of beyond? Did he murder someone? We're all dying to know but the devil has always been too damned proud to admit he's flesh and blood like the rest of us. What's the craic? You can at least give us that much to make up for being an epic arse!*

*Yrs, etc.*

*—Excerpt of a letter from The Right Hon'ble Muir Anderson (Son of Gordon and Ruth Anderson, The Earl and Countess of Morven) to The Most Hon'ble Jules Adolphus, The Marquess of Blackstone (eldest son of Their Graces, Robert and Prunella Adolphus, The Duke and Duchess of Bedwin).*

**26<sup>th</sup> February 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

The glasshouses were a good deal nicer than being outside breaking his back with digging, but Dixey had set him to work with a cloth and a bucket, and washing down the dirty glass with cold water was not much fun. The bandage on his hand was now dirty and sodden and the blisters were stinging like fury. Not that he was about to murmur a word of complaint. He could not help but wonder what Davenport would say if she discovered the state of her handiwork, however. That she had not intended for him to be doing the washing part of the job was obvious to him, if not to Mr Dixey. He glanced down at the grubby bandage and grinned. Oh, she'd pitch a fit.

Why the idea pleased him so much, he couldn't say, except that anything that riled Davenport was fine by him. He was feeling very pleased with himself too, for he had finally decided on the best way to get back at her. It was obvious, really, and he only wondered he hadn't thought of it earlier. Every writer's revenge was plain: you put your nemesis in a book.

"Well, that's the last bit of glass in place," Mr Dixey said, standing back to admire his handiwork.

"Mark, give that a wipe down and you can call it a day. Good work, lads. Archie, just bring those tools into the potting shed, would you? They'll all need washing before we can use again them this year."

"Right you are, sir," Briggs said, hefting a wooden tray filled with dibbers and trowels and other things Jules had no names for. "I'll see you back at the cottage if you want to get

off, eh, Mark?” Jules nodded and raised a hand before giving the new pane of glass a rub over with the soapy cloth. With a sigh of relief, he dropped the cloth back into the water and stooped to pick the bucket up when the door opened again.

“There you are, I wondered how you were getting on and... good heavens. What have you done to your bandage?”

Jules bit back a grin as he saw Davenport standing in the doorway. The damp air had made her red hair frizz madly, and it was escaping its pins on all sides. She looked like one of the Furies, backlit by the dying light outside, her chin up, eyes flashing annoyance.

He held out his hand to her, presenting the sodden bandage for her inspection. It had been white and pristine but was now a dingy grey and streaked with green from the moss and algae that had grown over the glass.

“Well, I suppose you’ll look that pleased when you die of blood poisoning too,” she said, with a tone that could have etched every piece of glass in the place. “I really ought to let you, but never let it be said that I allowed a foolish man to kill himself because he was too bloody minded to be sensible. Come along. Chop, chop, I don’t have all day.”

Allowing himself something of a swagger because he knew it would annoy her, Jules took his own sweet time picking up the bucket and carrying it outside.

“Leave that,” she said impatiently.

Jules shook his head, pointing towards the figure of Mr Dixey, who was disappearing around the corner with Briggs.

Davenport pursed her lips, giving him a measuring look that made his skin prickle. “Very well. I suppose you must finish the job you’ve been given properly. I’ll wait.”

Jules experienced a qualm of disquiet at the way she watched him and told himself he was being foolish. Yet he swore there was a glimmer of amusement in her eyes, and it set him all on edge again. Suddenly he felt a deal less sure of himself and, once the bucket and cloth had been properly put away, he did not feel quite so sanguine about spending time

alone with her. Irritated, he followed her back to the house, taking mental notes all the while about the way she moved, about her rigid posture and her air of ruthless efficiency, and that damned umbrella that she seemed to carry with her everywhere.

The predicted snow had not yet materialised, though the rain that had fallen all day had finally stopped, and so she used the umbrella like a walking stick, stabbing the metal ferrule into the ground as she went. Jules wondered idly if there was a concealed blade inside the handle and decided he wouldn't put it past her. The idea had merit, and he decided his caricature of the lady would certainly involve a hidden blade in her umbrella. She would probably use it upon any man foolish enough to flirt with her or open a door.

He had not yet determined what to call his lady. It needed to be close enough that she would know it was her, but without opening himself for a libel case, for he would not put that past her. Selina could become Melina. That was from the Greek, derived from Meli, for honey. Oh, sweet indeed, he thought with amusement. But Davenport... perhaps an anagram would work?

Before he could decide, he found himself back in the fragrant-smelling apothecary. It was a pleasant room, with bare red brick walls and a terracotta floor. The shelves and fitted cupboards were of solid oak with neat cream porcelain handles. On the large, scrubbed work bench sat a fat pestle and mortar, and bundles of dried herbs were suspended overhead.

Jules sat down, waiting for her to ring for a jug of hot water, which she duly did. She moved towards him, but there was a hesitancy about her today, an awareness that had not been there before. He looked up, feeling her critical gaze upon him but she looked away before he could catch her eye.

Fatigue born of early rising and hard work, and the draining nature of spending all day out in the cold had made his bones ache, and until this moment he'd had little time to consider anything else. Now, however, he wondered just what a dishevelled mess he must look. His hair did not turn into a frizzy cloud like hers did when damp, but it did stick out at

odd angles, much to his annoyance. If his hands were anything to go by, he was also exceedingly dirty, and he was so desperate for a hot bath he had actually dreamed of his bathing room at Beverwyck last night, despite not having lived there for several years. In short, he must look a wreck, and the farthest thing from the sophisticated gentleman he prided himself on being. He was, therefore, very much at a disadvantage.

Jules told himself not to be so ridiculous. It was pointless feeling vulnerable because he wasn't properly washed or dressed when she was wearing that ghastly gown. Good lord, did the woman not own a looking glass? It was the most repulsive shade of vomit green, and whilst a darker or lighter shade would have been lovely against the dramatic colour of her hair, this washed out, shapeless monstrosity was a crime against nature, not to mention her spectacular figure.

“Show me your hand.”

As ever, her tone made his temper spark, and it was with some difficulty he raised his hand for her inspection. She made an irritated sound and set about unwinding the bandage.

“I don't know why I bothered,” she said, with an impatient shake of her head. “Soak it, if you please.”

Jules wondered what she would do if he didn't please and entertained a lively vision of her tackling him to the ground as he tried to make his escape. Except the resulting tussle made his nether regions take a decidedly active role in the fantasy and he hastily put an end to it before it got too interesting.

Once both hands were cleaned to Boadicea's satisfaction, she reached for the cream she'd used before and took off the lid. Still feeling a little restless because of his too active imagination, Jules snatched up the pot before she could take any of the cream and applied it himself. She sent him a curious glance but said nothing.

“The greenhouse is looking much better. I can't wait for the spring. As you may have guessed, I love my garden. It was Mother's garden, actually, but she died nearly three years ago. I'm merely the caretaker in charge of it, to tell the truth.

Though the rose garden will be mine, I suppose. It's the first addition I've ever made, you see. I think she would have liked it," she said, an almost wistful note to her words.

Jules frowned, taken aback. Why on earth had she told him something so personal? He shot her a suspicious glance, irritated by the information she had revealed, for he did not wish to think of his nemesis as a real person with hopes and ambitions, a woman who had experienced loss. She was a cruel harpy with a sharp tongue who had nothing better to do than crush other people's dreams and deserved to be set down a peg or two, nothing more. But he felt uneasy all the same.

Wrong-footed and annoyed by it, he allowed Davenport to dab the cream over the torn blisters and to bind his hand up again with a clean bandage. He watched her as she worked, finding her competence rather soothing despite his irritation, and it was perhaps for this reason he was lulled into betraying himself.

"There, all done. I'm sorry it took so long. Does it feel better at least?"

"Yes, I thank you."

Their eyes locked, and Davenport gave a triumphant cry. "Aha!" she said, her eyes alight with a victorious gleam. "I knew it!"

Jules surged to his feet, taking a step back as if she might do him bodily harm, which he would not put past her. That dratted umbrella was in reach, for one thing.

"Come, come, don't be shy now," she said, folding her arms. "You may well have been kicked in the head by a horse, but I do not think it has had any effect on your ability to speak."

Jules glared at her, wondering what tack to take. He could shake his head and try to fob her off, but she was sharp, and he suspected that straight spine of hers was an indicator of a will of iron. She'd not let it be. He could try to disguise his voice, but his only attempts to do so in private had persuaded him that was unlikely to be convincing.

“I’ve nothing to say,” he said, his voice terse.

“Oh, really?” she replied, a sardonic quirk to her lips that was exceedingly provoking. “I rather thought you had a good deal to say to me. Surely you wish to tell me how a lady ought not to put herself forward and command a workforce like a man. I ought to leave it to my brothers, no doubt.”

Jules frowned. For as much as he disliked Davenport and the way she barked commands at him, it was not because she was a woman taking charge. If he were honest, he rather admired the way she ran the place... which it had been clear she did do, and single-handedly from what he could tell.

“No,” he said, deciding it was best to keep things simple.

She snorted at that, clearly disbelieving him.

“Why did you get your cousin—if he is your cousin—to tell me you don’t speak? Are you in some kind of trouble?”

Jules considered this. Well, he was in trouble, though perhaps not the kind of trouble she thought. He nodded.

Her expression clouded, though he thought it was concern in her eyes rather than anxiety, which just showed how wrong-headed the foolish woman was. She was alone in here with a man who might be a criminal for all she knew. The door was open for propriety’s sake, and he could hear the sounds emanating from the scullery down the corridor, but still. She was foolish to court such risks when she knew nothing about him.

“With the law?” she asked, lowering her voice.

He hesitated. If he was taken to court for adultery, it would certainly be trouble with the law, but that was not what she meant. He wasn’t guilty of a crime exactly, unless it was a crime against morality, in which case he was guilty as hell.

“No.”

She let out a breath. “Well, that’s something, I suppose. I do not relish the idea of having runners descend upon me to haul you away.”

“No runners,” he replied stiffly.

“Well, I am delighted to hear it,” she replied, eyes flashing. “Is there anything else you’d like to tell me? You may as well make a clean breast of it. For, if you know the first thing about gardening, I shall shortly see a fat pink pig winging its way past my bedroom window.”

Jules narrowed his eyes at her, folding his arms.

“You can look as brooding and Gothic as you please. I know I’m right,” she replied, with a haughty tilt to her chin, the maddening creature.

They stared at each other, but Jules refused to give.

“I shall figure you out, Mr Mark Briggs,” she said, enunciating the name with such precision it was clear she did not believe it to be his.

“I assume I’m dismissed?” he demanded, barely able to keep the irritation from his voice.

“Oh, no,” she said with a too sweet smile. “You’re a hard worker whoever you are and, providing I’m not harbouring a murderer or a revolutionary, those are too difficult to come by to dismiss you. Unless perhaps you wish to give notice. I shan’t stop you,” she added, with such a challenging glint in her eyes his temper sparked.

“Not on your life,” he said, giving her the benefit of a smile that showed too many teeth.

“Excellent,” she said briskly. “I shall see you at work bright and early tomorrow morning, then. Oh, and don’t worry, you won’t be in the greenhouses. I have something else in mind for you.”

And, before Jules had time to demand what the devil she meant by that, Boadicea left the room with a magnificent swish of her skirts, and the bearing of a duchess.

“Damn you, Davenport,” he muttered furiously. “I will get the better of you yet, you just see if I don’t.”



## Chapter 8



*Muir,*

*I've never received a letter before with quite so many references to arses.*

*You may wish to consider other such descriptions in future to avoid unnecessary repetitions.*

*Still, as appalled as I was by your illiterate scrawl, I do most humbly apologise for having missed your visit. I swear to you it could not be helped and I would not have abandoned you unless the cause was a desperate one. For God's sake, tell me you did not let on to his grace that I'm staying with Pip?*

*Whilst the husband in question is not wielding an axe (at least as far as I know) he is threatening to sue me under tort law for criminal conversation with his wife. I'm keeping my head down in the hopes he might cool off before he drags us all through the mire. If my father gets wind of this, I'm in the basket this time. I think I've pushed my luck as far as he'll stand and if this becomes public, I can hardly blame him if he decides to dig a hole and bury me in it. And before you ask me what the devil I was thinking, I wasn't thinking at all. I never do when I get myself into these idiotic situations. It's only afterwards when I see the mess I've made that I regret it and by then it's too late. I suppose there's a*

*chance I'll grow up one of these days but even my father seems to doubt it will happen now, so perhaps I'm wrong.*

*Apologies, old man. I would have liked to have caught up with you.*

*Yrs, etc.*

**—Excerpt of a letter from *The Most Hon'ble Jules Adolphus, The Marquess of Blackstone (eldest son of Their Graces, Robert and Prunella Adolphus, The Duke and Duchess of Bedwin) to The Right Hon'ble Muir Anderson (Son of Gordon and Ruth Anderson, The Earl and Countess of Morven).***

**27<sup>th</sup> February 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

“Reckon I know what kind of work she has in mind,” Briggs said mildly as they trudged up the hill to the big house the following morning.

Jules darted a look at him as their breath blew billowing clouds into the frigid air. Briggs grinned and waggled his eyebrows.

“Stow it,” Jules said irritably.

“You’re just on your high ropes because she figured you out so easily. I told you, you’d never pass for a low born gardener,” Briggs added with a smirk.

“Oh, I wondered how long before we got to *I told you so*,” Jules muttered, tucking his hands under his armpits before his fingers froze.

“Well, and so I did,” Briggs said indignantly.

“Well, she’s not figured me for a nobleman,” Jules shot back. “She thinks I’ve hopped the twig.”

“She what?” Briggs said, his dark eyebrows tugging together.

“Thought I might bring the runners down on her because I was hiding out after some nefarious doings,” Jules explained with a short laugh.

“You? A criminal?” Briggs exploded with mirth.

“Laugh all you want, but criminal conversation isn’t exactly the height of respectability,” he said morosely.

“Ah, cheer up, my lord. It might not come to that. Lord Haversham will see sense, surely?”

Jules shrugged. “I bloody well hope so, or I might as well pack for a long voyage.”

“What?”

“His grace mentioned India during our last little talk,” Jules admitted.

Briggs sucked in a sharp breath.

“It’s all right, you needn’t look so horrified,” Jules said gently, knowing he could not inflict such a fate on his loyal valet. This little lark was above and beyond, and he knew it, but at least Briggs would make a tidy sum for his troubles. “I wouldn’t make you come with me. I’ll give you a glowing reference, of course, not that you’d need it. You’ll be snapped up before the end of the day once it’s known you’re looking for a new employer.”

Jules looked around to see if this had reassured the man, only to discover Briggs had stopped in his tracks. His expression was not encouraging.

“Not take me with you?” he said with quiet rage.

“Er...” Jules hedged, wondering if he’d managed to say the wrong thing as usual.

“I’ve been with you since you were barely old enough to grow a hair on your chin, and you’d go swanning off to foreign parts and not take me with you? Oh. I see how it is.” Briggs looked straight ahead and marched off.

“Oh, hold up there,” Jules protested, hurrying after him. “I thought I was doing you a favour. You don’t mean to say

you'd *want* to come with me?" The sudden realisation that if he was sent into exile—and not the self-imposed kind—he might have Briggs beside him cheered him beyond measure.

Briggs shot him a look of such incandescent scorn Jules gave a bark of laughter and swept the fellow up, spinning him around. "You absolute diamond, Briggs. The very best of valets!"

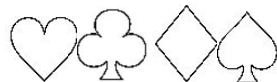
"Get orf! Put me down, you great lunatic!" Briggs protested, struggling ineffectually.

Jules relented and let him go and Briggs glowered at him. Shaking his head and making much of smoothing out his rumpled coat, which was all for show, as it was too big for him and full of holes.

"As if I wouldn't come with you. Pillock," he added as an afterthought.

"*My Lord Pillock,*" Jules said with dignity. "And I am immeasurably relieved to hear it. You know I wouldn't have survived a day without you."

Briggs snorted, apparently mollified by this confession, and the two of them finished their journey to the house in brotherly accord.



Whilst he knew Davenport was not like other women—and he had stayed up far too late writing a description of her retiring to her black lacquered coffin after drinking the blood of innocent and unsuspecting gentlemen—Jules had not expected her to be up and dressed and about her day at six in the morning. It was unnatural.

"Ah, there you are," she said, inspecting the fob watch attached to her chatelaine with a little moue of disapproval.

Jules gritted his teeth, for if it was over two minutes past the hour he'd be astonished and he had gone first to see Mr Dixey, who had sent him on to the house with a look of deep suspicion.

“As you see,” he said with a tight smile.

“Excellent. This way.” She strode off, with her usual mannish stride, skirts swishing as she went. Jules followed her, ignoring the curious gazes of two fresh-faced young housemaids who giggled as he passed. “About your business, please, Polly. Fran, should you not be in the laundry by now?”

“Yes, Miss Davenport,” the girls chorused and bobbed quick curtseys before scurrying off.

“Excuse me, Miss Davenport?” A footman halted their progress, his tone urgent. “Forgive me for the interruption, but Harold wants to know if he should call the vet in for Warrior?”

“Has the swelling not gone down at all?” she asked, frowning.

“Yes, a little, but not as much as he hoped.”

“Tell him to reapply the poultice and give it until midday. If it’s no better, then he had better have Gwillim over to see him.”

“Yes, Miss Davenport.”

They had barely gone three steps when a thundering on the stairway announced the arrival of a sturdy lad of perhaps twelve or thirteen years, closely followed by a breathtaking creature barely out of the schoolroom, with cornflower blue eyes and softly curling guinea gold hair. The boy hung over the rail, his cheeks flushed with anger.

“Lina, Abigail is the most ridiculous creature alive. I’ve told her and told her not to go into my room, and what must she do but come in and then give a blood-curdling shriek just when I was putting Captain Sharp into his cage!”

“There’s a rat loose in the house!” the lovely vision screamed and then swooned, collapsing gracefully upon the stairs and somehow not sliding down them or breaking her pretty neck in the process.

Davenport regarded this performance with a stoical expression. “Abigail, that was a very creditable swoon, but I

beg you will not act so foolishly on the stairs. One of these days you will hurt yourself and then you'll swoon for real."

Much to Jules' amusement, Abigail cracked an indignant eyelid and cast an unloving look at Davenport.

"Charlie, catch Captain Sharp and stop wasting time tattling on your sister. If he's not back in his cage before ten o'clock, you'll have no dessert for the rest of the week. Get Julia to help you. Abigail, you will help Nurse mind Benjamin and do Charlie's morning chores too as penance for being such a ninny. Now do go away."

With this, Davenport continued on her way, apparently confident that all would be just as she had ordered it.

Jules winked at the pretty pea goose as he passed, who blushed and brightened perceptibly.

"Don't encourage her in her silliness, if you please," Davenport snapped, giving Jules a jolt of alarm as he wondered if she had eyes in the back of her head or perhaps something more sinister that involved sleeping in coffins. "I saw you in the mirror," she added dryly, turning to quirk a derisive eyebrow at him and making heat climb the back of his neck for being so fanciful.

He followed her to the west side of the house where she opened a door onto an impressive room with a double height ceiling and beautifully crafted oak shelves that rose to a balustraded walkway and on again to the very top of the walls. Though a fraction of the size of the library at Beverwyck, which was held to be one of the finest in the country, it was nonetheless imposing for a house of this size, and in complete disorder.

"What on earth happened?" he asked, before he could think better of the question, as he gazed upon books in staggering and sometime precariously balanced towers and stacks all over the floor, tables and chairs.

"Jacob happened," she said with a sigh. She looked back at him and gave a wry smile. "My brother. Cleverest fellow you are ever likely to meet but can't stick at anything. He had

it in mind to reorder the library. I'll admit it *was* haphazard and a nightmare to find anything you needed. My mother loved this room, and we spent a lot of time here with her, but she was a chaotic creature. She would read to us all after dinner every night, but she always complained she could never find anything, though she probably put things back in the wrong place half the time. Jacob thought he was doing something nice for her by organising it, to cheer her up, but... I ought to have known better than to let him begin it. I was rather distracted at the time, or I would have realised what would happen," she added with a shrug.

Jules looked around, noting the dust on the upper most book of the stack beside him.

"How long has it been like this?"

"Three years, give or take," she said briskly.

Around the time her mother had died. Jules felt a pang of sympathy for her. Her father was a more or less permanent fixture in town and obviously left his family to their own devices, so he imagined her mother must have been a prominent figure in her life. He considered how he might feel if his mother was taken from him and experienced a shaft of pain deep in his chest. The duchess was a formidable woman, a fiercely protective and involved mother, an outspoken advocate of the rights of women, terrifying when roused, and with a heart like a marshmallow.

"Well, where shall we start?" he asked, surprising himself somewhat with his desire to get the job done. It surprised her too, judging by the way her eyes widened, and then he realised he had said *we*, not *I*. A foolish mistake.

"Oh," she said, before he had time to correct himself.

"Well, everything needs dusting, of course. I have arranged for the place to have a thorough clean this afternoon, but we could begin by seeing what—if anything—Jacob achieved, and if we can build on it, or if we need to start over."

Jules nodded, ignoring the dubious realisation that he was pleased she was going to be working beside him. It was only that he did not wish such an onerous task to be his alone, and

more importantly, he could keep an eye on her. For if he was to do her justice in his next novel, he needed to observe her at close hand, just as she had told him he needed to do for his secondary characters. Perhaps she could be the harridan older sister turned vampire, now a threat to the innocent heroine, he thought, remembering the pretty child on the stairs.

Jules picked up a book, turning it in his hand and finding a copy of *The Iliad* in Greek.

“You read Greek, of course?”

“Yes, though poorly,” he said absently, and then stilled, keeping his eyes on the book. Damn her.

“And Latin too,” she suggested.

Jules looked up, and a familiar triumphant glint in her blue eyes told him she knew she’d scored a hit. Only a gentleman would have received a classical education of that nature.

“Touché,” he said mildly.

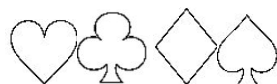
She inclined her head and Jules steeled himself for the barrage of questions that would follow, but none did. Instead, she turned back to the books and began sorting them. “I think we had best arrange them by subject and then alphabetically,” she said, glancing up at him.

Naturally, it wasn’t a question, but she seemed to look to him for his opinion, so Jules nodded.

“Very sensible.”

“Yes,” she agreed, and returned to her task.

Jules smiled to himself, and set about creating order from chaos, which he had to admit was a rather novel experience in his life which tended in the opposite direction. Rather to his surprise, he was soon absorbed in his work and the time passed far quicker and more pleasantly than it had in digging rose beds or washing greenhouses.



Try as she might, Selina was having the devil’s own job keeping her eyes from the intriguing Mark Briggs. Not that it



was his real name. She'd lay everything she owned upon that fact, not that she owned a good deal. Her father had given her a miserly four thousand pounds as her dowry, laughable when he could spend more than that on horses in a year. She had a small allowance that her mama had left her, and few pieces of jewellery that were worth a pretty penny but that would break her heart to part with. What would become of her when her father died and Hubert inherited, she did not know. Though there was every possibility they would find Hubert dead in a ditch one of these fine days.

Not that she wished such a fate upon him, but she could not help but resent him when, even with his uncle's hefty inheritance, her father had still bestowed a generous allowance on his heir. A fellow couldn't be on the town without a bit of change in his pocket, as that would make his sire look like a regular pinch penny. That his eldest daughter was his unpaid housekeeper and wore gowns that were shabby and several years out of date was by the by, however, for no one saw Selina nor ever would, saving his cronies if the General deigned to show his face back home.

He only ever did return home with his friends in tow, for fear she might force him to face the myriad problems she dealt with every day on his behalf. If he was entertaining, Selina could not possibly bother him with such minor details as the fact the roof on the north side of the house was leaking again, or that the drainage in the lower ten acres must be dealt with at once, or any crop would rot before it germinated.

So, she arranged things as she saw fit. She had a brain in her head, and was quite used to dealing with land stewards, disagreements between tenants, and workmen who tried to charge her over and above the going rate because they thought her a silly female with more hair than wit.

That was certainly not the case, she assured herself, dragging her eyes reluctantly from the man across the room from her as he hefted a huge stack of books from the floor and set them gently upon the tabletop they had designated as the sorting area. He had once again rolled up his sleeves. He must run hot, she thought, for the room was not overly warm, and

she watched in fascination as the muscles bunched and flexed in his forearms. She suppressed a sigh, wondering wistfully what his biceps looked like under the coarse cotton shirt, and decided the room was rather hotter than she'd previously thought. He turned then, catching her eye and Selina looked hastily away, crouching to pick up a small pile of books by her feet so he could not see her blush. She set them on the table and dared a quick glance at him to see his lips quirked in a smug expression that was both infuriating and mortifying at the same time.

She told herself not to be so missish. So what if she enjoyed looking at him? He was a big, virile man of splendid proportions and handsome features, and she was a healthy young woman. Obviously, it would please him to know he was admired; that too was only natural. There was nothing at all to blush over or feel silly about. The only men she ever spent time with were those who worked in the gardens, Owen, the footman, the grooms, and Jonah Hughes, the coachman, and not one of them could hold a candle to Mark Briggs. The only men of her own station were those cronies of her fathers, who were all of an age with him and were to be avoided after they'd had a few drinks. She never, ever, forgot to lock her room when they were on the premises, and she kept Abigail well out of sight.

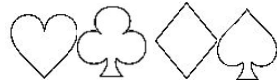
Selina had already gained a reputation among them for being a harridan, for she did not respond well to being squeezed or pinched and had no compunction in using her elbows or stamping on toes to dissuade them from doing so. Her trusty umbrella had become her constant companion, and its steel tip could be wielded most effectively. Papa seemed oblivious to such insults, but then he was oblivious to his entire family for most of the year, so it was hardly surprising.

Before she knew what she was about, she found herself staring at Mark again as he carried another stack of books to the table. Inevitably, he looked around and saw her staring. This time she did not blush and turn away, but held his gaze boldly, before returning to her work. There, see what he made of that!

A sudden crash and a gasp of pain was her answer as she looked around again to see he'd missed the table and dropped the books he was holding on his foot.

“Do be careful.”

Not above smirking herself, Selina carried on with sorting the books, feeling much happier.



Jules took the cheese sandwich Briggs offered him and glowered at it dejectedly. It was raining again, and they were eating their lunch in the shelter of the greenhouse Briggs had been working in. Jules could have gone to the kitchens as he was now considered house staff, but he felt bad enough abandoning Briggs as it was. Besides, conversing with the staff seemed a dangerous undertaking. A cheese sandwich was not the kind of repast he was used to, however, and the scent of something rich and meaty had plagued him as he went outside via the servant's entrance.

“Well, if you want steak and ale pie or roast goose, or venison and nice glass of claret, you need only say. We can be back at Goshen Court in a couple of hours, or better yet—”

“We are not going back to London,” Jules said, and took a large bite of the sandwich, chewing defiantly.

“Fine. Back to Lord Ashburton, then?”

“No.”

Briggs huffed and took a sandwich for himself. “It's all right for you, tucked up nice and cosy in that library. Some of us are out here freezing our tallywags off.”

Jules snorted but slanted Briggs a look of concern. “I'm sorry. It wasn't supposed to be this way. I figured we'd both be in it together, at least.”

Briggs shook his head and returned a rueful grin. “It's all right. I'm rather enjoying it, actually. Reminds me of when I was a lad working with my pa. It's nice to be in nature for a bit. I'd forgotten how much I like it.”

Jules sat up, alarmed. “You’re not thinking of going back to it?”

Briggs sent him a look of such scorn, Jules let out a sigh of relief. “Have your wits gone begging? I’m at the top of my profession. Give up valeting Blackstone to be a gardener indeed! One day, I’ll be valet to the Duke of Bedwin. As if I’d give that up,” he muttered, shaking his head.

“Oh, I notice there’s no loyalty to me in that diatribe,” Jules said dryly. “Just the titles.”

Briggs chuckled. “Don’t sulk. You know I’d follow you wherever you go. I’m here, aren’t I?”

“You are,” Jules agreed, accepting another sandwich. “And two hundred pounds richer for it.”

“I’d have done it for fifty,” Briggs admitted, grinning.

“You what?” Jules glared at him. “I knew I’d been bilked, you crafty devil.”

“Too late now,” his smug valet chuckled, swigging ale from a brown bottle.

“Give me that,” Jules muttered, swiping it from him and taking a few deep swallows.

“So, how are you getting on with Miss Davenport?” Briggs asked.

Jules took another draw from the bottle, considering this. “I’ve no idea. I feel like a mouse being toyed with by a cat with sharp claws and teeth.”

“Aye, she’s a canny one, I reckon.”

Jules nodded, remembering that bold stare she’d given him. It had done something to him, that look, as though she was wondering what he looked like without his clothes on. Heat had run up and down his spine and his brain had gone begging, missing the edge of the table and dropping half a tonne of books on his blasted foot. The smirk on her lush mouth when she’d told him to be careful had not helped. He’d not known whether he wanted to put as much distance

between them as possible—one of the larger continents might suffice—or kiss her.

“She runs this place single-handed, from what I can gather,” he said grudgingly, for he’d seen enough of her to recognise a capable hand on the reins. Everyone looked to her for guidance, never even considering asking for the general’s advice. Jules reckoned there was a good reason for that. “Her father’s a bit of a lout, that much I do know. Never liked him above half. He’s well enough when he’s sober, if you want to talk about hunting for the next three hours—which I don’t. But in his cups, he’s like a braying donkey; too loud, too raucous, and far too fond of the sound of his own voice.”

Briggs nodded. “Figured as much. There’s an older brother, you know. Hubert. Sounds like a nifty-naffy character.”

“Hubert Davenport,” Jules mused. “I’ve never come across him, or at least I don’t recall.”

Briggs shook his head. “You wouldn’t. A fribble, by all accounts, wouldn’t run with your set. A member at Coker’s, so that says it all. Got turned down by the Sons of Hades, from what I hear, and was none too pleased about it neither.”

Jules gave an amused laugh. “Leo is a stickler. He doesn’t care about breeding, but if you’ve not the blunt, the character, and three references he approves of, you’ve no chance. But if he’s inheriting all this, why is he not here?”

“He’s hardly ever here, unless he needs to sober up or keep his head down, according to Griffith.”

Jules frowned. For all his own scandalous ways, he never neglected his estates, or the people that relied upon him. Christ, his father would have strung him up by the balls long since if that were the case. He might drink and carouse and act as badly as any other young man on the town with money at his disposal, but he knew better than to let down those who depended on him for their living.

“Who’s Griffith?”

“The fellow Dixey has got me working with. He’s a good sort, been here man and boy. Doesn’t like Hubert none, that I can tell you. Apparently, he had a younger brother, a year younger than your Miss Davenport. Well-liked by everyone and doted on by the ladies of the household, but he died about four years ago.”

Jules looked sharply at Briggs. “Really? But the mother died only three years ago.”

Briggs nodded. “Aye, they’ve had a rough run of late. She died in childbed, her fourteenth, counting those that didn’t make it, according to Griffith. The doctor warned them she’d not survive another baby, but it seems like the general cared little for doctor’s orders. Between losing her son and another pregnancy, Griffith says the heart went out of her. Signed her death warrant, by all accounts.”

Jules gritted his teeth, having suddenly lost his appetite. Not that it was an unusual story. He’d heard such tales from his mother over and over again. Women treated like breeding machines until their bodies gave out, usually carrying them off and the babe too. It was sickening. He could not imagine risking a woman’s life in such a way for the gratification of his own pleasure. It wasn’t as if there weren’t methods to prevent conception, methods the man must bloody well know. His mother fought against such things, defying convention by insisting that women knew about their own bodies, about how to prevent unwanted pregnancies. But she was a duchess, and as much as there were those who decried what she did, she was powerful enough and pigheaded enough to stand strong. With his father backing her up, no one could gainsay her. But for a woman out here in the countryside, the property of her husband... Jules scowled and got to his feet.

“There’s another sandwich,” Briggs said, looking up at him. “And an Eccles cake.”

“You have it,” Jules replied, patting Briggs’s shoulder. “Keep the cold out. I’ll see you later.”

“Right you are,” Briggs said, watching him curiously as he trudged across the wet garden back to the house.

## Chapter 9



*Sir,*

*We have been most pleased with sales of *The Jewel and The Iron Key* and are happy to let you know we are producing a second edition at once as there seems to be a great appetite for the romantic adventures you have so been so good as to supply us with. This is wonderful news, I am sure you will agree.*

*Have you reconsidered the anonymity of your name? Whilst I must infer you are of an elevated position, surely the success you have enjoyed would mitigate any notoriety you might gain in revealing yourself? We will, of course, keep to your wishes in this matter, but it seems a pity.*

*The draft ideas you have lately sent us for a new piece of work are exactly the kind of thing to delight your readership. Melina Ravenheart is a wonderfully dreadful character, and I shall very much look forward to seeing what terrible things she does next.*

*We remain, dear sir, your obedient servants.*

*John Mortimer & Co.*

***—Excerpt of a letter to Anonymous from Messrs Mortimer & Co. Publishers, forwarded by Blackstone's man of business.***

**1<sup>st</sup> March 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

Jules stared down at the book in his hands. *Pride and Prejudice* was one of his mother's favourite titles and one she often held up as an example of a wonderfully written, clever romance novel. He wondered if the authoress ever had misgivings about a published book and had ever wished to go back and change things. For he ought to feel very pleased with himself about now. His publisher had enclosed the sales report, and it far exceeded anything Jules had expected. To commit to a second run so quickly meant that they were confident of sales continuing. They also loved the outlines of the story he had sent them, which was to have been his revenge on Davenport.

He glanced across the table to where her unruly red curls were just visible as she stooped to pick up more books. They had made good progress since the cleaners had been in and the stacks around the rooms were looking orderly and arranged rather than like an explosion in a library. Davenport had decreed that they would arrange all the books first, before attempting to put them on the shelves, an edict Jules had agreed with but had scowled over anyway, for appearance's sake. The truth was, he had rather enjoyed himself these past days. It was soothing work, and a lovely environment to be in when it was damp and cold outside. Davenport seemed indefatigable, never cross no matter how many times one of her many siblings interrupted her, or how often the servants required she answer every question posed from the head gardener to the head groomsman or household staff. It seemed as if the entire enterprise would grind to a halt if Davenport weren't there to oversee it.

“Have you read it?”

Jules looked up, shaken out of his reverie by the demand. He considered lying but decided against it. She knew he was a gentleman by birth, if nothing else.

“I have.”

“Really?”



He looked around at the surprise in her voice and frowned. “Yes, why not?”

She shrugged, squinting a little at the title on a very ancient-looking tome she was trying to place. “Most of the men I know don’t admit to reading romance novels, even if they do it.”

The words *I am not most men* hovered on his tongue, but he swallowed them down.

She smiled, a glint in her eyes that made him believe she knew what he’d been going to say, and he gave a reluctant laugh.

“I suppose you fell in love with Darcy?”

“Wasn’t I supposed to?” she returned with an arch look.

“Certainly, but do you always?”

“No,” she admitted, dusting the book she was holding with her sleeve. “Sometimes the villains are far more dashing and intriguing, but that’s why novels are so entertaining. They aren’t real.”

“But they mirror real life, condensed perhaps, for the reader’s gratification, but a good writer must draw on reality, or at least their own reality. Austen omits to mention the war that was raging through Europe at the time she was writing, for it did not enter the world she inhabited, unless you take note of the dashing army officers, but her books are no less compelling.”

She shrugged, conceding this point. “Yes, indeed, but a writer must also seek out those things that are a part of their world that are perhaps seen but not understood. Like an upper-class gentleman writing the perspective of a lowly serving maid when he hasn’t the first idea of what her day looks like.”

“But how can he do so, when the maid would never speak to him openly about her life?” he demanded, knowing they were on dangerous ground here but enjoying the conversation too much to stop.

“Then perhaps he ought to get her to read his work and speak to an intermediary about how she has been portrayed, if he really cared for realism and authenticity,” she retorted, and with such a sharp note to her voice, he did not venture to push her any further.

Her words, though an echo of the review she had written, lost a little of their sting, for he had accepted the truth of them some time since. He’d had little idea of what it meant to work for a living, and though his ‘working life’ had so far numbered mere days, he’d been given a little glimpse of how the other half lived he knew would stay with him, and that he intended to build upon.

Jules turned his attention back to sorting the novels he’d been working through, gratified to discover many titles he had read himself and enjoyed, as well as his own work. *The Ghosts of Castle Madruzzo* was gratifyingly well worn. Giving a surreptitious glance at his nemesis to check he wasn’t being observed, he set the book on its spine and let it fall open. He grinned as it revealed the part in the book where the heroine bested the villain, and then had a moment of regret at his grisly demise. For he was a wicked devil, but entertaining, and though the hero was a worthy sort and bound to be an excellent husband, Jules knew there was often something women found intriguing about an arrogant devil with a quick wit. Making a woman laugh was always his tactic for getting closer to them, and a woman who sparred with him was catnip, as far as his libido was concerned.

