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**Suddenly a Duke Series
Book Seven**

Alexa Aston



TRAINING THE DUKE

Suddenly a Duke Series Book Seven

Alexa Aston



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Dragonblade Publishing, Inc. is an imprint of Kathryn Le Veque Novels, Inc.

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Epilogue

About the Author



PROLOGUE

London—July 1807

LADY FINOLA HONEYFIELD sat at her dressing table, staring at her image in the small mirror she held.

Would tonight be the night that Lord Crofton offered for her?

The Season would end soon. Couples were becoming engaged, and she was right. She hoped she and the viscount might be one of them.

She had not drawn any suitors in her first Season, feeling much of a misfit. Her father, Lord Leppington, had passed when Finola was barely ten years of age. Her mother had died giving birth to Finola, and it seemed her father had never forgiven his daughter for causing his wife's death. He called her "the afterthought" because she was so much younger than her two sisters, who were fifteen and seventeen years her senior.

When her father died, word was sent to her sisters in Scotland. They were twin brothers and remained in the remote Highlands, never returning to London after their marriages. Finola had stayed with the local vicar, a clergyman and his wife, waiting for months for word from her father regarding her fate. When it came, the message said they simply did not want her. Even as a child, their words did not surprise her. Finola could not remember anything about her oldest sister and only had a vague impression of what the other one had looked like since she had left the Honeyfield household when Finola was barely three.

Still, it was a blow to her, not to be wanted.

The village had held a meeting to decide what to do with her. As she was from the nobility, the daughter of an earl. Yet the Earl of Leppington had no heirs, neither far nor wide, and the title had reverted to the crown on his death. Finola had sat in the vicar's parlor as prominent citizens of the village had discussed what to do with her.

Finally, Sir Roscoe Banfield had spoken up, saying he would take her

She felt relief blanket the room, everyone present no longer obliged responsible for an eight-year-old orphan.

Finola had gone home that same afternoon with Sir Roscoe. He had neither wife nor children and told her he had no desire to wed. He loved dogs more than people and told Finola he would teach her to do the same. Banny, as she had come to affectionately call him, had been right. He had never disappointed her as people had. The furry creatures became companions and next to Banny, her closest friends.

Banny was known for training dogs, English springer spaniel in particular. He would take them on as puppies, when they were three months or so, and teach them the basics of proper dog behavior before setting things up and training them to be hunters. Banny had taught everything he knew about training dogs and especially, hunters. She thought it would be her life's work until he had told her she needed to spend at least one Season in London, saying due to her rank, she should visit the waters of the Marriage Mart and see if a life in Polite Society, marriage called titled gentleman, might be for her.

Finola had accompanied Banny to town and since he had no residence there, they had stayed with a cousin of his, Lady Nance, a dowager countess. It was Lady Nance who sponsored Finola this Season and had prepared to make her come-out. Lady Nance had a cold disposition and little interest in doing anything other than berating Finola, especially about her weight. Her sisters bemoaned the fact that Finola was rather plump. The dowager countess said it was all well and good to carry a bit of weight after marriage, but she could not understand why Finola was so chubby at her age.

Because of this, Lady Nance severely rationed what Finola ate and instructed at the midnight suppers held at balls that Finola was only allowed a handful of bites. At garden parties, she was to only drink tea and refrain from eating at all. The one time she had surreptitiously reached for a macaron, Lady Nance had swatted Finola's hand with a fan, causing those nearby to stifle their giggles.

She knew the servants felt sorry for her. One maid had even tried to bring Finola something to eat when she came in from balls, helping her in dress as Finola hungrily wolfed down whatever she could. Afraid Lady Nance would fire the maid, Finola had finally told the girl last winter

ed to beto bring her anything else from the kitchens.

While Finola, for the most part, spent her time sitting w
He had wallflowers at events, somehow she had drawn the notice of the inc
ved his handsome Viscount Crofton. He cut quite a dashing figure, tall and
e same. looking like an angel. She had no idea how or why she had claim
t. Dogs attention, only that he had asked her to dance once several weeks ago
me her that, he had not engaged her in any more dances at balls—but he alwa
pleasant and kind to her at social affairs. Eventually, he asked Finola
iels, in on the terrace with him after supper one night. When they reached
months corner, Lord Crofton had taken her hands in his and drew them up, pre
tepping fervent kiss upon her knuckles.

Finola From that moment on, Finola loved him.
he had Three weeks ago, Lord Crofton had whispered in her ear at a garde
o attend for her to meet him in the gazebo, and she had done so. He had told h
test the beautiful she looked that afternoon and kissed her cheek, causing he
ied to a hot all over. Two weeks ago, the viscount had stopped her as she
retiring room at a ball and pulled her into an alcove, where he had give
sidence chaste kiss on the lips. Her first. She had thought she would be swep
ountess. by emotion and her love for him. In reality, the kiss did not stir her
d her to slightest.

erest in Last week, while both attended a card party, Lord Crofton had as
ht. She to take a turn about the room with him and told her how ardently he a
ess had her, causing her to feel flush all over.

once a Tonight, one of Lady Nance's maids had brought a note to Finola
erstand from the viscount. It asked her to meet him in the library this evening

Lord and Lady Turner's ball. She just knew he was going to offer
te. She Once more, she thanked the heavens for bringing such a handsome
to eat a angel into her life. They would have children and dogs and a wonder
in from together.

caroon, Of course, she had said nothing to Banny or Lady Nance of this
arby to courtship, at Lord Crofton's urging. He had shared with her that his
expected him to wed a woman with a large dowry. Finola's was adequ
aken to nothing what Lord Crofton said his family desired. Still, he pressed
g her to with her, telling her to be patient. That explained why he never called
uid that or asked her to dance at the many balls she had attended.

week not It did not matter. She knew deep in her bones Lord Crofton was t

for her and only hoped she would receive an offer of marriage from
with the library tonight.

credibly Going downstairs, she was surprised that Banny did not await her
blond, asked the butler if he had seen Sir Roscoe.

ned his “Sir Roscoe is feeling ill, my lady. He will not be accompanying you
to the Turner ball.”

ays was Knowing Lady Nance would not be downstairs for several more days
to walk Finola went upstairs and knocked gently on Banny’s bedchamber door

the far His valet answered the knock. “Ah, Lady Finola. Here to check
on Roscoe?”

“I am. Might I see him for a few moments before I leave for the
ball?”

on party The servant nodded and left the bedchamber to give them privacy.
Her how she stepped to Banny’s bed and was surprised at how wan he appeared.

er to go “I hear you are under the weather this evening.”

left the He shrugged. “Just a bit of indigestion, my dear, making
me uncomfortable. I probably am tiring of the city and its rich food and
not away from returning to Belldale and breathing the clean country air
in the Banny paused and then asked, “Have any prospects caught your eye
this season?”

ked her She decided to share with him about Lord Crofton. “Yes, Banny,
I admire one particular gentleman I favor. He has asked to speak privately with
me tonight.”

’s room “Do you hope for an offer of marriage from him?”

; during “Yes, I do. If he does ask for my hand, I will send him to see you
for her morning to ask your permission since you are my guardian. You have
been like a father to me these past ten years. I know you would look at
my life interests with Lord Crofton, especially in reviewing the
settlements.”

s secret “I am happy you have found someone, Finola.” He smiled
family “Perhaps I am also a bit blue, knowing it means I will lose you.”

ate but She placed her hand atop his. “You will never lose me, Banny.
his suit family. You will be a grandfather to our children.”

l on her He returned her smile. “We are family, indeed, Finola.” Then he w

“Are you certain you are all right?” she asked quickly. “I am here
he man summon a doctor.”

him in “It is nothing. Just the indigestion. I think I will lie here and read for an hour and then retire early. We can talk in the morning at breakfast, and you can tell me more about your young man and the outcome of tonight’s conversation.”

Finola kissed his cheek and bid him a good evening before returning to the drawing room and downstairs to the foyer. Moments after she arrived, Lady Nance appeared. “I am well, thank you.”

“Sir Roscoe is indisposed, my lady. He said we are to go ahead without him.”

Lady Nance’s face soured. “Well, that is most inconvenient.”

Finola shook her head. The woman had not even bothered to ask if tonight’s was wrong or how Banny felt. All she thought about was herself.

They were silent in the carriage and then entered Lord and Lady Telford’s townhouse, joining the receiving line to greet their host and hostess. When they stepped into the ballroom, Lady Nance went to join her friends, the dowagers who sat together and watched the dancers at each ball. Finola, on her return, moved to a section designated for wallflowers. Surprisingly, she had found out to be a good dancer, thanks to the dance lessons she had received before the Season began. Occasionally, she was asked by a stray gentleman to dance, but for the most part, Finola sat on the sidelines at every ball. The dance card empty. She would go into supper with a few of her friends, the wallflowers, but even after all these weeks, she did not know much about them for there was little conversation between them. It was as if the humiliations were great enough, and they did not bother to get to know one another.

The ball began, and she danced the second set, but the remainder of the evening programme remained blank. She watched Lord Crofton through the doorway after my evening as he danced several numbers. He was such a graceful dancer that she could not wait for the time when they would dance openly in public as husband and wife.