Jules looked up as the door opened and a little boy waddled in, trundling a toy wagon behind him full of wooden blocks and shapes.

“Play wiv’ Jammy, Lina?” the boy demanded.

“Benjamin!” Davenport exclaimed, setting down the book she was studying and hurrying across the room. “Where is Hilly?”

“Sleep,” the boy said succinctly.

She sighed and picked the child up, wiping absently at a grubby mark on his cheek before kissing it. “Oh, dear. What

about Abigail?”

Benjamin pulled a face and shook his head.

“Charlie?” she asked with resignation.

“Charlie, out wiv horsey. I want horsey, Lina,” the boy protested.

“Yes, I know you do, and you shall have one too, when you are just a little bit bigger.”

“I am bigger!” the boy exclaimed, bottom lip trembling.

Jules—who had five younger siblings, the smallest of whom was only six—sensed a tantrum in the making.

“You are extremely big for your age, I think,” he said, gaining the boy’s attention. “How old are you? Fifteen?”

The boy wrinkled his nose, looking at Jules with surprise. “Three,” he said with great certainty.

“No! Are you, really? I thought you were much older than that. A very big boy. I say, what have you got in that wagon there?”

The child squirmed in his sister’s arms until she put him down, picked up the string that pulled his toy, and took it over to show Jules.

“Blocks.”

“So I see, and can you build things with those blocks?”

The child nodded proudly.

“Can you build me a big castle?”

“Course,” the lad said, and with such evident scorn Jules laughed.

“Well, that told me. Show me how.”

He crouched down to watch as the boy took the blocks from the wagon and then glanced up, finding Selina watching him, her expression unreadable.

Jules stiffened as he remembered he was staff, beneath her and her little brother. He had a job to do and ought not to

forget it. Damn, but that rankled. The desire to tell her who he really was had become increasingly hard to contain, and yet there was another part of him that did not wish her to know. He did not dwell on why that might be. Jules stood, battering down his indignation as he offered her an apology. "I beg your pardon, I ought not to presume."

She waved this away and went back to her work, apparently content to let Jules entertain her little brother for her, but he felt her watching him, and was uncertain she was pleased with their interaction.

"Look!" the little boy demanded, taking back his attention to show three blocks, haphazardly set one on top of the other. Jules gave a soft laugh and spent a remarkably entertaining half an hour with the lad before an elderly nurse hurried in, clutching at her apron.

"Oh, Miss Davenport. I'm that sorry," she said urgently. "I only closed my eyes for a moment, and I must have dropped off. When I woke and found him gone, I was beside myself," she added, looking genuinely distraught.

"Not to worry, Hilly. There's no harm done. I ought to have asked Abigail to help you mind him, but she was so desperate to go into the village and buy some ribbon to furbish up that pink frock of hers I didn't have the heart to tell her no."

"Oh, indeed, no. For the dance next week is all she can speak of and there's little enough society in these parts. Goodness, and she'll be off for her season before we know it, I suppose," the nurse added disconsolately. "They grow up so fast. It seems like only yesterday that you were but a little bit of a thing. It's a shame you won't go to the assembly with her and have some fun."

Davenport cleared her throat. "Yes, well, that will be all, Hilly, thank you. Perhaps you could take Master Ben out for a walk, it's stopped raining now and I'm sure the fresh air would do you both good."

"Yes, miss, I'm sure you're right. Come along, little Jammy. Let's go and splash in puddles, shall we?"

“Oh, yes, Hilly. I like puddles,” the boy exclaimed, his castle forgotten in the light of such a treat. Jules got up, expecting the lad to go without giving him a backward glance, but at the last moment he checked himself and turned back.

“I like building with you,” he said, a little shyly.

“I liked it too. It’s an excellent castle,” Jules said with a smile.

“What’s your name?” the child demanded.

“J—Mark,” Jules said hastily, almost betrayed into giving his real name. “My name is Mark,” he repeated, feeling wretched for telling the little boy a lie.

“Bye-bye, Mark. Will you play with me again?”

“Perhaps, if your sister says you might.”

Benjamin glanced at his sister, who did not answer, merely saying, “Run along now, dear. Don’t keep Hilly waiting.”

The door closed behind them, and Jules glanced back at her.

“Hilly is too old to be his nurse, really,” she said, a trifle defensively. “But it would break her heart not to do it. She’s been with us since my eldest brother was born. She’s part of the family.”

Jules nodded his understanding. “I can see that. She’d resent the help of a younger underling too, I don’t doubt.”

“Quite,” she said, with a sharp nod, and Jules felt she was annoyed with him, but could not understand why or what he had done wrong.

They went back to work, but the conversation lingered in Jules’ mind, and he found it bothered him. “There’s to be a dance?” he asked, wondering if she’d tell him to keep his mind on his work. He did not know where he stood with her now. He’d come to her purporting to be a lowly gardener, but they both knew very well he was nothing of the sort. She had guessed he was a gentleman, but he was still in her employ,

albeit loosely and via Briggs, but all the same. He ought not to be talking to her of parties.

She glanced up at him. “Just at the assembly rooms in Monmouth. Why? Are you interested in going?” Jules avoided her enquiring look, studying the title of the book he’d picked up instead. “You’re not?” he asked casually.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Jules looked up at her, frowning. “What’s ridiculous about going to a dance?”

“Nothing in the least for Abigail, but I am well past the point of doing such things. I’m far too busy for one,” she added with a snap.

“Surely it’s in the evening?”

“Do you think I sit with my feet up eating sweetmeats and sipping sherry every night?” she demanded, sounding unaccountably angry.

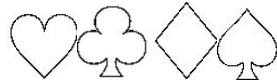
Jules stared at her, wondering again what he had done to make her look at him with such animosity. It startled him to realise how much it bothered him. Indignation burned for a moment at the way she spoke to him, but his curiosity to know more about her had him overcome his annoyance and speak gently.

“I don’t think anyone here works harder than you do,” he said cautiously. “But one evening to enjoy yourself wouldn’t hurt, would it?”

“Well, that’s where you are wrong, as about so many things. It would hurt very much.”

There was an undertone to the bitter rejoinder that he did not understand, but he felt the truth of it, her truth. She swept out of the room without another word and Jules knew himself to be dismissed. He did not understand how or why such an evening would hurt her, but she meant it, and despite the way he had been so summarily put in his place, there was an oddly tender sensation in his chest as he considered it.

He did not like to think of his magnificent Boadicea as anything less than indomitable. She had the hide of a rhinoceros, surely? She'd need it to run this place with the ruthless efficiency that she seemed to do everything. Yet there had been a glimpse of something raw and vulnerable in her words and Jules didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit.



Selina hurried out of the room, cursing herself. What the devil had got into her? She needed to remind herself of just who that man was and what it was he had in mind. If she'd had the slightest doubt, the conversation about Jane Austen and writing had put it aside once and for all. Did he know she knew? He must at least suspect, surely? So why was he still here? To draw her in and invite her to make an even bigger fool of herself, probably. Likely that whole touching scene with Benjamin had been entirely for her benefit, designed to melt the heart of an icy spinster. It had worked too, damn him. The sight of the big man sprawled over the floor, intent on helping her baby brother build his castle, had tugged at something deep inside her, desire and need awakening a long-forgotten dream of what her future might look like. Not so forgotten after all, it appeared, though as far out of reach as it had ever been.

Striding up the stairs, she entered her room and closed the door, leaning against it and letting out a ragged sigh of relief. It would not do for anyone to see her looking anything less than in control. Hot tears pricked at her eyelids and, though she scolded herself for being a great ninny, a sob built in her chest. She pressed her fist to her mouth and resolutely forbade herself to cry. It was his fault. It was all his fault. They had been going on splendidly before he got here. She had been, well, not *happy*, no. Content, though... or something close to it, and then Mark bloody Briggs or whatever his real name was had to come and mess it all up.

He was toying with her, she reminded herself, gathering information which she had no doubt would be used against her in some diabolical manner. She had no doubt he would discover a creative revenge on her for having dared to criticise

him. That was her own fault, she supposed, having to acknowledge that much. Her wretched tongue had never learned the habit of tact, of speaking softly, of modifying her opinions. If she'd been a man, it would not be a problem, in the gentler sex it was unforgivable.

She closed her eyes and tried her best to control her breathing, yet his words kept coming back to haunt her.

*I don't think anyone here works harder than you do, but surely, one evening to enjoy yourself wouldn't hurt?*

He had sounded so genuine, and she had known if she had allowed the charade to continue, he would have smiled that devastating smile, and gently teased and cajoled her into believing she wasn't on the shelf, wasn't too big and too forthright, and all together too much to deal with, and she had wanted that.

For a ridiculous moment she had wanted to believe in the lie, to let him say the words, to flirt with her and make her feel pretty and young again instead of like an old drudge, a dried-up husk of a woman past her prime.

“Foolish beyond permission,” she said furiously, reaching for anger to save her from feeling pathetic and weak, for she would not allow herself such frailty.

The family needed her, depended on her, and Mark Briggs was a liar and a fraud, and it was high time she let him know he wasn't fooling her. Not for a moment.



## Chapter 10



*Mr Mortimer,*

*I thank you sincerely for the wonderful news regarding my latest novel, and for placing your trust in it. I am extremely pleased with both sales and your treatment of my work.*

*I must, however, disabuse you of any misunderstanding. I will never, under any circumstances, reveal my identity. Any attempt to discover who I am or reveal that truth will result in court action and an immediate end to my writing career. I hope I have made myself clear?*

*I regret to inform you I do not believe I shall continue the story of Melina Ravenheart. I am working on another title and will send you an outline and the first chapters when I have them ready.*

*Yrs, etc.*

**—Excerpt of a letter to Messrs Mortimer & Co. Publishers, from Anonymous.**

**2<sup>nd</sup> March 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

Any tender feelings that Jules might have foolishly harboured towards Miss Davenport died a swift and mortifying death after approximately thirty seconds in her company the next day. She had been conspicuous by her absence all morning, a circumstance that had made Jules uneasy. Guilt and anxiety plagued him. He had no business being here, insinuating himself into her life under false

pretences, and he knew it. Pip had been right in what he'd told him. Davenport was a good sort, and she had enough to contend with without some spoiled nobleman sticking his oar in. He could still hear the last words she had said to him, hear that vulnerable note ringing in his ears,

*Well, that's where you are wrong, as about so many things. It would hurt very much.*

He did not wish to think of her being hurt. It was all wrong for his warrior queen, but a queen could be isolated, fighting for survival without knowing who to trust. A woman like that ought to have someone as strong as she was beside her, shoring up the places where she was vulnerable. Not because she was weak or needed protecting, but because she deserved someone to stand beside her, an equal to lean on when things got tough, as they inevitably did.

He spent an uneasy morning carefully crafting the words to an apology he did not entirely know how to give or what he was apologising for. Then she came into the room and started issuing contradictory orders and snapping his head off if he didn't jump to attention the minute she said so until he had returned to wanting to murder her.

"Not that shelf," she said, irritation dripping from the words. "We said the botanical and natural history texts would go over there instead."

"Yes, but you wanted—"

"I wanted you to put the books where I asked you to," she said caustically. "But if that's too difficult—"

"No," Jules replied through his teeth.

His jaw hurt it was clenched so hard and he was going to burst something if she kept this up. The only thing that held him in check was the certainty that she was goading him, that she wanted him to snap, and he was damned if he would give her the satisfaction.

Instead, he turned back to the safety of the ordered piles of books. There were a lot of titles in this section. Gardening had been her mother's passion and, combined with Davenport's

interest in both gardening and medicine, they had collected hundreds of books, from slender pamphlets to weighty tomes that took two hands to lift. Jules had just put the last book on the shelf and stood back to admire them when she said casually:

“Actually, I think I want to put the botanical books over there, after all. I often need to refer to them briefly and then put them back. It makes more sense to have them by the window where there’s more light.”

Jules swung around to glare at her as his blood pressure rose.

“That,” he said evenly, “is where I started putting them two hours ago, and you changed your mind.”

“Well?” she said, as if this was irrelevant. “What of it? Now that’s where I want them. I’m paying you for a job and you can do it or leave. Your choice.”

Jules frowned. There was an odd, defiant note to her voice, a feverish glint in her eyes, like anger that had turned to something hard and resolute. He suspected she’d gone out this morning, walking perhaps, despite the freezing weather, for her hair had a windblown look, escaping its pins with rebellious determination despite the ruthless style it had been wrestled in to. Had that been to let off steam, to give her courage, or to ease her heart? He did not like not knowing.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her, unable to modify the angry note to the demand, even though he was as much concerned as he was furious.

“Not a thing,” she said, returning an unconvincingly brittle smile. “Why should anything be wrong?”

“I don’t know... I...” He stopped, remembering again what she had said, the apology he had meant to give her.

“Davenport, listen,” he began, not entirely certain what to say but convinced now that he had hurt her with some clumsy attempt to satisfy his own curiosity. “I’m sorry for—”

“For what? Being incompetent?” she said, a sneer curling her lip, and now he knew without a doubt he had put his foot

in something he had not understood, and this was her retaliation.

He held his tongue, wondering if he should just let her get it out of her system. She was flushed now, and he could feel the atmosphere crackle, the restless energy coming off her in waves.

“You’re dismissed. Collect your things and take your cousin—or whatever he is—and get out of my sight.”

The words were cold, hard, and uncompromising, but there was something else, something anxious and desperate in the way her fists were clenched, the way she held up her chin, so proud, so bloody dignified. He wanted to shake her, or kiss her, probably both.

“No.”

Her eyes widened. “I beg your pardon?”

“I’m not going anywhere until I know what I said to upset you.”

“Upset me?” she repeated, the words dripping scorn. “Don’t be ridiculous. How could *you* upset me?”

“I don’t know, but I did, and I’m sorry, Davenport. Please, won’t you tell me what I said?” He held his hands out to her, hoping she could see the sincerity in his eyes. “I do not understand why the idea of you attending a dance should cause you pain, but I want to.”

She snorted at that, her expression one of contempt. “What, so you can gather more intelligence? You’d like that, I don’t doubt. Perhaps we ought to go together. You could have a marvellous time describing the desperate attempts of an old maid as she tries to attract the eye of any single man in one last-ditch attempt to catch a husband.”

Jules stared at her in horror. His heart beat in an odd, erratic manner and he felt vaguely sick.

“I don’t understand,” he said, though he suspected he understood far too well and was experiencing the distinct sensation of having the rug pulled from under his feet.

She stared at him, folding her arms, those intelligent blue eyes glittering with the light of battle. He'd wanted to cross swords with her from the first moment he saw her, and now she was giving him the chance he only wanted to repair the damage he'd unwittingly done.

"Do you mean to say you've discovered enough information now?" she asked, her tone mild.

His heart tripped as he realised she'd figured him out, that she had been toying with him just as he'd suspected. She looked smug and imperious, knowing she had bested him, and there was that maddening glint in her eyes that made him want to... to challenge her to a duel or something equally ridiculous. Except it probably wouldn't be ridiculous with a woman like her, she'd doubtless beat him, the devil take her. The realisation that he would be proud of her if she did might have made him smile if he were fool enough to underestimate the trouble he was in. He wasn't *that* big a fool.

"Enough information about what?" he asked, playing for time, as he realised his analogy of being the mouse toyed with by a cat was only too appropriate.

"About me," she said, staring at him, unblinking, accusation in the words. He deserved it too, deserved her scorn, but he didn't care so much for that as for the hurt he'd caused. She was putting on a brave show and, if he hadn't been studying her so carefully since his arrival, she might have convinced him that she was merely furious and disgusted with him. Perhaps he was an arrogant devil—very well, there was no *perhaps* about it—but he knew she was attracted to him, had allowed him past her defences just a little, and he'd betrayed her.

Jules swallowed, wishing it did not matter so much what she thought of him, but realising too late that it mattered a good deal.

"About you?" he said slowly, knowing he was just putting off the inevitable but discovering he did not want to be found out. He was curious to know more about Davenport, damn her

eyes, and not because he wanted revenge on her for making him feel like a failure at the one thing he was good at.

“Yes, about me,” she said, moving a stack of books from one place to another for no good reason he could see other than giving her something to do. She put the books down on the table with such a thump his heart leapt in response. “So you can write me into your next novel as some diabolical villainess, or the mean old harridan who thwarts the beautiful heroine’s plans to marry her sweetheart.”

She stood straight, glaring at him, daring him to lie to her, to dismiss her or push her aside. Good God, this woman was something else. Jules regarded her, wondering how she did it. Her hair was in complete disarray, the dismal grey green gown she wore this morning was undoubtedly the ugliest thing he had seen her wear to date, and yet her chin was up, her back ramrod straight. She looked down her imperious nose at him like a queen regarding a traitor before sentencing him to the Tower to await his bloody end.

“How did you know?”

The look she sent him could have etched glass, it was so contemptuous. “*You?* A gardener? Just how stupid do you think I am?”

“Not stupid in the least. As for me...”

“You’ll get no contradiction from this quarter, so don’t expect it,” she shot back, undermining his attempt at self-deprecation nicely. “So, what was it? My money is on the bitter old maid ruining her beautiful younger sister’s happiness out of spite.”

“Well then, you’d be wrong,” he replied, and at least he could comfort himself with the fact that he’d made her strong and beautiful *and* diabolical.

“Oh?” She hardly appeared reassured, and he didn’t blame her.

“A vampiress,” he admitted with a wry smile.

She made a choked sound, and he was uncertain if it was amusement or distress. It bothered him tremendously that he

could not tell.

“Well, I’m sure it will do very well for you,” she said, and with such dignity, he felt like the lowliest of villains. “You’ll excuse me if I ask you and your... Mr Briggs, whoever he may be, to leave forthwith.”

She moved forward, heading for the door, and Jules rushed to intercept her.

“Wait!” he exclaimed, not having the slightest idea of what he was going to say but needing her to know he wouldn’t do it. “I did come here to do just as you supposed, but... I shan’t do it. I’d already decided I wouldn’t. Please—”

“Please what?” she said coldly. “Congratulate you for having a scrap of common decency rather than to make fun of me in public? Bravo, Mr Briggs... ah, but that’s not your name, is it?” she added with a sneer.

“No,” he admitted, sidestepping as she tried to move past him. He held out his hands in a peaceable gesture as she took a step back. “I just want to talk to you. Please, just give me a moment. If you still want me to leave, I shall do so at once, only you still need help to finish sorting and putting the books on the shelves. It will take you weeks by yourself.”

“I do *everything* by myself,” she said, but there was a tremor in her voice, and this time a too bright sparkle glittered in her eyes that alarmed him more than her fury ever could.

Davenport did not cry – at least not in front of people. Though he wondered if perhaps she hid her tears and kept them private, a thought that twisted his heart. In public, however, she commanded, she arranged, and she scolded. She *did not* weep. The idea he might have reduced her to doing so in front of him made him feel sick.

“I can’t tell you my real name. Not yet, at least,” he said, for even knowing what he owed her, he wasn’t about to divulge his title until he knew she wouldn’t drag him through the courts for this ridiculous adventure. There was enough of that going on as it was. “And I most humbly beg your pardon. I know what you must think of me, and I don’t blame you.”

“How very noble you are,” she said, turning away from him, her arms tightly folded, but there was hurt behind the anger, and he heard it plain enough.

“I know I have behaved very badly,” Jules said, wishing that wasn’t always his line but used enough to having to say it. “And I ought not to have come here. It was ridiculous of me, but... I wasn’t thinking straight. It’s just, I was in the area, and someone sent me your review and I was so... *so* angry with you.”

She turned then, regarding him with a frown. “Why should you care a button what I think? I’m nobody. A faded spinster lady, the kind who will grow old dependent on her siblings’ generosity, no doubt. No one listens to me.”

Jules gave an indignant bark of laughter. “Everyone listens to you!” he exclaimed in outrage. “You say jump, and everyone demands, how high?”

Davenport flushed and put up her chin. “Here, perhaps, because there is no one else to take charge, and I might have known I should be disparaged for that,” she added with a bitter laugh.

“Not by me!” he objected strenuously. “This place would run to wrack and ruin if not for you. You’ve taken the job on and made it your own, and done it magnificently, too. Your father ought to weep with gratitude for everything you’ve done. Your brother too, if he’s to inherit everything you’ve created here.”

She flushed a darker shade, glaring at him suspiciously.

“I mean it!” he added, before she could speak. “I’m not flattering you to get myself out of trouble, I swear it. You’ll do as you think fit, but I need to explain. If you would only listen for a moment.”

Davenport looked at him, suspicion in her eyes, but she made a dismissive *go on* gesture and Jules steeled himself to be honest with the one woman he did not wish to know what a fool he was.



“I’ve made a mess of a lot of things in my life, Davenport, but I thought I could write. I knew that last book wasn’t my best work, but the publisher was clamouring for it and... and I didn’t know how to fix the problems. I ought to have tried harder, but I gave up, and then you called out every single thing I was worried about having got wrong and... and it poked at a sore spot. Your words were fair, perhaps, but cutting. They hurt, but I’m a big boy. I ought to have taken it on the chin and moved on. But as I’ve been reminded several times of late, I’m rather spoiled and used to getting my own way, so retaliation seemed like a more inviting prospect.”

“*Rather* spoiled,” she repeated, quirking one burnished eyebrow at him.

He gave a wry laugh. “Oh, very well. I’m thoroughly spoiled. A good-for-nothing gentleman with soft hands who’s never done a day’s work in his life. Does that fit me better?”

Her lips twitched slightly, which he hoped was an encouraging sign. “Well, you certainly paid for your revenge,” she said, gesturing to the bandage on his hand.

Jules raised it and returned a rueful smile. “In blood, sweat, and few tears too if you listen to Briggs. A fitting punishment in the circumstances, but at least I’ve gained a better insight into the life of a working man. That was what you wanted me to do, was it not?”

She nodded, regarding him with interest now. “I had no idea you would even read that review, let alone care, but did you not read all the bits where I said how wonderful it was? How much I enjoyed it?”

Jules shrugged. “It seemed like faint praise compared to the criticism, but I may have taken it a little too much to heart.”

“A little!” she exclaimed, shaking her head at him.

“Pax, Davenport,” he said, holding out his hand to her. “I’ve no intention of publishing a word about you or your family. The truth is, I admire everything you’ve done here, and I feel like a complete arse for having invaded your privacy in

such a way. If you want me to leave, I shall do so at once, but if you would like me to stay and finish this library as penance, I would be happy to oblige. By myself, if you'd rather it that way. Though I'd like to carry on with you. Much as I wanted to loathe you, I'm afraid I've rather enjoyed myself. I'd like to speak more to you about books and writing," he added, hoping that might pique her interest.

"*Your* writing?" she asked, narrowing her eyes, but he knew he had her.

Jules made a show of considering her words, trying not to smile at the eagerness he heard in her voice.

"Well, perhaps," he said grudgingly. "If you promise to be gentle and not make me cry."

She frowned at that, perhaps reading the serious note behind the frivolous words. "I am too forthright," she admitted, a tinge of colour coming back into her cheeks that clashed with her fiery hair. "I know I am, but I speak without thinking and—"

"You *are* not too forthright," he insisted. "You're just used to everyone looking to you and needing an answer. You have the voice of command. Believe me, I know it when I hear it," he added dryly.

Her eyebrows tugged together, a look of mingled chagrin and mortification on her expressive features. "But I was far too critical, I know I was. To own the truth, I regretted having been quite so blunt, only the book was so close to being really spectacular, but it fell flat now and then, and I was so frustrated with you for falling short of your best."

"Show me."

She looked up at him, scepticism in her expression.

"Well, here's your chance to tell me where I went wrong," he said, a challenging note to his voice. "Aren't you going to take it?"

She hesitated for a bare second before taking the bait and Jules experienced a little burst of triumph as she nodded resolutely. "Very well. I shall."

“Where is it then?” he asked warily, for it hadn’t been with his other work. He pointed at the pile of books, which was the only one that rivalled the gardening and botanical pile for size. “Novels are there, but it is not under A, for anonymous. What have you done with it, Davenport? Is it buried in a hole somewhere and stuck all over with pins?” he asked, daring to see if she could take a bit of teasing.

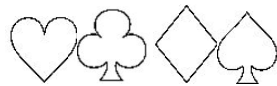
She rolled her eyes at him. “Oh, yes, I’d pay the exorbitant price of one of your leather-bound copies and then do that to it,” she returned tartly. “It’s in my private parlour,” she added, and hurried to fetch it.

Jules preened a little at this information, deciding he’d best make the most of it, for he suspected the following hour or so was going to be hard on his ego.

He wasn’t wrong.

On her return, she settled herself down at the table with pen and paper and demanded. “Where shall I begin?”

“At the beginning,” he suggested, like a fool.



Almost three hours later, and Jules’ head hurt, not to mention his self-esteem. He’d quickly discovered Davenport trying to pull her punches was worse than when she said exactly what she thought. She didn’t do tact well. He’d told her not to spare him and to give it to him plainly and, by God, she had. She had made reams of notes, in a neat, precise hand, detailing all his errors, followed by suggestions and comments about how he could have done better. Some of these were so obvious, he could not understand why he hadn’t seen them himself. Others were certainly eye opening, and he’d wished she had read his draft version, for he could see how her critical eye could have made all the difference. There were a few suggestions he’d balked at, and they’d enjoyed a vigorous disagreement over those, which had been as stimulating as it was maddening.

Now, he sat with his head in his hands, staring down at the table, trying to ignore his throbbing temples, and so didn’t at

once realise she'd stopped speaking.

"I beg your pardon," she said, her voice tight.

He looked up, wondering what he'd missed.

"I've said too much, haven't I? I knew I ought not to have... only, you asked, and it's so rare a man who isn't working for me asks my opinion and—"

"Davenport."

"And I thought you meant it, but of course, I've run on too long and overstepped and—"

"Davenport!"

She jolted, looking at him in alarm.

"Would you read the draft of my next book, whatever it is, and give me your thoughts as you go? I could send it to you, a few chapters at a time, perhaps."

She blinked at him, her blue eyes wide and startled.

"You w-want me to criticise you some more?" she said in astonishment.

Jules snorted, as it certainly seemed a ridiculous thing for him to request. He rubbed a weary hand over his face. "God help me, I do. Isn't that all your dreams come true?"

She gave a startled bark of laughter that delighted him. "Yes!" she said at once, making him laugh too.

"Dreadful creature," he said, shaking his head.

She sent him a doubtful look but smiled a little shyly, belatedly realising that he had only been teasing, and his heart gave an odd kick in his chest. He stood suddenly, gathering up the papers she had written for him.

"Would you look at the time!" he said, in a rush. "You'll be late for dinner, and Briggs will wonder where I've got to."

She stood too as he looked about for his coat and shrugged it on haphazardly. He suddenly had the urgent desire to get as far away from her as possible.

“Will you come back in the morning, then?” she asked him, an uncertain note in her voice. “Or... Or will you return home now? I suppose you can send me your work easily enough and there’s no need to continue this silly charade after all.”

Jules hesitated. He didn’t want to stay, not now, not after... but he’d promised. She was all alone here, for there was no one of any use to help her and the library was important. It was important to her, because her mother had loved books, and she needed it in order again. So he nodded, knowing he’d do better to stay away, for both their sakes.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll come in the morning.”

# Chapter 11



*Lucian,*

*Would you happen to have the slightest idea where my son and heir has hidden himself away this time? If the rumours circulating the ton are true, he may be halfway to Timbaktu by now and with good reason.*

*I wish I knew how to reach the ridiculous boy, though he's a grown man now for all I worry for him the same as when he was six years old and contracted the measles. I thought he would die, you know. I've never been so scared in my life. Thank God for Pippin, or ought I thank some pagan goddess? She certainly thought so.*

*I feel like I'm missing something obvious and for once my duchess refuses to enlighten me. She insists I must work it out with Jules myself but I'm damned if I know how. He makes me so furious when I see him wasting his talent, his life, on frivolity. I would not mind so much if I thought it made him happy, but he seems wretched, more so whenever he must face me over his latest scandal. Hence the disappearing act. If this one is true, I think it will be bad, God help him.*

*Do you fare any better with Pip? And here we were thinking we knew where we were with sons. What fools.*

*Yrs, etc.*

*—Excerpt of a letter to The Most Hon'ble  
Lucian Barrington, The Marquess of  
Montagu from His Grace, Robert  
Adolphus, Duke of Bedwin.*

**3<sup>rd</sup> March 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

“Not go to work?” Briggs stared at him in consternation.

“No. Well, the jig is up, as they say, so you don't need to carry on if you don't want to.”

Briggs rubbed the back of his neck. They'd just finished a simple dinner of fried potatoes and bacon, which had been surprisingly satisfying, and were sitting with their heels propped on the fender of the fire in the sparse little cottage, nursing large mugs of tea.

“But you're staying on to finish the library?” Briggs asked, giving Jules an odd look.

Jules shrugged. “Well, I said I would, and we've broken the back of it now. May as well, I suppose.”

“Hmm,” Briggs said, regarding him with a deal too much interest.

Jules flushed. “What the devil is that supposed to mean?”

Briggs shook his head, staring at the fire. “Not a thing, my lord.”

“Don't put on airs to be interesting, Briggs,” Jules scolded him. “If you've something to say, spit it out.”

Shifting in his seat, Briggs studied Jules for a long moment. “It's the right thing to do,” he said eventually. “You've acted like a stupid arse, and this is a way of making amends. I'm proud of you.”

Jules felt his eyebrows go up in surprise. “Oh,” he said, deciding he'd let the stupid arse comment go, in the circumstances. It wasn't as if it was less than accurate. “Well, good. Thank you, Briggs.”

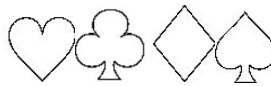
“What about you?” he asked with interest.

Briggs pursed his lips. “Reckon I’ll finish my job too. Don’t like leaving things half done.”

Jules nodded, accepting this as Briggs had always taken a pride in anything he put his hand to. He yawned broadly and stretched.

“Go on, you’d best get your beauty sleep,” Briggs said, an amused glint in his eyes. “You know how testy you get when you’re tired.”

Jules sent him a long-suffering look of reproach, wondered aloud why on earth he kept such a rude fellow around, and did as he was told.



Selina told herself she was being ridiculous, but it did not stop her from hurrying to the library the next day with all the anticipation of a child on Christmas morning. The day outside was dismal and wet but the library was warm and cosy with a bright fire blazing, and Selina let out a little sigh of pleasure at the day to come, a day she was looking forward to immensely.

She realised she was happy and was startled as she comprehended it had been a very long time indeed since she had felt anything like it. Even the unexpected arrival of an outrageous bill her father had run up had not been enough to kill the sensation. It was dangerous, though, and she knew it. Mark Briggs, or whatever his name might be, was a dangerous man. Perhaps he was not the wicked scoundrel she had thought him, for he *had* apologised, and she had believed in the sincerity of his words. However, he was heartbreakingly handsome, and those green eyes were just... her breath hitched, and she told herself to stop it. She wasn’t an idiot. He was finishing the library because he had behaved badly and needed to make amends, and he wished to talk to her because he valued her opinions about his work. That was all. A man like that would have females throwing themselves at his feet wherever he went and would never be interested in Selina, of all women.



It occurred to her then that she didn't even know if he was married! Not that it mattered. This was purely a business arrangement. Nothing more. So she would not be a ninny and do something so utterly foolish as to fall in love with him. She was far too level-headed for that.

The door opened and Selina turned with a smile, almost dropping the book she was holding as she beheld the magnificence before her. Her words of greeting died and all that emerged was a strangled sound of shock.

Whoever this man was, he had been devastating enough in the garb of a lowly gardener. Now, however, closely shaved and immaculately dressed in the finery of a gentleman, he was a work of art. Selina knew she was staring but she couldn't help it. Wildly, she sought for something—anything—to say and blurted out, “Are you married?”

She cringed inwardly, very aware that her cheeks were blazing scarlet.

A look of surprise lit those astonishing green eyes, and his mouth quirked a little. “No, as it happens.”

“Oh, that's... that's good,” she said in relief, and then blushed harder. She'd set herself alight if she kept this up. “I mean... not *good*, exactly, but... if you were married and here, doing this, with me... not that we're doing a-anything we ought not, only—”

He crossed the room and took her hands, staring down at her. Laughter glittered in his eyes, though it was a gentle expression, warm and kind, not the mocking kind of laughter such fashionable gentlemen had used to send her way during her one and only season.

“Good morning, Davenport. I'm sorry if I have startled you. It just seemed wrong to go about dressed as something I'm not. Also, I'm terribly vain and I missed my finery. Briggs assures me I'm the most dreadful peacock.”

“Oh,” she said, relieved to discover she could make a sound, for his hands were warm and strong and it was hard to breathe. She tugged herself free of his grasp before she could

make an even bigger fool of herself. Selina walked away, needing to put some distance between them. It seemed to help as her wits gradually returned to her. “He’s your valet?” she guessed.

“He is.”

“Oh, drat the fellow,” she said, disappointed.

He looked back at her in surprise, and she sighed. “Well, he was coming on nicely. Everyone likes him, and he works hard and knows his job... and now I shall have to find another gardener.”

The gentleman who was not Mark Briggs had the grace to look rather sheepish. “Oh, well, yes. Eventually, I’m afraid. He may be a worthy gardener, but he is a most excellent valet, and I really couldn’t part with him. However, he has decided to stay on and finish the rose garden, so you have a little time.”

“Ah, as to that, I do not think there will be a rose garden this year,” she said, ignoring the little stab of regret as she spoke the words aloud. It had been a foolish project from the start. Too frivolous when there were so many other more pressing concerns.

“Whyever not?”

He sounded almost annoyed, and Selina looked at him in surprise.

“Oh, the usual. Papa has been busy in town. I never did understand how a gentleman can run up quite so many debts in a short space, but I suppose that’s just my provincial attitude. A man of fashion, as you quite obviously are, must find it an inevitable part of life.”

“That did not sound like a compliment, Davenport,” he said with a wry smile. “And fashionable or not, I do not run up debts I can’t pay. Anyone who does or puts their family in an uncomfortable position to satisfy his own pleasures, is an unmitigated arse.”

She gave a shocked gasp at his words, not for swearing in front of her—well, yes, partly because he had sworn in front of her—but not because she disapproved, but for his

understanding she would not be missish about it. She liked that he had believed that. Except she had gasped, and now he was looking at her with concern. Selina laughed, for she had only been surprised, and his face eased as he realised he'd read her correctly. A new thought occurred to her.

“You know my father.”

He shifted uneasily, rubbing the back of his neck. Selina told herself not to notice the way the fabric of his coat tightened over the muscle in his arm as he did so. She failed.

“Not exactly.”

“You know of him and avoid him whenever possible, then,” she said, daring him to deny the truth of her words.

He hesitated, and she saw the ingrained desire of a gentleman to give a polite answer war with what he really wanted to say.

“Yes,” he admitted, observing her reaction cautiously.

She could not help but grin at him. “Very sensible.”

A breath of relief escaped him, and he laughed softly. “I did not wish to cause offence.”

“Oh, you couldn't, not in that way, at least,” she said cheerfully. “Papa cares nothing for us, so I decided long ago I wouldn't care a button for him either. It wouldn't be so bad if he were interesting, but he's a crashing bore, and his loathsome cronies are even worse.”

“How the devil did that man produce someone as interesting as you, let alone that ravishing creature I saw on the stairs?”

The smile froze on Selina's lips. *Oh*. Of course. Abigail. Selina might consider her merely a baby, but she would be of age soon enough, and there was no denying she was a beauty. She would cause a sensation upon her come out.

Selina pushed aside anything resembling hurt pride or disappointment and reminded herself sternly that there was no romance here. Not for her, at least. If he was as well-bred as she suspected, it might well be a splendid match for Abigail,

though not for several years yet. There was perhaps a chance he might be willing to wait for such a pretty creature. Not that she had a dowry to speak of, but judging by his coat and boots this man was not short on funds. Abigail was a henwit, though, and perhaps he would grow tired of her, though she could play piano and embroider as well as their mother had done. Perhaps that was all he looked for in a wife. It was true of many men. That it might apply here made Selina feel unaccountably melancholy. No doubt his mistress would be witty and clever and beautiful to make up for it. The chances of this fellow not having a mistress in town were not worth calculating. She felt vaguely sick. Selina did not wish to see her little sister made unhappy by an unfaithful husband, even if he looked like every hero the romantic creature had ever dreamed of.

“My mother was a beauty,” she said, forcing herself to speak with ease when she felt as if his words had knocked out the wind of her. “Abigail takes after her, though she’s little more than a child really. I’m told I’m like my paternal grandfather. He was big, you see. Well over six feet, though lamentably, I also inherited his and Papa’s dreadful red hair. Poor Julia is convinced she will die an old maid, as she’s stuck with it too. I can’t convince her myself, obviously, seeing as I’m living the life she fears, but she’s far prettier than me, so she’ll not have any trouble,” she added with a determinedly bright smile.

Mark—though Selina was having increasing difficulty thinking of him with that name—seemed not to hear this. He was studying her with an odd expression.

“I like your hair.”

“W-What?” This comment seemed so outrageous Selina took a step back, a hand automatically raising to her ungovernable curls.

“It suits you.”

She bristled, her chin going up. “There’s no need to be insulting.”

A look of confusion settled upon that far too handsome face. “Insulting? But that was a compliment.”

Selina snorted. “A backhanded one, perhaps.”

“No, Davenport,” he said, a steely note entering his voice. “A straightforward compliment.”

She looked at him doubtfully, certain he was roasting her still.

“You think I’m mocking you, or perhaps turning you up sweet,” he said as realisation dawned in his eyes.

“Well, I’m hardly a pretty little wisp of a creature with blond curls like Abigail, am I? I had a season once, though a very long time ago, but I remember well enough what kind of reception I received,” she said tartly. “I’m no diamond, Mr Briggs, a fact I am well aware of and quite at ease with, I assure you, but I do not appreciate being teased.”

“Then I shan’t. Come here.”

Before she could protest, he had grasped hold of her hand and towed her across the room to the fireplace. There was an enormous mirror over the mantel, angled down slightly, so that if you stood back, you could see yourself from head to toe—something Selina avoided doing too often. Now, however, she was forced to face the mirror. Her cheeks blazed scarlet with mortification as this man, about whom she still knew next to nothing, stood behind her, regarding her with frank appraisal.

“I’ll give you the truth, shall I?” he asked, a ruthless edge to the words. “Like you did about my book.”

“Very well,” she replied, steeling herself.

She’d heard it all before. Nothing he could say could hurt her any more than it had the first time when she’d been a silly girl with romantic ideas in her head. She was a woman now, strong and capable and not about to fall to pieces because a pretty fellow didn’t find her attractive.

“That gown ought to be tried for crimes against humanity,” he began. “What colour even is that? Dishwater sludge?”

Selina stiffened, realising this was going to be worse than she’d thought.

“It’s moss green,” she replied with dignity.

“Perhaps it was five years ago,” he said brutally. “Does your father not give you an allowance?”

“Certainly,” she replied, though her throat was growing tight.

She’d spent her allowance on new dresses for Abigail, though, because she’d grown so much hers had become positively indecent, and then Charlie was growing like a weed and needed new trousers and coats with shocking regularity, and that wasn’t counting the ones he ruined with climbing trees and doing what boys did to clothes.

“And you don’t spend it on yourself,” he guessed, with uncanny accuracy. “Because why would you? Now, that style—if a style you can call it—in which you do your hair is all wrong. It makes you look like a governess.”

Before she could protest, he began plucking the pins from her coiffure with nimble fingers.

Selina gave a little shriek of protest, but he hushed her.

“Don’t make a fuss, you’ll have the staff running in to discover what’s going on, and they’ll find you with your hair all undone. Dear me, no, how scandalous,” he murmured, a wicked note to his words that might have thrilled her if he hadn’t been making her feel such a fool.

“Please...” she tried, but her voice sounded odd, weak and unlike herself and she hated it so much she did not dare say more.

“Now then,” he said, as her shocking red curls tumbled about her shoulders. He sounded different this time, almost breathless. Likely trying not to laugh at her mortification, she thought bitterly. “This... is glorious.”

“B-Beg pardon?” was all she could manage, because surely, she’d heard that wrong.

But he wasn’t looking at her. Instead, he coiled a thick lock of her hair about his fingers and raised it to his nose.

“Chamomile,” he said softly, brushing it against his lips. Selina’s breath hitched. “So sweet and simple. Straightforward. No nonsense,” he added, slanting a look at her she did not understand in the least, his green eyes dark and dangerous.

Selina swallowed, her knees were trembling. She really needed to sit down.

The hand that wasn’t toying with her hair settled on her waist. “And as for the rest of you, Davenport. There ought to be a law against curves like these. They do things to a fellow’s intellect, like making him act like a complete fool and put his foot in his mouth, believe me, I know.”

“Y-You’re r-roasting me,” she stammered, hardly able to get the words out.

She watched him in the mirror, watched his expression become fierce as he met her eyes. “The first time I saw you, you took my breath away. There stands a warrior queen, was all I could think, a worthy opponent, the kind of woman a fellow goes to war with and prays he can win, for she’ll show him no mercy if he stumbles.”

Selina pushed away from him, tears burning her eyes. She turned around, staring at him in bewilderment.

“Why?” she demanded. “Why would you say that to me?”

“Because it’s true,” he replied calmly. “Because you’re a blasted fool to lock yourself up here and spend every penny you have on everyone else. Go to the damned dance, Boadicea. Get yourself a new dress, stop trying to wrestle those splendid curls into styles that can’t contain them. Free them and let them go wild, show off that outrageous figure to its fullest, and stop apologising for being tall and magnificent and managing, and pretty bloody wonderful.”

Selina stood staring at him, bosom heaving as she fought to breathe, to keep her dignity when she did not know whether to laugh hysterically at the ridiculous things he said or... or to weep with gratitude.

Neither held much appeal, and so the most dignified thing she could think to do was flee.



## Chapter 12



*Robert,*

*Having made some discreet enquiries, I believe you are right to be worried. Lord Haversham is set on suing Jules for Criminal Conversation with his wife. There have been some attempts to dissuade him, but all have failed so far.*

*As for his whereabouts, I have reason to believe he has gone to Goshen Court. I cannot advise you on how to proceed, however, as I do not know if I am doing right in letting Pip go his own way. I believe he is trying to make something of himself, to prove something, either to himself or to me, or both, and I have respected that and decided to wait for him to return when he is ready. It is not easy, however, when I could lift a finger and discover what is amiss, or simply turn up on his doorstep and demand to know. But Pip has always struggled to find his place. He has tried for too long to be me, for reasons I cannot understand. Not when I have tried so hard to show him he can be anything he chooses and that I am hardly an ideal role model, but they have a great weight on their shoulders, our heirs, and perhaps the idea that we must die to make way for them is a hard one to become accustomed to? But I have no devastating insight into how best to go on, as I have barely seen or spoken to my son in months.*

*I miss him, and pray he will find his feet soon, or I will know I have miscalculated.*

*Fools indeed.*

*Yrs, etc.*

**—Excerpt of a letter to His Grace, Robert Adolphus, Duke of Bedwin from *The Most Hon'ble Lucian Barrington, The Marquess of Montagu.***

#### **4<sup>th</sup> March 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

“You utter pillock, Blackstone,” Jules groaned as the door slammed shut behind her. What in the name of everything holy had he been playing at?

It was a question he could not answer. Or perhaps was afraid to answer. For it had been unbearable to hear her speak of herself in such disparaging terms, to discover—as he'd suspected—that not only did no one here value her as they ought to, but she did not even value herself. It had made him furious, though why, when it was none of his affair, he could not say. He needed to tread carefully, though. If anyone had come in, they would have seen her in what had been tantamount to an embrace, with her hair all undone, and come to inevitable conclusions.

Davenport was no lightskirt, nor a neglected wife with an eye for a bit of fun. Selina Davenport was that most dangerous of creatures, an unmarried lady of quality, and the kind of female he usually avoided like the plague. If they'd been seen in that position together, she would have been ruined, and he would have been honour bound to marry her. The idea made his blood run cold.

Married.

To Davenport.

Jules sat down before his knees gave out. He felt a little unwell.

“You bloody fool,” he told himself, rubbing a hand over his face. “Get a grip of yourself.”

But the words *married to Davenport* kept circling his brain and sending little shivers of terror over his skin. He ought to leave. The sensible thing to do would be to pack up his things and return to Goshen Court, except that did not seem far enough away. He didn’t dare go back to London though and there was still the blasted library to finish, and he’d promised to help. Jules smothered a groan as he looked around the room and at the endless piles of books. Well, the sooner he got the job done, the sooner he could leave. Determined now, for escape seemed like his best and only option, Jules got to his feet and set about returning the books to the shelves, following the plan that he and Davenport had agreed to before she’d had her little meltdown the day before.

He tried to concentrate on the work, but the scent of chamomile seemed to have infiltrated his brain, and he could not stop thinking about the silk of her fiery red hair against his lips. Irritated, he reminded himself that he could end up married to the dreadful girl if he wasn’t careful. Much as Jules admired her, he had no desire to marry yet, and certainly not a woman who wouldn’t give him a moment’s peace. But the feel of her slender waist beneath his hand kept returning to him. It had taken considerable willpower not to let his touch wander. He wanted to know what lay beneath all that whale bone and petticoats. A splendid bosom, certainly, and legs that must go on for miles, for she was far taller than any other woman of his acquaintance. He’d not have to break his neck to kiss her, which would be... *terrible!* A dreadful decision, he reminded himself severely. Determined to terrify his disobedient libido into submission, he tried to imagine being married to Davenport.

No doubt she would rile him every morning by discussing his previous day’s work and telling him everything he’d done wrong. He could just imagine the rows they’d have, when he preferred a peaceful morning—well, afternoon—to linger over his coffee. Mind you, that was usually because he was hungover. That would have to stop too, naturally. If he went out of an evening with his usual opera dancers and belles of

the demi-monde, he'd probably discover just what damage she could do with that blasted umbrella. He shuddered. As for the marriage bed... a vision of Davenport in his bed, naked and sprawled in a wanton pose, with all that glorious red hair spilling out over his sheets made his breath catch, desire hitting him so hard and fast he felt giddy with the shock of it.

"No," he told himself, shaking his head. "No, no, no."

"I beg your pardon?"

Jules spun around to see a boy staring at him in consternation.

"Er..." Jules said, momentarily lost, for the lewd vision of Davenport had melted his brain and it no longer seemed to work.

"Who are you?" the boy demanded, frowning at him.

That was an excellent question, and one Jules had no idea how to answer.

"A friend of your sister's," he said, hoping the child would leave it at that. Being Davenport's kin, that was too much to hope for.

"But weren't you a gardener?" he demanded, wrinkling his nose.

"Um, yes," Jules replied cautiously. "But not really. It was just... a lark. I er... was just—"

"Oh! You were playing a trick on her?" the boy asked guilelessly.

"Yes!" Jules replied, nodding with relief. "But not a bad trick, at least, it wasn't terribly funny, but she's forgiven me now... I think," he added in an undertone.

"Oh, she has, I'm sure of it. Lina never holds a grudge. She's a great gun. I've kicked up some dreadful larks in the past, and though she always scolds me—usually because I've ruined my trousers or boots or something—she never makes one feel like an idiot. You know how some people can make you feel like a silly child? Lina never does, not like Pa. I don't like it when he scolds me, but then he's got no patience for

children. Lina says we'll do better together when I'm older. Don't reckon we will, though," he added thoughtfully.

Jules nodded, a little taken aback by this sudden rush of confidence.

"So, you're repairing the mess Jacob made of the library?" he said, looking around with approval. "I'm glad. It made Lina dreadfully unhappy to see it all in disorder. Can I help?"

Jules nodded his agreement. Help meant he could finish quicker and, the faster he was away from this house, the better. "If you like."

"I'm Charles, by the way. Everyone calls me Charlie, though. What's your name?"

"Ju – Mark."

"Pleased to meet you, Mark. Do these ones go here?"

"No, on this shelf, and likewise," Jules replied, rather charmed by the boy.

He was a stocky lad, in that awkward stage between child and adult. He had the same shocking red curls as Davenport and the freckles scattered over his nose and cheeks were far more pronounced than on his nemesis. Hers were more delicate, like a faint dusting of cinnamon and Jules could not help but wonder if they appeared on other more interesting parts of her. Furious with himself for allowing such thoughts to creep back in, he shrugged off his coat and climbed the ladder. He must keep his mind on the job, and nothing else.

"Here, pass those up and I'll put them on the shelf."

Charlie did as he asked, and they worked in silence for a while.

"Where did you meet Selina?"

Jules paused, cross with himself for not having anticipated the question. He held a book suspended in midair as he looked down at the boy with a vague sense of panic. "She's... my friend's neighbour," he said quickly, before he had time to think too much about it.

“Your friend is a neighbour? But we don’t have any neighbours. Well, except for Goshen Court, I suppose. I know half the county is working there now, but that belongs to the Earl of Ashburton, and I don’t think she knows him at all. Is he your friend?”

Feeling suddenly trapped, for if Davenport discovered he was friends with Ashburton, it would not take her long to join the dots, Jules wracked his brain for an answer. Alongside Jules, Ashburton was one of the founding members of The Sons of Hades. There were few people the earl acknowledged as friends, but Jules was infamous for being among the notorious set he ran with, and Davenport was no fool.

“I say, is that a book about cricket? Do you play?” Jules demanded in desperation.

Much to his relief, Charlie was passionate about cricket and soon they were deep in conversation about the highs and lows of such a wonderful pastime. They had passed an easy and surprisingly enjoyable half an hour in this manner, when the door opened and Charlie’s little brother toddled in.

“Charlie, Jammy hungry,” the boy wailed.

Charlie set down the book he was holding and went to the lad, lifting him up. “It’s not luncheon yet, though, and you had an egg for breakfast, and soldiers.”

Benjamin shook his head, looking mutinous. “Hungy *now*, Charlie.”

“Well, where is Hilly?” Charlie demanded, sounding a little exasperated.

The little boy put out his hands in an expressive ‘how should I know’ gesture that made Jules smile.

“What about Abigail?”

Benjamin wrinkled his nose. “Looking in the mirror,” he said, with obvious incomprehension.

Charlie sighed.

“You could ring the bell and send for some tea and biscuits?” Jules suggested, feeling a little peckish himself.

“We’re not supposed to eat in the library,” Charlie admitted reluctantly.

“I won’t tell if you don’t, and we’ll be very careful to keep away from the books,” Jules said with a wink.

“Oh, capital,” Charlie replied with a grin, and ran to the fireplace to tug at the bell rope. When a maid appeared, she looked first at Charlie and then stared at Jules in astonishment, her eyes on stalks. “Don’t gawp, Polly, it’s rude,” Charlie admonished her. “Might we have tea and some biscuits? Oh, and cake too, if there is any.”

“Cake!” Benjamin piped up with enthusiasm. “Jammy want cake too, Charlie.”

“Yes, yes, you’ll have cake too,” his big brother soothed.

Polly frowned. “Mistress don’t like food in the library,” she said stoutly.

“Well, just this once, Polly, if you would be so kind,” Jules said, giving the girl the benefit of his most charming manners and a rueful smile. “All these dusty books give one a thirst, you see, and going up and down this ladder works up an appetite.”

Polly blushed but looked back at him with surprising boldness. “The books aren’t dusty, though, sir. Dusted them myself, I did.”

“Quite so,” Jules admitted sheepishly. “But I’d still like a cup of tea.”

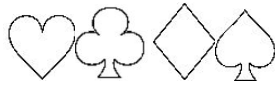
“Oh, go on then,” she said with an indulgent air. “But it wasn’t my idea if Miss Davenport hears of it.”

“No, indeed, you warned us most severely that it was against the rules,” Jules agreed, winking at her.

Polly giggled and hurried away.

“Jammy have cake?” Benjamin demanded, apparently believing there was some doubt in the matter. Jules grinned at him.

“Yes, you’ll have cake, my lad. Never fear.”



By the time Selina had walked several miles up hill and down dale at a brisk pace, she was more or less in control of herself. Until she remembered the words he'd given her so easily, words that would be etched on her brain until the day she died.

*There stands a warrior queen, was all I could think, a worthy opponent, the kind of woman a fellow goes to war with and prays he can win, for she'll show him no mercy if he stumbles.*

Perhaps if she walked to the south coast, that might do it?

*Stop trying to wrestle those splendid curls into styles that can't contain them. Free them and let them go wild, show off that outrageous figure to its fullest and stop apologising for being tall and magnificent and managing, and pretty bloody wonderful.*

Oh, good heavens. What had possessed him to say such lovely things to her? For if he had told her she was beautiful and sweet and all the usual endearments men usually gave their beloveds—going on what she'd read—then she would not have had any trouble at all in dismissing it as Spanish coin, a fellow trying to turn her up sweet for his own advantage. But he hadn't. Instead, he'd agreed she was tall and managing and her figure was altogether too much, but he'd made them sound like advantages, things he admired.

She sighed, shaking her head in bewilderment. It was no good. She could walk herself into exhaustion, but it would not change what he had said, nor the manner in which he'd said it. For it had sounded genuine, like he meant every word... like he *cared*.

"Foolish nonsense," she told herself sternly, ignoring the curious gaze of a soft-eyed cow that lifted its head to study her as she strode past.

A man like that, a man who looked like he did, with his ease of address and his charming manners, could have any woman eating out of his hand. She did not doubt he was



practised in the art of dalliance, and likely it was normal behaviour for him. Probably, he was skilled at tailoring his comments to suit whichever woman he was with. Appearing to admire things which were obviously faults to most people would be a surefire way to gain favour. He would make her the object of his gallantry for the time he was here, and then he would leave without a backwards glance, and she would be a fool to read anymore into it than that. No doubt he was packing right now, ready to get away from this dull backwater.

As for why he should trouble to say such things, the answer was clear enough. No doubt, he expected a woman of her years to be more sophisticated and to know not to take such gallantry as anything more than a little light flirtation. But Selina wasn't sophisticated. She had been little more than a girl when she had been thrust into the cruel waters of society and discovered she could not swim. At eighteen, she had packed up her dreams of being wooed, of happy ever afters and a man who would fall madly in love with her and want to share a life with her. She had set aside her hopes for a future and a family of her own, and when her brother and then her mother had died, she had picked up the shattered pieces of her life, hidden her own heartbreak away, and taken on responsibility for the household. Not that there had been a choice, for no one else was going to do it.

It would have taken very little to make her content enough with her lot. Her father's respect and just a little gratitude for raising his children for him would have been something. A word of appreciation from her eldest brother, and the assurance that he would see her right when he finally married and took over the household, would have eased some of her fears for the future. For no new wife—no matter how sweet-natured—would want her husband's managing sister in residence, that was for certain. So then what would become of her?

She supposed she would have to live with her Aunt Rita, a sour faced pinch penny who always smelled strongly of cabbage. Selina did not doubt Rita would lose no time in dismissing the minimal staff she kept on and have her take

over the role of unpaid drudge. She supposed she was more than qualified to take it on.

Selina stopped in her tracks.

*“Stop it!”*

The cows in the field beside her took umbrage at the sharp words and lumbered away, mooing mournfully as they went. Selina clenched her fists, furious with herself.

“You are better than this,” she told herself. “Just because a handsome fellow has a bit of sport at your expense, there’s no need to get yourself in a tizzy!”

Except it hadn’t felt like sport; it had felt real. He had sounded earnest and sincere. She sucked in an uneven breath and tried to calm her heart. Glancing around to ensure only the irritated cows could see her, Selina put her hands to her breasts and traced their outline, smoothing her hands down over her waist, over her hips. She *was* very curvy and, as much as she despised their groping and lewd comments, her father’s friends certainly did not seem revolted by her size or her figure. She had just assumed she was the only young female in their vicinity and therefore better than nothing, but what if Mark was right? What if she was not a dried-up old spinster, as her father kept telling her, but still in her prime?

Papa would certainly not encourage her to marry, for then he would need to employ a housekeeper and take charge of the estate himself, not to mention keeping accounts and paying his own bills, and that was far too much like hard work. What if he had told her no man would want a bossy female of her stamp, merely to keep her in her place? Selina walked on, considering this.

It did not change the facts of her disastrous season, but perhaps away from the glittering society of the *ton*, in more familiar surroundings with less fashionable people... perhaps she might do better? It had not even been a possibility before, for with her brother, then her mother dying, she had been in mourning for years and in no mood for socialising even if it had been allowed. Now, though....

A dance would not be so bad, after all, and someone needed to keep an eye on Abigail. Hubert had promised faithfully to be back from town to escort them, but Selina had no faith in anything that unsteady creature said to her. Hilly had agreed to chaperone Abigail if he didn't come, but at heart, Selina knew it wouldn't do. Abigail could pull the wool over her nurse's eyes with no difficulty and was too easily led to be left unattended. With looks like hers, the local bucks would fall over themselves to snare her, and she could do so much better than a minor squire's son with limited prospects or fortune.

Selina walked on, considering her options. If she *did* go, what would she wear? Her wardrobe was hideous, that much she knew. Her gowns had been washed and made over too many times, but there was no money to spare on something so frivolous. Except, this was her future... and that was not frivolous. No one else was going to look out for her, that much was clear.

There would be no knight in shining armour to save her, she told herself, resolutely not thinking about Mark Briggs.

Mama had loved the latest fashions and always worn fabulous dresses in lovely fabrics. Selina remembered carefully packing them all away and sobbing her heart out as she did so. Oh, how she missed her beautiful mama. But her dresses were here, and she knew her mother would want her to use them. Of course, they were years out of style, and her mama had been far smaller, but perhaps she could reuse the fabric from two dresses, to make one new for herself. The dressmaker she had used for Abigail's new gowns in Monmouth might not do for fashionable London ladies, but she was clever with a needle, and thrifty too, which Selina approved of. She was certain she would not turn her nose up at such a challenge. Well, then, that was decided.

Selina turned on her heel and strode back towards home. There were two dresses she had in mind that ought to do the job. She would fetch them and get Jonah, their coachman, to take her into Monmouth. With the dance being held in only four days, there was no time to lose.

## Chapter 13



*Jules,*

*I hate to say it, but I think you'd best get back to town. You had better prepare your defence as it seems you may need it. Lord Haversham seems intent on dragging you and his wife through the dirt, no matter that it will illuminate him in a less than becoming light. Lady Haversham tells me she has friends who will stand by her and give evidence that his Lordship is a tyrant and treated his wife abominably, not that it will do her much good as far as the trial goes but it will sway sympathy to her cause. She begged me to send you her apologies for the appalling mess she got you into and to ask you to forgive her for being so indiscreet. She said for her part, despite everything, she does not regret it. I think she's a fair way in love with you, Jules, but for heaven's sake, keep away from her when you return. It will do neither of you any good to be seen in her company.*

**—Excerpt of a letter to *The Most Hon'ble Jules Adolphus, Marquess of Blackstone* (eldest son of *Their Graces Robert and Prunella Adolphus, The Duke and Duchess of Bedwin*) from *Mr Leo Hunt* (son of *Mr and Mrs Nathaniel and Alice Hunt*).**

**4<sup>th</sup> March 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

By the time Selina returned from her trip into Monmouth, it was dark, and she assumed everyone would have had their supper without her as she had warned Hilly to tell them she might be late returning. Mark would certainly have taken himself off after the way she'd run out on him that morning and she had no expectation of finding him at the house at such a late hour. No doubt he'd gone back to wherever he came from, now he knew she was the kind of female that took to her heels if he tried to flirt with her. It was an uncomfortable thought, but she told herself briskly that it was for the best and she didn't care a fig where he went. The heavy sensation in her chest said otherwise, but she wouldn't think about that. He was gone, and that was all that mattered.

That being the case, it surprised her to hear laughter coming from the library, of all places. The children never went in there, partly because she discouraged them as it was in such disorder, and partly because they had no desire to sit amongst piles of dusty books. Curious to discover what they were up to, she hurried into the room and stopped on the threshold, blinking with surprise.

Though there were still plenty of books to be put in place, they had filled almost the whole of the full height wall opposite the fireplace and the left side of the chimney breast during her absence. Far from having abandoned the project, Mark seemed to have manoeuvred the entire family into helping him, though they were not working now. Instead, he seemed to be teaching them all to play Loo.

In the centre of the table appeared to be half the contents of Selina's button box, which Mark was cheerfully drawing towards him whilst Abigail, Charlie and—good heavens—*Jacob* booed him with obvious enjoyment. *Jacob* never played cards, he certainly never got into the spirit of games and silly pastimes enough to boo and laugh with such obvious enjoyment. Mark, obviously playing the role of a villain out to fleece the silly innocents playing him, gave a theatrical laugh and tugged at an imaginary moustache, an image that was rather spoiled by the way he held Benjamin on his lap, with one big hand securely about the child's middle. Benjamin

reached to swipe one of the buttons, but Mark swiftly pushed the pile a little farther out of reach.

“Now then Ben, my lad, let’s see what cards we have this time,” he said, carefully arranging his hand as the little boy looked on with a frown.

“Red ones,” Benjamin observed brightly.

Mark sighed. “Very true, Ben, but that’s supposed to be a secret.”

“Secret?” Ben said, his eyes lighting up.

Selina felt an odd tug at her heart as her little brother pressed his finger to his lips and made a shushing sound.

Mark laughed and ruffled the boy’s hair. “Exactly right, that’s the ticket. Now come along, young ’uns, have I terrified you into never playing cards for money yet? You’re all up the River Tick without a paddle, you know. I own everything you have. Are you going to withdraw?”

“Not everything!” Abigail said stoutly. “I have two buttons, and Charlie has one, and so does Jacob. So, I vote we pool our resources.”

“Oh, you’re determined to sleep in a ditch tonight, then,” Jules said, shaking his head sadly.

“Not if we win!” Abigail replied, giving Mark a coquettish look from under her eyelashes.

Selina squashed an unwelcome stab of jealousy, though Mark did not react to the flirtatious look, only carried on playing. “Very well. Who is going to play on your behalf?”

“I will, as I’m the one with a brain,” Jacob replied, gaining himself a thump from Charlie and a squeal of reproach from Abigail. “Though we’d best hurry up, Lina don’t approve of gambling. She’ll pitch a fit if she finds us.”

“Oh, will she?” Selina replied, stung.

It was true that she did not approve of gambling in the least. Her father lost shocking amounts of money with tremendous ease whilst his children struggled to dress

themselves as they ought, and the roof on the north side of the house leaked. That was not to say she was a killjoy, however, and Mark seemed to be showing them how easily they could lose their money, which was a valuable lesson indeed.

To her dismay, her siblings' expressions were ones of horror at being discovered. Only Benjamin smiled when he saw her, his chubby face lighting up with pleasure.

"Lina! Jammy playing cards."

"So I see," she said with a smile.

Mark was impassive, his countenance watchful, as she closed the door behind her.

"I see you've all ruined yourselves," she said, quirking an eyebrow at the large pile of buttons at Mark's elbow.

"Oh, Lina, it was only a bit of fun," Abigail said crossly. "Don't scold us."

Mark was watching her. She could feel his eyes upon her, but she refused to meet them, not wanting to see what he thought of her now.

"I wasn't going to scold you, Abigail," Lina said, finding the words sounded rather defensive, but hurt to have been accused so. Was this how they all saw her, as a tyrant who spoiled their fun? "It looks like you're having a lovely time. Do carry on, but I think Benjamin had best go up for his bath. It's very nearly bedtime, my lamb."

"No, Lina!" Ben protested.

"Bath, and warm milk and a biscuit if you are very good," she added judiciously, her heart easing a little as Ben scrambled from Mark's lap, only to squeeze hard as the boy turned his face up to the man.

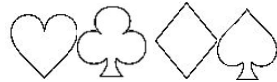
"Night, night," he said, holding his arms out in the expectation of a kiss.

An expression of surprise flickered across Mark's face, but then he smiled, and it lit his green eyes with warmth and pleasure as he bent and hugged the little boy, kissing his cheek.

“Good night, Benjamin. Thank you for playing with me.”

“Fanks,” Benjamin said with a nod and hurried to Selina, who lost no time in picking him up and taking him away.

She heard Mark call out an invitation for her to join them, once Benjamin was settled, but she pretended not to hear him, and closed the door behind her.



Jules gathered up the buttons and returned them to the biscuit tin they’d come from. He’d sent the others up to bed as it was late now, though he was touched by their protests that they wanted to keep playing. Jules had been surprised to discover how much he liked them all, for outside of his own family he spent little time with such young people, but they were funny and good natured. Lina had done well with them since her mother died, for her father had obviously never had a hand in their upbringing.

Putting the lid back on the tin with a sigh, Jules wondered what he was playing at. He ought to be gone by now. Hell, he ought to have gone back to stay with Pip last night if he’d had an ounce of sense. It appeared any remaining sense had left him, though, because he still couldn’t make himself leave. Not yet, at least.

They’d broken the back of the library today. With Jacob, Abigail and Charlie all pitching in, it had gone swiftly, and they had promised to finish the job for Selina. Which meant he had no reason to still be here. He couldn’t just leave, though. Not without saying goodbye, at least.

She must know he was still here, he reasoned. So, surely she would come to bid him goodnight or throw him out. Davenport would have no qualms in doing so if he overstayed his welcome, which he most certainly had. He ought never to have spoken to her as he had this morning. He’d wanted to make her see herself as he did, that was all, he assured himself. It was just a crying shame to see such a woman hide herself away and let her family take advantage of her loyalty and kindness. He did not wish to think of her as ending her days as



an old maid, dependent on a sibling's charity for a roof over her head. It was clear the family were hardly plump in the pocket. That was the only reason he had said such indelicate things in any case. He had not been flirting with her, *wooing her*, God help him. He hadn't. Because that would be idiocy.

Davenport would make some man a fine wife. A political man, perhaps, one with ambition. Lord, a woman like that could run the country herself, never mind manage a man who wished to do so.

She'd make a magnificent duchess.

The thought came out of nowhere and struck him so hard he felt quite winded by it.

His mother would adore her.

"*No!*" he said aloud, shaking his head vigorously, as if anyone else but him had come up with the idea. "You've run mad, Jules, old man. Too much time rustivating, that's what it is. You need a drink."

He headed to the tantalus he'd spied earlier, tucked away behind a daunting stack of Greek classics, and let out a breath of relief to discover it was unlocked. Giving the contents a dubious sniff, the scent of fine brandy reassured him, and so he poured himself a generous measure. He downed it in two large swallows and poured another, relieved by the puddle of warmth that unfurled in his guts. Another couple like that and he might be able to get his shoulders back where they belonged instead of up around his ears. Deciding he had best distract himself, he carried on putting the books on the shelves, but tension still sang through him, and he was considering pouring himself a third, large measure, when the door opened.

"This is above and beyond," observed a cool voice.

Jules turned to see the woman who occupied far too much of his mind in the doorway. She had changed from this morning's dishwater monstrosity but was wearing the dismal brown carriage dress she had worn into town. His fingers itched with the desire to take it off her and dress her in rich

satins and velvet, in shades of deep forest green and russet and even purple. How splendid she would look, like an empress.

However, offering to buy an unmarried lady a new wardrobe would end with him either getting his face slapped or marched up the aisle, so he held his tongue.

“Just passing the time. I thought I had best see you before I leave.”

She nodded, her face impassive. “You’re going back to town, I imagine. I only wonder you lasted this long.”

Indignation prickled down his spine. Did she think him such a fribble that he did not enjoy the countryside, that he could not bear to be away from society for more than a week or two before he grew bored? “Not immediately. I’ll be staying with friends nearby for a little longer.”

She looked mildly surprised, but did not enquire as to which friends, or where exactly he would be. Jules told himself this was a good thing and he ought to be relieved. He wasn’t.

“I see.”

“Do you?” he asked irritably.

“Yes, of course. You have made a splendid job of the library and even, it appears, got Jacob to help to put the books back, something I’ve not managed over the past three years. You are to be congratulated. Still, it frees you from the task, which is all to the good.”

“Damn you, Davenport, that’s not why I did it,” he said, hurt by the accusation, and a little guilty as it was partly accurate but only in very small part and... and *no*. It wasn’t true. He didn’t want to go, God help him. He ought to. He very definitely ought to, but he couldn’t. Not yet.

She snorted and shook her head and Jules observed her as she stood before him. Her chin was up, as usual, her expression challenging, but her arms were crossed, not in a defensive pose, but as if for comfort, to hold herself steady. Jules’ heart ached for her. Did anyone ever stand beside her, take her part? Did anyone ever ensure she got enough rest, that

she ate properly, that her needs and wants and desires were cared for?

“Where did you go today?”

“To Monmouth. To the dressmakers, as it happens,” she said, a glint in her eyes that dared him to make sport of her. As if he would. “I have decided to take your advice. I am going to the dance at the weekend. Perhaps I have been foolish in refusing to go. I am not hideous, after all, and I have many skills that would make me an admirable wife to a man of ambition. Just because I didn’t take in society, does not mean I could not make a decent match with a man who wished to better himself. So, I must thank you for that, and of course, for everything you have done here with the library. You have more than made amends for the trick you played on me so you may go with a clear conscience. No harm done.”

Jules blinked at her. He had the sense the words had been prepared and rehearsed. Not that it made them any less accurate. So, she had seen sense. That was good. Excellent, in fact. He need not worry now. He could leave knowing she would find herself a worthy husband who would see she didn’t wear hideous gowns, who would treat her as an equal and appreciate just what a magnificent creature he had been lucky enough to take as his own.

He felt sick.

Must be the cognac.

“I will, of course, be more than happy to carry on with my critique of your work if you should still wish it,” she said briskly, as if speaking to a business acquaintance. “But that can be done by correspondence in the future. So... if that’s all?”

Jules stared at her. Incensed. He had been dismissed. Again!

“That’s it, is it?” he demanded, his voice cool enough, though anyone who knew him well would recognise the dangerous tone as one that usually preceded accusations of public disorder.

“What else is there?” she asked, with the imperious lift of one amber eyebrow.

“What else?” he echoed, the words little more than a growl as he stalked towards her.

A look of alarm flitted across her face before she steeled herself and stood ramrod straight, hands fisted at her sides, chin up.

“What else?” he repeated, a chaotic mix of emotions churning inside him. Lord, but she made him furious, so... so bloody angry but... “*This* is what else, Davenport,” he said, and pulled her into his arms.

He hadn't meant to do it. At least... he didn't *think* he'd meant to do it. But whatever his intentions, it was too late now. He kissed her hard, his arms locking about her as she gave a little squeak of alarm. For a bare second, he was embracing a marble statue, and then she softened in his embrace, flinging her arms around his neck and kissing him back with such enthusiasm he nearly fell over. Jules put out a hand, grasping the mantelpiece for support and dragging his mouth from hers with some difficulty, as she had him in what amounted to a headlock.

“Christ, Davenport, let a fellow breathe, will you?” he gasped.

She blushed, looking utterly mortified and stammered an apology.

“Oh, stow it,” he said with a laugh. “I didn't say stop.”

So he kissed her again, and she responded with alacrity. Not that she had a clue what she was doing, but she wasn't letting that stop her. She pressed close and Jules wondered if he'd run mad, but Lord, she was wonderful. An appalling, managing creature, trying her best to take over when she didn't have the slightest idea what she ought to do, but still, utterly wonderful. In the end, he took her face between his hands to hold her still.

“Stop trying to win, you dreadful girl,” he scolded her, quite unable to keep the warmth and amusement from his

voice. "It isn't a competition. Like this...."

For once she held still as he brushed his lips gently over hers, pressing soft kisses to first her upper, then lower lip before running his tongue over the seam of her mouth. She opened on a soft sigh, and he pressed closer, showing her the way of it, encouraging her to mimic the sweet slide and tangle of tongues. She caught on quickly, and Jules knew he'd made an error in judgement, for now she had gained some skill and the result was terrifying. His heart hammered in his chest, lust a fire blazing out of control in his blood and an ache in his loins that was going to drive him distracted. He wanted her. Hell, he had wanted her from the start but now... now she was here, in his arms, and he could have her... if he was prepared to marry her.

He pulled back abruptly, breathing hard.

"Good God, Davenport. I was right. You are dangerous."

"D-Dangerous?" she repeated, sounding agreeably dazed, which was something. At least he wasn't the only one afflicted with this madness.

"Yes, dangerous. A danger to yourself, as well as me. What are you thinking, letting me get so carried away? Don't you have the slightest sense of self preservation? You should have slapped me, for heaven's sake. Good God, you ought to have screamed for help."

"But I didn't want to," she said, and with such candour Jules was hard pressed not to kiss her again.

Instead, he put some distance between them, running a none too steady hand through his hair.

"Well, anyway... I... I ought to go," he said, feeling like an absolute bastard, for he had no business treating her in such a way, but he wasn't about to marry her and if he stayed... He sucked in a breath. "It's for the best. We'll kill each other or... something, if I stay," he said, giving her a rueful smile.

She laughed unsteadily, still looking utterly stunned, which was a balm to his pride. Her hair was coming loose, a tumble of liquid copper about her shoulders, and her pale skin

was flushed, her lips red from the ferocity of their kisses. Christ, if he took her to bed, it would be like nothing else on earth. That thought galvanised him into action, for there would be no bed sport with Davenport unless she had a ring on her finger and so he must go. Now. This moment.

Taking his courage in his hands and not daring to linger a moment longer, he moved back to her, pressed a sweet, regretful kiss to her cheek.

“Goodbye, my adorable Boadicea,” he murmured, and walked away.

## Chapter 14



*Jules,*

*I don't know if this letter will reach you, but a little bird suggested I might find you here. If the rumours flying about town are true, I think you had better come home, my lad.*

*It's time to face the music.*

***—Excerpt of a letter to The Most Hon'ble Jules Adolphus, Marquess of Blackstone, from his father, his Grace, Robert Adolphus, The Duke of Bedwin***

**8<sup>th</sup> March 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

“What the devil is wrong with you?” Pip demanded.