When a break occurred before the supper dance, Finola left the ballroom, not bothering to excuse herself from those seated around her, doubtless they would even miss her presence. She made her way to the library and closed the door. A few minutes later, Viscount Crofton joined her, closing the door behind him. She knew if anyone walked through that door and caught them together together it would be compromised. Excitement filled her. Perhaps that was the viscount’s plan—for them to be seen together and him to be a gentleman.

for a bit offer for her. His family could not protest under those circumstances. Crofton doing the right thing.

tion.” He placed his hands on her shoulders. “Thank you for meeting me tonight, Lady Finola. I believe we have things to say to each other.”

ared, as He bent, his lips touching hers. Her heart quickened in anticipation of nothing. Frustration filled her. She should *feel* something when he kissed her without—but she didn’t. She hoped after they wed that she would enjoy it more.

Suddenly, he wasn’t kissing her at all. Instead, he forced her lips apart and thrust his tongue deeply into her mouth, causing her to gag.

struggled against him, but he only held her more tightly. She felt like a foreign army invaded her and tried to take her by force. She pushed against his chest with her palms, trying to break the contact between them, and the kiss itself.

He finally did so and looked down on her, a mocking light in his eyes. “My lord?” she asked unsteadily, looking at the face of a stranger who received was the kind, solicitous gentleman. In his place was a stranger.

Lord Crofton slipped an arm about her waist, and his palm went to her breast. He squeezed it tightly, causing pain to fill her. She gasped. Then his fellow fingers pinched her nipple so hard that tears sprang to her eyes.

His mouth returned to hers in a bruising kiss. Finola wasn’t enjoying it at all and struggled against him.

Once more, he broke the kiss, laughing.

“What do you think, my lady? Do you enjoy my kisses?”

Uncertainty ran through her, but she pasted a smile on and said, “Of course, my lord.”

“Do you think to kiss your future betrothed?”

Her heart leaped at his words. “I would, my lord. What are you saying?” she urged, hoping to hear the words which would make her his.

He dropped his hands from her and began laughing loudly. She stood there, unsure how to react.

“You may show yourselves, gentlemen,” he called.

Confused, Finola looked about the room as more laughter erupted. A gentleman stepped from behind the curtains. Another rose from behind the settee. Still a third stood from a chair he had sat in on the far side of the androom.

s, Lord And they all laughed loudly.

At her.

ne here A sick feeling washed over her as Lord Crofton captured her wrist
tried to flee the room.

n. Then “You must be wondering what is going on, Lady Finola. I will tell
sed herYou are attending the final meeting of the Epsilon Club. For this
his kissanyway.”

“Epsilon Club?” she echoed.

as apart Though his features remained angelic, the words from his mouth
Finolathose of a devil.

as if a “You see, my lady, Epsilon stands for Enticement. The Enticement
ed hardWe are a group of rakes who choose one unsuspecting lady each Season
n themsee how easy it is to fool her.”

“I d-don’t understand,” she stammered.

yes. Crofton chuckled, his grip tightening painfully on her wrist. “
r. Gonerogues who toy with a girl making her come-out each year. We choose
who is pretty—but not too pretty. One lacking in confidence. We like
t to herladies who do not have many friends. The quiet ones with not many
hen hismembers and lacking in social connections are simply perfect to dally

Tears filled her eyes. She tried to pull away, but he held her in
ing thisFinola cast her eyes to the floor, humiliation filling her.

“We make our pick a few weeks into the Season after we have r
with the latest crop entering the Marriage Mart.”

She recalled having danced with the other three present, once ea
id, “Ofthen they had never addressed her again.

“This was my year to play with our choice,” Lord Crofton continu
make a chubby wallflower feel special. We knew after our reconna
aying?”that you would have no one to confide in. That as I paid a bit of atten
you, you would believe my lies. That I would become everything to
e stoodyou convinced yourself someone like *me* would think to be with so
like *you*.”

Tears now poured down Finola’s cheeks. Lord Crofton took her
ed. Onehand and forced it upward until she was gazing in his eyes.

ehind a “Did I make you feel special, my lady? Did you go home and ki
of thepillow, pretending it was me? Were your dreams of me and a life you
to lead as my viscountess?”

He roared with laughter. “Your dreams of love and marriage are dashed, I’m afraid. You are not special. You are not wanted. You will not be loved. Yes, I enticed you into kissing me—and I reject you now, Honeyfield.” His smile turned evil. “And there isn’t a soul you can sell you about it without damaging your reputation. That is, if you have anyone to. We have watched you. You sit among your fellow wallflowers and not a word. Lady Nance chastises you at the drop of a hat. And Sir may be old—but he is not foolish enough to challenge me to a duel.”

When Viscount Crofton released her. “You believed the lies. You are another innocent fool whom the Epsilon Club has made a mockery of.” She slapped him.

It startled him, but he laughed it off, as did his friends, and he said, “Glad I didn’t truly ruin you, my lady. I could have, you know. You believe every lie. Every sweet nothing I murmured in your ear. You would not give me anything, including your virginity. I preferred to merely lose one instead of ruin you. You are far too plump for any man to ever be interested in you—and that includes me and the members of the family Club.”

Laughing, Lord Crofton said, “Come along, gentlemen. We have a place with and conquered yet another stupid cow.”

If Finola had one of her hounds present, she would sic the dog on the man until he was ripped apart. This despicable, cruel viscount. She held her tongue as Crofton and his fellow rakes leered at her, and deliberately bumping into her and breaking into peals of laughter. They exited the library.

She ran to the door and locked it behind them, not wanting to give anyone seeing her.

And then Finola wept.

Her sobs echoed through the empty room as she recalled every touch, every glance Viscount Crofton had given her. She had been nothing but a game to them, a game in which men who were supposed to be gentlemen were anything but as they toyed with a young woman’s heart. She was right—she had no one to share her story with. Even if she did doubt anyone would believe her. Overweight, slightly pretty Honeyfield an object of desire? One led along a garden path and unceremoniously dumped.

re now Humiliation burned within her, even as her face and neck flamed with never-embarrassment.

Finola Thank goodness the Season was nearing its end because she did not speak to her. She could go to many more events and see Lord Crofton and his cronies to talk by, laughing at her. She had been a fool to think she might attract a handsome and speak gentleman and marry. Her hopes of having a family now fled. She would return with Banny to the countryside and bury herself in her work with training puppies and young dogs. Dogs were loyal and kind and are yet everything Finola now needed.

She dried her tears and sat in the library a while longer, comforting herself, not knowing how much time had passed since she had last been in the ballroom. Going to the library's door, she threw the lock and relievedly stepped out, carefully looking in both directions. Seeing no one, she hurried quickly along the corridor and heard the distant strains of music coming from the ballroom.

As she passed the retirement room, she ducked inside and remained behind one of the curtains for a long time. Finally, Finola emerged and lingered just outside the ballroom until the last dance came to a conclusion. Then she made her way to Lady Nance.

"There you are," the dowager countess said. "I did not see you at the ball. Don't tell me you were off somewhere, sneaking food."

"No, my lady," she replied. "I would not do such a thing."

They went to the carriage. Inside, Lady Nance said, "Another engagement was announced tonight. You have yet to have a single man come calling on you, Lady Finola."

"I doubt any will," she said truthfully. "I am not what the gentlemen in London are looking for. I think it is time Sir Roscoe and I return to Belldale."

"I see." The dowager countess studied her a moment. "Did something happen to you tonight?"

Her cheeks heated, but the carriage was dim and Lady Nance's eyes were not the best.

"No, my lady. I simply have tired of the social scene in London. Sir Roscoe told me I should make my come-out and see if I enjoyed the Society. I have found it not to my taste at all. I prefer a quiet life in the country. If you do not mind, I think we will return home tomorrow."

ed with Roscoe has mentioned how much he misses the country air.”

“Do as you see fit. Polite Society is not for everyone. Perhaps you do not think make a match in the country. Some squire, possibly.”

As they pass The carriage came to a halt, and a footman handed them down. As they decentered the house, Lady Nance’s butler rushed toward them.

“My lady, I am afraid I have bad news to share with you. Sir Roscoe has passed.”

“Passed?” the dowager countess said, as if an inconvenience had occurred.

“Yes, my lady. When his valet readied him for bed, Sir Roscoe left the room agitated and then clutched his heart. I sent for the doctor immediately. By the time he arrived, Sir Roscoe was gone.” The butler finally glanced at Finola. “I am sorry, my lady.”

Finola grew dizzy and then faint. Darkness rushed up and overtook her. Even as she lost consciousness, all she could think of was she was alone. Forever alone.

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Forever alone.



CHAPTER ONE

Spain—1 January 1813

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL CYRUS CRESSLEY slipped into the coat which Brigadier batman, held out to him.

“Bertie should be here with your breakfast any moment now, Sergeant batman told him.

Cy had never understood why some men brought their families. Yes, a handful of officers brought their wives, but for the most part, foot soldiers whose families accompanied them to the Peninsula. Brigadier brought along his wife and their eight-year-old son. These civilians lived in camps abutting those of the military and followed them whenever they went on the march.

Cy didn't have to worry about a family. As a second son of the Duke of Margate, he had been destined from birth to go into military service. His older brother would one day take the ducal title. Cy and Charles had been close siblings. Charles was over ten years older than Cy and from what he had learned through the gossip of servants, their mother had a string of miscarriages and stillborn children in the decade between them. He suspected all those failed attempts at providing a spare to the heir had weakened his mother physically. The fact he had been brought to term and delivered healthy was what their cook had called a miracle.

Unfortunately, the Duchess of Margate had died shortly after the birth of her second son.