Jules looked up from the plate of breakfast he had been contemplating for the past five minutes but hadn't actually touched. He blinked, torn from his tangled thoughts by Pip's irritated demand.

“Sorry, old man, wool gathering. What was that?”

Pip set his coffee cup down with a clatter, glaring at him. “I asked what the devil is wrong with you, Blackstone. You've been moping about the place ever since you got back from your ridiculous adventure with Miss Davenport. Are you certain you didn't do anything terrible over there? I'm not going to have an irate brother or that dreadful father on my doorstep, demanding you marry her?”

“No!” Jules exclaimed, stung by the accusation. “Certainly not.”

He ought not to have kissed her, though. Oh, Christ, how he wished he hadn't kissed her, for now he could not get the memory of it out of his head. He couldn't get *her* out of his head. The dance was tonight, and she was going, intending to find herself a husband. The vision of some paragon of the gentry with political ambitions sweeping her off her feet kept intruding on his thoughts. Some lusty squire's son with big shoulders, putting his hands on her, on his Boadicea. Not that she was his, he didn't *want* her to be his! But the thought of it still made his stomach churn with an odd mix of sorrow and jealousy. Good God, she was driving him distracted. He'd send himself to Bedlam if he kept this up.

"Jules!"

"What?" Jules jumped to discover Pip staring at him with a peculiar look on his face, as if he'd never seen him before.

"Well, I'll be damned," Pip said, a slow smile curving his lips, amusement glinting in his cool, silver eyes.

"What?" Jules demanded, suddenly on the defensive. To his dismay, he felt heat crawling down the back of his neck.

Pip chuckled and shook his head. "Nothing," he said, smirking and picking up his knife and fork.

"What the devil are you looking so bloody smug about?" Jules stared at him uneasily. The idea that Pip might have an inkling about what the trouble was did nothing to soothe his state of mind.

Pip rearranged his face to something less likely to get him thumped, but there was a tremor of laughter in his voice. "Not a thing, old man. I say, when is Briggs coming back to you? I've never seen you look so disordered. He'll pitch a fit if he sees the state of that cravat, and you desperately need a shave."

Jules glowered. He was well aware he did not look his sartorial best. He'd not been able to muster the energy to shave himself this morning, and whilst he was more than capable of doing it, and of tying his own cravat, it took concentration, and he seemed to have lost the knack. Damn that dreadful,



diabolical girl! He wished to God he'd never heard the name of Davenport. She was ruining him. "Briggs will be back shortly. He finished work yesterday and is packing up our belongings at the cottage this morning. I sent the carriage for him about an hour ago."

"And not a moment too soon," Pip said with a grin. "There's post for you there, by the way. I may be mistaken but I believe I recognise his grace's hand on that top one. You've been run to ground, my friend."

Jules' stomach clenched as his gaze drifted to the letters. It was indeed his father's hand. With a sense of inevitability, he reached for it and broke the seal. He scanned the brief note, a little surprised by the lack of condemnation and threats to his person if he did not present himself immediately at his father's door. Lord, perhaps things were worse than he'd thought if his father had decided to be kind to him. He didn't think he could bear that. Far better his sire should rant and rage, and tell him what an imbecile he was, than try to protect him, or—worst of all—be kind and understanding and yet so dreadfully disappointed.

Jules' stomach, already in a delicate state, tied itself into a knot. He pushed his breakfast away with distaste and opened the letter from Leo, which compounded matters by telling him to get himself back to town. Well, that was that, then. As his father said, time to face the music.

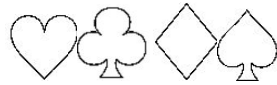
He'd best leave tomorrow morning. There was a wrenching feeling in his chest.

"Everything all right?" Pip asked gently. "You've turned the ghastliest shade, you know."

Jules gave a short laugh. "For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," he said darkly.

Pip looked vaguely alarmed. "Steady on, Blackstone. Biblical quotations from you at this hour of the morning are enough to ring alarm bells. You're not about to do anything daft now, are you?"

Jules considered this and gave Pip a long, searching look. “You know, Pip, I rather think I am.”



“Well, I never did,” Polly said with a shake of her head. “You look splendid, Miss Davenport, truly. I never saw you look so lovely.”

Selina gave a shaky little laugh, quite unable to take her eyes from the unfamiliar image in the mirror. The dressmaker, Mrs Hughes, had done her proud. She had rejected the first two dresses given her, in a lovely jonquil yellow, which Selina had thought very pretty but Hughes had been adamant would not do at all. Happily, Selina had also added four other gowns, just in case, including one of deep purple and another of black, which bore a large quantity of lace she’d thought might be useful. To her surprise, Mrs Hughes had instantly taken up the purple, insisting it was the very thing alongside the black lace. Selina had been exceedingly dubious, never having worn such a bold colour in her life before, but now...

Her heart gave an odd thump as she turned this way and that. She looked, well, not *pretty*, exactly—no one could ever describe her as pretty—but, as Polly said, she did look rather splendid. The gown was cut low over the bust, descending over her bosom in a demi-coeur style. It was set off with a black lace pelerine with two falls, and three more deep flounces of black lace at the bottom of the skirts. Despite the lace, the style was severe, and the cut seemed to highlight her large bust, making her waist look ridiculously small in comparison. Polly, who had been urged into the role of lady’s maid for the night, had begged to be allowed to do Selina’s hair for her. Selina usually did her own hair, but she remembered Mark’s words and let Polly have her way.

The results were startling. The uncompromising styles she usually favoured scraped the hair from her face and wrestled her long, heavy locks into submission with more pins and liquid Bandoline than she cared to admit, often giving her a shocking headache by the end of the day. This style, far less severe, left some curls free to fall gently about her face and

entirely changed her forthright profile, softening her features and the rather fierce line of her jaw.

“Oh, miss, put it on now, please!” Polly said, holding out a square leather box, lined with white silk. The girl was almost bouncing with excitement and Selina turned, her throat growing tight as she looked at the magnificent necklace. Her mother had left it to her, and Selina guarded it jealously, knowing her father would have sold it if he could. It was the one thing of value she owned, worth a small fortune, but she would rather have died than part with it. The necklace comprised a graduated series of large, oval amethysts, each set within a frame of diamonds. The last amethyst, a huge stone, hung like a pendant over her décolletage and, as Selina allowed Polly to fasten it in place, she remembered Mark’s words to her.

*There stands a warrior queen, was all I could think, a worthy opponent, the kind of woman a fellow goes to war with and prays he can win, for she’ll show him no mercy if he stumbles.*

For the first time in her life, she felt like a queen, and though it was irrational, she wished he hadn’t gone away. It was for the best; she knew it was. It was just as he’d said, they’d kill each other or *something*... though he had not explained what the something was and it plagued her, wondering what he had meant. But he’d had to go. He was only dallying after all, amusing himself with a gently bred spinster while he was rusticating for a bit. No doubt he was back in town by now, passing the time himself with far more sophisticated beauties and not sparing her another thought.

The idea made her throat tight, as that kiss... oh, that kiss would live in her memory until she drew her last breath. She had not known, had never understood, what it was to be kissed in such a way. She had been reshaped by that kiss, branded by it, and she did not think she would ever be the same again.

She was grateful to him, she told herself. It had been a generous thing for him to kiss her so splendidly, and to make her feel as though he’d truly desired her. He had made her feel alive, and wanted and feminine in a way she had not believed

possible. For he was big and strong and not the least bit intimidated by her, and for the first time in her life, she had felt almost delicate.

He had never tried to crush her or made her feel like she was wrong for taking charge either, for making decisions, for taking what she wanted and kissing him back like a madwoman. So yes, she was grateful, but she was glad he was gone all the same. She truly was. Absolutely. Glad and relieved. Now there were no distractions. She could get on with her life and her new purpose. Tonight, she would find herself a suitable husband, or at least, make some tentative steps in that direction. For surely Mark Briggs, or whoever he was, could not be the only man in the world who was not afraid of a strong-minded female, and whoever or wherever that man was, Selina was determined to hunt him down.

## Chapter 15



*Hart,*

*I need your help. What do you know about roses?*

*—Excerpt of a letter to Mr Hartley De Beauvoir (adopted son of Inigo and Minerva De Beauvoir) from The Most Hon'ble Jules Adolphus, Marquess of Blackstone.*

**8<sup>th</sup> March 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

“You’re going to the assembly... in Monmouth?” Pip repeated, as if Jules had just announced he intended to fly to the moon.

“Well, why else do you think I’m all tarted up?” Jules said irritably, checking his cravat in the mirror yet again, despite knowing Briggs had worked a miracle and it was a thing of perfection.

“Yes, but... in *Monmouth*,” Pip said again, disbelief in his astonished expression.

“Yes, in Monmouth. Whyever not? I’ve always known you’re a bit of a stickler, Pip, but I never knew you were such a damned snob.”

“I’m not!” Pip retorted, laughing. “I’m just trying to imagine the Marquess of Blackstone at the local assembly. My God, everyone will lose their minds.”

“Well, the Marquess of Blackstone isn’t going,” Jules shot back, tugging at his waistcoat. “Mr Mark Briggs is going.”

Pip shook his head and groaned. “Oh, Jules, you utter pillock.”

“What?”

Pip settled down in the chair by the fire and sighed. “There’s no point in me explaining it. I can see you’ve got your mind made up and I know what a pigheaded devil you are. But you’re heading for a fall, old fellow. A spectacular one, too, unless I’ve missed my guess.”

“Curse it, Pip, what the hell do you mean by that?” Jules demanded.

Pip’s expression softened. “You’ve gone and got yourself all in a knot over Miss Davenport, which is precisely why I warned you not to mess with her. You’ve never been able to resist a challenge, and she’s the kind of woman to be a red rag to that pride of yours. But she’s not the kind you dally with, and you know it, which means this is serious.”

Jules felt a tinge of colour crest his cheekbones and turned to look at the fire, frowning down into the flames. “It’s not... I don’t—”

“Oh, stow it, Blackstone. You can fool yourself if you like, but not me. But if you go wooing the lady as someone you’re not—”

“But she doesn’t know me,” Jules cut in. “She doesn’t know about all the ridiculous things I’ve done, the mess I’ve made of everything. If she did... But she likes *me*, Pip. At least I think she does, and she admires my writing, and doesn’t just want to be with me because I’m the heir to a dukedom. You, of all people, must know how liberating that is!”

Pip snorted and returned a crooked smile. “Obviously, I do. But that doesn’t change the fact that you are lying to a woman you’ve got feelings for. If this is serious, if you mean to court her, you must tell her before it goes any further.”

“Court her?” Jules said, alarmed. “I never said...”

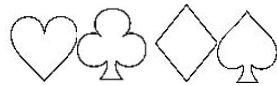
Pip made an irritated shooing gesture. “Oh, go away. Go to Monmouth and don’t woo the lady you aren’t in love with

and don't come crying to me when you've bollocksed it all up."

Jules opened his mouth to utter a stinging rejoinder and failed to think of a single thing to say in retaliation. Instead, he closed his mouth with a snap and stalked out of the room. *In love*, indeed. With Davenport! Pip had lost his bloody mind, poor fellow. It was what came of singing nursery rhymes and dressing dolls. Jules had seen the poor fellow cross-legged on the floor of the nursery yesterday, attending a doll's tea party and eating an imaginary cake! Extraordinary behaviour.

Except that it had been rather endearing, and Jules had wondered if he'd be so foolish with his own daughter, and a vision of a little freckled girl with flaming red hair had come to mind, shocking him so profoundly he'd had to take himself off for an invigorating ride in the freezing cold until he came to his senses.

Well, there you were then, the two of them were barking mad, him and Pip both. Pip over his tiny little daughter and Jules... Jules was in deep trouble.



"Oh, Selina, what a stir you've caused," Abigail said, her beautiful face flushed with excitement.

The girl had been all a-twitter at being allowed to attend her first proper assembly, despite not being formally out yet, but she was just as excited for her big sister. Selina admitted she was touched by Abigail's sincere pleasure in her triumph, and triumph it was.

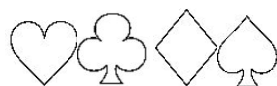
Unlike her disastrous debut, when Selina had been a shy slip of a girl, she was confident now, both in her own abilities and of her standing among the local people. Here, in this world, she was respected. Yes, perhaps they thought her a managing creature, too outspoken no doubt, and not one to suffer fools, but she was respected too. Everyone here knew she managed their estate single handed, that she alone had kept things together when her father and brother would have let them fall apart. Perhaps she was not a diamond of the first

water, perhaps men did not fall in love with her on sight and write her sonnets, but they knew her to be a woman of sense, capable, and not a silly girl. As it turned out, that was a lure all of its own to a certain kind of gentleman.

They had only been here a little over twenty minutes, the dancing had not yet begun, and much to her astonishment Selina's dance card was already half full. Unheard of! And all her partners were more than eligible. Admittedly, none of them set her heart pounding, but Mr Lloyd was a good-looking fellow. A man approaching his fortieth year, he was known to be one of the wealthiest landowners hereabouts, except for the Earl of Ashburton. When Mr Lloyd had asked if he might request the honour of a dance with her this evening, he had looked at her with such blatant admiration, Selina had felt a blush rise to her cheeks and become almost flustered. Such silliness. She felt as giddy as Abigail and feared she might giggle alongside her overexcited sister if she didn't take herself well in hand.

Then the wistful, if ridiculous, desire that Mark might be here this evening to witness her triumph and see her in her lovely new gown chased away any desire to laugh. Though it was beyond foolish, she had to acknowledge the truth of the matter. No man would ever live up to him. Not even the estimable Mr Lloyd. Her mysterious gentleman was the most gloriously handsome, most maddening, absurd, challenging, interesting man she had ever known, or ever would know. But he was gone. She scolded herself before she could fall into melancholy. She had a wonderful evening ahead of her and she was dashed well going to enjoy it.

She turned as the music struck up for the first dance, greeted her first partner, and allowed him to lead her onto the floor.



Jules stepped down from Ashburton's carriage, having decided it was prudent not to take his own, and walked into the assembly rooms. The place was an absolute crush and, not for the first time that day, Jules wondered what on earth he was



playing at. Though he was happy to attend balls and even escort his mother or sisters to gatherings when required to do so, events of this nature always put him in a rare temper. It was a peculiar situation, to be that most sought after thing, an eligible gentleman, but when you were heir to a dukedom, husband hunting put you in the biggest danger in such an arena. He knew many men envied him his rank and fortune, and he understood that. His parents had never allowed him to take his privilege for granted, but that did not mean it couldn't sometimes be a pain in the arse. The heir to one of the highest titles outside that of the royal family was a matrimonial prize many women—and their mothers—would go to outrageous and Machiavellian lengths to capture. He could never let down his guard, never pay too much attention to a particular lady, and never, ever allow himself to be tempted into a quiet corner or a private room, by accident or by design.

Yet here he was, walking into the lion's den, and sticking his head right between the blasted creature's jaws. Willingly! Not that anyone here knew who he was... he hoped. Most of his set would have gone to London after Aunt Harriet's Valentine's Day ball. That was an event no one of the *ton* would miss, for not to be invited was the most crushing blow imaginable.

A cursory look around reassured him of this fact. He recognised no one here and could only hope the same could be said of him. Either way, he could not return to town without seeing Davenport. Without telling her... Well, he wasn't certain what he wanted to tell her, but he hoped it might come to him when he saw her. If the crimcon blew up into a scandal, he had no doubt his likeness would be plastered over every newsheet going, which meant Davenport would see it. She would see the ghastly story and realise he was at the heart of it and write him off as a despicable libertine before he'd got the chance to explain things to her. Not that there was a great deal he could say in his own defence. He was a spoiled aristocrat, despite his parents' best efforts, who was squandering his life on women and getting himself into trouble.

He needed a challenge, that was the trouble. Something or someone that would take him to task for being idle, someone

who knew him and believed he could be better, that he could do better... Someone...

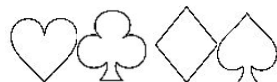
His thoughts ground to a halt as he stood among the milling crowd at the edges of the ballroom. There was a dance in progress and Jules felt his attention riveted by the woman being led around the room by a handsome fellow with silver grey hair. He wasn't the only one watching, either.

Jules looked around to see many admiring glances cast at his Boadicea. An anxious, sick sensation swirled in his guts as he wondered if he had left it too late already. He'd done things all wrong, kissing her like he had and then running for his life, telling her he was going back to town.

He *was* going back to town, but if she wanted him to come back again...

His gaze followed her around the room, and he found he was quite unable to take his eyes from her. Lord, but she was magnificent. The gown she'd ordered was perfection and whoever had made it for her deserved every commendation, for it fit like a glove. He had always known the figure beneath her hideous gowns was the kind to make a fellow weak at the knees, but Lord, how the dress highlighted her curves. The rich purple colour sang against her red hair and pale skin, and she looked like an empress. The amethysts sparkling at her throat and ears glittered in the lamplight and Jules felt dazzled, as if the vision of her would be stamped on his mind forever, burned into his heart.

There was a buzzing sound in his ears, but he did not know where it came from and nor did he care. The moment the dance ended, he was moving, striding across the floor with one purpose in mind. To claim his Boadicea.



Selina reached for the fan dangling from her wrist and applied it with some force. Good heavens. Three dances in and she was breathless. She had forgotten the stamina required for some of these events. Still, it was going very well, and she had enjoyed dancing with all her partners, though she had

reprimanded Major Jones for holding her far too closely. He had apologised very prettily, but with such a twinkle in his eyes that she was uncertain she wished to dance with him again.

Abigail handed her a glass of lemonade and Selina took a grateful sip, suddenly aware of an excited murmur of sound as the chatter of the crowd increased. She handed the glass back to Abigail, who was frowning.

“What are they all in such a-twitter about?” she demanded.

Abigail shook her head. “I don’t know... Oh!”

“What?”

Selina looked at the astonished expression on her sister’s face and followed her gaze.

“I think that’s why,” Abigail said, sounding a little breathless.

Selina could understand it. The man striding towards her with such a look of determination in his eyes did not belong here. Though he wore the same outfit of black and white as every other man here, it looked entirely different on him. His cravat and shirt were the crisp, bright white of a fresh fall of snow, and his coat and tight-fitting trousers looked to have been moulded to a physique that would have made Adonis weep with envy. Everything about him screamed quality of a rank far beyond anything anyone else here could claim. He was breathtaking; he stuck out like a sore thumb, and he was heading straight for her.

Selina gasped. Whatever was he doing here and... who the devil *was* this man?

“Miss Davenport, good evening to you,” he said as he reached her and executed a formal bow.

“M-Mr Briggs,” she replied, unnerved to discover her voice sounding so faint and unlike herself.

He winced, his expression rueful. “About that, Davenport... We need to talk.”

“But what are you doing here?” she asked, confounded.

“Trying to talk to you,” he said, grimacing as he looked around to discover everyone was watching them and hardly being subtle about it either.

“Oh, yes, because a public dance is the ideal place for a private conversation,” she replied dryly.

His lips twitched. “I do enjoy it when you put me in my place, Boadicea, but needs must. I’ll take all your waltzes, if you please.”

“There’s only one left,” she replied, not without some satisfaction.

He glowered at her. “Damn it, Davenport,” he said, frustration vibrating from him. He turned to Abigail and smiled. “Fetch your sister a glass of lemonade, if you please.”

“But we have a glass, we’re sharing it,” Selina objected, not wishing to subject Abigail to fighting her way through the crowd again.

Abigail, however, looked at the glinting green eyes fixed upon her thoughtfully, and returned a grin. “Yes, of course. Though it might take me a while,” she added, with a saucy tone Selina did not understand.

“Good girl,” Mark replied approvingly, watching her go, before turning back to Selina and lowering his voice. “I ought never to have left last night, not with so much unsaid, only... I *had* to. You do see that?”

“Yes, you need to go back to town shortly. I quite understand,” she replied, telling her irrational heart that there was not the slightest need to get its hopes up.

He wasn’t here for romantic reasons. That was just silliness, and she should stop feeling all flushed and faint and breathless, for she would only end up feeling a fool.

“No!” he muttered, irritated now. “That is not why.”

“Then, what is?” she demanded, resenting him for crashing in upon her evening and looking so gloriously

handsome and making every other man here look dull and unappealing in contrast. It wasn't fair.

"Because, you little nitwit, I would have seduced you had I stayed, and you'd not have done a thing to stop me," he growled in her ear.

Selina felt the blush surge up her chest, her throat, and scald her cheeks.

"Good God, stop that. Everyone will know what I'm talking to you about if you turn that colour!" he exclaimed, moving to stand in front of her and shield her from the view of as many people as possible.

"Then you ought not say such things!" she objected, fanning herself with renewed vigour.

"It needed saying," he replied doggedly. "I can't get near you without wanting to put my hands on you, and... and that dress doesn't help. Damn me, Boadicea, I was right, you know. You look like a queen tonight. I've never seen anything so splendid in all my days."

The blush couldn't get any worse, thank heavens, though the words warmed her from head to toe. She dared a glance up at him, feeling ridiculously shy and pleased at his approval.

"Boadicea?" she repeated, bewildered.

"My warrior queen."

He even said it with a straight face.

"Truly?"

His expression softened, a look in his eyes that made her heart thump hard in her chest, for all she could not believe in it. "Every man here is watching you, love, don't you know that? But they're only observers, for you belong to me. Do you understand?"

Selina looked up at him, not understanding at all. She could not have heard him correctly.

"Everyone is looking at you," she amended, for that was blatantly obvious. "They want to know who you are, and no, I

don't understand. What do you mean?"

He opened his mouth to speak but a polite cough from beside her had her turning to see Mr Parry had arrived to claim his dance.

"If you'll excuse me," she said, wishing poor Mr Parry to the devil as he led her away.

Her head was whirling long before the dance began as she replayed Mark's words. He had called her *love*, and that she belonged to him. To *him!* If she had been any other woman, she would have known at once that it was a declaration, but she was Selina Davenport, and from this man...

He had turned up on her doorstep, intent on humiliating her by pretending to be someone he wasn't. Yes, he'd admitted to all that, and he had apologised, but he had never revealed himself. His appearance tonight, the reaction of her neighbours and friends, was startling enough to prove, if proof were required, that he was not only a gentleman, but from the highest ranks of society. A man like that would not be looking for a wife in the depths of Monmouthshire, of all places. Unless it wasn't a wife he wanted. Selina gasped.

"Beg pardon, did I tread on your toes again?" Mr Parry asked cheerfully.

"No, not at all," she replied, the words automatic, for he had stamped over her toes several times already, just not at that moment.

She looked at him, her heart thundering. He was a decent fellow, a good man with a pleasant face, though shiny with perspiration. His hands were clammy, too. He owned a handsome farmhouse about ten miles from her own home and was a prosperous landowner. It was by no means a brilliant match, but not one to blush for, either. She would have a comfortable home, a kind husband, a family of her own. It would not be an offer to turn her nose up at, assuming she had correctly interpreted the gleam of interest in his eyes.

Finally, the dance ended, and Selina hurried towards the doors before Mark could waylay her. She needed a moment

alone, to collect herself. Making her way past the refreshments room and the queue for the ladies retiring room, Selina hurried on, relieved to discover there were quite a few people milling about outside, taking the air. She shivered, turning her face up to the cold night sky, and leaping from her skin as a deep voice sounded behind her.

“You don’t escape me that easily, Davenport.”

Swinging about, she faced him. The hard planes of his face seemed sharper in the moonlight, too handsome, the glitter in his eyes a warning she was out of her depth.

“What do you want from me?” she demanded.

His expression changed to something softer and a little bewildered. “I hardly know,” he admitted. “All I know is I can’t get you out of my head, you dreadful girl.”

“And you want... you w-want...” she began, not knowing how to put such a crude demand into words she could speak aloud.

He took a step closer. “I want you,” he said, his voice a thrilling murmur of sound that slid over her skin like a caress, too intimate, too arousing. Far too tempting.

“There are men here that would marry me,” she said, putting her chin up.

He snorted. “I am well aware of that, I assure you. Why the devil else do you think I’m so determined to stake my claim before I leave?”

Selina’s breath hitched. The nerve of the man! “So, you mean to secure me as... as what? Your sometime mistress, to pass the time while you are stuck out in the countryside with nothing better to do?”

He reared back as if she’d struck him.

“I mean to do *what*?” he repeated, and with such outrage, she wondered if she had been a little hasty.

“I don’t know!” she threw up her hands, fighting to moderate her tone before people started looking at them. Except, the music had begun again, and everyone had gone

back inside. It was only the two of them now. She focused on her point, determined to understand what it was he wanted with her. “You come here, out of the blue, telling me things I find exceedingly difficult to comprehend, and I—”

She didn’t get to say anything else, for he pulled her into his arms and kissed her with such savagery, her mind went blank. He held her ruthlessly tight, so tight she could not breathe, his lips punishing against hers. It was marvellous.

Finally, he released her, and she might have stumbled if he hadn’t caught hold of her again.

“You ridiculous girl, Davenport. You can’t seriously believe I was offering you a *carte blanche*?” he demanded, amusement and exasperation in his voice. “A fellow doesn’t do that to respectable females, surely you know that much?”

She gave a hiccupping sort of laugh, too stunned to know much of anything at that moment.

“Then why?” she asked, staring up at him with too much hope in her heart. Her mind was screaming at her, telling her it was a trick, a lie, that it was too good to be true. Men like him did not fall in love with or marry girls like her. At least, not outside of romance novels. Happy ever afters only belonged within the pages of a good book.

He reached out, caressing her cheek with his hand, staring at her with affection in his eyes. “I hardly know, Davenport. I only know that you have got under my skin. I think of you constantly and I want to be with you. I admire you, more than I have ever admired any woman outside of my own mother. You’d like her, by the way.”

“Your m-mother?” she repeated, dazed with shock.

“Still think I’m giving you a slip on the shoulder?” he asked with laughter in his voice. “Because I would not refer to my mother in those circumstances, I assure you.”

“I should think not,” she replied indignantly, still finding it hard to follow the conversation with anything approaching seriousness. “B-But, Mark, I don’t even know who you are.”



His face fell, those glinting green eyes suddenly serious. “No. I know, and we need to speak about that.”

She nodded, bracing herself for the worst.

Voices and laughter coming from below the terrace they stood on and, moving closer, caught his attention and he gave an irritated sigh. “Come, we can’t stay here. You’ll be well and truly ruined if you’re discovered alone with me.”

“Are you very wicked, then?” she asked, thinking to tease him but becoming increasingly alarmed by the dark expression on his face.

He didn’t reply, which was answer enough, and Selina remembered she had painted him as a womaniser from the start. So, she ought not be surprised, or disappointed.

He led her back inside, pushing her through one door and coming around the long way to meet her back inside the ballroom. A practised move to avert suspicion, and one she suspected he was well accustomed to.

“I’ll come to the house tonight,” he said once they were standing together again. “Then we can talk properly. I’ll tell you everything, I promise.”

She nodded, looking up at him with foreboding in her heart.

“Don’t look like that,” he said, and she saw anxiety in his eyes. “Please, Davenport. I know I must appear to be something of a loose screw, and I know you’ll not think much better of me when you discover who I am, but—”

“Selina!”

Selina jolted in surprise at the familiar bellow and turned automatically.

“Hubert!” she exclaimed in shock, stunned to see her older brother.

“Well, promised I’d be here to escort Abigail, didn’t I, sis?” he said genially.

“You did.” Selina offered him a smile, forbearing to remark that he was supposed to have escorted them to the event, not turned up halfway through it. Hubert, however, was beaming at her as if he expected to be congratulated on being such a splendid brother, so she added a hasty, “Thank you.”

Hubert was a man of many and mercurial moods, but sulking, she could not abide.

“Looking in prime twig tonight, Lina, old girl, if I might say so. You’ll never be a beauty, far too tall and mannish for that, but all the same. You’ve put on a good show. I feel quite proud of you.”

“How very gratifying,” she said icily, though the words went straight over Hubert’s head as always.

Mark, however... Selina’s breath caught at the murderous glint in his eyes. He was glaring at Hubert in a manner that boded ill for her brother’s health.

“You’ve not introduced me, Miss Davenport,” he said, and the icy manner, the hauteur with which he spoke, gave her a sudden chill as she wondered again who this man was.

Hubert looked at him then, giving Mark his attention for the first time and she was struck by the sudden change in his expression, and the almost worshipful look in her sibling’s eyes.

“Good God,” Hubert said, sounding breathless with excitement. “It... It *is* you? By Jove, I can hardly believe my eyes. Here, in Monmouth! Oh, but do excuse me, running off at the mouth, but it takes a fellow by surprise to come home and find *Blackstone* in such a deadly backwater as this!”

Mark... or she supposed she must now think of him as Blackstone, was rigid with suppressed emotion, not that Hubert noticed.

“I say, I must tell you, I so admire that nifty way you have with a cravat. I don’t suppose you’d consider showing me while you’re staying here, though why in God’s name you would want to, unless....” Hubert slapped a hand to his forehead. “Oh, but I’m a slowtop. You’re here visiting

Ashburton, no doubt. Thick as thieves, you two, I know, which reminds me. Can't you have a word with that Hunt fellow? Try as I might, I cannot persuade him to let me join the Sons of Hades."

"Mr Hunt makes his own decision," Mark replied coldly. "I have not the slightest influence over him."

Selina stiffened. The name of Blackstone had rung a faint bell, but she had never troubled herself overmuch with the names of all those in the upper echelons of society, safe in the knowledge that she would have nothing to do with them. The Sons of Hades, however, was a title she was well aware belonged to a notorious and exclusive club that Hubert was wild to join. The rules for entry were vague, but you had to be obscenely rich and run with a fast set of society known for their hard drinking and wild behaviour. There were a handful of members, most of whom who were notorious, Ashburton had certainly been one often written up in the scandal sheets though he'd been absent for the past year or more. The other....

"Oh, pity that," Hubert said with a sigh. "Still, just you wait until I tell my friends I came home and discovered the Marquess of Blackstone at the local assembly. They won't credit it."

Hubert never had mastered the art of speaking at a level that was anything less than a roar, and so his words dropped like a stone into the still waters of the assembly and the ripples spread quickly out. Murmurs of interest and whispers and shocked gasps and feminine giggles merged until the sound was a loud buzz in Selina's ears. The Marquess of Blackstone. Son and heir to the Duke of Bedwin. Notorious libertine and one of the founding members of that despicable club of profligates and ne'er-do-wells.

"Hubert," Selina said, relieved to discover her voice was fairly steady. "I'd like to go home now, please."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Lina, I've just got here," Hubert protested.

“Now, Hubert,” Selina repeated, in the obey or die voice even Hubert would not willingly ignore. “I am feeling rather unwell.”

“Dash it all, though I must say, you’ve gone an awfully funny colour. Not going to cast up your accounts, are you?”

“Certainly, and over those ridiculous new boots you’re wearing if you do not take me home at once.”

Hubert paled and leapt into action at this dreadful threat. “I’ll fetch the carriage around,” he said, and hurried away.

There was a taut silence during which Selina stared out unseeingly across the ballroom. Though she had made up her threat to Hubert, the possibility of doing as she’d told him seemed increasingly likely.

“Davenport.” His voice was soft, but somehow made her flinch. “I’m sorry you had to find out that way. I was going to explain everything to you tonight.”

She nodded, feeling somewhat numb. “Yes, my lord, you did say you would.”

“Please, don’t start ‘my lording’ me,” he said, an edge to his voice. “You may call me Jules in private, or Blackstone in public.”

“Not Mark, then... oh, the *Marquess* of Blackstone,” she said with a little laugh. “That’s quite funny.”

“Briggs’ idea of a joke,” he said, watching her. She could feel his gaze upon her like a weight but could not quite bring herself to meet his eyes.

“So, you are heir to the Bedwin dukedom. That makes you the biggest prize on the marriage mart, surely? I imagine your parents have a list of suitable young ladies as long as their arms. Though it could run for a mile and a half, and my name would still not be there. If you would excuse me—”

“No! Dash it, I won’t let you run out on me. My parents haven’t got a list,” he retorted, adding judiciously. “At least, I don’t think they have, but either way, they aren’t the usual

aristocrats wanting a marriage of fortune and property. They want me to marry someone of my choosing.”

“That does not mean they will approve if you marry beneath yourself. I beg your pardon, here comes Hubert.”

Selina thought she had never been so pleased to see her brother in all her days. Abigail, having taken an age to carry out her mission, arrived at the same moment.

“Here’s your lemonade,” she said to Selina, holding out a glass to her before noting their sibling. “Oh, Hubert, you came!”

It made Selina’s heart hurt to see the way Abigail’s eyes lit up at the sight of her big brother. Her sister did not know how her brother and father squandered their funds on pleasure seeking rather than taking care of them, for Selina had shielded her from the truth of it. And though Abigail might reproach Hubert for visiting so seldom, she was still young enough to be in awe of the big brother who made her laugh and brought her trinkets and sweetmeats. She did not know that the ridiculous get up he was rigged out in would have cost a fortune, probably more than enough to repair their leaking roof. Not that the idea of paying for the roof instead would cross their darling brother’s mind for even a second.

“Yes, and now we’re going, pet,” Hubert said with a sigh. “Your sister is as green as pea soup. Did you eat some bad chicken, Lina? I did that once. Lord, never been so sick in all my days.”

“No,” Selina said, holding onto her patience by a thread.

“Oh, Selina, don’t say it!” Abigail said in dismay.

Selina regarded her beautiful little sister, her eyes wide with disappointment, and knew she could not spoil this for her. Poor Abigail had been looking forward to tonight for weeks and to make her leave so early would be cruel.

“No dear. Hubert will see me to my carriage. I’m quite capable of travelling home alone and he will stay to chaperone you. I’ll send the carriage directly back so it will be here in time to pick you up.”

Abigail heaved a sigh, as though some dreadful disaster had been narrowly averted. Selina smiled despite herself.

“Is the carriage ready, then?” she asked Hubert, who nodded.

“Waiting outside, so come along before you make a spectacle of yourself and flash the hash.”

Selina tolerated the indelicate cant comment with as much grace as she could manage, before kissing Abigail’s cheek and wishing her a lovely evening.

“It won’t be the same without you, though,” Abigail said wistfully, and with such sincerity Selina was touched. Perhaps they did not all think her such a harridan after all.

Then she turned to Mark—no, to Blackstone. “Good evening, Lord Blackstone, I hope you have a pleasant journey back to London.”

Then, with what she thought was remarkable composure bearing in mind she wanted to weep with disappointment, she walked away.

## Chapter 16



*Jules,*

*If you think I'm going to find you roses so you can strew their petals over your latest light o'love's boudoir at this time of year, you've lost your mind.*

*However, supposing there is a slim possibility this was a sensible question, I know a fair bit. If you are serious, I would need to know the soil, and situation they would be planted in – is it in full sun, sheltered, etc. Climbing or shrub roses? What colours are you thinking of and is there a design to follow?*

*What are you up to?*

***—Excerpt of a letter to The Most Hon'ble Jules Adolphus, Marquess of Blackstone from Mr Hartley De Beauvoir (adopted son of Inigo and Minerva De Beauvoir).***

**8<sup>th</sup> March 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

“I thought you were Mr Briggs?”

Jules turned to Abigail, who was staring at him, her pretty nose wrinkled with confusion.

“I lied,” he said shortly, too anxious to come up with a more palatable explanation. “I was angry with your sister about something, and so I came here to get my own back, except—”

“Except you like her,” Abigail said with a grin. “You like her a lot. In fact—”

Jules sent her a look of pure exasperation. “Yes, I know. I know!” he said tersely. “I don’t understand why everyone thinks I’m a complete dolt, but I had gathered that much.”

“What are you going to do about it, then?” she demanded, folding her arms. “Faint heart et cetera.” She waved a hand airily at him, as if expecting him to perform a magic trick.

Scowling, Jules ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “What can I do? I must return to London tomorrow and she’s gone home and—”

“Well, go after her, then!” Abigail said, stamping her foot. “In romance novels, if the heroine leaves, the hero chases after her. He doesn’t just stand there thinking, oh well, that’s that.”

Jules stared at her. “A fair point well made. If you’ll excuse me.”

He turned on his heel, and Abigail wished him luck as he went, which made him feel a little better. At least she didn’t seem to dislike the idea of him courting her sister. That was what he was going to do, he realised as he strode through the crowd, ignoring all the whispers and stares as people watched him go. Frustration gnawed at him as he waited for his coat and hat to be brought and he practically ran for the exit the moment they were handed to him.

As he pushed open the door to the building and felt the chill evening air hit his skin, he saw Hubert close the carriage door. It moved away, the horses’ hooves ringing out on the cobblestones. Hurrying down the stairs to the street, he knew he could not hail the driver and ask him to stop, for there were too many people watching.

Instead, he crossed the road, walking briskly in the same direction as the horses picked up speed. If they got too far ahead, he wouldn’t have a chance of catching them. They turned the corner, easing smoothly into a lively trot. Jules shot a quick glance behind him and looked about the street to be certain no one was watching and ran.

Though he was far fitter than many people might realise, being fond of boxing and riding and many gentlemanly sports,



running had never been something in which he'd found any pleasure. Running on cobbled stones did not improve his opinion of the activity and he gritted his teeth as they slammed against the soles of his feet. The carriage was moving fast now and had already gained a considerable lead. Jules grabbed his hat before it hit the ground and ran full tilt towards the carriage. Finally coming alongside, he made a grab for the door handle, swung it open, and heaved himself inside.

His arrival in his beloved's presence was not as elegant as he might have hoped. He'd intended to deposit himself in the seat beside her and make some urbane comment about just popping in for a chat. Instead, he found himself sprawled at her feet, gasping like a landed fish and feeling utterly ridiculous.

The shriek of alarm that heralded his entrance into the carriage swiftly became an indignant expression of outrage.

"What in the name of heaven do you think you are doing?" Davenport demanded, staring at him with an expression of such horror he wondered if this had been such a good idea after all. Especially as he couldn't speak, too focused on trying to breathe to attempt more than a few garbled words.

"Need... talk," he managed between gasps. "Give... give... give me a moment...."

He lay on his back on the carriage floor, heedless of the damage to his clothes—Briggs would have his hide for this—and narrowly missing getting his ankles broken as the carriage turned a sharp corner and the heavy door slammed shut.

Davenport peered down at him as if he'd crawled out from under something unpleasant.

"For heaven's sake, get up. You look ridiculous."

He didn't doubt it, but the effort of moving was not appealing. Still, needs must. Grasping the velvet-covered seat cushion, he pulled himself up and heaved his body onto the seat beside her. Davenport moved away, pressing herself as far into the opposite corner as she could go.

“If you think I’m going to attempt to ravish you,” Jules said, tugging a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping the sweat from his face with it. “You have a very inflated notion of my prowess. I need a lie down in a dark room.”

“Then go and find one and leave me be!” she said crossly.

Jules sighed. “Davenport. I have a horrible reputation, as I’m sure you are aware. I’ve no doubt you think me a vile womaniser and I can’t say much in my own defence, except that I think I’ve been looking for something... for someone,” he amended. “All these years, and I didn’t know it. But I was looking in all the wrong places. My father tried to tell me, but I didn’t listen. It was you, though, my darling Boadicea. I was searching for a strong, impossible, intelligent, wonderful girl who was brave enough to put me in my place and tell me when I was getting it wrong. Someone who could see my mistakes and make them better, make *me* better...”

She blinked hard, her eyes glittering in the dim light of the carriage lamp. He hoped perhaps that was a good sign.

“You cannot be serious,” she said, but there was a quaver in her voice.

Jules laughed. “Listen here, Davenport. I’ve been a target for marriage minded mamas and their title hungry daughters since I was barely out of short trousers. I’ve been on the run all these years and have made a career out of dodging anything that remotely resembled a respectable woman. Yet here I am, literally throwing myself at your feet like a lunatic, and begging you for a chance to prove myself. To court you, my dearest Boadicea, is all I want. Just a chance to win your heart. Are you going to throw all that back in my face?”

She gave him a look of concern, as if she thought his recent exertions had somehow damaged his faculties.

“It won’t work,” she said, almost kindly, as if explaining something to a small child. “We are from different worlds.”

“Nonsense,” he said briskly. “You are used to managing a household and people. You can’t be bullied, and you have a

strength of character I recognise as something to be admired. Besides all of that... I need you. You know that I do.”

He watched her, saw the scepticism in her eyes, and knew this would not be easy. Davenport was no pushover, but he had known that from the start.

She gave a little snort and shook her head. “You need a good editor, that’s all.”

Jules shifted closer to her on the seat and leaned closer, dismayed when she gasped and pressed back harder against the side of the carriage.

“You liked it when I kissed you before,” he reminded her.

“That was different,” she replied with dignity, blushing hard enough that he could see the colour rise, even in the indifferent light from the carriage lamp.

“How was that different?”

“Because, my lord, we are in a closed carriage,” she replied, sounding exasperated. “Why I must explain that I shall be ruined if anyone finds us here, I do not know.”

“Oh, you don’t,” he said blithely. “However, the same applied to the other times I’ve kissed you, and you didn’t object then.”

“That was before,” she muttered, tugging her cloak tighter around her and folding her arms.

“Before what?”

“Before I knew you were the heir to one of the most powerful dukedoms in the country!” she snapped. “Have you taken leave of your senses? You need to marry someone of your own kind.”

“Don’t be such a snob. Besides, you are my kind,” he said, grinning at her. “The kind I like best. Bossy and opinionated and managing, and likely to murder me if I behave in a way that you disapprove of.”

“You,” she said with dignity, “are a very odd fellow.”

“Perhaps,” he agreed with a shrug. “But strong women don’t frighten me. I view them as a challenge.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “If you are thinking of making sport of me—”

“Lord, no. I’ve made my intentions clear, I think. Haven’t I? I want to court you. If you’ll let me.”

She put up her chin, turning away from him. “You would need to apply to my father for permission,” she said coolly.

“Nonsense. That halfwit? You wouldn’t listen to a word the old windbag said, nor care for the opinion of that fribble of a brother of yours, so don’t try giving me that line, my girl. Did you see the appalling get up he was wearing?” Jules shuddered.

“Oh, wasn’t it awful?” She smiled before realising she had been betrayed into doing so and firmed her lips in a thin line. When she spoke again, it was with renewed hauteur. “I will thank you not to speak of my father, nor my brother, in such terms.”

“Well, it’s not my fault he looked like a constipated pigeon,” Jules retorted. He studied her face, pleased to note that her lips twitched with the effort of not laughing. “Don’t deny it now, love.”

She sent him a reproachful glare. “I’m not denying it, but I am not your love, and you must stop speaking to me in this... this ridiculous fashion. It won’t do,” she added, but with enough regret behind the words to encourage Jules that all was not lost.

“I think it will,” he told her firmly.

Davenport threw up her hands and turned to look out of the window. He watched her as the darkened streets passed by. She was silent for a long moment.

“You are going back to London?”

“Yes. In the morning,” he said with a sigh. “I... I’m afraid I’m in rather a lot of trouble. I hope it will come to nothing,

but there's a chance there will be a very unpleasant story in the newspapers over the coming days."

She turned back, giving him a hard, questioning look. "What did you do?"

"What I always do," he said with a bitter laugh. "I jump in with both feet without considering the consequences. Like pretending to be someone I'm not in order to get back at a lady for a cutting, if accurate, review."

"Like throwing yourself into courtship with an unsuitable lady when you barely even know her," she amended, with a little sniff.

"That's different," he said softly. "I know I'm right this time and, as for not knowing you, I *do* know you. I know all I need to know, but I am perfectly ready to spend the time to discover every single thing about you, my own dreadful Davenport."

"Oh!" she said, turning on him, her cheeks flushed, eyes sparkling. "I do wish you would stop making love to me in such a way. It's most disconcerting and distracting when I am trying so hard to be c-cross with you!"

"Give it up, love," Jules advised her sternly. "It's not worth the effort. And if you think this is me trying to make love to you, I don't think you've been paying attention."

With that, he reached for her, pulling her into his arms and kissing her hard. One hand came up to rest upon his chest and he wondered if she could feel the way his heart was thundering. How extraordinary to get to such an age and realise he'd not had the least idea about what desire really felt like. Not just lust, but the kind of wanting that began as an ache in your soul and threatened to swallow you down into darkness if you could not have the woman you yearned for.

The kiss stretched on, and he allowed himself the pleasure of dreaming of kisses where he could let his hands wander, to explore the dangerous curves that had caught his attention from the first. Reluctantly, he let her go, aware that a

respectable courtship did not begin by debauching one's beloved in a carriage.

"Well, love, I think this is where I get out," he said, eyeing the passing countryside.

They'd made good time, though she had a fair way to travel yet. He'd have to send someone with a message for his driver to come, but the gates to Ashburton's place were at the top of the hill they were climbing. He was going to have a cold trudge home, however, as it was a good three miles or more to the house. Jules turned back to her, pleased to see she was gazing at him with the dazed expression she always got after he'd kissed her.

"Unless you would like me to accompany you home. I'd be delighted to do so," he added hopefully.

She blinked and gave a distracted laugh, touching a finger to her reddened lips. "I think I may be safer alone."

He grinned, unable to disagree with that observation, but then he remembered what he was facing, and the grin faded to something more serious. "If you do hear *things* about me, try not to think too ill of me, please, love. I was a damned fool, and I deserve everything that's coming, but if I had known... if I had the slightest inkling—"

She reached up and pressed a finger to his lips. "Go back to London, my lord. Get your life in order. Talk to your parents. I'm certain they will make you see sense. But do not give me any promises or meaningless words until you have had time to reflect and consider."

He took her hand in his, holding it tight. "You think me shallow," he said reproachfully, unable to squash the hurt of that.

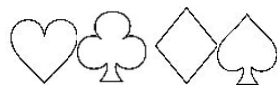
She shook her head, her smile soft and kind. "No. I think you are romantic and impulsive, like many of the characters in your books. I know you mean what you say, now at least, but I do not believe your feelings are as strong as you claim. If they are, however, you may prove me wrong."

“I will,” he said firmly. Raising her gloved hand to his lips and kissing her fingers, he knew he could prove that much. “Just watch me.”

“Oh, I shall,” she said, a wistful note to the words that was more encouraging than perhaps she realised.

“Goodbye, my darling Davenport. I shall be back for you. Just wait and see.”

And with that, he waited for the carriage to slow as it approached a tight bend in the road, opened the door, and jumped out.



Pip made his way down the stairs, his tread heavy, the candle he held guttering from the draft that whistled around the front door. He thought wistfully of his snug little townhouse in London. It had every modern convenience, including a tiled bathing room and hot and cold running water. He was used to the difficulties of living in a historic house. But whilst his childhood home at Dern Palace was a prime example of all the inconvenience of a vast property that was hundreds of years old and covered several acres of ground, it was, at least, not falling down. At least, not all at once. It was also homey in a way he did not know how to create. His mother had a knack for it, for making a home, and he badly needed her advice.

A longing for her hit him so hard and fast he had to scold himself roundly. He was not a snot-nosed boy any longer, but a man of eight and twenty. A father, God help his sweet little girl. But he had no business feeling so ridiculously homesick, for wishing his mother would come through the door and hug him and ruffle his hair like she had when he was a child, telling him it would all be all right. And it always had been. She and Papa had seen to that. He'd had a gilded childhood, and he was repaying them by bringing an illegitimate daughter into the world and keeping her a secret from them. Oh, what a son to be proud of he was turning out to be.

Shame pressed down on him, making his stomach churn. He would be better. He would *do* better. If only he could show them that he was doing everything in his power to make a home for Otilie, to create a place where she could grow up safe and happy, then perhaps they could see he was making amends. Perhaps they, too, would not feel such shame.

He brought to mind his father, wondering what the great man might think of him now, but shied away, too cowardly to contemplate his displeasure. Thoughts of his magnificent sire left him feeling shaken and wretched. All Pip's life he had aspired to be the image of him, to walk in his footsteps and become as respected and powerful as the man he admired above all others. Well, he was off to a pretty shaky start, and he did not see how he would ever recapture the lost ground.

“There you are.”

Pip jumped, almost dropping the candle. The note of irritation in the woman's voice was unmistakable, and though he could barely see her through the gloom, he had no trouble identifying the person speaking. It was astonishing how much disgust she could inject into so few words, but Mrs Harris truly despised him. Pip wondered, not for the first time, why he didn't just get rid of her, but Otilie adored her and perhaps... perhaps he felt like he was getting his just desserts, in keeping close someone who so thoroughly hated him and made no bones about showing it.

“Mrs Harris,” he said politely, determined to be a gentleman and give her no further reason for disliking him so intensely... apart from being a despicable whoreson bringing shame down on the head of an innocent child, anyway. “You were looking for me?”

“Yes. The fireplace in the nursery is smoking again. It won't do.”

Pip sighed. “No, indeed. I thought the problem had been remedied, but apparently not.”

“That is because it only happens when the wind is coming from the west,” she said, with such a look down her nose at him—even though she was looking up—because he hadn't



figured out this simple fact. He almost laughed but thought better of it.

She was a funny little thing. Petite, with appalling hair of a dingy brown that she insisted on scraping back into a viciously tight bun. It made him wince to contemplate how many pins she must use to hold it in place. Perhaps she was so snappy all the time because she had a constant headache. She wore spectacles too, which always seemed grubby, an odd thing when the rest of her was so neat and spotless.

“I see,” he said with interest. “So how do we remedy the problem?”

“Do I look like a chimney sweep?” she asked him, indignation glittering in her eyes.

He still wasn't certain of their colour.

“No, indeed, I only...” But she had turned on her heel and stalked off without another word. “Good night, Mrs Harris. It was pleasant talking to you,” he said quietly, shaking his head.

Turning, he carried on to the parlour, which was one of the few comfortable rooms in the house. He felt weary to his bones, having spent the day sorting through an attic room which seemed to have been used as a dumping ground for odds and ends of furniture and paintings and things which his late and unlamented aunt had decided needed to be put out of her sight. It wasn't a job he felt he could leave to the servants, who might end up throwing some priceless antique or family heirloom onto the bonfire that burned almost constantly around the place as he reclaimed it from the wilderness.

It was a dirty and wearing job and he still felt dusty and grimy, despite having given himself a thorough scrub. The only bright spot in his day had been taking Otilie out for a ride on the pony he had bought for her. Seeing her face light up had filled him with joy, and determination enough to go back to the dusty mess in the attic and get the job done. There had been another highlight, he realised as he crossed the freezing cold entrance hall. Discovering that Jules had finally got his comeuppance and fallen hard for Miss Davenport, of

all females, had been priceless. The poor idiot hadn't even realised it.

Pip chuckled and then frowned as movement outside caught his eye. He walked to the window, peering out into the moonlight.

Opening the front door, he stepped out into the night, unsurprised to discover the temperature did not differ from inside the hall and was merely a little windier.

“What the devil are you playing at?” he demanded, watching Jules trudge up the weed-ridden driveway, shoulders hunched against the cold, his hands thrust into his coat pockets. “What have you done with the carriage?”

“Need to send someone over there with a note for the driver,” he said tersely. “Well, don't stand there, let me in. I'm frozen to the marrow, and I need a drink.”

Bewildered, but prepared to be entertained—Jules' disasters were usually good for a laugh—he followed his friend into the parlour and poured two glasses of brandy. Jules was standing in front of the fire, holding his hands out to the flames.

“Well, what have you done now?” Pip demanded, handing Jules his drink and settling himself down in his favourite chair.

Jules favoured him with a baleful glare and sipped his drink. “Among other things, I begged Miss Davenport to let me court her. I was sprawled on my back on the floor of her carriage at the time... and not for any interesting reasons, I assure you. I think the pathetic nature of the pose may be the only thing in my favour. She might take pity on me and allow me a chance if I'm lucky,” he said with a snort.

Pip gave a choked laugh and rubbed a hand over his face. “Lord, Jules. How do you do it?”

“It's a gift,” he said morosely. He set the glass down on the mantelpiece and shrugged out of his coat, tossing it over the back of the chair before sitting down. “She thinks I'm a loose screw. That I'm from a different world and the moment I

return to London, I'll forget all about her, or that my parents will make me see sense."

"Well, she has a point," Pip said, not unkindly. "You're hardly noted for your fidelity. You fall in and out of love so fast I don't have time to learn the girl's name before there's a new one on your arm."

Jules let out a huff of laughter. "That wasn't love, that was lust. This is different. This is serious," he said quietly. "And I'm going back to London, likely about to become the centre of the biggest scandal in decades. Bearing in mind she thinks my title is a decided mark against me, how do you think that will make me look as a candidate for her hand?" he asked, and with such a despondent tone, Pip realised it really was serious.

Jules wasn't playing at this. He meant to have Davenport for his wife.

"I think that if she cares for you, she will stand by you. After all, this happened before you even met her. If you can prove to her you've grown up, that you want to settle down and make a life with her, then you'll win the lady's hand."

Jules returned a wry smile and raised his glass. "Thanks, Ashburton. I needed to hear that."

Pip nodded and mirrored the gesture. "Anytime, Blackstone, and best of luck. I don't doubt that you're going to need it."

## Chapter 17



*Thorn,*

*How are you? Have you been keeping an eye on Cat? How does she fare? I've asked her to come and stay but I think it had better wait until the weather improves. Lord, does it never stop raining here?*

*Jules has been staying with me for a while, but he left a few days ago. Yes, he knows about Otilie now, not that I invited him. The devil turned up like a bad penny in his usual airy fashion. You'll never believe what he's got himself into this time.*

*Anyway, the truth is, I'm a tad blue devilled. I don't suppose you fancy coming to stay for a bit and getting your hands dirty? I could do with the company.*

***—Excerpt of a letter to The Right Hon'ble Mr Thomas Barrington from his older brother The Right Hon'ble Phillip Barrington, The Earl of Ashburton (sons of The Most Hon'ble Lucian and Matilda Barrington, The Marquess and Marchioness of Montagu)***

“Darling!”

Though he knew it would not last, Jules' spirits lifted as his mother hurried across the cosy environs of her private parlour to greet him, hugging him tightly.

“Oh, I am so happy to see you. But... Jules, you've lost weight. Have you been eating properly and look at the state of

your hands! Whatever have you been up to?"

The duchess glared up at him, scrutinising his face as though she could read the answers there.

"I've been up staying with Ashburton in that pile of rubble he's insisting on living in. I got a good deal of exercise whilst I was there and did a bit of work about the place to help out," he added vaguely, not about to tell her of his foray into the life of a gardener. Not yet, at least.

"Oh, dear Pip. How is he? Matilda is so worried about him. She's been begging Montagu to let her go to him but he's adamant that they shan't stir a foot in his direction until they are invited."

"Montagu is probably right," Jules said carefully, knowing he could not give her the answers she wanted.

Narrowing her eyes at him, the duchess pursed her lips. "You know what the trouble is," she said.

"Possibly," Jules replied, evading her and heading for the decanter she always kept for days when her children, or the rest of the world, tried her legendary patience a little too far.

"Jules," she said sternly, folding her arms.

He turned, shaking his head. "No, Mama. Not even for you. My lips are sealed."

She made a sound of frustration and returned to the chair she had obviously been sitting in when he arrived. A notebook lay open beside it with copious illegible notes scrawled over the pages. No doubt preparing for her next novel. He pitied her poor editor, for despite her wealth of talents, his mother's handwriting was execrable.

Jules turned his attention back to the decanter and heard a tut of disapproval from behind him.

"It's not even noon," she reproached him.

Jules snorted. "If I must face my father, I'll be damned if I'll do it without a little something to calm my nerves."

His mother sighed, shaking her head. “Well, I don’t think you can blame him for being vexed with you,” she said impatiently. “Lord, *I’m* vexed with you! What were you thinking? No, don’t tell me. I don’t imagine there was anything resembling a thought in your head when the poor woman caught your eye.”

Jules shrugged. He had always spoken frankly to his mother. She was a defiant force of nature who had set about ensuring women knew how their own bodies worked and how to avoid unnecessary pregnancies. Missish, she was not.

“She was beautiful and lonely, and that devil of a husband carried on parading his mistresses around town without a care for her feelings. I mean, if the fellow must be unfaithful, the least he could do was have a bit of discretion, not make her feel a fool in the eyes of the world. Instead, he left her at home all alone, never escorting her anywhere. The only time she got out was if her brother deigned to take her.”

“True enough, love,” she said sadly. “I felt wretched for her, but you must see that you’ve only made things a thousand times worse?”

“Of course I do. *Now!*” he said irritably. He took a sip of the brandy, regarding his mother’s worried expression. “Just how furious is he? Are we talking murderous rage or something more apocalyptic?”

His mother smiled, a reassuring expression that told him he might escape without being flayed alive. “You do your father a disservice,” she scolded gently. “I know he has spoken harshly to you the last few times you’ve seen each other, but he is worried about you. He loves you so much and is so proud of you, and then you go and act in such a way... darling, you must see how frustrated it makes him to watch you throw all your talents to one side and act the brainless aristocrat. For he does not know of your tremendous success, remember. If he did, perhaps—”

“No!” Jules said, going hot and cold at the very idea.

“He’ll be hurt when he does find out,” she told him frankly.

“He won’t, because he will never know,” Jules said, downing the rest of his drink.

His mother sighed but said nothing.

Jules turned to look at her, noting the concern in her eyes. Sighing, he set down the empty glass with regret, the desire to pour another was strong but he resisted. He sat down opposite her, his elbows on his knees, leaning towards her. She reached out her hand to him and he took it, gently squeezing her fingers.

“Mama, I need to tell you something. I’ve met someone.”

“Oh!” the duchess exclaimed, her expression changing in an instant. “Oh, Jules!”

“What’s he done now?” demanded a weary voice from the doorway.

Jules stiffened, all at once feeling eight years old and in short trousers as he turned to face his father, the duke. He shot to his feet, standing up straight and resisting the urge to check his cravat was still tidy.

“Good afternoon, Father,” he said, wishing his heart would stop messing about and beat in a regular rhythm rather than skipping around like a newborn lamb.

“Oh, Robert! Jules has met someone,” his mother said, defusing a little of the tension in the room with her obvious joy at his words.

Surprise lit his father’s eyes, and he closed the door, coming into the room and sitting down on the arm of the duchess’ chair. He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, smiling down at her with an expression that spoke of decades of love and affection, of a deep understanding and accord that few people ever managed.

“Is that so?” he said softly. “Well, well.”

“Tell us everything,” Mama demanded urgently.

Jules sat down again and cleared his throat, aware he could not do so. He had meant to give his mother a slightly

expurgated version of the truth, but with his father here, he could not even do that. Instead, he kept it brief.

“She’s a neighbour of Ashburton’s,” he said carefully. “I won’t go into the circumstances of our meeting, but they were inauspicious. I couldn’t stand her, nor she me.”

“Oh, Robert,” she said, reaching for his father’s hand, her eyes sparkling. “How perfectly romantic.”

His father met Jules’ eyes and his lips twitched, which reassured Jules enough to let go some of the anxiety singing through his blood.

“Anyway, we ended up spending some time together, and I discovered my first impression of her was entirely accurate. She’s the bossiest, most managing female I’ve ever met in my life, and it turns out... I don’t think I can bear the thought of living without her.”

The duchess sighed, a dreamy look in her eyes whilst his father silently handed her his handkerchief. She took it and gave her nose a vigorous blow.

“When can we meet her?” she demanded eagerly.

“Soon, I hope,” Jules replied, praying the sense of foreboding that plagued him was just his nerves working overtime.

“Does she know you are about to be named in a crimcon of the sort that will drag your name through the dirt for weeks?”

Jules felt a blush scald his cheek and cleared his throat uncertainly. “Not precisely, but I have warned her that something of the sort is coming. I did not give her a false idea of how bad it will be, however.”

“And she still wishes you to pay your addresses to her?”

Jules took a deep breath. “No, actually. Though she hasn’t refused me because of the scandal, but because she does not think me serious. She believes her position is not elevated enough to be my wife, which is absolute nonsense.”



“Jules, if you have fallen in love with an opera dancer, I swear to God...” his father began.

Jules stood abruptly. “I know I have behaved shockingly these past years, sir, but please give me a little credit. Her name is Miss Selina Davenport. Her father is General Davenport. It is by no means a grand nor an illustrious connection, but certainly respectable.”

His father’s gaze bore into him, a considering look in his eyes.

“Selina Davenport,” his mother, who seemed to keep a catalogue of every person she had ever met in that startling brain of hers. “That rings a bell. Let me see... Oh, yes, I remember. A tall girl, red hair.”

“Yes, Mama.”

A slow smile curved his mother’s lips. “Not your usual type at all, Jules. A handsome girl, to be sure, but not a beauty precisely. I should say more, a woman of substance. I liked her, as I remember, though I don’t think we were ever introduced. She carried herself well, though, with dignity, although she was scared to death, if I remember correctly. But she had so few connections.”

“You are entirely correct, as always, Mama.”

“General Davenport is a conceited oaf and a boor of the kind I cannot stomach,” his father said decisively. “However, if your mama thinks well of her, I’m sure I shall, too. You say she refused you? Surely, she must be aware of the extraordinary advantages of such a match? The last I heard, Davenport and that popinjay of a son of his were at low tide.”

Jules nodded. “They live the highlife in town, whilst Dav—*Miss* Davenport raises the children, works as unpaid housekeeper, and generally keeps everything running. She’s... She’s remarkable,” he said, unable to keep the admiration from his voice. “And her brothers and sisters are very amiable, though they drive her distracted, for they are all very demanding in their own way. Her youngest brother is only three, though. A dear little lad.”

“The father has no hand in their upbringing?” the duke asked.

Jules shook his head.

“Then, you realise, if you were to marry, you would not only have a bride, but a readymade family that was not even your own to contend with.”

“Yes, sir. I know it.”

The duke let out a breath of laughter and shook his head. “Good God,” he said quietly. “I knew the day would come, but I confess I had feared I would not live to see it. You’ve grown up at last.”

Jules shifted uncomfortably, relieved that his father approved, but aware that growing up was something he ought to have done many years ago.

“Then you’ll give me your blessing?”

“Of course, we will!” his mother exclaimed. “How could you think otherwise? Won’t we Robert?”

His father looked down at her and smiled, before bending and pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Of course we will, love. If you approve of the girl, then I have nothing more to say on the matter.”

Jules let out an unsteady breath of relief. “Thank you. I knew you wouldn’t let me down. It’s only, Davenport was so certain you’d disapprove of her and, what with the mess I’m in currently—”

“As to that,” his father said, his tone grim.

Jules’ heart sank. And it had been going so well.

“I know, sir,” Jules said, feeling utterly wretched.

“Well, I think I had best leave you two men to have a little chat,” his mother said briskly, tidying away her notebook and getting to her feet.

Jules sent her a pleading look that she did not pretend to misunderstand, but she only smiled at him. Crossing to where he sat, she leaned down and kissed his cheek.

“Courage, little acorn,” she whispered softly, using a pet name she had given him when he was only a baby, as a reminder that one day he would be a mighty oak tree, no matter how small and inconsequential he felt at the time.

Jules watched her go before daring to meet his father’s eyes.

“Don’t look so stricken,” the duke said gently. “I’m not going to rake you over the coals. By the look of you, I suspect you’ve done a fair bit of soul searching of late. It’s not pretty, is it, when you look back and realise what a mess you’ve made, how badly you have behaved, and how it could have so easily been different? But there is no way of going back, Jules. We can only go forward, and make sure we do better.”

“Yes, sir,” Jules said with feeling. “I don’t even know why... except, well, perhaps I do, only you’ll think it foolish, I dare say.”

His father looked at him and got to his feet, picking up Jules’ discarded glass and a clean one for himself. He poured them both a healthy measure of brandy, and handed one to his son, before sitting down opposite him.

“Go on,” he said.

Jules took a moment to consider what he wanted to say, to try to explain something he could not understand for himself until quite recently. “I’ve always known what a privilege and a responsibility it is to be Bedwin. I have never, for a moment, been anything but proud and profoundly glad that I would have the chance to carry on your legacy, and, I hope, make you proud too.”

His father smiled, a look of such warmth and approval in his eyes, Jules’ throat tightened. Telling himself to buck up, he carried on.

“I have always taken the role seriously, and despite my... my ridiculous adventures, I have never neglected my own estates, or shirked my responsibilities.”

“I never said otherwise,” his father remarked lightly.

“No,” Jules replied. “But you knew I only did the bare minimum. I acted as... as an overseer, a manager, perhaps, not as the Marquess of Blackstone. I did it because it was my duty, not because I cared, not because it was my legacy. Not like you do.”

“I know it. Are you going to tell me why?”

Jules hesitated, wondering if his father would think him fanciful, or just making excuses. He avoided looking at him as he spoke, not wanting to see scepticism in his eyes. “I think... I think I thought that if I did not take it seriously, if I did not do it quite well enough, that you would not think me ready to be duke. And if I wasn’t ready to be duke—”

“I would live until you were and therefore not kick the bucket anytime soon?” his father said with a wry tone. “And you, naturally, would never be quite ready.”

Jules darted his father a look to see if he was being mocked but saw but sympathy and regret in his face.

“I told you it was foolish,” he said, a trifle defensively.

The duke rubbed a hand over his eyes and gave a short laugh. “Lucian Barrington, I swear you are omniscient,” he muttered to himself.

“I beg your pardon, sir?” Jules asked in confusion.

His father shook his head. “Nothing,” he replied with a smile. “But I do not think you foolish, Jules. In fact, I am touched, and very, very proud of you. I am afraid I cannot promise you I shall live forever. One day, you will be duke, just as you ought to be. It is right and proper. All things have their time and place, but I tell you this. I could still bowl you out and in a flat race I’ll wager my new bay over any flashy bit of horseflesh you care to name, and I have no intention of shuffling off for a good while yet.”

Jules gave a startled laugh and a good deal of the weight that had been pressing down on him of late lifted in the light of his father’s smile.

“I am exceptionally glad to hear that, sir, though I shall take that wager and make you eat your words.”

“You do that,” the duke said, regarding him with amusement from over the rim of his glass. He took a sip of brandy, his expression becoming serious, and Jules knew they were not done.

“It’s a bad business, son.”

Jules nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“I’m speaking to Montagu about it. I hope if the both of us exert our influence over Lord Haversham, we shall be able to silence him.”

Jules bit his lip. “I... I’m grateful... beyond grateful, sir, but I made this mess, and I think—”

“I admire the sentiment,” his father said, but with a tone that brooked no argument. “But if you think I wish to see my family dragged through the dirt, you may think again. It *is* your mess, and you ought to clean it up, but you cannot. I, however, can, and shall do so, and you may live with the indignity of that as a punishment for your foolish and thoughtless behaviour. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Jules replied, his voice hoarse.

The duke nodded. “Then I shall say no more on the subject. You, however, ought to put your time to better use by applying to General Davenport for permission to court his daughter. Then I suggest you return to Monmouthshire at once and go about the business seriously. If your mother remembers the girl so clearly and approves her, then I must believe she will make an excellent duchess one day. For God’s sake Jules, secure your interest there, and do *not* mess it up!”

“Yes, sir,” Jules said once more, and this time, with rather more enthusiasm.

## Chapter 18



*Dear Pip,*

*I shall be with you next week if I can rearrange a few engagements in time. Sorry, to hear you're in the doldrums, but you may rely on me to act as court jester and raise your spirits. As for getting my hands dirty, get stuffed. I don't like you that much and it's your inheritance, not mine. I got a pocket watch.*

*I've heard what Jules has been up to, as will all the world very soon. I do not envy him, though it was obvious enough where that affair was going but he never did listen to a word anyone said. I suppose he's fallen in love with darling Tilly as well? How is my little angel? I'm sure she misses her Uncle Thorn most terribly – as I'm her favourite person in the world – so give her my best love and tell her I'm bringing her a present when I come.*

*I have tidings of a more serious note to give you, however. It seems that Aggie has disappeared. Fred is beside himself. I've never seen a fellow go all to pieces in front of my eyes, but it is not a pretty sight. Even her father seems at a loss to explain where or why she has gone. Obviously only a few people know the truth, the official line is that she's gone to stay with some of his relatives in the south of France. I pray she is well and safe and shall shake her soundly for scaring us all so much when I*

*next see her. She has been a dear friend  
and I cannot bear to think that she may be  
in a fix and did not turn to one of us for  
help.*

*Perhaps it is small comfort, but you are not  
the only one with troubles to bear, brother.  
Chin up. I shall be with you soon and we  
shall set the world to rights over another  
bottle or three of that excellent burgundy  
you served me with the last time.*

**—Excerpt of a letter to *The Right Hon’ble  
Phillip Barrington, The Earl of Ashburton  
from his younger brother, The Right  
Hon’ble Mr Thomas Barrington (sons of  
The Most Hon’ble Lucian and Matilda  
Barrington, The Marquess and  
Marchioness of Montagu)***

**14<sup>th</sup> March 1845, The Guard’s Club, 49 St James’ Street,  
Mayfair, London.**

It took Jules several days to run his quarry to ground. He finally turned him up in a club for officers of the Guard’s Division opposite Whites. The atmosphere was lively, with a good deal of ribald laughter and the scent of roast meat, cigar smoke, and liquor perfuming the air.

Jules, who had spent the morning running hither and yon in search of his future father-in-law, was hungry, increasingly irritated, and in no mood to run the gauntlet of a brace of old school pals who had taken the military route and no doubt served with honour. On any other day he might have been pleased to take a drink with them and reminisce about their school days, but for the moment he had no patience with men who had clearly been celebrating the anniversary of some event or other and were more than a trifle bosky.

“Oh, come on, Blackstone, don’t be such a slow top,” complained Captain Hastings, who was looking more disreputable than honourable, with his coat all undone. The evidence that this celebration had been going on for some time

showing with the unshaved state of his chin. “You were always ripe for a lark before.”

“Yes, I know,” Jules replied darkly. “But not today, old man. I’m looking for General Davenport. Have you seen him?”

“Lord! What do you want with that old windbag?” the captain demanded. “He won’t be amusing, not even a bit. Drones on about horses and hunting and... and... and well, that’s all, really.”

“I know it,” Jules replied with a sigh. “Nonetheless.”

The captain shook his head, staring at Jules with a look of bewildered disappointment. “Oh, well, if you must, you must, but a dashed peculiar state of affairs is what I say. Still, he was in the red saloon, last time I saw him.”

“Much obliged, Hastings,” Jules said, and made his escape before the fellow could change his mind.

The red saloon was barely visible through the fog of cigar smoke that hung in a cloud over most of the room. Jules, who had never had a taste for the vile things, grimaced and plunged into the stifling atmosphere. A huge fireplace was blazing like fury, making the atmosphere in the room close and the temperature nigh on tropical. Jules had the urgent desire to fling all the windows open so he might catch his breath. His attention was taken, however, by the sight of the General standing, glass in hand, and chatting with some crony or other. Though he found nothing to like in having to present himself to such a man, Jules knew his own worth. From the General’s point of view, he was the golden goose. He anticipated no problems in securing his agreement. The trouble would be getting the man to hold his blasted tongue until his darling Boadicea came to her senses.

The General looked up, removing a fat cigar from his mouth as he saw Jules approach. He was a striking-looking fellow for a man of his years, far better looking than his son. It was clear enough where the divine Abigail had inherited her beauty from. Though the resemblance to his beloved was faint,



that too was visible, in the uncompromising line of his jaw and a rather imperious nose.

“General Davenport,” said politely, reminding himself he was the Marquess of Blackstone and had no business being the least bit anxious. Davenport was of age for one thing, if she wished to marry, then she could get on and do it. “Might I have a private word?”

“Oh, Lud, Davvy, you in the basket again?” chuckled the fellow he was speaking to, turning next to address Jules. “If you’ve come to collect, I shouldn’t hold your breath, for he owes me twenty pounds and I don’t expect to see it before May Day.”

“No. It is nothing of the sort,” Jules said frostily, disliking the implication he had sought the fellow out merely to chase down an unpaid debt.

“Well, what do you want, then?” the general asked suspiciously, before his expression cleared. “I know you, you’re Bedwin’s heir. Blackthorn, ain’t it?”

“Blackstone.”

“That’s the dandy,” the general agreed affably, whilst simultaneously summoning a servant. “Well then, come, come, have a drink with us. Perkins, bring us a bottle of that brandy, will you? Not that swill you served me yesterday, mind, the good stuff.”

“Actually, I would rather be private, if—”

“Oh, that’s all right. No need to trouble yourself, this rattlepate will leave us be. Eh, Kershaw? Be so good as to bugger off, old fellow. The marquess wants a private chat.”

Apparently undisturbed by this command, Kershaw obligingly buggered off, but there were still half a dozen men in the room. Admittedly, they were not close enough to overhear, but Jules did not like his business done in such a manner.

“Is there not a private room or—”

“Oh, cut line, Blackthorn, what is it you want, old chap? I’ve got an appointment this afternoon to check out a very fine stallion and I don’t wish to be late. Say what you want to say, if you would, please.”

Short of dragging him from the room by his cravat—a tempting idea—Jules had little choice but to carry on. Lowering his voice to be certain no one could overhear him, he made it brief.

“General Davenport, would you be so good as to give me permission to court your daughter?”

The general looked up, one red eyebrow quirking in an expression that suddenly put Jules forcibly in mind of his dear one. “What’s that? A marquess court my little girl? I should say so. Yes, yes, of course, old man. Goodness, what a turn up! Mind you, she’s a bit young and I reckon Selina will cut up stiff over it, for she’s not even out yet, and—”

“I meant, sir,” Jules said doggedly, holding onto his temper. “That I wished to court Miss Davenport, not Miss Abigail.”

This time, the general looked utterly dumbstruck. “Court Selina?” he repeated, as though he was uncertain he had heard the words correctly.

“Yes, sir,” Jules replied.

“Whatever for?”

Strangling his future father-in-law in a gentlemen’s club probably wasn’t going to add to his reputation, Jules realised with regret, but the desire to do so remained strong.