His father was a cold man, with little interaction with either of his sons. Charles had been away at school when Cy was born, and Cy had very few memories of his brother because of that time spent apart. By the time he was ready to leave Melrose for school, Charles was starting university the following year. They had rarely been at Melrose at the same time over the years.

Charles preferred town and remained in London after graduation

whatever he did with his friends. Cy had completed public school and university at Cambridge, never seeing Charles once during those years, taking no trips home to East Sussex. A commission was purchased upon his graduation, and he had entered His Majesty's army, eager to fulfill his military duties as an officer. Being a hard worker and very disciplined man, Cy quickly rose through the ranks. He felt serving his king was a privilege.

He had gained the respect of his fellow officers by being goal-oriented and focused. In strategy meetings, others complimented him on being able to get to the heart of a matter, even as he saw the big picture of things. "Sir," his men would be the first to admit he was a bit stubborn and domineering, but his efforts and experience helped him ascend the ranks with ease.

His reputation was spotless, and his men adored him since they knew he was a leader both on and off the battlefield. It was the rare officer of high rank who joined in the action, much less led soldiers against the enemy. Lieutenant-General Cyrus Cressley did this on a regular basis.

Fortunately, progress was finally being made in this Peninsula. Duke of Wellington was on the run, especially after last year's Battle of Salamanca. As a high-ranking officer, Cy was able to participate in a strategy session with Wellington and knew this spring would bring about the tide in the favor of Britain and her allies.

In the meantime, drills were essential to keep the men's skills at a high level, even on this first day of a new year.

"Good morning, Lieutenant-General," Bertie Briggs said, as he delivered the tent with a steaming bowl of stew in one hand and a half-loaf of bread in the other.

The boy set the meal on Cy's makeshift desk.

"That's a good lad, Bertie," he told the boy. "Why don't you go back to retrieve something to eat for your father and yourself?"

"I've already eaten, sir," Briggs told him. "Bertie, you go back to your mum now. I'll send for you if I need you."

"Goodbye, Father. Goodbye, Lieutenant-General Cressley."

Bertie left the tent, and Cy picked up the bowl of stew, stirring it, seeing the steam rise from it.

"More drills today?" the batman asked.

left for Cy chuckled as he took a bite. “Drills are the backbone of His Majesty’s army, Briggs. You know that. I hate the inactivity as much as the need for Cy but that is the nature of war. You know war is fought in months of unfavorable weather, while the rest of the time we hunker down and plot to discipline our enemies.”

was a “After Ciudad Rodrigo, though, I see an eventual victory for us,” said.

oriented “I do, as well,” he told the batman. “Take a few minutes for you to be able to will see you on the range.”

around Cy finished his bowl of stew and then used the bread to mop up the plate. He left. He returned the wooden bowl to those men who pulled cooking duty but his he made his way to the fields where drills were commencing. The soldiers

constantly practiced marching, shooting, and bayoneting. He borrowed a new bayonet from a private and sparred with a few soldiers, earning cheers from those around him. Cy had found a brotherhood in the army that he had never experienced in civilian life and was grateful he knew his place in the world and could put his leadership skills to good use for the crown.

ir War. He moved to where troops were practicing on the range with their rifle. He slowly moved down the line as he observed. He stopped twice to demonstrate to a soldier how to better hold his weapon and what to do in the event of a miss with his target.

Handing the rifle back to the private he borrowed it from, Cy then took a high bicorne from his head, using his forearm to wipe the sweat which had gathered along his brow. As he dragged his forearm across his forehead, his bicorne blocked his vision, he was suddenly knocked back, falling head first into the ground. Sitting there, stunned, he felt a throbbing just above his right eyebrow and realized he must have been shot. Hit by a stray practice bullet. He blinked as a trickle of blood dripped into his eye.

ack and “Get back!” he heard Briggs shout.

The batman dropped to his knees next to Cy, the sound of material tearing to his ears. “You’ll be fine, sir,” Briggs assured him as he wrapped cloth around Cy’s head.

He recognized the signs that he was going into shock but was still conscious of all happening about him. Briggs instructed men to lift Cy from the ground. “Quickly, boys,” Briggs encouraged. “But gently.”

He was carried from the practice field, knowing they headed

ajesty's surgeon's tent. He hoped at least one of them would be on duty. U
xt man, during a battle, the tents were filled with wounded officers, crying
is with anguish. Nothing came from his lips, however. It was as if he were
again stand unable to move or speak.

He sensed being placed on a table and heard Briggs shout Dr. She
Briggs name. That was good news. Sheffield was one of the younger surgeon
skilled than most, willing to take risks in order to save a man's life.
rself. I *But could Cy survive a shot to his head?*

He listened as the doctor began unwinding the cloth around Cy'
ie juice Briggs explained the accident and how Cy's bicorne had been in fron
duty as face when the bullet pierced it.

soldiers "That may have been what saved our lieutenant-general," the p
owed a commented. "Slowing down the velocity. A chance of surviving a b
rs from the head is less than five percent. None if the bullet enters from the si
d never front on, being partially obstructed, such as this? We have a chance,
e world of saving Cressley's life. I will operate immediately. Stay here."

Cy felt himself being brought to a sitting position and a bottle pl
r rifles, his lips. He was urged to drink from it and continued doing so, the
ce and sweet Madeira being poured down him to numb the pain.

ocus on "It is Dr. Sheffield, Cressley," he heard in his ear. "Drink as much
wine as you can. The bullet is just above your right brow. Protruding,
n swept I will remove it now. Acting quickly is your best chance for survival."
ich had He tried to respond to the surgeon, but only a mumble emerg
ead and supposed he finished the Madeira because the bottle was removed fi
g to the lips, and he was lowered onto his back again. Someone stuck a stick
is right mouth, and he understood it was for him to bite down upon when t
round flared.

Suddenly, his limbs were stretched out and then held down by oth
time being wasted to even tie him down. The surgeon's knife cut in
il being forehead, and he locked his teeth around the stick, grunting in agony. A
around of blood seemed to pour from him. His eyes were closed, but he cou

Sheffield dig around and then remove the ball as pain poured through h
l aware "This is very good," the surgeon said optimistically. "Very good, in
ground. Cy sensed Sheffield leaning over him, but he was too tired and hurt
badly to open his eyes.

for the "Good news, Cressley. I was able to remove the bullet—and it was

Usually, No fragments at all. I doubt there are any skull fragments either. I
out undamaged bone. Those would have been more dangerous than
frozen fragments. I will clean and wrap the wound. You are to rest now. You
make it, man. You will live.”

Sheffley’s He drifted off, floating above the pain.
s, more



his head. CY AWOKE AND felt the dull ache above his right eye. Reaching up a hand
to touch the bandages which wrapped around his head and extended over his
eyes, going to the bridge of his nose and resting there.

Physical “Ah, you are finally awake.”

Bullet to He recognized Dr. Sheffley’s voice and relaxed.

de. But “Will I live?” he asked weakly.

Briggs, “Briggs and your men have been asking me that same question for
two days, Lieutenant-General. I have complete confidence that you will
achieve a full recovery. I have already examined and cleaned the wound twice
and will do so again now. As I do, I am going to ask you a few questions. To
memory, so to speak.”

One of the “All right,” he said, sitting up with the surgeon’s help.

in fact. “It’s me, sir,” Briggs said from nearby. “Everyone is asking about
Don’t know where the stray bullet came from. Probably never will. I
wonder if I can find out who did shoot you, I will shoot him myself,” the batman promised.
From his
Cy laughed weakly as Dr. Sheffley continued to unwind the bandages
into his. Finally, he felt they were completely removed and opened his eyes.
The pain was mistaken. There still must be bandages on them because it was dark.
Dr. Sheffley said, “All right. Let’s see if we can—”

“Why haven’t you removed all the bandages?” he demanded.

A slight hesitation occurred, and then the surgeon said, “I have, Cy.
A surgeon. Tell me what you see.”

Cy’s heart sank as he uttered one word. “Nothing.”

“Give me a moment,” Sheffley said.

He heard whispering going on. He sensed someone moving away
and figured it to be Briggs. Then he knew Briggs had returned, holding a lantern.
Cy smelled the oil and then felt the heat from the lantern, knowing he was
safe and intact.

Cy’s heart sank as he uttered one word. “Nothing.”

“Give me a moment,” Sheffley said.

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and figured it to be Briggs. Then he knew Briggs had returned, holding a lantern.

Cy smelled the oil and then felt the heat from the lantern, knowing he was
safe and intact.

saw no being held directly in front of his face.

bullet “I do not see the lantern,” he said dully. “I don’t see anything at all
ou will “Don’t worry just yet,” Sheffley told him. “What could be occu
temporary blindness. The force from the blow you received from the
could be pressing against your optic nerve. The bullet entered directly
your right brow. I am not worried about it yet.”

Cy couldn’t help but focus on the *yet*.

“I will test a few things,” the physician said.

and, he Dr. Sheffley proceeded to ask him a series of questions, wh
over his surgeon said was testing Cy’s recall. He had no gaps, which Sheffl
was very good news.

The doctor then asked Cy to move various limbs. He lifted arms. V
fingers on command. Twisted from side to side. Turned his head from
right and then looked up and down as instructed.

the last “Your motor skills are intact,” the doctor said. “Once again, e
ll make news. Let me ask you a few different questions now to test your rea
e. I will Various parts of the brain control different aspects of thinking. I wan
st your if you can figure out the answers to what I ask.”

For the next few minutes, Sheffley peppered Cy with questions
which he answered without hesitation. Hope built within him.

ut you. “I see no problems in your thinking, Lieutenant-General. What I
f I ever has occurred is that the pressure on this optic nerve has caused some s
ised. in your brain. It will require rest to restore it to normal.”

ndages. “You are telling me this blindness will be short-lived?” Cy asked.

No, he “I am saying it is likely to be temporary, Cressley, but doctors
rk. God. We can only give you our best professional opinion, based up
experiences. I am now going to rebandage your wound and will also
your eyes. You will need to stay prone as much as possible for th
ressley, several days and hope that the bruising and swelling within your bra
subside.”

Cy sat numbly as Sheffley redressed his head wound, talking of ho
the stitches were and that the scar above Cy’s right eyebrow wo
ray and minimal. Sheffley even teased him that the ladies would find th
lantern, attractive and that he would have a good story to tell when he a
; it was parties, entertaining the civilians present.

But Cy was a man of war—and this war with Bonaparte would

ending anytime soon. Even if Wellington managed to defeat the
.” Corporal’s armies in Spain, most likely British troops would then march
ring is France and other parts of Europe to support their allies there
e bullet Bonaparte.

7 above He did as Dr. Sheffley required and remained flat on his back for
only rising occasionally to relieve himself. Briggs wanted to stay by
constantly, but he sent the batman away, not wishing to talk to
Instead, young Bertie Briggs came to keep him company. He sent
ich the boy’s presence, and every now and then, Bertie would pat Cy on the sh
ey said and tell him all would be fine.

When the week ended, Dr. Sheffley had Cy sit up and remove
Viggle bandages from his forehead and eyes. He opened his eyes and looked
1 left to the tent. He could see somewhat with his left eye, though things were
blurry. From his right eye, however, only dark shadows appeared, sh
xcellent blots.

soning. “How is your vision?” the surgeon asked, concern evident in his voice
t to see Cy told him what he was seeing, and Sheffley said, “It may still
time.”

, all of He knew the British army didn’t have time to waste on officers who
not lead. Even if his sight returned, he had experienced blinding head
believethis past week, ones which immobilized him. His gut—and heart—told
welling would never be the man he had been, and it would be best to resign
commission and retire from the army.

“Could I go and see Major-General Parker?” he asked, a lump
are not throat.

on our Quietly, Dr. Sheffley said, “I am sorry, Cressley. I do think it would
o coverwise if you did.”

he next Briggs spoke up. “Let’s get you to your tent, sir. We’ll get you
ain will and that unruly hair trimmed and then we’ll go see the major-general.”

Cy stood shakily, Briggs clasping one elbow and Bertie the other
ow neatled him to his tent. He kept his eyes downcast the entire way the
ould be wanting to see the pity in the eyes of the men he passed. He laugh
he scar himself, thinking he wouldn’t have been able to see it even if he had
attended looked each man they passed directly in the face.

He stood as Briggs and Bertie undressed and then washed him.
not be fetched hot water and his batman shaved Cy and then snipped away

Littlehair. The pair redressed Cy in a fresh uniform.

“You look fit as a fiddle, sir,” the batman praised.

Yet Cy heard the false note in Briggs’ voice. He had become attuned to the tone in a person’s voice this last week, his hearing picking up things in a week, had before and his brain catching the moods of others. Sharp hearing, his side would not replace the excellent eyesight he no longer possessed. Already anyone had missed considerable time away from his men while they continued the training and drilling, as well as meetings with Wellington and his houlder officers. Soon, the army would be on the move again, ready to pour in and soul into battle once more.

With a heavy heart, Cy allowed Briggs and Bertie to lead him to the command officer’s tent. He met briefly with Parker, giving the general the bad news. Parker did not try to talk him out of resigning and Cy said he would help Cyrus in selling off the commission. He assured Cy a small pension would also be awarded to him since he was no longer physically able to serve.

Once again, father and son led Cy to his tent, his left eye seeing and his right next to nothing. No one spoke a word to him. In the silence he passed, he sensed others’ sympathy. Pity. Restlessness. Shame and adache through him, knowing he was no longer the man of action he had been. Cy thought that he had let down his men. He would never pick up a sword again. Would he lead others into battle.

The war would go on—without Lieutenant-General Cyrus Cressley

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The war would go on—without Lieutenant-General Cyrus Cressley.



CHAPTER TWO

Melrose—Late January 1813

CY RODE NEXT to a peddler whose cart made its way toward Adderly Briggs slept in the back. His batman's son had accompanied Cy from to England, and he had told Briggs he would find a place for the Melrose.

Melrose . . .

It was hard to think of going home after such a long time. Most had fond memories associated with their homes and families.

Cy had none.

His father had been a man who had no interest in children, especially who was not his heir apparent. Cy could probably count on one hand the conversations he'd had with the Duke of Margate. He did not go personally, though, because he had witnessed how Charles, too, had always been ignored by their father. Cy wondered if Charles remained in town, if it had been his habit, or if his brother would be at Melrose. He dreaded the reaction he would soon have with his father. Moreover, he was worried about his future.

He wasn't interested in charity and merely wanted to be useful in his own capacity. A good portion of his vision in his left eye had returned, but things far away were still blurry. It was only when he was up close to something that he could truly see it. If things remained the way they were, he might have to go into London and meet with the eye surgeon Dr. Sheffler, as Dr. Sheffler recommended, hoping at least he might be able to get a pair of spectacles which might allow him to see things clearly at a distance. The left eye was also sensitive to light, which is why he now wore his hat low on his brow.

The right eye was covered with an eye patch. Cy had seen no progress in the three weeks since the accident that had left him almost completely blind in his right eye. The terrible headaches still crept up on him with

warning, incapacitating him. That was why Briggs had insisted that his son accompany Cy back to England. His batman worried that one of his headaches would affect Cy so greatly that someone might do him harm and take advantage of him. Bertie was to stand by Cy's side and ward off any inquiries, protecting Cy as Bertie's father would have done.

He constantly wore the patch over his right eye, only removing it to wash it. Each morning when he awoke, he opened his eyes with a mixture of hope and dread, believing his sight had not returned, and yet still clinging to hope. On the next morning that a miracle had occurred overnight. Only disappointment awaited him and at this point, he doubted he would ever have vision restored to his eye again, despite Dr. Sheffley still being hopeful of that, telling him to continue to give things time to heal.

He looked down at the ill-fitting clothes he now wore. They were shabby when compared to the tailored officer's uniform he had proudly worn for eight years. He did not feel it right, though, to continue to wear the coat and white trousers, since he had resigned his commission. He was grateful that Major-General Parker would handle the sale of his commission and direct the proceeds to Cy at Melrose, along with seeing that the pension be awarded due to his injury. Parker did not have Dr. Sheffley's optimism and had told Cy that His Majesty's army couldn't have any more officers leading its men.

The words had cut him to the quick, but he would rather someone be honest and sting him with words than give him false hope.

He had kept his two white shirts, though, and purchased a coat and breeches from a local widow before making his way to the coast with his things and boarding a ship bound for Brighton. The dead man had been short of nothing for Cy, but he tucked the trousers into his Hessians. No one would know he had been struck two inches above his ankles. The ill-fit of the coat, however, could not be hidden. Cy was a large man and the coat's fabric strained against his broad shoulders and back, as well as being too short for his arms. Still, the spectacles he had bought had been the only things available in the short time he had before leaving Spain for England.

He knew at first glance he made a poor impression on everyone he met across the country. It couldn't be helped. There was a tailor at nearby Adderly, in the local village closest to Melrose. He would see if the man was still open and have a few things made up. For now, he focused on what he would

his father. The Duke of Margate obviously had a steward who ran the dukedom also came with more estates than this ducal count. Perhaps Cy could be sent to one of those to manage it. If not, he would be grateful if his father allowed him the use of a cottage on the grounds. Cy was not averse to physical labor and would join the other farmers if need be.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Bertie still asleep in the back of each wagon. He would make certain that the boy found a position at Margate regardless of where he wound up. Bertie could work his way up and then to the career in service. Cy would make certain Bertie was cared for since he had done the same for him. Though the boy had admitted he missed his parents, he told Cy that he was grateful to be going home because he wanted to get as far away from the war as possible.

They reached the outskirts of Adderly, and the peddler brought the scarletto a stop.

"This is where you wished to be let off," the man said.

The peddler was traveling east after this, and Cy would go through the small village and then head north toward Melrose. It would be another three days to Melrose, but he told the peddler, "Thank you for taking us this far."

"Happy to help out, Lieutenant-General."

Cy had told the man he had recently traveled from Spain. The peddler had drawn out from him that Cy had left the army due to his recent injury which made him unfit for duty. He knew some men in retirement continued to wear their former rank as a courtesy title. His rank was a mouthful, but besides, those in this area would know him as Lord Cyrus, son of the Duke of Margate.

He offered the man one of his few remaining coins but was waved off. Climbing from the wagon, Cy leaned over and gently shook Bertie.

The boy opened his eyes. "Are we there?"

"We are as close as our friend can bring us, Bertie. Come. We have a ways to go."

He grabbed the boy under his arms and swung him to the ground. Both waved as the wagon proceeded to roll away.

"Where are we?" Bertie asked.

"This is Adderly, the closest village to Melrose, the name of the place where I grew up."

Melrose, “Are we going through it?”

ry seat. “Actually, we need to because we head north. That means you will
ould beef Adderly, though there is not much to it. Melrose lies to the north
s of themiles.” He rubbed the boy’s hair affectionately. “It will feel good a
: tenantstretch our legs after riding in the cart for so long.”