“Because she is an extraordinary woman and I wish to persuade her to be my wife,” he said, drawing on years of breeding and aristocratic pride to crush any further snubs.

“Oh, quite so, quite so,” the general said, eyeing Jules with bewilderment. “Horses for courses, eh? No accounting for taste and all that.”

“Quite so. After all, some people don’t have the slightest desire to throw you out the nearest window,” Jules said,

having had quite enough of hearing the man insult his own daughter.

“Oh, now, don’t be like that,” the general replied, slapping him on the shoulder. “I beg pardon. Ought to know a fellow in love is not entirely sane. Still, must celebrate, for I didn’t think I’d ever get the old girl fired off. Reckoned I’d have the keeping of her until I turned up my toes, and then my son after me. Born to be an old maid, she was.”

Jules clenched his fists, but before he could make any other comment, another voice piped up.

“What’s that, Davvy? One of your girls is going to marry Blackstone? What a triumph! A stroke of luck, too, before everyone calls in their markers. Miss Abigail, one presumes.”

“Ah! You presume wrong. It’s Selina he wants!” the general replied and burst out laughing.

Jules opened his mouth to give the general his opinion on this behaviour towards a daughter who had practically raised her own siblings single-handed whilst managing his blasted estate too, but another voice cut in. This one made his blood run cold.

“He’ll marry any decent girl over my dead body.”

Jules turned, a sudden sick sensation roiling in his guts. For here was Lord Haversham, the man who wanted to sue him for having an affair with his wife.

“Does she know, I wonder, what kind of man she has fallen in love with?” Haversham mused, his eyes glittering with malice.

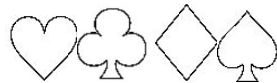
“Don’t matter a jot, heir to a dukedom!” the general said with a bark of laughter that was taken up around the room as the tasty morsel of gossip was passed around. By dinner time it would be all over London.

Jules knew the only thing he could do without making matters far, far worse was to leave. The old Jules, the one who did not think before he jumped in fists first, would have caused a scene. But it took little imagination to consider what Davenport might say if he did.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he said, refusing to call them gentlemen, before turning on his heel.

“I can’t help thinking Miss Davenport ought to be put right on a few points,” Haversham said, his voice pitched low so only Jules could hear him.

Jules did not respond, nor acknowledge the threat, but a chill of foreboding skittered down his spine as he left the room.



**14<sup>th</sup> March 1845, Berkeley Square, Mayfair, London.**

Jules turned his collar up against the brisk wind whistling across the square and quickened his pace as he left the Guard’s club behind with relief. Briggs was readying things for the journey back there while he was out. For no matter what the general had said, he’d known he must get himself back to Monmouth at once. Now though, it was imperative, before Haversham could write and tell Davenport exactly what kind of trouble he was in. Jules must at least tell her the vile details himself. At least now he could give her his parent’s approval and her father’s blessing. She must see he was serious after that. So, all he had to do was make himself look pathetic, do a tremendous amount of grovelling and pray she’d take pity on him.

A familiar figure on the street ahead of him caught his eye as he marched along.

“Harleston!” he called, though the wind snatched away the sound and the man did not turn.

Conor Baxter, Viscount Harleston, had been a friend since his schooldays, though they didn’t see a great deal of each other. Harleston was rather more serious than the rest of them and whilst he was a founding member of the Sons of Hades, he had never taken an active role. A fastidious fellow, he had always been something of a mystery to Jules. Hurrying up to him, Jules tapped him on the shoulder, wondering why he was standing in the middle of the street on such a vile day.

“What?” Harleston snapped irritably, turning to glare at Jules, who raised his eyebrows in astonishment at such a reaction. For Harleston was unfailingly polite, always the gentleman. “Oh, I beg your pardon, Blackstone,” he said gruffly and returned to what he had been doing, which was rubbing briskly at a dark stain on his otherwise immaculate coat.

“What happened?” Jules asked, amused now, for one thing guaranteed to get Harleston’s feathers ruffled was someone making a mess of his neatly ordered world.

“I escorted Mother and Cara to Gunter’s, Latimer is meeting them there, but in the short time I was there, some clumsy girl managed to throw her cup of chocolate over me. I still don’t understand how she managed it, for she was sitting down, and I was only walking past. One might believe she’d done it on purpose, but I’ve never seen the creature in my life before. I wouldn’t mind, but she had the nerve to imply it was my fault!” he added, incensed.

“Oh dear, bad luck, old chap,” Jules said, trying his best not to laugh at the fellow’s misfortune. “Listen, I’m off to Monmouth this afternoon but I’m starving. I’m going to grab a quick bite to eat before I leave, want to come?”

Harleston shook his head. “I’m not going out in this ruined coat. I shall have to go home and change,” he said, stuffing the handkerchief back in his pocket.

“Suit yourself,” Jules said with a sigh, falling into step with him as he strode off.

“Well, Blackstone, I might be irritated about being attacked with a hot beverage but what’s got you looking so anxious?” Harleston demanded as they crossed the square. “Has Lord Haversham decided to go to court?”

Jules stopped in his tracks, his heart suddenly crashing about. “Don’t tell me it’s common knowledge now?”

Harleston snorted, shaking his head. “Good grief, the panic in your eyes! Not that I blame you. No, it isn’t, but this

is bad, Jules. How many times have I warned you this is where you'd end up? But did you listen?"

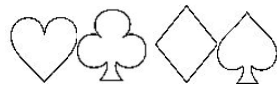
"Yes, yes, thank you ever so, Cassandra," Jules retorted, nettled. "But who told you?"

"Latimer heard it from the Comte de Villen. No idea where he got it from, but he always seems to know the latest *on dits*. I don't think anyone outside our intimate circle knows, though."

Jules let out a breath. That was something, he supposed. For now.

"Where are you off to, then? Monmouth, you say?" Harleston gave him a narrow look, his expression considering. "Don't tell me. Is there, perchance, a lady waiting for you?"

"Yes, as it happens," Jules replied tersely. "And with a bit of luck – no, *a lot* of luck, that lady will one day be my wife." With that said he at least had the satisfaction of striding off, leaving Harleston looking utterly thunderstruck.



### **18<sup>th</sup> March 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

Selina stared at the accounts book before her. The numbers were doing little whirling dances and made no sense at all. She blinked, bringing the page back into focus and cursing herself for the tenth time in as many minutes. Drat the man. No matter how many times she promised herself she would not think of him, would not moon about like a silly girl, would not sigh and stare out into the garden and daydream about stolen kisses... here she was, thinking of him and mooning over him and daydreaming. It was intolerable.

"Lina."

Selina lifted her head to regard Benjamin. She had set his bricks out on the rug in front of the fire, for Hilly had fallen asleep directly after lunch and she hadn't the heart to wake her. He had played nicely, building castles and knocking them

over, for the past twenty minutes. The lure of his bricks had finally lost their appeal, though.

“Yes, my pet,” she said, holding out her arms to him as he made his way to her.

“Want Mark,” he said, his soft brow furrowing. He pointed at his bricks, his expression one of disgruntlement.

“You want him to build castles with you?” she guessed, her heart aching.

“Yes. Get Mark, Lina. I like Mark.”

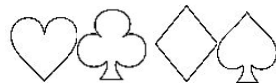
“I like Mark too,” she said wistfully. “But it won’t do, sweetie. It won’t do.”

“Yes. Will do. Mark come to live here. He come here with Jammy and Lina and Abi and...”

“No, darling. Mark cannot do that, but I’ll build a castle with you if you would like?”

Benjamin received this offer with the scorn it apparently deserved. “No. Want Mark,” he said stubbornly.

Selina sighed.



Once Hilly had woken up from her nap, Selina returned Benjamin to her care and took herself off to inspect the progress being made in the garden. She had avoided her new garden and the greenhouses in the ten days since Mar—Lord Blackstone had gone, but that would lead to disaster. She knew well enough how quickly her plans could fall apart if she was not there to manage things and oversee them.

So, she walked briskly, umbrella shielding her from the worst of the drizzle that had been interminable since she had woken, intent on making sure things were progressing in her absence. She arrived at a scene of chaos.

“Well, they ain’t our roses!” Mr Dixey insisted, thrusting a bit of paper back at a red-faced delivery driver.

The driver gesticulated furiously at it. As she drew closer, Selina realised it appeared to be an order form. Mr Dixey was flanked by two of the under-gardeners, who were gawping at proceedings as if they were at the theatre and enjoying themselves too.

“Well, it says here in black and white that they are,” the fellow said irritably. “Miss Selina Davenport and then some odd sounding house name I ain’t about to try to pronounce.”

Mr Dixey threw up his hands in frustration. “But we haven’t bought the roses yet. We always get our stock from Clive and Hughes and there’s been no order placed and, as I’m the one that would do it....”

“Mr Dixey, what is going on here, please?” Selina demanded, hurrying up to the men.

“Thank heavens, miss. This fellow has come all the way from Kent, and he tells me there’s nigh on two hundred rose bushes on those two wagons there, and that they’re yours.”

“How extraordinary,” Selina said, bewildered by this. “What makes you think so, Mr...?”

“Mr Peters, Miss Davenport, and there’s your name all right and tight at the top of the order. Now it’s not like the blast—beg pardon—it’s not like the roses need paying for. The order was paid in full before delivery.”

Selina took the proffered order form and stared at it. Between the drizzle and Mr Dixey’s muddy hands it was remarkably dog-eared, but she could make out the name De Beauvoir Nurseries and Landscaping, and her own at the top. Peering closer, she saw a dizzying list of roses, including many varieties she had discussed with Mr Dixey. There was no way she had been able to even consider such a fabulous array or number of plants, however, not on her meagre budget and... Her breath caught as she reached the bottom of the list and saw the name in which the account had been made.

“Oh,” she said, as the order form became suddenly rather blurry. “Oh, my.”



“Is anything wrong, miss?” Mr Dixey asked, his ruddy face crinkling with concern.

“Um...” Selina replied, but her throat was tight, and she felt suddenly rather unsteady. “No, but I... I have rather a headache. If... If you would excuse me.”

“But what about the roses?” Dixey demanded.

Selina could not answer. She needed a moment of privacy to steady her nerves and think about just what this meant? Because it was the most romantic gesture she had ever heard of, and she did not know what to make of it. She had spent the last days convincing herself and her stubborn heart that Lord Blackstone had only been toying with her, or at least, that he was not in earnest. Once he'd gone, she'd taken herself off to her brother's room and shamelessly stolen an old pile of scandal sheets. She never looked at them herself, having no interest in the doings of people she neither knew of nor cared about. Now, however, she wanted to discover how the man spent his time.

It was nothing she ought not to have suspected and only reinforced her belief that he could not have been earnest in his declaration. He was a pleasure seeker, a man who took nothing seriously and only wished to enjoy himself. This was not the life of a sensible man she could rely on, one who would be a tower of strength and a friend as well as a husband. This she told herself over and over, yet she only remembered him sitting on the floor with Benjamin, building castles and playing cards with her other siblings, warning them about the dangers of gambling but making it fun too. She remembered him helping her arrange the library as penance for his foolishness, and his earnest desire to hear her opinions about his writing, even though it smarted to hear such criticism.

He'd said he'd been looking for something, she reminded herself wistfully, *looking for her*.

“Oh, what nonsense,” she said aloud, trying to laugh at the absurdity of a man like that wanting her, of all women.

But she could not laugh. Indeed, she felt very much like crying, and now he'd gone and sent her two hundred roses for

her garden, and what on earth was she to make of that? For no doubt the extraordinary sum he must have spent buying and transporting them here was pocket change to such a man? Yet he had thought of her, of her rose garden. He could have just sent her a bunch of hot-house flowers, or sweetmeats, or something expensive and frivolous, but he hadn't done that. He had thought about her, about what she would like, and he might as well have stepped inside her mind, for he had judged it perfectly. And now she was a wreck.

Giving her nose a hearty blow, she hurried back to the house, going by the front door as she did not want the staff seeing her in such a state. Shaking off her umbrella, she went inside and hung up her coat and hat. What she was to do about the roses she simply could not decide. She ought to send them back, but... but oh, she wanted them so very much. Even if she never saw him again, it would be a reminder that a handsome man had once considered her lovely enough to flirt with and express his admiration. That would mean a good deal in the lonely years to come.

Selina took herself off to her little parlour where a fire was blazing and sat down at her escritoire, determined to write a letter to the marquess and... well, she'd think of something.

Barely had she lifted her pen, however, when one of the upstairs maids knocked on the door.

“Beg pardon, miss, but there's a gentleman here to see you.”

Selina frowned, Polly knew all her neighbours, so this was a stranger. Not Blackstone, she told herself sternly before her heart began to thud, for Polly would have recognised him too.

“Did he give you his card?”

Polly nodded and handed it to her. Selina stared at the card, none the wiser. She got up, moving to the mirror to check her hair was tidy.

“Show him in, please.”

Polly bobbed a curtsey and hurried away, and a moment later showed in a man Selina had never met before. He

stopped on the threshold, staring at her in surprise.

“Miss Davenport?” the man said, as if he doubted the truth of it.

“I am Miss Davenport,” she replied, watching him curiously.

His expression became grim, his thin lips compressing until they were almost invisible. “I confess, you are not what I was expecting.”

Selina stiffened. The man’s manner was insolent, and she did not believe that she had been offered a compliment.

“As I did not expect you at all, Lord Haversham, the feeling is mutual,” she replied coolly. “Are you a friend of my brother’s, or my father perhaps? Neither are here, you know. Hubert may be back this evening, but my father is in town.”

“No, I am not a friend,” the fellow replied, his tone suggesting he wouldn’t be caught dead in such company. Whilst Selina had some sympathy with this outlook, she did not appreciate the fellow’s obvious desire to be hostile and insulting.

“Then may I enquire as to what I owe the pleasure?” she demanded, making no bones about her own displeasure.

“Pleasure,” he said, his lip curling. “I suppose you think that’s enough to risk your reputation for?” The words were shocking enough, but the spite behind them quite took Selina’s breath away.

Who was this man and why was he speaking to her so?

“I think it best you leave now, before I have you thrown out,” she said, beginning to feel alarmed by his antagonistic manner. He obviously had a bone to pick with someone and she was in his line of fire through no fault of her own. “My maid told me there was a gentleman to see me, but I see she was mistaken.”

“Well, you’ve got spirit, at least, I’ll give you that,” he said, something that might have been admiration gleaming in his eyes.

“I am so very pleased to have met with your approval. Nonetheless, I should like you to leave. Now.”

“Not until I’ve had my say,” he replied.

Selina regarded him with mistrust. He was a tall, thin man and might have been attractive if not for the lines of dissipation that hardened his mouth and eyes. His hair was dark and slicked into place, and the scent of macassar oil was only overpowered by his cologne, which was flowery and spicy at once. Selina felt a headache tug behind her eyes and wondered if Owen, her footman, was in hailing distance. If she shouted, would he come?

“Then please do, so I may be rid of you and this tiresome interview.”

He sneered, moving to the mantelpiece and leaning an arm along it. “I suppose you think you’ve done very well for yourself. A woman like you, on the shelf and with no likelihood of ever securing a match. How did you do it? Did you trap him into it? Have you got something on him?”

Selina felt the colour drain from her face. This was about Blackstone. He had warned her he was in some kind of trouble, and now the fool man had managed to drag her into it too.

“I do not know to what you refer. If that is all—”

She moved to the door but before she could open it, he moved, grabbing hold of her wrist. Selina gasped, truly alarmed now.

“That son of a bitch made me a laughingstock,” he said with such savagery, Selina could only stare at him.

Before she could think of what to do or say, a commotion out by the front door caught their attention. A moment later, a woman flew into the room, took one look at Selina and gave a shriek.

“Ronald!” she shouted. “You take your hands off her at once.”

“Oh, Maisie, what’s it to you? I thought you might be pleased if I broke up Blackstone’s little romance. Then you can have him all to yourself again.”

“Oh, Ronald, you great oaf, you are the biggest fool on earth,” the lady cried, a sentiment which Selina had no qualms about agreeing with, but she held her tongue, torn between fascination and horror. That this was the scandal Blackstone had feared was beyond doubt, and the irate husband’s words left little uncertainty what the trouble was.

“No doubt,” he said in a scathing tone, releasing Selina and going to stand by the fireplace once more.

The lady wrung her hands, nervous eyes darting between Selina and her spouse, her cheeks flushed with mortification.

“Miss Davenport, please forgive my husband. I can only imagine what you must think of us. I swear to you, I would have stopped him if I could, but the stubborn idiot would never listen to reason. Not from the beginning. Even in the weeks after our honeymoon, he’d rather spend his nights with his petticoats and opera dancers than come home to his poor little wife!”

Ronald folded his arms and looked mutinous, and the lady turned a pair of melting blue eyes upon Selina, who sighed. This, then, was the kind of lady Blackstone usually favoured. It was hardly a surprise. Petite and lovely and blonde, she was the delicate sort of female that brought out a male’s protective instincts and generally saw them make complete twits of themselves. However, this domestic argument had been brought into Selina’s private parlour, and she was not having it.

“It seems that I have been embroiled in your personal affairs though no fault of my own,” she said with as much dignity as she could muster. “Whilst I am sorry for your troubles and give you my word not a breath of this little scene will ever pass my lips, I believe you ought to go elsewhere for the final act.”

“Ah, but you are embroiled too now, my dear,” Lord Haversham said, his expression grim. “For if Blackstone

intends to wed you—”

Selina blinked. “I beg your pardon?” she said faintly.

He gave her a quizzical look. “Why deny it? Everyone knows now. The ton is abuzz with the news, I assure you.”

“W-What news?”

Selina’s knees were feeling a trifle uncertain now, so she felt behind her for the nearest solid object and eased herself into a chair.

“Why, that the biggest prize on the marriage mart went to your father’s club and asked for his permission to court you before half the club members.”

The words made sense, she knew they did, but try as they might the meaning eluded her. Emotions battered her from all sides, but she could not decide to which she ought to react. Should she pay attention to the one that wanted to jump up and down with glee because he had asked her father for permission to *court* her... or the one that wanted to bash him over the head with something heavy because he’d done it with an audience. In the end, she composed herself and decided she would do both jumping up and down and cursing at a later time, and in private.

“I see,” she said, relieved the words were reasonably steady. “I still do not understand what business it is of yours.”

“Then you haven’t heard?” the lady asked in surprise. “Why, Ronald is proposing to take us to court for criminal conversation.”

Selina jolted, so shocked she stood up again, glaring at Lord Haversham in outrage. “Are you out of your mind?” she demanded.

Haversham stiffened. “Mind your tongue, miss, and remember who you speak to.”

She snorted at that. “Pretty words from a fellow who comes in and insults and intimidates a single woman in her own home.”

He had the grace to blush at that and looked away from her. “I beg your pardon. That was ill done of me. I can only say that love makes one do ridiculous things and act in a way one would never have credited before.”

“Love!” Lady Haversham said scornfully. “Is that what it is when you can’t bear to spend more than one night in seven in my company but prefer your friends and those... those *women*?”

“Don’t start that again,” he shot back at her. “I’ve heard it all before, and all the time—”

“All the time I was waiting for you!” the woman yelled, and she had quite a decent amount of volume too for such a petite creature.

“With Blackstone!”

“And why not, when everyone knew you’d set Mrs Winchester up in a lovely flat in Mayfair. *Winchester!* Why, she’s almost ten years older than I am, Ronald, and not half so pretty, not to mention a friend of my mother’s! Can you not understand how humiliated I was?”

Ronald rubbed the back of his neck and avoided his wife’s pleading gaze.

“Did you do such a thing?” Selina demanded in awe at his nerve and incensed on the lady’s behalf.

Haversham picked up the fire poker and stoked the fire irritably but said nothing.

“He did,” the lady assured her bitterly. “And all the running around began within just weeks of our marriage. I felt such a fool that I could not even hold my husband’s attention for such a short time.”

“Oh, come now, Maisie, it wasn’t like that,” Ronald protested. “All the fellows have their bit on the side, it’s normal.”

“Well, from where I was standing, it was crass and hurtful,” the lady shot back, tears sparkling in her eyes. “You didn’t give me a second thought. If you’d just been discreet, I

might have stood it, but to make me such a fool was too much.”

Selina looked from one to the other of them, studying them intently. They’d both come all the way here for this little scene. They were both furious with each other and not about to let the argument go. And they were both obviously in love with the other. She sighed. Why were people such idiots?

“Lord Haversham, did you leave your new wife and behave in such a crass manner as she says?”

“Yes, he did!” the lady cut in, before he could take a breath. “Parading his pretty bits of muslin all over town, and everyone was *so* kind and *so* sympathetic to me,” she said, her voice breaking.

“Oh, my dear,” Selina said, for she had been on the receiving end of such spiteful sympathy herself and well understood what she meant.

“Quite.” The lady sat down and took out a lace edged hanky, wiping her eyes and giving her nose a delicate dab or two.

There was a taut silence and Selina crossed to Lady Haversham, laying a hand on her shoulder in a show of solidarity. “Lord Haversham, if this is true, I cannot help but think you brought much of this situation on yourself. I would never comment on another’s affairs, but you have washed your dirty linen before me and leave me little choice in the matter. Whilst I do not pretend to excuse Blackstone and your wife, the situation you created was obviously intolerable and beneath you.”

“Beneath me,” he repeated, with a bitter laugh. “Low indeed for a man who feels like a worm, but that bastard took my wife.”

“You will mind your tongue in the presence of ladies, and never mind the self-loathing and accusations. What do *you* have to say to your wife?” Selina demanded.

A prickling quietness filled the room.

“I was a damned fool.”



The words were hoarse and barely audible, but heartfelt, and Selina regarded the man who was staring down into the fire with an expression that made her heart turn over.

“Yes, you were,” Lady Haversham said in trembling accents.

“Everyone mocked me for being so in love with you,” he said, avoiding their gazes. “They said I needed to put you in your place before I was living under the cat’s paw. I didn’t want to go out, Maisie. I wanted to stay with you, but all my friends kept on and on, taunting me and... Christ, what an imbecile I was. I had something lovely and precious, and I threw it away for the respect of men I don’t even like above half. I wish I could go back. I wish I could change everything, but I cannot.”

“Oh, Ronald, you fool” Lady Haversham whispered, tears streaming down her face. “And n-now it’s too late.”

There was a taut silence from Ronald, who looked utterly wretched as the lady buried her face in her handkerchief and wept.

“Nonsense.”

Selina’s impatient voice cut through the hysterical wailing and both parties looked up in surprise, staring at her.

“It seems to me you’ve both acted foolishly indeed. I feel wretchedly sorry for you both, but I cannot help but point out that you brought it on yourselves. I have half a mind to tell you both to go to the devil if I’m honest. If I thought you would do so without involving Blackstone or myself, I might let you do it too,” Selina said irritably. She took a breath and let it out slowly, her dismay at being involved in this dreadful scene mitigated by their obvious misery. With a softer tone, she added, “However, I cannot help but observe that you are both utterly miserable.”

“Utterly,” Haversham said with feeling, casting his beautiful wife a look of such regret, Selina almost felt a grain of sympathy for him. Almost.

“Yes,” said Lady Haversham simply, her pretty nose red now. “I was so happy the day we married. I thought we would always be so. That we would live together in blissful harmony, and nothing would ever disturb our little idyll.”

Selina fought her instinct to return a cutting remark over this treachery sentiment, which bore no relation to real life whatsoever. If the lady had truly believed that, she was a first-class ninny.

“Well, then. I should say it is about time you both stopped behaving like you’re acting out a bad melodrama and reconciled your differences.”

“But Ronald is taking us to court,” Lady Haversham wailed.

“Then Ronald is a bigger fool than I credited him with being. Is that truly what you want?” she demanded of Lord Haversham in frustration. “To shame yourself and your wife in public, to end any chance of ever having the marriage you presumably both wanted not so long ago? Good heavens! Where is your spirit, man? You still love her, fight for her, don’t throw her away because your pride has been dented. You created the situation, you mend it.”

“If I thought... If I believed for a moment that there was a chance for me,” Lord Haversham said desperately.

“A chance for you?” Lady Haversham screeched in outrage! “A *chance* for you? How many chances did I offer only to have them thrown back in my face?”

“I know, my darling, but now you are in love with Blackstone!” he raged furiously. “I cannot compete with that.”

Lady Haversham pulled a face at her husband, looking remarkably indignant. “No, I’m not!”

Lord Haversham stared at her. “N-Not?” he whispered.

“Oh, Ronald,” she said with a sigh. “Of course not. I thought you knew.”

Lord Haversham looked like he’d been hit in the head with a cricket bat. “But he’s a marquess, and handsome, and

younger than me, and—”

Maisie rolled her eyes. “Yes, but he talks about books and such dull things, Ronnie, darling. He doesn’t make me laugh like you do and... and *oh*, I missed you so.”

“Oh, Maisie.”

“Oh... *Ronald*.”

## Chapter 19



*Dearest Aunt Sally,*

*I'm so sorry this letter is late again. I just don't know what happens to the days and then when I sat down to write yesterday, I managed to knock the ink over. I'm not sure how. I could swear I did not touch it nor jog the desk, but over it went and ruined five sheets of paper. Papa was very cross. Our housekeeper, Mrs Everly, was none too pleased either as a few drops splattered the carpet. So, I have been in disgrace.*

*I wish I was back with you. I think of you often and wonder what you are doing. It is comforting to me to know that at Inglenook Cottage all is going on just as it did before I came to stay with you, the same as while I was there, and shall always be the same. Here everything changes, moment to moment, and I find it dizzying. There are too many people and too much noise and the more people and the noisier it gets, the more likely I shall do something foolish and make everyone stare.*

*You'll never credit what I did on our last trip to Gunter's. I was out with Lady Bailey, and we were sitting minding our own business, sipping hot chocolate, for it was perishing cold that day, and then this man walked past us. He was neat as a new pin, without so much as a hair out of place, and I was just thinking how much I envied him*

*the ability to stay tidy and wishing I could emulate it when...*

*—Excerpt of a letter from Miss Lucy Carleton to her aunt, Miss Sally Jefferson.*

**18<sup>th</sup> March 1845, Llun-y-mynydd, Monmouthshire.**

Jules leapt to the ground and threw the reins of his sweating mare to the footman that came hurrying out of the house, without a word of explanation. His heart was hammering and had been doing so ever since he'd got the news that Lord Haversham was on his way to Monmouthshire.

He'd known the fellow meant to cause mischief but had assumed the bastard would content himself with a letter explaining what a foul devil Lord Blackstone really was. He'd been prepared for that. Though it would not aid his chances with Davenport, he felt certain he could explain to her that he was no longer that man, that meeting her had changed everything, had changed *him*. It might take him months to win her, years even... a dismaying thought, but not one that would stop him. She was the one. What it was about her that gave him such certainty he was not sure, except that perhaps Davenport herself was only ever entirely certain. She never prevaricated or made excuses. Davenport made decisions and stuck to them, she acted instead of endlessly talking about what she might do. She was a marvel, and he needed her and her certainty in his life.

The idea that Lord Haversham might have come here to harass and embarrass his Boadicea made something wild and angry thrash about in his chest. Jules was not a violent fellow. Though he was remarked to strip to advantage and had never made a fool of himself at the boxing establishment he frequented, he had nothing approaching a killer instinct. Yet if Lord Haversham had upset his Davenport in any way, he would not answer for the consequences.

He burst through the front door, relieved when Polly appeared to see what the commotion was.

“Where is Miss Davenport?” he demanded furiously.

Polly's eyes went round, and she pointed to the back of the house and Davenport's private parlour. "But you can't go in, my lord. She's got visitors."

"Much I care for that," he replied savagely and threw open the door.

The scene that met his eyes was not one he had expected. Lord and Lady Haversham were sitting together on the settee, gazing at one another like slightly older and jaded versions of Romeo and Juliet. Jules turned to see Davenport pouring out drinks, brandy by the look of it, and healthy measures too.

Despite his unheralded entrance, she had not yet noticed him enter the room. "I'll have one of those too," he said, for he felt like he'd walked into some peculiar parallel universe.

Davenport gave a little shriek and set down the decanter with a clatter. "Mark!" she exclaimed, and then blushed furiously, which was so endearing he wanted to kiss her. "I mean, my lord," she added.

He smiled at her, hoping she could see his heart in his eyes, for it seemed his family could and teasing him had become their new favourite hobby. Stepping into the room, he closed the door and regarded Lord Haversham.

The man's expression shuttered, his shoulder's stiffening. "You!" the fellow said with undisguised fury.

Jules stood his ground but glanced back at Davenport, searching her face for signs of distress before he decided whether to take Haversham outside and settle their differences in the time-honoured fashion. She looked as poised and calm as she always did, but she'd likely look like that if the roof had fallen in, so there was no telling.

"Haversham," he said coolly. "I see you decided to visit Miss Davenport in person. Have you enjoyed a nice little chat? Did my gently bred lady, alone in the house, relish hearing what you had to say?"

Haversham flushed at the implication he had acted with gross impropriety. As well he should, Jules thought savagely. Still, he got to his feet, vibrating with rage.

“And did my gently bred wife relish your—”

“Lord Haversham!” Selina’s tart voice cut through the insults and male posturing as effectively as if she’d taken the ears of small boys and given them a good tug. “Don’t you dare come into my house and subject me to any more of your invective and vile insinuations. We have established you are just as guilty as your wife, so think carefully before you make it worse again.”

Lord Haversham’s chin jutted mulishly but Lady Haversham got up, clinging to his arm, and kissed his cheek.

“Now come, Ronnie, darling,” she coaxed. “If I can forgive all your indiscretions, surely you can forgive my own little foolishness too? You promised.”

Haversham turned to regard the lady and gave a taut nod. Staring back at Jules with loathing, he added, “Stay away from my wife, Blackstone.”

“I’d be delighted to. No offence, Lady Haversham,” Jules added hastily.

The lady gave a little sniff and looked away, whilst Lord Haversham sent him a look of volcanic dislike, but merely added, “And I shall leave you and your fiancée alone, too.”

“Oh, but I’m not...” Selina began, but Lord Haversham wasn’t attending to her.

Instead, he turned back to his wife and his expression changed dramatically, the hard lines softening and his eyes glowing as he stared down at her. “Anything for you, my sweet buttercup.”

“Oh, Ronnie,” she sighed, and lifted her face for a kiss.

Jules shook his head, utterly bewildered, and walked over to Davenport. “Is it witchcraft?” he demanded.

She handed him a drink, darting a shy look at him. “Don’t be silly.”

“Well, what the devil did you do? They hated the sight of each other, he wanted me dead, or at least disgraced, and he

came here with the intention of wrecking my life. *What* did you do, Davenport?"

She shrugged, picking up two more glasses. "Nothing really. Just talked some sense into them."

Jules watched her as she crossed the room and handed the drinks to the star-crossed lovers, shaking his head in amazement.

"Why are you looking at me so oddly?" she demanded, as she returned to his side.

"Because, my darling Boadicea, I shall never cease to be amazed by you. Not if I live to be hundred. You are the most remarkable female I have ever met. As if anyone but you could have talked sense into that pair."

"Such flummery," she said, sounding a little exasperated, but the little tinge of pink still lingering in her cheeks told him she liked it all the same.

"It's no more than the truth. Now, do you mean to tell me that you have really reconciled those two, and Lord Haversham is not going to take me to court?"

"Of course he isn't taking you to court. As if I would allow him to do such a ridiculous and ill-advised thing," she said hotly. "Though, really, my lord, after all I have read about you in the past months' scandal sheets, it's a wonder you've not landed there long before this. I cannot pretend I am not heartily ashamed of you. Your behaviour has been shocking and not at all what I would expect of a man I..." She broke off, staring at him with such an expression of regret his chest hurt.

"Yes, Boadicea?" he said softly, gazing down at her. His heart was hammering with fear, with the horrible realisation she might not forgive him, but what had she been going to say? A man she *what*?

She set her mouth in a firm line and shook her head. "Never mind."

"But I do mind. You were giving me a well-deserved scolding. Don't stop now."



She sent him a look of sheer exasperation. Jules grinned at her.

“There’s no talking to you,” she told him crossly, picking up her drink and stalking out of the room.

Jules downed his in one large swallow, certain he was going to need a little bolstering, and hurried after her. She encountered Polly as she crossed the hall and, as was her way, began issuing orders.

“Polly, make sure no one enters my private parlour anytime soon, please, oh, and don’t forget to ensure Hubert’s valet’s room has a good fire blazing. You know what he’s like for catching chills and then Hubert will sulk if the silly fellow is laid up in bed and his cravats aren’t just as he likes them.”

“Yes, miss,” Polly said, and hurried to the servant’s staircase.

She had almost reached the library door when Owen, the footman, appeared. “Begging your pardon, miss, but Jacob had ordered the gig be made ready and—”

“In this weather? With his chest? I should think not,” she said indignantly. “He may not care if I have to sit up all hours nursing him, but I don’t relish the idea. He may take the carriage or stay home, and you may tell him to come to me if he doesn’t like it. Foolish boy.”

“Very good, miss. Also, I don’t like to mention it, but Mrs Hilson has dozed off and—”

“And you may take Benjamin to Miss Abigail and tell her to look after him until she wakes up, Owen,” Jules said firmly.

Davenport swung around, glaring at him in outrage. Jules winked at the footman, who grinned at him. “Yes, my lord,” he said, and hurried off.

“How dare you!” she exclaimed. “How dare you interfere in the running of my household?”

“I know, it was very bad of me,” he said soothingly. “Now, come into the library so you can scold me properly without anyone hearing. A fellow has his pride, you know.”

Davenport made a sound of outrage. “Ha! You’ve enough pride to fill an East Indiaman!” she shot back.

“True enough. Born to be a duke, you see. Comes with the territory, I’m afraid,” he said, ushering her into the library and closing the door firmly behind them.

“That does not give you the right to give orders in my house!”

“But it’s not your house, love, no matter how magnificently you run it. For the moment, it is your father’s, and then it will be your brother’s. Assuming the fool hasn’t lost everything by that time for I don’t reckon that day is so far off even now.”

She paled, looking up at him with hurt in her eyes. “You think I don’t know that?”

He moved closer to her, and she backed up, moving away as he prowled closer, until she found herself with a shelf full of books at her back and could go no farther.

“Of course you know it,” he said gently. “But you deserve so much more than this. You deserve a home of your own, an estate that is worthy of your full attention, a family who appreciates just how wonderful you are and a husband... a husband who would love and honour you, who would stand with you and share the burden, not wrest it from your grasp *or* allow you to run yourself ragged doing the work of ten men.”

She stared up at him doubtfully. “But you’re Bedwin’s heir and I’m—”

“You are the woman my heart has chosen, the only one who has ever met me head on and held me to account... and I didn’t mind. Well,” he amended wryly. “I minded, but I wanted to be better, I wanted only to prove to you that I was as good as you believed I could be. That’s still what I want, love. To look into your eyes and know you’re proud of me, because your good opinion, your respect, it worth more to me than anything else I can think of.”

She groaned and put her head in her hands.

“I was rather hoping you’d sigh and throw yourself at me by this point,” he said, lifting her chin so she was forced to look at him.

“But it’s... ridiculous,” she protested, clutching at his lapels. “Your parents...”

Jules reached out and cupped her cheek. “My mother remembers you from your come out and heartily approves. She can’t wait to meet you properly and tells me this is probably the first sensible decision I have ever made in my life. The duke agrees with my mother because he trusts her opinion implicitly. If she says you are the woman for me, he accepts it. They are a team, a single unit that works together, that strengthens each other with their differences and never lets anyone else see a weakness in the other. They are remarkable, unstoppable, and I know we can be the same.”

He saw longing in her eyes and his heart eased a little. Perhaps it would not take him so much time and persuasion as he’d believed.

“I know it will take time to trust me, I understand that, but I’m not really the frivolous fool you read about in the papers, you know. Underneath, I think I’m pretty decent. Not perfect, and a bit conceited, I’ll need the odd set down, of course, but I’m loving, and kind, and loyal, Davenport. If I make you my wife, there will never be another. I shall give it all up, all the foolishness, and I shan’t regret it for a moment, if you are committed to me as I shall be to you.”

A tear trickled down her cheek and he caught it on his finger. “What’s this for?”

“Because it’s not fair,” she said, coming as close to pouting as he could ever imagine her doing. “You know just w-what to say to overcome all my arguments, and they were good arguments too,” she added sadly.

“I never doubted it,” he murmured, taking the glass from her hand and taking a sip. He put it aside and placed a hand on the wall on either side of her head, caging her in. “You know, Davenport, I’ll happily argue any point you like, but I shall always have an answer, or a solution, and if I don’t, we can

figure one out together, but I mean to marry you. I'm just letting you know this so you don't have the foolish notion you can put me off. Unless, that is, you don't want me?"

She stared up at him and, to his alarm, her bottom lip trembled.

"Darling?" he said, pulling her into his arms. "What is it?"

His beloved buried her face against his shoulder and let out a sob. "I do!" she wailed. "I do want you. So m-much..."