As they walked through the village and down its only thoroughf
κ of thecould see not much had changed in the years he had been absent. They
Melrose,the blacksmith’s shop and heard the clang of his hammer against th
have aThey moved along and saw the bakery, where Mrs. Carroll would ta
the ladon Cy as he stared into the window at her sweets. Occasionally, she
sed hismotion him inside and give him a treat, clucking her tongue as she
wantedThey passed by Mr. Simon’s store, which carried a variety of items:
then passed Mr. Timmon’s tailor shop, where Cy hoped he could
: wagonsmall wardrobe made up.

There was no time for that now, though. It was important to
Melrose and be settled in some fashion.

ugh the They walked at a brisk pace, Cy whistling as they went along th
e milesBertie did not know how to whistle, and so he gave the boy a brief less

“Wet your lips and pucker them like so.” Cy demonstrated and no
approval at the boy.

ller had “Now, gently blow air through your lips. Very softly. Relax your
, whichand blow harder.”

l to use Bertie tried and grinned. “I heard something.”

though. “Yes, you make different tones when you blow. You can adjust yo
e DukeYour tongue. Your jaw. Doing so creates different tones.”

By the time they reached the turnoff in the road and headed up the
d away.Melrose, Bertie had a good command of whistling. He was glad t
caught on quickly and knew wherever Bertie landed, he would do his
learn the new position.

ve a bit They saw not a soul as they walked up the tree-lined lane toward th
house. With it being the end of January, tenants would not be out
d. Theyfields. The colder months were times to do repairs, such as mending
re-thatching cottage roofs, and repairing tools. Beginning next month,
would begin plowing fields.

e estate When Melrose came into sight, Bertie gave a low whistle, using l
skill to perfection. “This is where you live?”

“I did so many years ago as a boy. I left at age seven and went a
l see allschool, only returning for brief amounts of time between terms. My l
h threetoo, was away at a different school and then university. I rarely saw h
gain tofather preferred residing in town and only came to Melrose upon occas

Bertie’s eyes widened. “You mean you lived in this house
are, Cyyourself?” he asked, clearly astonished.

passed “Oh, I was never alone. It takes an enormous staff to run a house
e anvil.this, Bertie. Melrose employs a butler and housekeeper, along with t
ike pityunder them, from footmen to parlor maids. Then there’s Cook in the k
: wouldand her scullery maids. They prepare all the meals. In the stables, th
did so.head groom and then other grooms who care for the horses.”

s. They Bertie’s eyes lit up. “I like horses. Sometimes, I would go to t
have awhere the officers’ horses were, and one of the soldiers would let m
the horses.”

get to “Would you be interested in working in the Melrose stables?”

The boy frowned. “No, sir. My place is at your side.”

ie way. “I know your father told you to get me here, Bertie, and I apprecia
on. help. Both on the ship and in England. I did promise him, however
dded inwould help find you a position at Melrose. If it is the stables you
work in, I will arrange for that to happen.”

tongue The boy’s mouth set stubbornly, and he shook his head. “No. I am
with you.”

“Then perhaps we should compromise on the issue.”

our lips. Bertie frowned. “What is . . . compromise?”

“It is where one person wants one thing, and the other wants sor
lane toelse. They try to meet in the middle so both get a little of what the
he boyShall we say you stay with me a while, then when my vision improve
best todon’t need to depend upon you so much, you could then work in the st

Bertie thought it over and nodded. “All right, Lieutenant-General.
ie mainI can . . . compromise,” he said, saying the new world slowly.

: in the “I am no longer a lieutenant-general, Bertie. I have resign
fences,commission. You do not need to refer to me in that manner anymore.”

tenants “Then what should I call you, sir?”

“Those around here will refer to me as Lord Cyrus or my lor
is newshould do the same.”

“So, you’re a lord?”

away to “I am the son of a duke. Using lord in front of my name is a courtesy, but I am the second-born son and titles belong to my older brother. He is the duke. My designated an earl and when our father passes, Charles will become the duke of Margate.” Duke of Margate.”

all by “Why does he get to be the duke and you don’t? You were in charge of many men in the war, my lord. I bet you would be a great duke.”

such as Smiling, Cy said, “That is not how the laws of England operate. It favors the firstborn son. He is the one who inherits his father’s title, as well as any properties and wealth.”

ere is a “That’s not fair,” Bertie declared, with all the wisdom an eight-year-old possessed.

he pen “Fair or not, that is the way things simply are.”

e brush By now, they had reached the front drive and Cy swallowed, suddenly overwhelmed. Battle seemed tame when compared to his father.

As they approached the door, he said, “Let me do all the talking. I don’t want to be rude—that is, people who are members of Polite Society—do not wish to be rude; that is from little boys, especially if they are servants.”

wish to Bertie smiled brightly. “And I am your servant, my lord, because of you.”

to stay He smiled fondly at the boy. “You do, indeed.”

Summoning his courage, Cy rapped his knuckles against the door. He waited for the knock to be answered. When it was, it was a footman in full livery who opened it. His eyes glanced up and down, taking in everything fitting clothes and then the boy beside him.

y want. “May I help you?” the footman asked haughtily.

es and I Hating that he had been judged and found lacking, Cy gazed into the footman’s eyes and in an equally haughty tone replied, “I am Lord Cressley, returning home from the Peninsular War. I wish to see the Duke of Margate at once.”

ed my Astonishment filled the servant’s face, and he stepped back, wavering into the massive foyer. Closing the door, the footman asked them to wait.

Cy looked at the lavish furnishings of the foyer, with its large grandfather clock as its focal point. It began chiming four o’clock, and Bertie raced to it, awe on his young face.

When the clock silenced, Bertie turned and faced him. “I’ve never

tesy. I anything so wonderful!”

is now As the boy rejoined him, he said, “It is called a grandfather clock. It has been struck four times, which means it is now four o’clock in the afternoon.”

Servants wind this clock and others throughout the household every day. I am sure that time is not lost.”

An elegantly dressed servant entered the foyer, trailed by the footman. They who had admitted them. Cy assumed this was the current Melrose butler, well knowing the one who had served many years had most likely retired by now.

The servant approached him, and Cy said, “As you have been informed, I am Lord Cyrus Cressley. I have come home from the fighting in Scotland. I wish to speak with the duke.”

“You are not in uniform, my lord.”

nerves “No, I am not. I gave up wearing my uniform at the same time I finished my commission.” He pointed to his eye patch. “As you can see, I suffered a serious injury which made me unsuitable to remain in a leadership position in the army. I am now in the service of His Majesty.”

to hear The butler said, “I am Arnold, Lord Cyrus. I have been at Melrose for the past five years. My wife, Mrs. Arnold, serves as housekeeper here.” He glanced to Bertie. “And whom might this be?”

“I am Bertie Briggs,” the boy said cheerfully, thinking the butler was addressing him, and then looked to Cy. “It is all right if I share my name with your lord?”

dressed “It is perfectly fine to do so, Bertie.” He turned from the boy to the butler. “Bertie is the son of my batman and assisted me in returning to England. My father served me loyally for several years, and I promised to look after him. He will be helping me adjust to civilian life until I am better. Then I want to see that he be placed in the Melrose stables.”

Cyrus “I see,” the butler said. “You can take that up with His Grace the Duke of Mitchell, who is our head groom.”

Arnold turned to the footman. “Take the boy to the kitchens, and give him something to eat. Then a bath. Tell Mrs. Arnold to find him some clean clothes, as well.”

dfather “Yes, Mr. Arnold,” the footman said. “Come with me, Bertie. We have a lot of new things to wear and scrub the filth from you. And Cook will be glad to wish to fatten you up.”

er seen The boy glanced to Cy for approval, and he nodded. “Go on, Bertie.”

could most certainly use a bath.”

lock. It He watched Bertie leave with the footman and then looked to
ernoon.who asked, “Would you like the chance to have a bath yourself, my lord
day so “Perhaps later, Arnold. I am wearing the only clothes I own,
purchased them as I left Spain. I am hoping to get to the village and
ootmanTimmon is still there, have him make up a few things for me.”

butler, “Mr. Timmon is still the tailor for the area,” the butler informed hi
y now. me take you to His Grace then. He is in the drawing room, taking tea.”

rmed, I They ascended the stairs, and Arnold told a passing maid to
Spain. Isecond teacup and plate to the drawing room.

Tea sounded wonderful to Cy. He had missed a good English af
tea, with a strong brew and small sandwiches and sweets. His mouth v
orfeitedat the idea of the possibility of lemon cakes being present. They w
ered anabsolute favorite, and he had not had any since his university days.

for His “Wait here, my lord,” Arnold said, entering the drawing room and
Cy in the corridor.

ose the He braced himself for the upcoming conversation with his father, t
Arnoldtime they would speak together as adults. The last time Cy had seen th
was a year before he left for university. No correspondence ha
butlerexchanged between the pair during the ensuing years. Sometim
me, mywondered if Margate even remembered that he had a second son.

Arnold appeared. “You may go in, Lord Cyrus, but I must warn y
e butler.Grace’s gout has just begun to act up. If he makes it through tea, it w
nd. Hismiracle.”

Bertie. He had not known his father suffered from gout, a disease of wealt
will askwho ate rich foods and rarely exercised. Of course, Margate was c
eighty now. He had not wed until he was almost forty, quickly pro
nd thenCharles and then ten years later, Cy. Idly, Cy wondered if Charles had
if he would repeat their father’s pattern of delaying marriage and enjoy
get himbachelorhood for as long as possible.

suitable Stepping inside the room, he sensed the fire burning in the grate
opposite side of the large room and carefully made his way across its
will gethis gait slow because he was in an unfamiliar place after so long a ti
o doubthis one eye still showing blurry shapes. His father was slumped in
next to the fire.

ie. You “So, what do you want?” a deep voice demanded.

Cy sucked in a quick breath as he squinted at the shape, making Arnold, duke's familiar features, ones in which Cy did not share, having been "rd?" took after his mother's side of the family. It was not his father, though havingsat in the chair.

l if Mr. Apparently, Charles was now the Duke of Margate—and h bothered to notify Cy of their father's death.

m. "Let

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Cy sucked in a quick breath as he squinted at the shape, making out the duke's familiar features, ones in which Cy did not share, having been told he took after his mother's side of the family. It was not his father, though, who sat in the chair.

Apparently, Charles was now the Duke of Margate—and had not bothered to notify Cy of their father's death.



CHAPTER THREE

CY CAME TO stand before his brother.

Charles Cressley was grossly overweight. Cy could see so, even with his limited vision. Their father had been what was kindly termed a portly man, not very tall and one who had short, stout legs and a large, protruding nose. Charles had inherited everything from Margate's looks to his build, but Charles had gone to the extreme. No wonder he was having trouble with gout.

"I asked what you are doing here."

Since he had not been invited to sit, Cy remained on his feet, his hands clasped behind him, his posture that of the former army officer he had once been.

"I have come home to Melrose, Your Grace," he said, addressing his brother as a duke for the first time. "I was hoping to make myself useful to you here or possibly one of your other properties. Of course, I was expected to see Father."

Charles snorted. "He died years ago. Six? Seven? I cannot even remember now because his death meant nothing to me. You well know, as much as I love that Margate was no father to either of us. I say good riddance that he is dead and burning in the fires of Hell."

He did not berate his brother for not informing him of their father's death. Charles was correct in pointing out that Margate had been no parent to either of them. With the help of servants and tutors, the two Cressley boys had raised themselves.

"I don't see what you think you can do around here. From the look of you, you've lost an eye." No sympathy was present in the duke's tone. Their relationship, the brothers had never been close.

"I still have my eye. I was shot in the head. The surgeon who removed the bullet found it intact and said most likely there was pressure on what is now the optic nerve. For the moment, I cannot see from my right eye, but Sheffield has every hope that my vision will return soon."

Cy did not say that his left eye could only see blurred images if the

in the distance, and that it was incredibly sensitive to light. He already knew this interview would go poorly and did not wish to arm his brother with information that would only be used against him.

A maid arrived with an extra teacup, saucer, and plate, and curtsied before the duke before offering Cy the items. He took them, and she left the room.

“You might as well sit and have a cup of tea,” Charles said graciously. “Pour me some tea, as well. I like four lumps of sugar and plenty of cream in my cup.”

He sat and poured out for them both, doctoring Charles’ tea to meet his specifications and handing the saucer over.

“Make me a plate,” his brother ordered. “Two of everything.”

Cy looked at the veritable feast on the tray before them and asserted that the plate which held a variety of items, once again passing this to his brother. He noticed both times that Charles had trouble gripping what he was given.

He then helped himself to what was before them and bit into a pea. It was the best-tasting thing he had eaten in a decade. He might not have missed camaraderie in the army, but he would never miss the food.

“This gout will be the death of me,” his brother complained bitterly. “I can’t see, I have to prop up my leg. Gout is a sneaky thing, creeping up on you when you least expect it.”

He tried to muster sympathy for his brother’s condition and asked, “When did it begin?”

“I have suffered from it a good decade now. It started in my right thumb, the largest one. Ached so much that I could not even walk. Could not sleep. The bedclothes touching it brought me the greatest agony. That first attack came from nowhere and kept me off my feet a good two days.”

The duke sighed. “It has only gotten worse over the years. The suddenness of the attacks is frightening. The pain, unimaginable. The swelling in my joints. They turn red and tender. The doctors tell me that my condition will never get better, only that the excruciating pain and frequency of the attacks will continue to make my life miserable.”

Charles then rambled a good ten minutes about his gout which had continued to eat the delicacies on his plate. Apparently, the gout had spread to both of his brother’s feet and subsequent joints. He heard of Charles’ pain and pains in his fingers, wrists, elbows, knees, and ankles. His

dy sawelaborated on how each attack grew in magnitude, often putting him
er withfor weeks at a time these days.

“The toe is throbbing now. From experience, I know the pain will
eyed toI have already warned the servants they are to be quiet. Any noise c
rawingme. This most likely will be my last tea in the drawing room for a goo
or more.”

umpily. “My greatest sympathies to you, Your Grace. Perhaps now tha
milk inhome, I could be of some use to you when you are incapacitated.”

“You think *you* could be a duke?” Charles spewed hatefully, h
to hissudden and frightening.

Quickly, he said, “Of course not, Your Grace. I was merely sug
that while you were dealing with these infirmities that I might be able
nbled aabout the estate. No one could take your place, however, Your Gra
her. Headded, trying to placate his brother, who seemed to have a quick tem
1. wondered what else he didn’t know about this man, one who now he
ich tart.fate in the balance.

miss the Charles waved a hand in the air. “I have a steward. That is who n
Melrose. I have also hired competent servants who can keep my hou
y. “Yourunning.”

on you “Then might I go about on the estate, serving as your eyes and ear
inquired. “I could work with the tenants. I know this is the time of yea
“When—”

“You know nothing about running a country estate, Cressley,” his
oe. Thechided. “Why, you have been off playing soldier for what—a decade?”
p. Even Anger boiled within Cy. Through gritted teeth, he informed his bro
t attackhave not been *playing* at anything, Your Grace. I have been fight
enemies on the battlefield for crown and country, so that titled noblem
s. Theas you might be able to continue the lives you do, enjoying your holdin
I havewealth.”

that my Cy sensed the tension in the air as his brother said, “Go ahead. R
:quencymy face. You were always the tall, strong, handsome Cressley. The o
took after Mama and her side of the family. Well, *you* killed her.”

uile Cy He had always sensed some hidden animosity between them and
movedknew the root of it. Now, Cy understood that Charles blamed him f
s’ achesmother’s death.

brother “I am sorry that my birth caused Mama to pass. Surely, you unde

to bed though, that she had been with child many times between your birth and mine. That she had birthed other children, stillborn babies, further weakened her.”

disturbs “You still killed her,” Charles said, his tone low and threatening.

id week “There is nothing I can do about that now, but I would like to be able to serve you and the Cressley family in any capacity I can. I know as the Duke of Margate that you have numerous holdings. Perhaps there is an estate that could use an extra bit of attention, Your Grace. I would be happy to join you all together and help out.”

In anger, Charles slammed his teacup into the fire, shattering the china. “I have no need of your help in anything, Cressley. I barely know who you are, let alone how to help you.”

ce,” he “Your role in this family and society was to serve in the name of the Duke. Obviously, you are half a man now and have been forced to resign your commission because you can no longer lead men into battle. If you think you will move into this house and live an easy life at my expense, think again. I can manage to give you nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

usehold Cy rose, once again reining in his anger so he did not say something in haste which he would regret.

rs?” Cy “I came home because Melrose is my home. As much as it is your home, you might be the firstborn son and hold the title, but you do have a responsibility to me, a family member, like it or not.”

brother “I cannot look upon you,” his brother admitted. “You remind me so much of Mama. While she was alive, it did not matter that Father neglected me. I noticed who I was. Once she was gone, I never felt loved.”

ing our “And I did?” Cy asked. “I was not as lucky as you to have known my father. We both know Father ignored the both of us. I would think that would give us a bond to share.” Then Cy turned the conversation. “Have you been a good father, Your Grace? Have you done a better job of raising your heir than I did?”

ne who The duke winced, and Cy didn’t know if it was from guilt or pain.

“I have yet to wed,” Charles admitted. “I have thought to do so, but with the time the Season approaches and I am in more and more pain, it seems better to wait.”

“Well, you better pull yourself from your sickbed, Margate, and get yourself to the next Season. Find yourself a bride—else you are looking for a long time.”

and the future Duke of Margate. I am sorry to have bothered you.”

As Cy turned to leave, his brother called, “Wait.”

Slowly, he turned and faced Charles again, not able to distinguish features.

“I know what my duty is—and I *will* wed. I apologize, Cressley. The Duke is, I simply cannot abide looking at you. It causes me too much pain to state that. However, I know that you are family to me, and I owe you something for your service to England. I do not want you in this house, but I will grant you the hunting lodge at the far edge of Melrose. It has not been used in ten or fifteen years. You can live there. It is the best I can do at this time you are.” At least he would not be homeless.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I will go there. If you have need of me in any way—if I can be of any service to you, personally or to Melrose in general—your hope you will send word to me. I am proud to be a Cressley and thank you for serving the Duke of Margate.”

A groan escaped Charles’ lips. “Bloody hell. It’s starting. Speak with Mrs. Arnold if you would. He can see to me. And speak with Mrs. Arnold when you leave today. She can help supply any needs you have at the lodge.”

Even with his poor vision, Cy could see his brother’s face contort in a way that was not pleasant. “I don’t mean to be cruel to you. Having you move out of my sight is not what I want to ask.”