"Well, there's no need to cry over it," he said with a shaky laugh. "I mean, many people may think you've taken leave of your senses—I'm related to most of them—but it's not that bad."

"Oh, you silly man," she said crossly, pushing away from him. "You've not considered, not thought it through. I cannot marry you!"

Jules sighed and pulled her tighter against him. "Tell me why, then."

She made a wobbly, hiccupping sound, utterly wretched. "Because I cannot leave the children. Jacob might fare well enough now, for he'll be at university, and Abigail could be put in the charge of a sensible woman if you think your family would be willing to guide her, but as for Charlie and Julia, they still need me, and I'm really the only thing resembling a mother little Benjamin has ever known, and—"

Jules kissed her, for it was really the only way of dealing with such nonsense. She sighed, softening against him instantly and wrapping her arms about his waist. He kissed her until there was no resistance in her at all and she sagged against him, all her fight gone.

"I can't leave them," she said brokenly, staring at the top button on his waistcoat and tracing it round and round with her finger. "No matter how much I want to marry you."

"I'm not asking you to."

Her head whipped up, and she stared at him open-mouthed. Jules smiled and caught an unruly lock of red hair,

tucking it behind her ear.

“I believe I said we would do everything together,” he reminded her gently. “And that means raising your brothers and sisters as best we can, too. It will be good practise. I have seven siblings, you know. I’m used to a lot of noise and chaos. I’m not sure I’d know what to do with myself in a quiet house. Besides, then no one will notice that I make the most noise and mess and chaos. I can blame them.”

“You’re serious,” she said in awe. “You’d really take us all on? Are you mad?”

He laughed, shaking his head. “I’ll take you in your shift, Davenport, and I’ll take all the troubles and responsibilities that come with you. I chose a woman who was capable of taking on the world, and so if the world comes with her... so be it.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed and flung her arms about his neck.

Jules staggered, caught his heel in the carpet, and overbalanced.

The two of them crashed to the floor, leaving Jules gasping as Davenport’s full weight landed on top of him. A bare moment later, the door flew open, and Abigail appeared flanked by Jacob and Charlie.

“Oh!” Abigail said in alarm and then grinned, giving Jules a saucy look. “My lord, you have ruined my sister. I insist you marry her and repair her good name.”

Jules gave Davenport a long-suffering sigh and shrugged. “Oh, all right then,” he said. “If you insist.”

“If I had my umbrella,” Davenport observed through narrowed eyes. “You would not be so rude.”

“Just as you say, love,” Jules replied, and kissed her, much to the delight of their audience.

## Chapter 20



*Dearest Mama,*

*I am writing to you with the most wonderful news. Though she is usually an extremely sensible and level-headed young woman, I have finally persuaded Miss Selina Davenport to do me the honour of becoming my wife.*

*I am so happy I do not think I can put it into words, but I know you understand. Tell Papa I am sorry for the trials I have given you both, but they are at an end – if he'd seen the way the lady wields an umbrella, he would understand. Seriously though, thank you, both of you, for bearing with my nonsense and always being there for me. You have been the very best of parents, and as I am now to be a family man, I shall need your advice more than ever.*

*Don't say I didn't warn you.*

*Mama, please make plans for a splendid wedding as soon as you possibly may. I know you are capable of miracles, so please, find a date in April and help me make this happen before the foolish girl realises what a bad bargain she's struck.*

*I am bringing her to meet you as soon as I may, so expect us shortly after this letter arrives.*

***—Excerpt of a letter from The Most Hon'ble Jules Adolphus, The Marquess of Blackstone to his mother, Her Grace,***

*Prunella Adolphus, the Duchess of  
Bedwin.*

**21<sup>st</sup> March 1845, Beverwyck, London.**

“Big,” Benjamin said, staring, awestruck, up at the magnificence that was Beverwyck. “Big, *big* castle.”

“You’d need a few more bricks for one that size, I’d say,” Charlie said manfully, though he looked rather pale. He lifted his little brother into his arms and glanced doubtfully at Jules. “You really will be a duke one day, then?”

“I’m afraid so,” Jules said apologetically. “Though I very much hope not for a long while. You’ll have got used to the idea by then.”

“No,” Charlie said with a short laugh. “Don’t reckon I will.”

“Is the duchess very grand?” Abigail asked, reaching for Selina’s hand.

Selina squeezed her gloved fingers in encouragement, but also turned to Jules for reassurance.

“I think I had better just let the duchess speak for herself,” he said with a wink. “It’s how she prefers it, but I promise you will like her very much. I know I do.”

He took Selina’s free hand, and she felt her heart swell as he reached for Julia too, who had been quiet all morning.

“What if they don’t like us? Will you still marry Selina? Where will we go?” she asked, the questions suddenly exploding out of her.

Jules knelt down until he was level with the little girl’s face. “Julia, I like you very, very much, which is how I know my mother and father will like you, too. You need to ignore their grand titles, for they’re just Mama and Papa to me, you see? And no matter what, you will always have a place with us, and no one can change that. Not ever.”

Julia let out a breath and stepped forward, wrapping her arms about Jules’ neck and hugging him tightly. Jules put his hand to her slender form and hugged her back, glancing up at

Selina as he did so. Emotion filled her chest, pressing against her ribs until she thought she might burst at the happiness shining in his eyes. They mattered to him. Not just Selina, he cared for all of them, cared what became of them. They would be safe with him.

Once Julia had let him go, Jules stood again, clearing his throat.

“Well,” he said, sounding a little unsteady. “Is everyone ready?”

“Yes, Jules,” everyone chorused, except for Benjamin, who said, “Yes, Mark... I m-mean, *Jools*.”

“Good show. Let’s go and meet the family, then,” he said, gripping Selina’s hand tightly as he escorted them inside.

He was nervous too, she realised, and she wasn’t sure if she found that comforting or not.

After they were greeted by a rather intimidating but surprisingly welcoming butler, Jules led them through a series of rooms that left them all with their mouths open. Selina tried to imagine growing up in such an opulent and vast building. It was a good job they had a large family, she decided, for one might have felt very small and alone otherwise.

Finally, Jules brought them to stand before a large, polished oak door, and gave a smart knock before entering.

“I asked them to meet you in this room,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “I thought you might like it.”

Selina did not have time to question this statement as Jules drew her forward, and into a library of the size and magnificence she could not have imagined. She had never seen so many books and so much polished oak in one place in her life before. For a moment she just stood, staring, mouth agape, before she realised she was being observed.

Movement from beside one of two grand fireplaces on opposite sides of the room, caught her eye. In a flurry of royal blue silk, a woman got to her feet. She was not precisely beautiful, but she had a face that was filled with character and wisdom, and that you would be hard pressed to forget. Her



hair had once been blonde but was now streaked with white. However, the smile that transformed her face on seeing Selina changed her perception of what she saw. She was quite lovely.

The duchess hurried across the room, skirts swishing as she walked.

“My dears!” she exclaimed, beaming at them. “I’m so delighted to meet you all. Please do come in, and don’t be afraid of the size of this draughty old place. Poor Bedwin and I rattle about like two peas in a pod half the time. Luckily, I still have some young children too, and the grown-up ones come and visit me a lot with their babies, or I should run mad. Now, come, come, sit down. Robert, darling, ring for tea. Now who is this handsome fellow? No... don’t tell me... Benjamin!”

Selina, quite overwhelmed, allowed the duchess to usher them all into the room, submitted to a surprisingly tight hug from the lady, and was propelled to a seat whilst her grace took inventory. Jules had mentioned something about her being a force of nature. She saw now exactly what he’d meant.

Benjamin stared up at the duchess. “Yes,” he said, glancing back at Selina for reassurance.

“And do you like building things, Benjamin?”

Benjamin nodded solemnly. “Jammy likes building.”

“He can’t say Benjamin yet, but he likes jam,” Selina cut in, blushing and feeling ridiculous but defensive of her little brother and his silly name. “It became a nickname, and now —”

“A very fine nickname, and I am very fond of jam myself, especially raspberry jam,” the duchess said approvingly and, much to Selina’s amazement, got to her knees on the floor in front of Benjamin. “Now, Benjamin. I have some things for you, but they used to belong to Jules, and he loved them very much. If I give them to you to look after, will you take very extra special care of them?”

Benjamin nodded vigorously.

“Ah, sweet little man,” the duchess sighed, cupping his soft cheek and looking wistful. “I wish I’d had another boy.”

“Good grief, woman, eight children was enough.”

Everyone jumped, having entirely forgotten the duke was there at all, so consumed were they by the force of the woman in front of them.

As one, all eyes swivelled in his direction, and were surprised to find the man smiling ruefully.

“It’s quite all right. I’m used to standing in the background when Prue is in full flight. How do you do? I’m very pleased to meet you all, especially you, my dear,” he said, moving to take Selina’s hand. “I owe you a debt, I think.”

Selina gaped at him. “I shouldn’t think so,” she said, bewildered.

“Well, I beg to differ. You have brought my son, the one I have been waiting for these past years, to his senses, and home to us again. I was never more relieved, nor proud of him for making such a wonderful choice. I’m afraid I have made a few enquiries you see, my dear, and everyone tells me what a sensible, clever, and level-headed woman you are.”

Blushing furiously, Selina could not help but query this, for she could not imagine who would have said such things about her. “Are you certain they didn’t say bossy and overbearing?”

“Quite certain,” Bedwin said, lips twitching.

“Duchy,” Benjamin said plaintively, for despite being coached all the way from Monmouth, the word duchess was one he could not quite manage. He tugged at her heavy silk skirts and Selina prayed fervently that his hands were still clean. “Duchy, where are Jules’ things? You give them to me?”

“Oh!” the duchess said with an apologetic laugh. “Poor little man, how patient you’ve been too. The naughty duke distracted me,” she added, sending a look of mock annoyance towards her husband.

“Benjamin!” Charlie hissed, looking mortified that his brother had been so forward.

“It’s quite all right,” the duchess soothed. “It is a dreadful torment for a child to wait after being promised a treat. You were quite right to remind me, Benjamin, but do call me Prue. Can you say that easier? Yes, far better than duchess, so stuffy. Now, if you look in that box over there, you will find some things to occupy you, and you may take them home too, if your sister says it is allowed.”

Benjamin gasped and ran to the box, giving a little cry of delight as he saw the treasures within.

“What did you give him?” Jules asked his mother curiously.

“Your building blocks, and I found some wooden soldiers that used to stand sentry on the turrets.”

“Oh, the ones Jasper made for me,” he said, grinning. “He’ll have hours of fun. I certainly did.”

“You’re very kind,” Selina said, feeling as though she were living in a dream. “Truly, I... I never imagined.... Jules told me you would welcome us, but... but this... when I’m certain I cannot be at all what you hoped for.”

The duke made an odd coughing sound. His wife was less subtle and gave a bark of laughter.

“Not what we hoped for?” she repeated, sounding tickled to death. “Oh, Robert, darling, help me up, I’m stuck,” she added, for her heavy skirts were cumbersome for playing on the floor with small boys.

Selina watched as her husband moved towards her and helped her up, saw the look that passed between them, one of decades of love and understanding. He escorted her to her seat and saw her settled before taking his place beside her. The duchess reached for his hand, but she was staring intently at Selina.

“Look at me, my dear. When Bedwin met me, I had no fortune, no connections, I am certainly no beauty, nor have I ever been.”

The duke made an indignant sound of protest, but she hushed him. “You know very well that you are biased, my

love, because you fell in love with *me*, not my face. It is a sensible thing to do, you know, for looks fade, and if there is nothing else... well. But Jules is my son, and he knows quality when he sees it. He knew when he found you that he had found a woman of substance, one he could face everything life threw at you both and never buckle. You'll hold each other up when things are tough, and you will laugh and love and celebrate all the wonderful things that are in store. Oh, my dear, the idea that you are not what we hoped for is quite amusing to us, for we have been praying for you, and finally, here you are."

Selina made a choked sound, for once in her life quite at a loss for words. It didn't seem to matter. The duchess chattered and got everyone talking while Selina composed herself, and little by little Selina realised what she was seeing. Her grace was a bossy, managing female. She took over and arranged people and things as she thought they ought to be. Selina glanced at the duke, who was watching his wife with a look of indulgent adoration, and to Jules, who was quite obviously full of pride for her. Julia, Charlie, and Benjamin all adored her already, and she had even charmed Jacob by telling him to stop sitting about trying to look tidy and explore the library... words designed to make her his favourite person in the world. They all thought her wonderful.

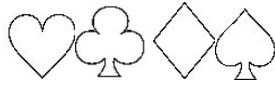
"I told you," Jules whispered to her. "She's a force of nature. One cannot help but submit to her and no one ever even minds, for she always knows what's best. Do you like her?"

Selina nodded, smiling. "Very much indeed."

"You'll like my father too, he'll do better when he gets to know you all a bit more. He usually lets my mother take charge with guests he doesn't know, as he's more reserved, but he likes you. That much is obvious."

She turned to look at him, knowing her heart was in her eyes. "I love you, Jules," she whispered. To her surprise and pleasure, he blushed, and she realised—though she had known it and surely, he must have done too—she had not told him so before.

He returned a smile of such happiness she felt winded by it. Leaning in, he whispered to her: "I'm very glad to hear that, Davenport, because I adore you."



They were married two weeks later. Though Jules had favoured a large, splendid affair at St James' Church, the idea of so many people staring at her and gossiping made Selina feel quite unwell. She had done her best to look enthusiastic and say all the right things, but Jules had sensed something was amiss and asked his mother for advice.

"I don't know why you should want such a big wedding, Jules," she said when they next met. "Small, intimate affairs are becoming so much more fashionable. Don't you agree, Selina?"

Selina had grabbed it like a proverbial lifeline.

"You really didn't want a big wedding at all, did you?" Jules asked her later.

"I only want you," she'd said, shaking her head apologetically.

The words were designed to melt his heart, and they did. Jules couldn't have given a damn if they got married in coal scuttle, so long as it was done at once.

Finally, the day had dawned, and now Jules stood with his bride, who was dressed in a soft dove grey gown that shimmered silver in the light. Her hair blazed like fiery copper against it. His breath caught as he glanced across her at her, solemnly reciting her vows. She meant them, the look in her eyes showing him that she was not merely repeating as the ceremony demanded but giving herself into his care. For a woman like her, independent, courageous and capable, to do such a thing, afforded him an honour of which he was viscerally aware.

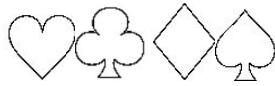
Her father had given her away, looking pleased as punch, though Jules had no illusions about why that was. It had taken little time to get the father and brother's measure, but they did

not know him yet. If they thought they could squeeze him until they bled, they were in for a shock, and if they dared do anything to upset Davenport, they would find themselves in the cargo hold of a ship going far, far away. After a frank conversation with them on the subject of his wife, he did not think the two were daft enough to risk that, at least, but one never knew.

The day passed in a blur. Later he would remember snippets, turning and seeing his mother wiping her eyes, her head on his father's shoulder, the sight of his friends and family, laughing and teasing and celebrating with them, and little Benjamin falling over and hurting himself, and running at once to Jules for comfort. In that moment, Jules knew his life was changed for good, and for the better. He had people who relied upon him, not just nameless tenants who needed a decent landlord. He had a family now, and everything that affected their lives was important to him. Benjamin had turned to him without a second thought, and he needed them all to be able to do the same.

The only dark shadow during the day was the absence of his brother, Fred. With all the excitement and happiness of falling in love and marrying the woman of his dreams, Jules had not been aware of his brother's troubles. His parents had kept it from him at first, allowing him to be truly happy with nothing to mar the perfection of his days. But Fred's heart was broken, his beloved Aggie disappeared with no trace, and Jules did not think he would ever be whole again. He might not have understood this so easily a very short time ago, but now, the idea of living without the woman he loved was too hard to endure. Fred had apologised to Jules and wished him happiness, but the idea of celebrating Jules and Selina's love when he was in such turmoil was too much for his brother to endure.

Jules made himself a promise to look after Fred, to do everything he could to get him through, to ensure he too knew that Jules could be relied upon, even with the care of a broken heart. He thanked Providence that he had been so unbelievably lucky.



Selina stared down at her hands, twisting the gold band around and around as the carriage drew them away from Beverwyck. The sounds of their family and friends faded into the background, their cheers and good wishes disappearing and leaving only the sound of horses' hooves, the turn of the wheels, and her heart thudding with anticipation.

*She* was the Marchioness of Blackstone.

Selina stifled a giggle, not entirely successfully, and Jules shifted beside her. He had one arm around her waist, the heat of his hand burning through her gown and making her achingly aware of the fact they were now married.

"What's funny, Davenport?"

She gave him an arch look. "You mustn't call me that, I'm a married lady now. A marchioness, of all things."

"You'll always be Davenport to me, my little love, no matter how grand you are."

Selina blushed, not at all displeased by this. Though most might find being addressed in such a way appalling, she took it as a sign of respect and affection.

"I don't know how to be a marchioness," she confessed, turning to him.

Jules only laughed, the best. "Yes, you do," he objected. "You've been doing it all your life. Just carry on, love. You don't need to change a thing. I, on the other hand, I must learn to be a useful human being *and* a father... I mean, I don't know what you are worrying about. I'm the one with a hill to climb."

"Foolish man," she sighed, staring at him and wondering when it had happened. When had her heart handed itself into his keeping? It wasn't like the silly thing had asked her permission; it had just up and left her. Not that she cared. It seemed her heart had a great deal more common sense than she had given it credit for. "You are capable of anything you choose, as you well know. I mean, you've never done a day's

work in your life, and you know nothing about gardening, but look how well you got on.”

Jules snorted. “Yes, I got blisters and didn’t fool you for a moment. Any other marvellous examples?”

“I don’t need to give examples,” she said crossly. “I see the man before me. I see you, Jules. You are good and honourable and true, and you mean the things you say. I have not only given myself into your care, but my brothers and sisters, too. Do you really think I am so brainless as to do such a thing if there was the slightest doubt of your worth? I don’t fall in love with just any silly fellow, you know.”

Jules stared at her, and his lips quirked into a smile. “You always know the exact right thing to say to me. I love it that I know you speak only the truth, even if it is sometimes hard to hear. I adore you, Davenport, and I cannot wait to get you alone.”

Selina swallowed and turned away, aware she was blushing crimson.

“Nervous, sweetheart?”

She gave a taut little nod.

“There’s no need,” he soothed, his gentle voice making her heart career about as if it had run mad. “I’ll take the best care of you.”

“I have done my best to prepare for y-you,” she said, a trifle breathlessly.

Jules sat back a bit, regarding her with undisguised interest. “Have you, now?”

“Yes,” she said, putting her chin up. She would not be missish about this. It was a normal part of marriage, and it was obvious Jules would do as he said and take care of her. But she hated not knowing what it was she ought to do and so, with no mother to do the job for her, she had taken it upon herself to become informed. The duchess had tried several times to have a private little chat, but as much as she adored her new mother-in-law, Selina had felt that was simply too much.



“How, may I ask?”

Selina swallowed. “I f-found a book.”

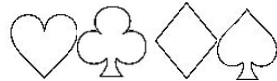
He tugged her a bit closer. “I’m listening. What was the name of this book?”

“*A Guide to Matrimonial Matters for the New Wife*, by the Reverend Eustace Snipe.”

There was a short silence.

Alarmed, Selina turned to look at her new husband, finding him gazing at her with such a look of fond exasperation she blushed. “W-What?” she began, only to be pulled ruthlessly into his arms.

“Darling, throw the book out,” he whispered, and kissed her until she thought that might actually be a very sensible idea. The reverend *had* seemed a rather dull fellow after all, which her husband certainly was not.



The staff of Jules’ town house on Upper Brook Street greeted Selina with every appearance of genuine delight. She had met them during the previous weeks as Jules had brought her to the place that would be their new home when they were in town. This audience, at least, she could do, and she greeted them just as she ought, without blushing or stammering despite being a new bride and viscerally aware of the fact. The housekeeper was a very sensible woman and Selina liked her very much. She flattered herself that the feeling was mutual and that they would go along famously.

Briggs was there, of course, though it seemed he had become good friends with many of the gardeners at her home and was determined to keep in touch. He had promised her to keep an eye on her roses if he ever visited and greeted her with warmth and his firm assurance that between them, they could make something of Jules, even though he was a sorry fellow.

Selina admitted herself surprised and rather pleased that he was allowed such leeway in his speech, but supposed if one was to embark on the kind of ridiculous escapade the two of

them had tried on her, there ought to be a good deal of trust and friendship between them. Going on the way Jules snorted and told him he was a rude devil, and he had no idea why he kept him on, Selina assumed this was the case.

There was only one cloud in the sunny landscape of her existence. Leaving the family home in Monmouthshire had been a horrid wrench. It was the only home she had ever known, and despite the difficulties and the reality of the situation, she had loved it as her own. She despaired of what would become of her rose garden too. Briggs' promise was sweet, but she would be surprised if he managed to visit more than once a year. Her garden would need a good deal more tending than that. The duchess had given her several recommendations for excellent housekeepers, though, so—as long as her father and brother paid the necessary wages—Selina was sure the right candidate would ensure the house and garden were taken care of. That was something.

At least her father had been saved the expense of keeping the children. Jules had requested an interview with his new father-in-law and brother-in-law at Beverwyck a few days earlier and, whilst Selina did not know what had been said, she knew Jules had told the pair he would take responsibility for the family, financially and in all other ways, and he expected no interference from either of them.

She doubted they'd put up much of a fight. It was far more likely they would hang upon Jules' sleeve themselves whenever possible, though the thought made her cringe. She hoped he would not let them plague him.

Jules' home was elegant and light, built of white stone over five storeys, grand enough to befit the heir to a dukedom, though it was not on the scale of Beverwyck, thank heavens. Large windows flooded the rooms with light and the furnishings were elegant and modern. All of this was his doing, which Selina admitted herself relieved by. She had no eye for design, and the idea of redecorating filled her with terror. Jules, however, seemed to revel in it, and had enjoyed pointing out his favourite pieces and the rooms with which he

was most pleased. It had pleased her too, to see the pride he took in having created a place to be admired.

“We’ll let the children make their rooms their own, of course, for I’m certain Abigail will wish to redecorate,” he had said simply, apparently not minding in the least if they changed all his meticulous designs. The ease with which he was prepared to admit them into his world touched her more than she could express.

Now, though, he was in no mood to linger and admire their new home. Once the staff had been greeted, he ushered her upstairs to their adjoining bedrooms.

“I hope you realise that we will not have separate beds,” he said to her the moment the door closed. “I have no problem with you having your own room, but whether we sleep here or in my room, it will be in the same bed.”

Selina nodded, finding no problem with this either, even though her tongue seemed to have glued itself to her mouth. For a woman used to taking charge and telling people what to do, she felt all at sea, and not at all certain of how she ought to behave.

“Come along, Davenport, come and sit down and have a little something. I doubt you ate a bite at the wedding breakfast. I certainly didn’t and I’m famished.”

He tugged her hand, drawing her to the corner of what was her room where a table had been laid for two and set with a splendid array of little tarts and delicacies, and a bottle of champagne on ice.

More than willing to put off the inevitable for a few moments, despite her eagerness to be in his arms, Selina sat at the table and allowed her husband to feed her choice morsels from the array of dishes on offer.

“Try this one,” he said, lifting a tiny choux bun for her to try.

Obediently, Selina opened her mouth, and he popped the delicate treat inside, brushing her lips with his fingers. Chewing slowly, Selina let out a little sigh of pleasure.

“Divine,” she said happily.

She looked up to find him watching her, his green eyes suddenly dark.

Swallowing nervously, she licked her lips, and his gaze tracked the movement, making her insides squirm, though not unpleasantly.

Jules cleared his throat and poured them both a glass of champagne. “By the way, you remember I spoke to your father and brother the other day?”

“Yes,” she replied, wondering why he was mentioning it now.

“Well, I’m afraid I did a bit of digging, my love, and the pair of them are up to their ears in debt. It’s far worse than I had realised. You father made a shockingly bad investment in a stud farm, and a dozen other ridiculous ventures, and I need not tell you your brother is a loose screw, I know. However—”

“What?” Selina stared at him in alarm. “Oh, how could they? Oh, Jules! The house... Don’t tell me—”

Jules sighed, shaking his head. “Davenport, let me finish before you start fretting and making plans to avert disaster, for there is none, I assure you.”

“But you just said—”

“I just said,” Jules carried on firmly. “That they *were* in debt. They are not now.”

“Oh, no, Jules, they didn’t ask you?” she said in dismay. That he had been forced to pay her family’s debts before they’d even married was beyond mortifying.

“Certainly not,” he replied coolly. “I offered.”

“Why?” she demanded, perplexed. “Surely you know they’ll come to you at every opportunity now if they think you’ll keep them afloat.”

“That, they will not, and I did not simply pay their debts, Davenport,” he said softly. “I bought them.”

She stared at him, an odd sensation gathering in her stomach. "I don't understand."

Jules took her hand, twining their fingers together, his gaze fixed upon the gold band she wore. "The house, and the estate, love. It's yours. It wasn't entailed, so I bought it. I paid their debts and well over the odds for the place. They've funds to keep them afloat well enough if they don't outrun their budgets. I've put the house in your name, Davenport. Hubert didn't like it much, but he hadn't much of a choice in the matter considering the type of people he owed money to. So, you can keep it or give it to one of the children if you choose, but it will be your decision. I know how much you love the place. So, I thought we could go there in the summertime. I'd rather like to see it when it isn't perishing cold and raining, for one thing," he added ruefully.

He looked up then, an expression in his eyes that made her heart feel as if it might burst.

"Did I do right, love? I rely upon you to tell me."

"Oh," she said, too overwhelmed to say another word. "Oh, J-Jules. Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

She leapt up and ran to his chair, throwing her arms about his neck with enthusiasm. A touch too much enthusiasm as it turned out, as her weight bore them both back and sent them crashing to the floor, chair and all.

"Ooof!" Jules lay winded for a moment before giving a heavy sigh. "You're very hard on a fellow's bones, Davenport, not to mention the furniture. I daresay the staff shall think we broke the bed," he remarked, chuckling now.

"I'm so sorry!" Selina cried, burying her face against his waistcoat. Good lord, but this was a fine way start to things. She'd nearly broken his head, and she was none too certain the chair had survived.

"I'm not," he said, the words low as he nuzzled at her ear. He rolled her onto her back and stared down at her. "I've wanted to get you in this position for weeks, love. Don't think I'm letting you up now."

“But we’re on the floor,” she protested, nose wrinkling.  
“And I’m dressed.”

“The first thing is not a problem. The second, I mean to remedy.”

“Not lying down, you won’t. This corset is new, and I don’t have the slightest idea how it works, and the dress—”

“Are you telling me how to undress you, Davenport?” he enquired mildly.

Selina considered this. “No.”

“Jolly good,” he replied with a grin, and proceeded to undress her with remarkable skill, though she did have to roll this way and that to allow him access.

She could not help but point out it would have been much easier if they’d just stood up, a comment that made him laugh a good deal for reasons she did not understand. In fact, there was a lot more laughter than she had anticipated as he muttered and cursed buttons and hooks and every dressmaker that was ever born, and generally amused her by being absurd, even though his fingers were skilled and made short work of every impediment they encountered.

Finally, she was left in her drawers and chemise and, though her cheeks were burning, and she was jittery with nerves, she was not afraid. Jules would take care of her, just as he had promised to do, and he would tell her what to do. He would not make fun of her or laugh unkindly if she did or said something ridiculous. So, all she had to do was let him love her, and that didn’t seem such a hard thing to do.

## Chapter 21



*Jules,*

*You asked me what in the blazes I was doing, “marrying that strumpet.” Maybe I shall tell you one fine day, if ever the burn of humiliation dies away, which I doubt. I was caught like a fat trout and now I have nothing left to do but repent at leisure, as the saying goes.*

*Yet, I hear I owe you happy tidings. Well, I offer you them with my whole heart old friend. For God’s sake, be happy, happy enough for both of us. For I am living a nightmare to which there can be no end. I am determined there will be no children from this marriage so my brothers will have to buck up and do their duty.*

*And yes, I know you would have helped, but there was nothing I could do that would not have been dishonourable.*

*I wish you every joy with your bride and your new wife. Perhaps you might bring her to Scotland to meet me. A visit here in the late spring would be romantic, would it not? I am eager to meet this lady who felled such a stubborn bachelor. Do not, I beg, give her to expect a meeting with my own lady wife. I shall not offer one to either of you.*

**—Excerpt of a letter to The Most Hon’ble  
Jules Adolphus, The Marquess of**

*Blackstone (eldest son of Their Graces, Robert and Prunella Adolphus, The Duke and Duchess of Bedwin) from The Right Hon'ble Lyall Anderson, Viscount Buchanan (eldest son of Gordon and Ruth Anderson, Earl and Countess of Morven).*

**21<sup>st</sup> March 1845, Chartley, Upper Brook Street, London.**

Jules stared down at his wife. A sudden shaft of panic speared his heart as he considered how easily he might have missed her, if she hadn't written that review, if he'd not gone to visit Pip, if he'd not got the ridiculous idea in his head to take his revenge on her. So many things might have gone wrong, and yet here they were.

He had taken all the pins from her hair, and it spilled out over the carpet like liquid copper, fiery sparks glittering along the tresses as the firelight flickered and reflected in the coils. Jules had longed to see her like this, all undone, free of all restraints except those in her mind, and he meant to do away with those too.

"You looked so beautiful today," he said softly, laying his hand on her chest. Her heart hammered beneath his palm and confirmed his suspicion that she was being brave and was not half so sanguine and relaxed as she made out.

She sent him a doubtful look, and he tweaked her nose. "Don't look like that, it was the truth. You took my breath away."

"I'm not beautiful, certainly not as lovely as Lady Haversham," she whispered, and he saw the vulnerability in her eyes then, the part of her she hid from everyone but him.

"To the devil with Lady Haversham. I have eyes for no one but you, my own magnificent Boadicea. You have broken down my defences, laid siege to my heart, and taken everything I am for your own. And, for the record, I was never gladder of anything. I love you, you alone, you are all that I



want. All I see is the loveliest girl in the world. I shall make you believe it, too.”

“Please do.” The words were faint but heartfelt, and Jules was more than happy to comply.

He bent his head and kissed her, smoothing his hand over the fine cotton of her shift to cup one splendid breast. A soft groan escaped him at the feel of her under his hands, her nipple drawing tight and pressing against his palm.

“All mine,” he murmured in her ear, pleased by the way her breath caught.

He stayed for a moment, toying with the taut little bud and watching the play of emotion over her face turn from embarrassment to something hot and curious.

“Come, sweetheart. I’m not really going to make love to you on the floor when there is a perfectly good bed waiting for us. But that’s not to say I won’t do it another day, just in case you were wondering.”

“I was,” she admitted candidly, which made him smile.

Jules helped her up and then watched, charmed and amused, as she rearranged the bed to her satisfaction, smoothing down the already turned down covers and plumping the pillows.

“Lovely sheets,” she said, smoothing a hand over them. “Far nicer than we have, though they were nice once, but they’ve been washed and mended so many times now—”

“Davenport?”

“Yes?”

“Hush.”

“Oh. Sorry. I talk when I’m nervous. Shall I turn down the lamps?”

“No. I want to see you.”

“See me? *Oh!* I see. I mean... very well. If you are quite sure...”

“Quite sure,” he agreed.

She was perched on the very edge of the mattress, hands folded demurely in her lap.

“Will you combust if I take off your shift?” he asked her gently. “You may keep it on a bit longer if you prefer.”

She shook her head. “N-No, I am determined not to be silly,” she said, chin up as ever.

Jules put his finger to that proud chin and tilted her head. “You could *never* be silly,” he told her and pressed a kiss to her mouth, not letting her go until he felt her limbs become pliant and she gave a little sigh.

Satisfied, he took hold of her shift and tugged it up over her head. Jules stepped back a little, taking in the picture she made, sitting in her lacy white drawers, with her glorious red hair cascading over her naked breasts.

His breath caught, heat and desire burning through him and devouring all in its path.

“Davenport,” he said, a little unsteadily. “You really have been hiding your light under a bushel.”

She frowned, looking somewhat puzzled. “Well, I know you hated my gowns, but I really haven’t. I’m nothing out of the ordinary, I’m sure, and—”

He pressed a finger to her lips, silencing her. “Never, *ever* say that again. You are extremely special. More than you know. You are special to me, and I love you.”

She blinked, her eyelashes growing wet and spiky as her bottom lip quivered. “How do you say such lovely things so easily?”

“It’s easy when they’re true. Lie down now.”

She did as he asked, and Jules lingered, trailing an idle finger up and down between her breasts. His wife stared at him, her breathing increasingly erratic as his body throbbed with the urgent desire to join her but he was not about to rush her.

“May I?” he asked, tugging gently at the leg of her drawers.

Davenport nodded, keeping her eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Swiftly, he divested her of her final piece of armour and allowed himself a moment to view his prize in all her glory, and glory she was, from the tips of her perfect toes to her fine, imperious nose, not to mention the splendid landscape of curves in between.

She darted an anxious glance at him, and he smiled.

“Beautiful,” he assured her as she returned a shy smile.

Quicker than he’d ever managed in his entire life, Jules disrobed, casting clothes to the floor in a manner which would have given Briggs an apoplexy on any other night. He thought he could be forgiven for such carelessness this once.

With more haste than grace, he climbed into the bed and lay down beside Davenport, who was still staring fixedly at the ceiling.

He smiled, stroking her cheek with the back of one finger. “Good evening, Selina,” he said, though it felt odd to him to use her given name. He much preferred Davenport. It was strong and just a little autocratic, like his beloved.

She sent him an odd look, and he grinned at her. “You were ignoring me.”

“I most certainly was not,” she objected. “I don’t see how anyone could.”

“Well, I’m rather hoping you won’t,” he replied with a chuckle.

There was a taut silence.

“I don’t know how to act,” she said, her voice constricted. “I hate not knowing what to do, Jules.”

He leaned in and kissed her ear and her throat worked. “Stop worrying about what to do and let me take over for once. Just be with me. Can you do that?”

She turned her head to stare at him and let out a shaky breath. "I can do that," she agreed.

"Then let me see if I can gain your attention." Shifting over her, he bent his head and did what he had been longing to do ever since he had first realised what magnificent proportions were hiding under her dreadful gowns. He took one ruddy nipple into his mouth.

She made a little squeaking sound and her breathing sped up, but he applied himself to his task, using his tongue to gently circle and tease first one breast, then the other. Finally, she let out a long, shuddering sigh, and he felt her hands go to his hair.

"Touch me as much as you want to," he told her. "I shall die if you don't."

She did as he directed and he revelled in the feel of her hands exploring him, of her confidence growing as she allowed her curiosity to take charge. When she reached down and squeezed his buttock with one hand, he could not help but give a snort of laughter.

"Sorry," she said, blushing as he looked down at her. "I've been longing to do that."

The admission pleased him more than he could say, but he simply kissed her hard to make sure she knew he approved and carried on his own inventory of his new wife. Slowly, he made his way down her body, kissing and nuzzling, touching her so very gently, moving her now pliant limbs this way and that. She especially liked his tongue on the sides of her breast and sighed blissfully, making a sound of regret as he moved on to explore her soft belly.

He wondered if she would protest as he kept moving down, nuzzling into the fiery thatch of curls between her thighs and growing dizzy as the womanly scent of her invaded his mind. Davenport had given herself over to him, though, and made not a murmur of protest, only sweet whispering sighs and moans that made him ache with the desire to be inside her.

Settling himself between her spread legs, he looked down at her, gazing across her fair skin, rosy with desire and sprinkled with golden freckles, to her lovely face, pink cheeked, soft red lips slightly parted.

“Any complaints?” he enquired softly.

“No,” she sighed. “Can’t think of one... of anything... Carry on,” she added, dazed, with an authoritative sweep of her hand.

Having been given his orders, Jules was more than content to obey, and what a marvel it was, to see his tightly laced, high-handed, proud wife dissolve under the touch of his mouth and hands. At the first touch of his tongue to the little secret bud between her thighs, she almost hit the ceiling and gave an exclamation of surprise that made her clap her hand to her mouth.

“*Oh!*” she said, staring down at him. “Oh, my.”

Jules grinned at her and carried on. Though he knew she was doing her utmost to keep still and not make a sound after her outburst, she could not do so. Little by little, he broke through her defences with slow, gentle sweeps of his tongue. Carefully he slid a finger inside her, thrilled by the slick heat discovered by his intimate questing.

“Jules,” she whispered, her head tilting back. “Oh, I didn’t know... I didn’t know.”

“It’s my pleasure to explain it all, Davenport,” he said unsteadily, entirely consumed by the vision of her abandoning herself to his touch. Returning to his work, he continued to lap at her with slow, firm sweeps of his tongue until she clutched at the sheet and cried out. The waves of her climax rolled over her, hips bucking as she let go of any last vestige of shyness. The sounds of her joy sent a thrill of triumph lancing through him, a surge of masculine pride and possessiveness he had never known before. Yet he knew no other man could have unbent his proud Boadicea to such wantonness, and the only reason he had succeeded was because he had earned her trust.