“I understand, Your Grace.”

Cy went and rang for Arnold. He then crossed the room slowly, trying to avoid bumping into any furniture, and left the drawing room to go outside for the butler.

When Arnold arrived, Cy said, “His Grace’s gout is acting up terribly. I wish for you to tend to him, Arnold. I am to live in the hunting lodge on the far side of Melrose. His Grace said that Mrs. Arnold would be able to help for whatever I might need there.”

The butler nodded. “If you will go downstairs, Lord Cyrus, a footman will direct you to my wife. The hunting lodge has not been used in a good many years. It will need a thorough cleaning, as well as the larder stocked. Mrs. Arnold will be able to help with everything.”

“Thank you,” Cy said sincerely.

He headed down the corridor, his hands grazing against the wall to

himself. He reached the stairs, returning to the foyer. A footman greeted him and Cy asked that he be taken to the housekeeper.

Mrs. Arnold was in her office just off the kitchens and rose to greet him.

“It is good to meet you, Lord Cyrus,” the woman said, her tone kind. “The fact that your husband told me of your arrival. How may I be of service to you?”

“His Grace has generously offered me use of the Cressley hunting lodge after my new residence,” he informed her. “Arnold says the lodge has not been in use for many years and that you would be able to ready it for me.”

“Yes, I can do so, my lord. It grows late, though, and I would like to be sending a crew to clean it thoroughly first thing tomorrow morning.”

“I will supervise them myself and make certain it is stocked with the proper provisions in any and all dishes and that the larder is filled. I also will assign a maid to clean the lodge—clean for you twice a week.”

“That is most generous of you, Mrs. Arnold.”

“If you would like, I can have a footman bring you your dinner early tomorrow morning from Cook.”

“I would not ask for anyone to go to such trouble for me. I have a hunting lodge of my own for many years, Mrs. Arnold, and can make do with whatever I have in my larder. If you will excuse me, I will leave now for the hunting lodge.”

“Oh, no, my lord. I told you I would have staff clean it tomorrow morning. If it is all the place will be filled with cobwebs and who knows what else? You must stay at Melrose tonight.”

He hesitated and then said, “I do not believe this is something His Grace would approve of.”

The housekeeper gave Cy a knowing look. “His Grace’s gout is acting up again. He will be confined to his bedchamber for a good week or more. He is unable to walk.”

“I am sorry to hear that. I am the bly. I am in charge of the household. I run it as I see fit. You will stay the night on the Melrose, Lord Cyrus. I have already had a guest bedchamber readied for you. I will arrange and even as we speak, water is being heated for your bath.”

She glanced up and down at him. “My husband tells me this is a good dress you can have to wear. It will need to be washed. There are some trunks in the wardrobe filled with clothes that are a bit out of date. I am hopeful something might suit you. It would not be fashionable, but it would be better than putting on these filthy clothes again. I merely needed to see you in person to judge your size before I went through the trunks.”

She rose. “I will have a maid take you to your room now and help you get ready for the night.”

ed him, by the time your bath ends, I will have located a few things for you to

“Thank you, Mrs. Arnold. I am most grateful for what you are doing for me.”

id. “My The housekeeper summoned a maid, and Cy was taken to a bedroom.

A large tub already stood in the corner of the room and a bath sheet, soap, and brush had been placed upon the stool next to it. He walked about the room restlessly, moving to the windows and glancing out, seeing that the room overlooked the rear of Melrose and its gardens.

l prefer Then a brigade of servants appeared, all carrying buckets of water. I will water was poured into the tub and two were left in reserve to rinse his linens was then left alone, and he stripped his ill-fitting clothes, folding them and placing them on the floor beside the tub. Cy climbed in, letting out a sigh as he sat and stretched, the hot water enveloping him. He revealed several minutes and then dunked his head, scrubbing his scalp and face each day then using the brush and soap to scrub the dirt from his body.

Standing, he used the extra buckets to rinse the soap from his hair, then dried himself with the bath sheet, wrapping it tightly around his waist. Arnold arrived with a large stack of clothing in his arms and said, “Arnold thought some of these might fit you, my lord. The boy you brought with you has been cleaned and fed and will sleep in the kitchen.”

ou must “Send him up to me if you would, Arnold. He is a long way from here and is used to sleeping on the floor next to me.”

s Grace “Very well, my lord. I will send him to you after you have had dinner. Mrs. Arnold thought you might prefer a tray in your room.”

ting up. “That would be wonderful.”

has left Cy took the next few minutes trying on the various items Arnold had brought and was surprised that a few came quite close to fitting him.

for youthankful that Mrs. Arnold had allowed him to stay the night at Melrose.

would be better—safer—for him to journey to the hunting lodge in daylight. That way, he could take his time on his way there, studying his surroundings as best he could. It would also be nice to have Bertie accompanying him there had not addressed anything about the boy’s future with Charles, but Bertie would want to stay by Cy’s side as he acclimated himself to the hunting lodge. Once he had done so—and hopefully after the vision in his

eye cleared more—he could have the boy placed in the stables under the care of Mitchell.

wear.” For now, he had a home and a small amount of money to live upon until the funds from the sale of his commission arrived. Cy would be frugal; he learned to build a new life for himself, one not only on the edges of the wilderness—but far from society itself.

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For now, he had a home and a small amount of money to live upon until the funds from the sale of his commission arrived. Cy would be frugal as he learned to build a new life for himself, one not only on the edges of Melrose—but far from society itself.



CHAPTER FOUR

FINOLA DRESSED FOR the day in her usual attire—a man’s shirt, trousers coat, and boots. It was easier to go about her business of training dogs were dressed in such a manner. She had never known greater freedom when she had decided to do so. Men’s clothing was both extremely comfortable and practical. She had numerous pockets in which she kept treats to use in reinforcing pups’ good behaviors. She did not have to worry about her hem snagging on something or worry about warmth, especially on a cold day such as today.

The boots actually were her favorite part of what she donned each day. She tucked her trousers into the Hessians, made especially for her by the Brighton bootmaker. The boots were sturdy, snug-fitting, and easy to walk in, especially across all the terrain she traveled each day. That had been something she had taken to, the walking involved in exercising her spaniels. When Banny had been alive and she had helped him, she was the one who spent more time teaching the dogs the correct behaviors and commands with her voice and hand gestures. Banny had taken the dogs out about the estate, walking them greater distances the older the pups became. She handled all the training when it came to hunting game and flushing partridges.

After Banny’s death, when Finola inherited Belldale, she had returned to the small estate, desperate for something to occupy her time as she missed the man who had served as her father in all but name. Training dogs had saved her.

In more ways than one.

Once she added walking and hunting lessons with the dogs to her daily routine, she found the excess weight fell off her. Over the next few months, she had lost a good four stones. Lady Nance had called at Belldale two years after Banny’s passing, on her way to visit a distant cousin, and she had not even recognized Finola.

She glanced in the mirror now, thinking of that pathetic girl she had

during her come-out Season and saw no trace of her. While Finola was but two inches over five feet, she now possessed womanly curves. Her weight had changed the angles in her face. That, along with adding years, had seen her turn out to be quite pretty. Lady Nance had told her that some women grew into their looks and complimented Finola's snatched frame.

She had not seen the dowager countess again since that last meeting, riding as if she doubted she ever would, since she had no desire to return to the glamorous ballrooms of London. No, she had learned painful lessons there at the expense of the Epsilon Club and would remain at Belldale until her death. That was Banny's will had left Belldale to her so she would always have a home to store her treasures.

When the clients dried up and took their dogs elsewhere for training, she worried. When they discovered Banny had died, Finola had not let that stop her. Banny had imparted to her all his wisdom regarding dogs. Training them gave her purpose. Instead of hoping clients came to her, she purchased two English springer spaniels, her favorite breed to train, and began raising litters. She trained them, training the pups until they were close to a year old and then sent them to the titled nobility.

Soon, her reputation had spread and now Finola had a waiting list of gentlemen who wished to purchase one of her specially bred and trained dogs, known throughout the area as Honeyfield springer spaniels. She retired the pair she'd mated together for five years, having studied everything she could get her hands on regarding English springer spaniels. The two had each been four when she bought them and from her conversations with other breeders, she had learned the female would gradually produce more pups as time passed. That original pair was now retired, and she had sent them to a squire one county over, who had the pair hunt occasionally. For the most part, they were pets to the squire's three children, who lavished attention on the dogs.

Finola had kept one of their pups, naming her Hera, and purchased another English springer spaniel with incredible lines and a good temperament. She reared him Zeus and had mated the pair last summer for the first time. Hera had produced a litter of eight pups, six males and two females. These were the dogs Finola now trained. She would allow Zeus and Hera to couple again next spring and had high hopes on what their second litter would consist of. So far, this first one had dogs of even, sweet tempers. English springer spaniels

was still were known for their keen intelligence and friendly natures, and she had
Losing been disappointed in the training of the eight.

g a few She twisted her hair into one, long braid and then went downst
Finola some breakfast. Banny had gotten along with a valet, two maids, and
nile and She had written the valet a good reference and one of the maids had g
with him. Staying with her was Mrs. Hargraves, who served as both co
ing and housekeeper, caring for Finola's clothes, and Gilly, who did the clean
ittering acted as scullery maid in the kitchens.

e hands "Good morning," she told the pair as she joined Gilly at the small
nkfully, the kitchens.

o. She insisted the three of them eat their meals together, finding it
ng after to do so separately. Banny had left her this house to do with as she
ny had Finola simply made things easier on them all by saving the dining ro
Finola special occasions. The three took their meals in the kitchens morni
Englishevening. The only thing that had remained the same was she had to
rs from afternoon by herself in what had been Banny's study. They had c
selling together every day from the time he brought her home to live with hi
Finola felt closer to him when she did so.