Pleased beyond measure, he could not hide his grin as he climbed back up her body, staring down at the destruction he had wrought. Flushed, her skin damp, her breath coming in short little gasps, Selina took one look at him and buried her hands in her face.

“Oh, good heavens! I shall never be able to look at you again!” she said, though the words were muffled.

“That might make breakfast a touch awkward,” he observed gently, stroking her face. “Selina, my own darling, don’t be bashful. There’s nothing to be embarrassed by here. I’m your husband, and if I please you, then that is as it should be. Do you think less of me for what I have done, to bring you pleasure?”

That brought her hands down, an indignant frown puckering her brow. “Of course not!”

“Well then, why should you feel ashamed of having enjoyed it?”

She considered this as he waited. Eventually, she met his eyes. “That makes a good deal of sense, only women are not supposed to... to *like* it, and the reverend said—”

“I already told you to consign that blasted book to the bin, or the fire, I’m not fussy. If you don’t. I shall,” he said resolutely. “The reverend is no doubt a pious fool who thinks women should suffer through sex and childbirth without a whimper and do their duty.”

“He *was* rather a windbag,” Selina agreed thoughtfully. Her expression became indignant. “And he had the most outrageous things to say about our ability to—”

Jules kissed her, not about to allow the Reverend Snipe another moment of his wedding night.

“I’ve not finished yet, love,” he reminded her, settling between her legs.

She stiffened, her previously languid limbs suddenly taut.

“Easy,” he said, smiling down at her.

“Yes,” she said, taking a breath and making an obvious effort to relax. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologise. Talk to me,” he said, reaching up to stroke her face. His arousal was pressed close against her sex, and he was in an agony of pent-up desire, but he was damned if he would do a thing until she wanted him to. “Are you still afraid?”

“It will hurt, won’t it?” she said simply. “I’m not afraid of a little pain, only I don’t know if it is a little or a lot.”

“A little,” he assured her. “As little as I can manage. I can’t bear to hurt you, darling, and it will only be this first time. I promise.”

She stared up at him and pride filled his heart as he saw the way his words reassured her. She trusted him implicitly and, if he said it would be fine, she believed him. The weight of that trust hit him and suddenly he was almost as nervous as she was.

“Then I’m ready,” she said, linking her hands behind his neck. “Thank you, Jules, you have been so very kind, so... so lovely.”

“I couldn’t be anything else with you, love, and we’ll go gently,” he said, soothing her, stroking her long limbs, and good lord, but she had long, shapely, beautiful legs, just as he had suspected. Moving with excruciating slowness, he eased into her, his breath catching, lungs seizing as the pleasure of it melted his brain. Heat and wet warmth surrounded him, and he could think of nothing but the feel of her, the incandescent sparkle of desire in his blood. Nothing had ever felt like this before. He was speaking, he knew, love words, endless praise, but though he felt the meaning of what he was saying, he could not have recalled what he said. The joy of it, however, would stay with him until the day he died. He knew that, knew it as his beloved Davenport relaxed and joined him, catching onto the rhythm of the thing and shedding her inhibitions with an enthusiasm that stunned him. Of course, he ought to have expected the moment when she tried to take over and speed

things along, hurrying toward the glittering peak he had shown her earlier, eager to experience it again.

Gently but firmly, he calmed her. "Don't rush," he whispered, gazing down at her. "There are no winners here, Davenport. No one needs to be in charge. Let's find it together. We have all the time in the world, you know."

"I'm impatient," she said, laughing a little.

Jules smiled ruefully. "You won't have long to wait, you feel too good. I'm not going to last much longer."

"Truly?" she asked anxiously. "Even though I don't know what I'm doing?"

"Oh, love, when you do know what you're doing, you're going to be dangerous."

She looked ridiculously pleased by this, but Jules could not speak anymore. Words had lost all meaning as desire took over, consuming every thought. There was nothing but her, the scent of her, camomile and warm woman, the feel of her soft skin, her welcoming body, and then he was lost. The climax took him by surprise, coming on harder and faster than he had expected, rocking him to his soul as he gave himself to the only woman he would ever love, from this day forth, until the end.

She clung to him as he let himself go, holding on tight, her soft cries underlying his as they made promises together, for a future they would share.

It took him awhile to regain his powers of speech, too shaken by what had happened to him to find words until they were settled against the pillows once more. His wife's head rested on his shoulder, her long, lovely hair cascading over his chest.

"Well, Davenport. Do you agree we should consign the reverend to the flames?"

"Yes," she said, daring a smile at him.

Jules grinned and ducked his head, kissing her swiftly. "I'm glad to hear it, love."



“What a stuffy old fool,” she murmured. “I can’t imagine what I was thinking, reading such a dismal book when there are so many more interesting stories to be told.” Tears glittered in her eyes, and he rather thought his might look the same as she drew his head down to hers and whispered: “Jules, I do believe in happy ever afters. I didn’t, but I do now.”

He made a choked sound and kissed her, for there was really nothing else to be done. “I’m pleased to hear it, my darling Boadicea. So, let us find ours together.”

And so they did.

## Epilogue



*Hart,*

*Stop being such an objectionable arse. Your parents will be with us for Christmas, my father and mother and more siblings, nieces, nephews, and cousins than I care to count. If you give me the go by, you will leave me no choice than to come and get you by force. As you are a far bigger and far, far uglier character than me, this will humiliate us both, but mostly me.*

*For God's sake, avoid such a pitiful scene and present yourself decked out for a jolly family get together or we shall be at outs.*

*—Excerpt of a letter from **The Most Hon'ble Jules Adolphus, Marquess of Blackstone** (eldest son of **Their Graces, Robert and Prunella Adolphus, Duke and Duchess of Bedwin**) to **Mr Hartley De Beauvoir** (adopted son of **Mr and Mrs Inigo and Minerva De Beauvoir**).*

**Almost five years later...**

**25<sup>th</sup>December 1849, Chartley, Upper Brook Street, London.**

Jules watched with amusement as eight-year-old Benjamin instructed his three-year-old nephew on how exactly to place the soldiers upon the turrets of the castle they'd built. His son, Rufus, who already had very definite ideas about how things ought to be done, was arguing his case for a different arrangement.

“He’s just as bossy as you were,” Jules’ sister Victoria observed, tilting her head to one side as she stroked her belly. This was baby number four, and Jules could only smile as he recognised the wistful look his wife cast her. His eighteen-month-old daughter, Dinah, squirmed in her mother’s lap, eager to knock the castle down and cause a riot.

“Bossier,” Jules replied wryly. “I blame Davenport.”

“Don’t you go blaming me,” his wife retorted, laughter glinting in her eyes. “Besides, he isn’t bossy, he’s learning to be a duke. Isn’t that right, Robert?”

His grace, who had taken the wriggling Dinah from her mother’s lap, settled the little girl in his own. His granddaughter immediately snuggled against him without a murmur.

“Quite right,” he said, unperturbed as the child simultaneously sucked her thumb and held tight to his lapel. “Though Jules wasn’t bossy, he was just extremely naughty.”

“I resent that remark,” Jules replied, affecting a look of reproach.

“Stow it. You were the worst.”

Jules looked around to see his cousin Hart standing beside him. He was observing the two boys playing with the bricks. His expression was unreadable, but something like regret flickered in his eyes and Jules felt a pang of guilt that his own childhood had been so idyllic. Hart had been born in the workhouse, and his existence before Minerva and Inigo had adopted him at six years old, was something of which he would never speak. Still, at least now he could join in the jollity of a chaotic family Christmas. Well, as much as Hart ever did. Jollity wasn’t really his thing. Nor was joining in, come to that. Jules hoped he was enjoying himself and this wasn’t the trial he made it out to be.

At least Fred was finally settled. His beloved Aggie had returned to him at last, after disappearing for years, and the family had celebrated their marriage just days earlier. The relief of knowing his younger brother was happy and loved

and had a wonderful future ahead of him was a great weight from Jules' shoulders, and he finally understood just how much worry he'd caused his own father. Jules would move heaven and earth for this family, he realised, and be glad to do it.

The butler arrived then, announcing that tea was ready, assuming anyone could eat another bite after the magnificent dinner Selina had arranged for them with their excellent housekeeper. Everyone began to file out with good humoured murmuring and laughter, but Selina caught his eye then and made a 'go on' motion towards his father who had not yet moved.

Jules swallowed anxiously and made a face back. Selina widened her eyes at him, which he correctly interpreted as 'don't you dare back out now, or I shall have something to say to you.'

Giving it one last go, Jules sent her puppy dog eyes and a pout. She remained unsurprisingly unimpressed. With a sigh, Jules steeled his nerves and went to the Christmas tree, where one small present had not yet been given out.

He picked up the prettily wrapped parcel and carried it over to his father.

"Sir, before we go into tea, there is something else I would like to give you," he said, aware his voice was a little unsteady.

His father looked up, surprised. Careful not to jostle his granddaughter, who had fallen asleep in his arms, he reached for the present.

"Well, I'm very spoiled this year," he said, grinning at Jules.

Jules looked around as his mother appeared beside him, clutching at his arm. She stared at him hard, one eyebrow quirking. He wondered when he had learned to communicate with the women in his life without saying a word, but nodded. His mother's grip on his arm tightened, and he heard her let out a faint squeal of excitement.

“Good heavens!” his father said, staring at the book in his hand. “*The Lady Conquers All*. I thought this wasn’t supposed to be published until February.”

Jules cleared his throat nervously. “Er... No. But the author gets early copies to approve them and... well. There you go and... it’s signed. By the er... author.”

“Why, this is splendid! Thank you, son. I’ve so enjoyed the author’s other works these past years. Very imaginative and so well written. I thought *The Jewel and the Iron Key* was not the best of them, if I’m honest, but the last couple since then have been excellent too.”

“So I’ve heard,” Jules muttered, sending his wife a rueful glance and rolling his eyes. He watched as his father turned to the place where the signature was and paused.

“I thought you said the author signed it?” he said, looking up at Jules, puzzled.

His mother’s grip tightened on his arm and Jules took courage from that, and from the approving glance Davenport sent him, from the pride in her eyes. She said this title was the best thing he had ever written, and he believed her, because she never told him anything that wasn’t true.

“It is,” Jules said, holding his father’s gaze. “I’m the author.”

Selina stood and came to him, taking his hand, and he was flanked on both sides by the strongest women he knew as his father’s piercing gaze held his.

“You wrote all those books?”

Jules nodded. His mouth had gone dry. “Yes, sir.”

His father looked down, tracing a hand over the gold tooled writing on the leather cover. There was a taut silence except for the unpleasant way Jules could hear his own heart beating in his ears.

“I suppose you thought I would be angry. That I would say you were putting the title at risk,” his father said softly, regret behind the words.

Jules cleared his throat and nodded once more. His father looked up and shared a glance with his mother, and he realised they had always done this too, not needing words to understand what the other was thinking.

“No one else knows?” he asked cautiously.

“Lady Rose, and Leo and Pip know, all of whom can be trusted, obviously,” Jules said.

The duke nodded and set the book aside, then stood up, careful not to wake the little girl in his arms. Carefully, he handed her into her grandmother’s care and stood, regarding his son and heir.

“Well, I’m surprised, I admit, and a little hurt you did not tell me of your success, but I suppose I can understand why you didn’t. Though I presume your mother knew,” he added with chagrin, casting his wife a look that promised words later. “But, Jules, I’m so proud of you. Not just for this, but... you’ve earned my respect, and my trust, and I know that when the time comes, I’ll be leaving the dukedom in capable hands. That means a lot to me. Well done, son.”

Jules swallowed hard. He had dreamed of hearing such words of praise from his father, but never really believed he could be worthy of them.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice gruff. “But, please, sir. Don’t go doing anything so rash as to turn up your toes now. I’m in no hurry, I assure you.”

The duke laughed and shook his head, and then embraced Jules, hugging him tightly. “Not likely. Not while you’re writing such interesting books. However, will I learn what happens at the end? Now, if you’ll excuse me. I think I need a quiet spot and a brandy.”

And the duke picked up his book and sauntered off in search of both as the duchess shot him a delighted smile and followed in his wake.

The moment the door closed behind him, Jules turned to find Davenport was smiling at him, love and pride shining in her eyes and so he went to her, taking her in his arms.

“He’s going to adore it,” she reassured him.

“Yes,” Jules said, sure of that much. “Though not half as much as I adore you.”

“I should think not,” she said tartly, and then grinned... and kissed him.

“Mmm, a scolding and a kiss,” he murmured, the look in his eyes explaining quite clearly that there would be much more kissing the moment he had her alone. “The perfect end to a wonderful day. Thank you, Davenport.”

“You’re very welcome, my darling, and that’s Boadicea, if you don’t mind.”

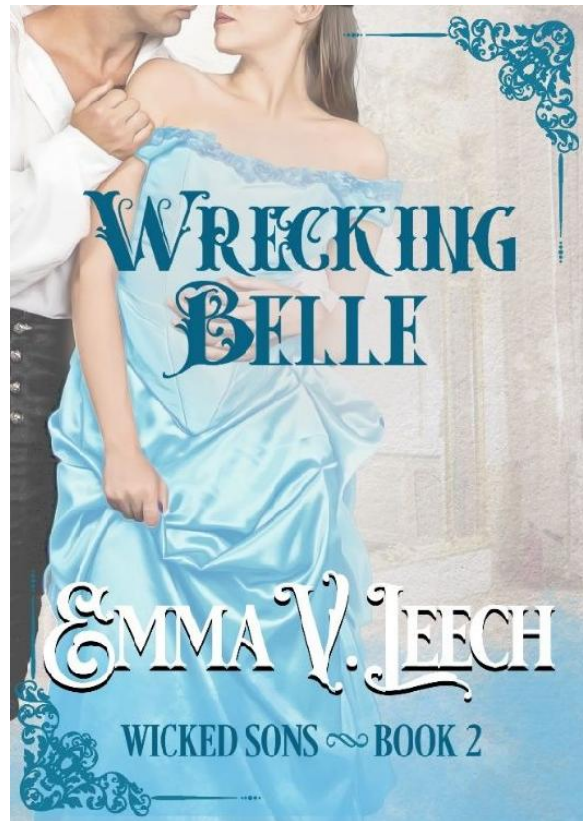
He didn’t in the least.

Next in the scintillating new series, Wicked Sons...



# Wrecking Belle

*Wicked Sons Book Two*



*To Be Revealed!*

Read on for an unedited sneak peek!

## Chapter 1



*Dearest Aunt Sally,*

*I'm so sorry this letter is late again. I just don't know what happens to the days and then when I sat down to write yesterday, I managed to knock the ink over. I'm not sure how. I could swear I did not touch it nor jog the desk, but over it went and ruined five sheets of paper. Papa was very cross. Our housekeeper, Mrs Everly, was none too pleased either as a few drops splattered the carpet. So, I have been in disgrace.*

*I wish I was back with you. I think of you often and wonder what you are doing. It is comforting to me to know that at Inglenook Cottage all is going on just as it did before I came to stay with you, the same as while I was there, and shall always be the same. Here everything changes, moment to moment, and I find it dizzying. There are too many people and too much noise and the more people and the noisier it gets, the more likely I shall do something foolish and make everyone stare.*

*You'll never credit what I did on our last trip to Gunter's. I was out with Lady Bailey, and we were sitting minding our own business, sipping hot chocolate, for it was perishing cold that day, and then this man walked past us. He was neat as a new pin, without so much as a hair out of place, and I was just thinking how much I envied him*

*the ability to stay tidy and wishing I could emulate it when...*

*—Excerpt of a letter from Miss Lucy Carleton to her aunt, Miss Sally Jefferson.*

**11<sup>th</sup> March 1845, Berkeley Square, Mayfair, London.**

Conor watched anxiously as his valet, Murphy, regarded the stain on his coat.

“Chocolate, you say, my lord?”

“I’m afraid so. Some ridiculous woman decided to throw it over me,” he said irritably.

The man’s greying eyebrows rose a little and Conor thought perhaps his lips twitched, but he otherwise restrained from commenting. That was worrying. Murphy was never usually short of opinions or comments. “Would she have had a good reason for doing so?” Murphy asked, the picture of innocence.

Well, that was better. All the same, Conor narrowed his eyes. “No.”

“A pity,” Murphy replied with a sigh. “It’s about time you did something to get a cup of chocolate thrown in your face, I reckon.”

“What a vile thing to say,” Conor responded, nettled. “As if I would ever...”

“Ah, I’m only pulling your leg,” the fellow said with a soft laugh. “I just mean you ought to go and stir things up a bit. You’re not dead yet, you know. You used to be full of larks. When you started that club, for example, and...”

“And that was a long time ago. I’m not a green boy set on mischief any longer.”

“Aye, more’s the pity,” Murphy muttered under his breath before adding. “Well, a baking soda paste ought to put this to rights, but I’d best see to it before it sets.”

“Very good, Murphy, thank you.”

Conor made his way down to his study and sat at the desk. Everything was just as he liked it, neat, orderly, clean. Carefully, he removed the white cloth that covered the latest project he had begun. Laid out with precision on a thin tray upon his desk were pieces of a clock. The tiny silver parts glinted in the light and Conor smiled as he picked up the tweezers and selected a miniscule cog. He had always loved puzzles and figuring out how things work, but it had not been until a few years ago that he had rediscovered his passion for making things.

He had been riding over to visit his sister and her new husband, Sylvester Cootes, when he'd fallen from his horse. Foolish of him to have taken the jump when he could easily have ridden around it. Happily, his mare had escaped injury. He had not been so lucky. It had been bad. So bad the surgeon had wanted to take his leg. Thank God Mama and Aisling would not let that happen. His sister had a talent for healing, and she had taken charge. Between them, his mother and sister had nursed him, but the pain had been of a kind he had not believed it possible to survive. But he had, and he was well again. So, that was that. All was well.

Cootes was a decent fellow and seemed to make his sister happy. He was also the new estate manager of Trevick Castle. Conor had been raised, knowing that he would one day be the Earl of Trevick, and so he had learnt all there was to know about the castle and the business of running it at his father – and his mother's – knee. Cootes, however, was full of new ideas and innovations, and it had been a huge relief to Conor to know the estate was in good hands, and some of the burden taken from his father. If that had not been the case, he would have stepped in himself, but only because it was his duty.

As much as he loved the countryside and his ancestral home, he was fascinated by progress. He had spent much time with the industrialist, Gabriel Knight, who had fostered his interest in the railways and put him in the way of some sound investments. He owed the man a good deal and admired him tremendously.

Conor looked up as the clock on the mantelpiece chimed, a precise, bright sound to announce the hour of one o'clock. All through the house was the echo of that sound, and Conor smiled. He watched the door, and a few seconds later it opened, revealing his housekeeper, Mrs O'Brien. She nodded to the footman holding the door and carried in a tea tray, setting it carefully on the edge of the desk.

"Good afternoon, my lord. Did you have a pleasant morning?"

Conor glanced at her, amused. "I'm certain Murphy told you that I did not."

"Ah, well. Accidents happen," she said mildly, putting the delicate china cup the right way up in the saucer and adding a precisely cut cube of sugar. The precision of the cut was down to Conor. He had designed and made a sugar saw, so that his footman could make a better job of breaking up the sugar cone. Previously, using the sugar scissors, the lumps were all different shapes and sizes, so his tea was either a little too sweet or not quite sweet enough. It hadn't used to bother him, but of late details of that kind seemed to drive him distracted.

Mrs O'Brien poured the tea and took the cover off a plate to reveal a generous slice of game pie, an apple cut into careful slices, and a large piece of cheese. "There's a lovely jam sponge too. I'll fetch you some up presently."

"Excellent, thank you," he replied politely as she nodded and made her way out again.

Conor sighed and reached for the tea, taking a sip. Perfect. Just as he liked it. The clock on the mantel ticked the seconds by with an accuracy that helped ease the tension that had been climbing down his spine since the incident at Gunter's Tea Room.

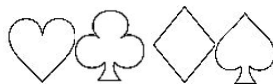
Sighing, Conor reached down and massaged his leg. It always ached when the weather was cold and damp, though he refused to acknowledge that fact unless it became unendurable. Unbidden, he remembered the face of the foolish girl who had ruined one of his best coats. Her hair had been blonde, so fair it was almost a shock to look upon it on a dull

March day. As she had thrown the cup – there really was no other word for it, she *had* thrown it at him – her eyes had widened with horror. Blue eyes. Clear and bright and guileless.

Once the damage had been done, the teacup dropped to the floor and smashed, and she had sat there, staring at him as everyone whispered and exclaimed and chocolate dripped down his front. Not a word of apology, no hastening to hand him a napkin and try to remedy some of her handiwork. Not so much as a blink.

Conor could not quite remember what he had said or done, but he suspected it had not been his finest hour. His leg had been hurting like the devil and his mother, whose table he had just vacated, knew very well he was irritable because his leg hurt, and had been intent on scolding him for not looking after himself, not doing the exercises Aisling had prescribed for him, for shutting himself up with his projects, for not getting out and seeing his friends, *and* for not finding himself a wife... Ugh.

Ah well. As Mrs O'Brien said, accidents happened. He ought to know. Still, Murphy seemed to think he could rescue the coat, and he never had to see the wretched girl ever again. So, there was nothing to worry about. His life could return to peaceful normality.



**6<sup>th</sup> April 1845, Beverwyck, London.**

Conor watched, rather bemused, as Jules got himself leg shackled. He had truly believed the fellow would remain a bachelor for years yet – based purely on the evidence before him. But no, Jules had fallen, hook, line and sinker, as the saying went, and his bride was something of a surprise too. She was not what you would call pretty, though she was a fine-looking woman of ample proportions and had the air of a female who would not take any nonsense. Conor had to admit that it looked as if Jules had made a wise choice, which was astonishing really, when you considered all the terrible, heedless decisions he'd made up to this point. But then they all

had to grow up. Conor had done it a few years earlier, that was all.

“Conor!”

Conor looked around and smiled as he saw Larkin Weston striding towards him.

“How are you?” Larkin said, reaching out and taking his hand, shaking it warmly. “You’re looking well.”

Conor forced himself not to give an acerbic comment, a habit he’d gained during the long months of his recovery, to dissuade people from asking him how he was. Larkin was good a friend, though, and one of the first to visit him when he had been laid up for endless months with his leg in plaster. He’d visited often and at length and never seemed to mind when Conor was brittle and ill tempered, which, if he remembered correctly, was most of the time. Perhaps it was because his own father had a similar injury, though Baron Rothborn’s had been gained heroically during the war, not because he was a blasted idiot who took a risk he’d not needed to take.

“I’m well enough,” Conor replied, seeing laughter gleaming in Larkin’s eyes.

“You must be, you didn’t bite my head off,” the man said with a wink. “Well, would you believe it. I never thought I’d see the day that Jules tied the knot. And before the rest of us, too!”

Conor snorted. “I know. We were halfway through the ceremony before I really believed it wasn’t a prank of some sort.”

“We’re all done for now, you know that,” Larkin observed wryly. “Mother has been in alt ever since the invitation arrived and has not stopped dropping hints I ought to be following in his footsteps.”

“Good God,” Conor groaned. “Not yours too. I swear...” He broke off, eyes narrowing as he saw a glint of striking blonde hair on the far side of the room. *No*. Surely not.

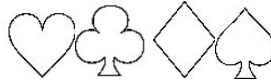
“What is it?” Larkin asked, following his gaze.



“I don’t know. I just thought I saw...” Conor craned his neck but could see nothing more. He shook his head. “No. Nothing. What was I saying?”

“No idea. Can’t have been interesting. I need a drink. Coming?”

Larkin raised his empty glass, and Conor nodded, following his friend across the room.



“I feel like an imposter,” Lucy complained, doing her best to blend into the elegant furnishings so no one would notice her. She was horribly aware of her borrowed gown and the shoes that were a little too big and kept slipping off her heel. If only Papa hadn’t been so eager to launch her immediately the opportunity arose, she might have had her own things to wear. Patience was not something he understood, however. If Brian Carleton wanted something, he wanted it *now*.

Lady Bailey sent her an impatient look and waved a gloved hand at her. “Stop slouching, stand up straight, and *do* take that hunted look from your face.”

“But I wasn’t invited,” Lucy hissed, more mortified by this fact than she could quite manage to put into words.

“No, but I was, and the duchess is a dear friend. There are at least half a dozen eligible bachelors here and her grace will quite understand my feelings when I explain *the circumstances*.” Lady Bailey sighed heavily, and Lucy winced.

*The circumstances* were things Lucy preferred not to think about. Not that there was any escaping the fact Lucy’s father had blackmailed Lady Bailey into bringing his daughter out in the world. There was no other way of putting it, either. Lady Bailey owed her father a good deal of money, lost to him via his exclusive gambling club, and Papa had refused to give her time to pay. Paying in full was impossible and would cause the lady a good deal of embarrassment. Papa would, however, overlook the bill entirely, if she got Lucy appropriately fired off and married to a man of fortune and good breeding. If he

had a title, Papa would even give her a bonus. Lucy shuddered as the humiliation of those words being spoken made her stomach turn over.

It wouldn't be so bad, but Lucy did not think Lady Bailey liked her overly much, and that made her anxious, and being anxious made her jittery, and when she got jittery, well, that's when things went wrong.

“Ah, there is her grace. I must just see if I can snatch a word with her. Now, sit there, and don't move.”

“Very well,” Lucy said, not having a lot of choice in the matter.

Lucy watched the lady go and prayed no one would notice her. Everyone here seemed to know everyone else, and Lucy experienced the familiar and melancholy sensation of being alone in a crowded room. Turning her back on the celebrations, she looked instead out of the window at the formal gardens. If only Papa hadn't been so ambitious, she might have stayed quite happily with her Aunt Sally at Inglebrook cottage and been perfectly content. The squire's son had even taken something of a fancy to her, and whilst he was not terribly bright, he had been kind and rather sweet. It didn't seem a terrible fate, to marry a man who would be kind to one and not shout if you broke his mother's favourite bowl or caused a scene in a shop through no fault of your own or...

*“You.”*

This rather severe and unenthusiastic observation made Lucy yelp with surprise. She turned, taking a step back, and her shoe slid from her heel, making her ankle go over sideways. With a gasp, she clutched at the curtain and might have pulled the entire thing down upon her head, if the man who had spoken to her had not reached out a hand and steadied her.

Lucy righted herself, but her shoe was not on her foot, and she cast a despairing glance around the floor, turning in a circle to look for it.

“Whatever are you doing?” the man demanded.

Lucy glanced up to see him staring at her like she was an escaped lunatic. Well, that was harsh. She might be clumsy, but she was not mad. “Looking for my shoe,” she said, with as much dignity as she could muster.

The fellow rolled his eyes and crouched down, pushed the heavy layers of her voluminous skirts back, and retrieved her shoe.

“Oh,” Lucy said, colour rising to her feet. “Well, I can’t see much of the floor with these dratted skirts taking up all the room, now, can I?” Being fashionably dressed seemed to mean an end to doing normal things as far as Lucy could tell, like reaching for something off a shelf, for one could not raise one’s arms above chest height.

The man said nothing, but he had that long suffering look on his face that Lucy was all too familiar with. Her father generally looked the same way. And this fellow didn’t even know her! Though he looked somewhat familiar.

“Give me your foot,” he said, with a tone that suggested she not argue with him.

With one hand on the window frame for balance, Lucy put out her foot, though only her toes showed beneath her skirts. The man took hold of her ankle, with strong, warm hands that made Lucy’s breath snag in her throat. He put the shoe firmly on her foot. It fell off again.

“It’s too big,” he said with a frown.

“I know that,” Lucy replied, terse now. “That’s why it came off.”

“Why is it too big?” he demanded, looking irritable now. He had tremendously blue eyes that blazed against his fair skin, and hair that was as black as... as... Lucy tried to come up with something original but only the words, night, ink and a crow’s wings came to mind. All of which worked but were rather uninspiring. But it was certainly black.

“It’s not mine,” Lucy replied, shoving the thing back on her foot. “Oh, do get up, before everyone stares at me.”

“Why are you wearing other people’s shoes? Who are you?”

“Cinderella,” she shot back before biting her tongue. She must remember not to say whatever came into her head. The fellow looked singularly unamused in any case. “I beg your pardon. I am Lucy Carleton. How do you do?” she said brightly.

Lucy held out her hand to him, but he didn’t move, his long fingers still curled around the glass of red wine he held. Instead, his eyes narrowed.

“You threw a cup of chocolate over me.”

Lucy opened and closed her mouth. Now she remembered. She dropped her hand.

“Oh.”

“Oh,” he replied grimly.

“That was you.”

“It was.”

Lucy chewed on her lip anxiously. “It was an accident.”

“So I’ve been telling myself. Though how you did it, I still cannot fathom.”

“Don’t ask me,” she said, laughing, though it was a rather high-pitched nervous sound she did not like in the least. “I never know how I manage these things.”

He narrowed his eyes, studying her in a way that made the back of her neck prickle.

“Do things like that happen often, then?”

“Oh, all the time.” She nodded, her eyes darting around the room, looking for an exit. Not being terribly tall, it was hard to see much over his shoulders, so she stood on tiptoe, hoping to see a door to freedom.

“What are you doing?” he asked her suspiciously.

“Beg pardon?” Lucy dragged her attention back to him. “I’m just standing here, while you scold me.”

“I wasn’t scolding you, and you were doing something. You looked like you were searching for a hiding place or somewhere to run to.”

“Oh, you’re very perspicacious,” she said, looking at him with admiration. “I never have the faintest idea of what other people are thinking.”

“You astonish me,” he replied, his tone dry.

“And you *were* scolding me,” she added as an afterthought.

“I was not! Besides which, you were making no attempt to hide the fact you were about to bolt. That’s very impolite.”

“You’re still doing it, you know,” she said, tilting her head to one side to look at him more critically. “Are you an only child?”

“No! And what difference would that make?”

Lucy shrugged. “Only children are sometimes spoiled and can be very judgemental of others. At least, I have found that to be so on occasion.”

“I have two sisters,” he said, sounding irritable.

Lucy looked back at him doubtfully. “Oh.”

“I do!” he insisted, and then shook his head. “This is a ridiculous conversation.”

“You started it,” she pointed out.

He took a breath, looking like he was struggling to keep his temper, and replied with studied calm, “I did not.”

Lucy wrinkled her nose at him. “Now, that just isn’t true. I was here, minding my own business, when you came over and said *you!* in that imperious way you have, and startled me so much I fell over.”

“You did not fall over.”

“I would have, if you hadn’t caught me.”

“Then you ought to thank me, not insult me.”

“If you hadn’t been so rude, I would not have fallen over in the first place.”

He gave her a speaking look. “Somehow, I remain unconvinced on that point.”

Lucy sighed, she was always honest – rather too much usually – and she had to concede the point. “Well, I can’t blame you for that,” she admitted. “I’d probably have tripped over something sooner or later.”

He snorted and shook his head. “Why have I never seen you before? Who do you know here? Did the duchess invite you?”

Lucy felt a blush rise from somewhere in her midsection, spread over her chest and work its way up her throat to her cheeks. “Um. Not... exactly,” she admitted, twisting her fingers together.

The man frowned at her, which he did a lot, and which made her stomach feel rather odd and squirmy. He had the most piercing blue eyes, far darker than her own, which she considered a rather insipid shade of watery blue.

“Are you supposed to be here?” he demanded.

Lucy swallowed hard, panic rising in her throat. Her heart was beating very hard now, and she knew that he was going to make a scene, to call her out as an imposter. There was only one thing to do.

“Excuse me,” she squeaked, and tried to make her escape.

All might have been well, if not for the dratted shoes.

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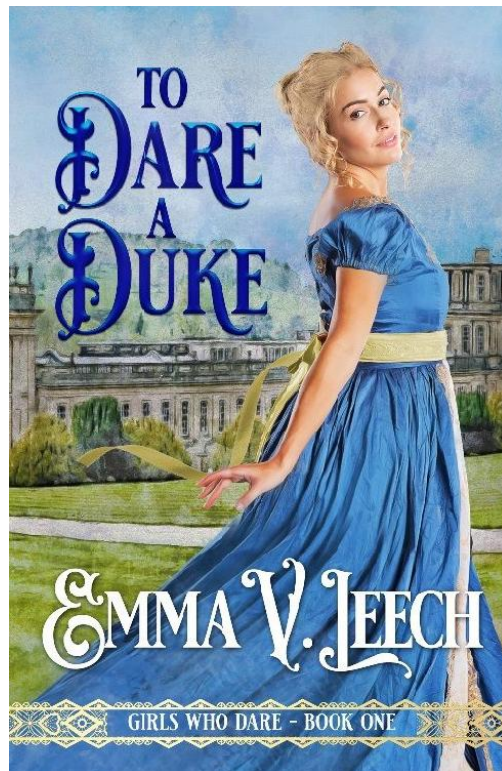
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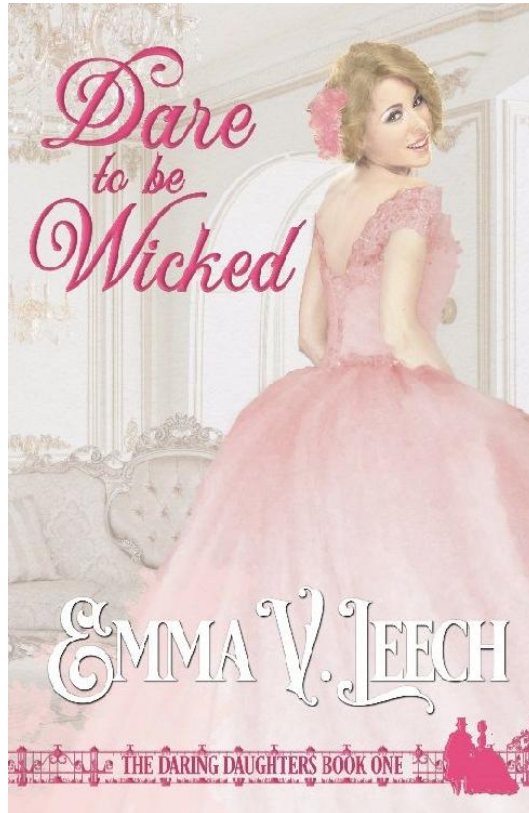


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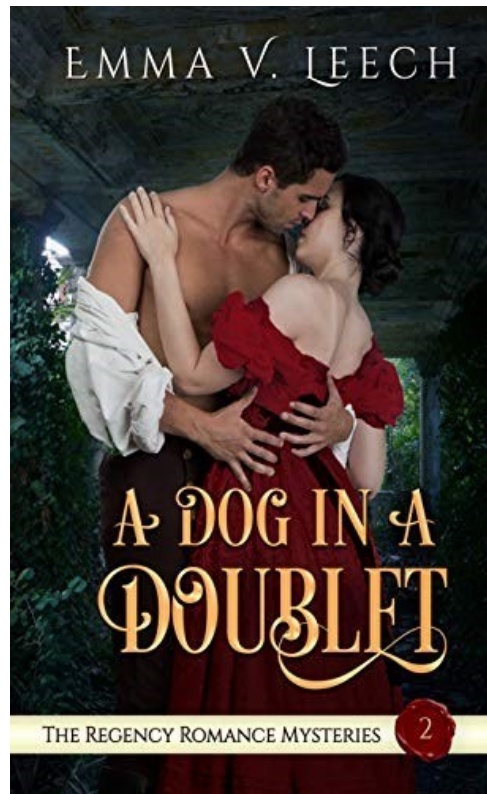
\*\*\*\* **Warning:** This book contains the most notorious rogue of all of Cornwall and, on occasion, is highly likely to include some mild sweating or descriptive sex scenes. \*\*\*\*

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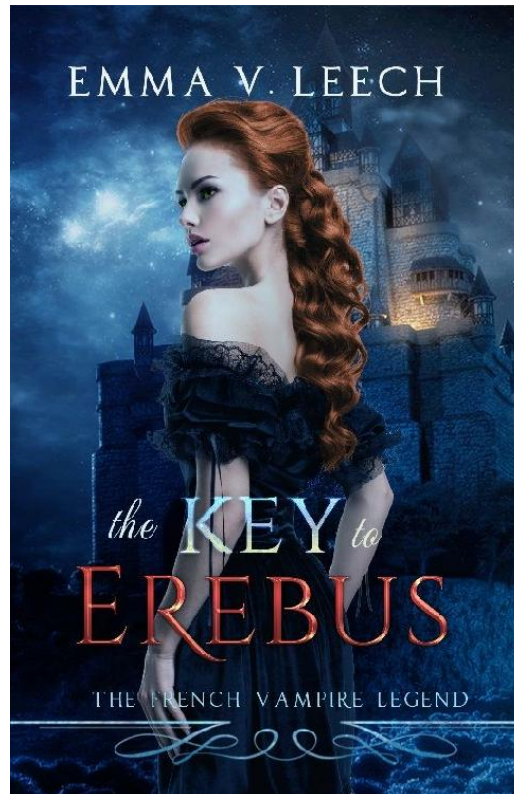
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