, list of Mrs. Hargraves scooped eggs onto Finola's plate, then did the sa
trained Gilly and herself. Gilly set a rasher of bacon in the center for them
he had themselves to as Mrs. Hargraves brought a plate of toasted bread an
rything down, along with a jar of marmalade. The women filled their pla
vo dog stalked about what lay ahead that day.

ns with "How is that Pollux coming along?" Gilly asked.

e fewer Of the litter, Pollux was the one who had proved to be the most c
ad sold While he was intelligent, his curiosity had gotten him into a bit of
For the during his training. Finola was determined to pay special attention to
love on and hoped the extra time spent with the pup might help bring him arou

"He certainly has the most stamina of his littermates," she told th
aised a "He likes to walk farther than any of the others. I think I will take h
enamed Athena out this morning for a long walk before the others get their wal
era had "Athena is very good-natured," Mrs. Hargraves said. "She is al
ere the little mother to the others. When I feed them, Athena makes sure ever
ain this eating before she does so herself." The housekeeper chuckled. "An
: of. So Triton tried to muscle out Hermes yesterday? Athena swiped a paw
spaniels knocking him back."

had not “She is protective,” Finola agreed. “I have seen her watching others. I am considering keeping her when I let the others go. I think she would make for a good mother herself in the future.”

a cook. “How soon might you breed her?” Gilly asked, spreading marmalade on another slice of bread.

book and “Two years old is the very minimum, I’d say. I would probably wait until she was three, however, before I tried to get a litter off her. I am not interested in a dog that produces a lot of puppies having puppies. In my opinion, a more mature dog makes a better mother.”

They finished eating, and Finola slipped into her greatcoat and headed for the stable. In good weather, she kept the dogs in a run next to the barn. During these winter months, though, she wanted them protected from the cold. She had separated some of the stalls into different spaces so each dog would have a place to sleep and rest, but she also had knocked down the walls between a couple of stalls so the group could also be together to socialize. She had found socializing pups early to be key to them becoming better-behaved dogs and also easier to train.

“Hello, everyone!” she called as she opened the barn doors.

Gilly took care of feeding their horse and cow, while Mrs. Hargrave helped with the dogs in the morning. Finola fed and bedded down the dogs at night. If they’d all been fed already, she would take them to the dog run now. The morning was cold and crisp, but they would enjoy the play time.

“Zeus, Hera,” she said in a calm voice.

The parents of the litter shared sleeping quarters and rose upon hearing their names.

“Let’s take your babies out to the dog run.” Opening the door, the dog came out, and she said, “Heel.”

Immediately, the pair fell into step with her, one dog on each side. Finola always favored the left, and so Zeus was happy to walk on Finola’s right and allowed the dogs to relieve themselves before opening the gate to the dog run and ushering them inside.

Returning to the stables, she took a pair at a time to do the same, as it is easier to work with the pups in pairs. With large litters, though, this could be time consuming. She wondered if she should hire some local farmer to come and help her with the training and then selfishly decided not to want anyone infringing on her training and time with her dogs.

ver the already hard enough to let the pups from each litter go once their training was complete, and they had reached an age where they could go out and be productive hunters for some lord. Still, she might very well need the money for the future if she bred Athena with another spaniel. Juggling two different large litters would be difficult on her own.

wait until She saved Athena and Pollux for last, bringing them outside and then in favor of them piddle before calling them to her.

as for a “Heel,” she said, calmly and firmly, giving each a treat as they fell into place beside her.

added to Finola started out, keeping the dogs next to her for a few minutes, then she gave the command and let them run a bit. Athena kept close to her, doubling back every so often to be near Finola. Pollux, on the other hand, raced ahead. She whistled, and he returned.

own the “Good boy,” she said, rewarding him with a treat pulled from her pocket. He took off again joyfully, and she allowed him to do so. After a few minutes, they reached the edge of Belldale. No fence appeared, just a path

which divided her property from that of the Duke of Margate. She had never seen the old duke, dead these past six years, once in the village. His son, the current duke, rarely entertained and never invited Finola when he dined. Since she belonged in what was a bit of a no man’s land socially. While she was the earl’s daughter, at five and twenty she had no guardian and no husband. She never attended the Season in London and so did not have that in common with neighbors who did so. She was acquainted with some of the gentry and hearing folks in the village but for the most part kept to herself. She knew she would be a topic of gossip for many in the area. Her experiences during her last Season had caused her to shy away from most people. Her dogs were her friends.

e. Hera Coming close to the thick grove of trees, she called, “Pollux!”

ght. She Waiting, she called for the dog again and still got no response. The dog ran worried that he had crossed into the duke’s lands and feared the gamekeeper might have set a trap which Pollux had stumbled into. Containing her nerves, she finding that Athena would remain calm, Finola motioned for the dog, and she proved entered the copse. The day was overcast and the woods dark, little warmer penetrating it.

she did When she emerged from the trees with Athena, it surprised her. It was smoke coming from the abandoned hunting lodge. She had passed it

ing was occasion and had never seen anyone there. Glancing about, she found and be—with a man and boy.

help in They sat in the clearing on a fallen log. Pollux was licking the boy different, and he laughed and squirmed even as he tried to pet the dog.

It was the man, though, who drew Finola's attention. Even seated letting could tell he was a large man, likely a few inches over six feet in height. His shoulders were broad, straining against the poorly-fitted coat he wore.

Well into unruly, jet black hair and a strong jaw and high cheekbones. He was incredibly handsome, even with the black eye patch worn over his right eye.

But Pollux was her first concern, and she put her fingers to his neck, testing within emitting a sharp whistle. The man and boy stilled, while Pollux glared at her other with what Finola could only term a guilty smile on his face.

"Come," she said firmly. "Now."

The dog knew he was in trouble and trotted over to her. She bent a r some his face between her hands.

"Come when I call, Pollux," she told him, again her tone firm—and only angry—since English springer spaniels did not do well when yelled at. She instructed, and both dogs did so. "Stay," she commanded, leaving Athena to walk over to the human pair, who gazed upon her curiously.

"I am sorry if my dog disturbed you," she apologized.

"He's pretty—and friendly!" the boy exclaimed. "I've never been so common a dog before." The boy paused. "Is he in trouble?"

"He is because he ran off and did not come when I summoned him," the boy frowned. "But you didn't yell at him. When I'm in trouble only father yells."

Finola glanced to the man sitting next to the boy, figuring him not to be this boy's father by the smile the man bit back.

"No. Pollux is an English springer spaniel. They are very smart when sheeager to please, but also sensitive ones. They do not do well if you scold them. They cower and do not learn the lesson they should. It is impossible to use a firm tone with them, so they understand they have done wrong. Only your voice with them proves ineffective."

"Mum yelled at me a couple of times," the boy revealed. "But she told me why she was angry so I wouldn't do the same thing again."

"Ah, you learn quickly then, just as my dogs do."

"What did you say his name was?" the boy asked.

Pollux “Pollux. In Greek mythology, he was the divine son of Zeus, a god of war, and Leda, a mortal,” she explained. “His half-brother was named Castor. He was the son of Leda and Tyndareus, the King of Sparta.”

“What’s a mortal?”

“A human,” the man replied.

Finally, the man had spoken. Finola had kept her attention on the boy. He had been incredibly aware of the man during the conversation.

“Can I pet Pollux again?” the boy asked. “And your other dog?”

“Yes, if you would like. It is always good to ask a dog’s owner if you can pet them. Some dogs are guard dogs and can be quite fierce. Always ask before you touch them so that you are not injured.”

Finola turned and said, “Come.”

Athena and Pollux bounded over and halted before her. She patted them on the head and gave them a treat before looking back to the boy.

“What is your name?”

“Bertie.”

“Stand if you would, Bertie, and come next to me.”

The boy did so, and she told the dogs, “This is Bertie. Friend. Friend.” she repeated. The dogs sat patiently as she told Bertie, “You may pet him now.”

He moved to Pollux first and brushed his hand over the dog’s head and down its back.

“See, he likes that,” she encouraged. “Stroke him a few times but don’t ignore Athena. We don’t want her to feel left out.”

Bertie did as Finola asked and then began petting Athena. She alternated petting both dogs, who looked quite content.

“If you would like, you may throw a stick for them and have them fetch it. They like that game. They also like to hold the stick in their mouths and have you tug on it.”

“Thank you!” he cried, running to gather a few sticks, and tossing them.

The man, who had remained seated on the log, finally stood. His face was a startling green, drawing her in.

“You seem to know quite a bit about dogs.”

“I breed and train English springer spaniels,” she replied. “Apologize for trespassing with my dogs. I live at Belldale, which abuts Grace’s land. No one has used this hunting lodge in many years. Forgive me.”

od, and for interrupting your day. I hope you will not share this incident with Grace.”

“Why is that?”

“I have never met him, but I would suppose a duke would be particular about someone trespassing on his land.”

boy but “Then we will tell him you were invited. By Bertie and me.”

He did not identify himself, and she was loath to introduce herself. She was drawn to him in some inexplicable way and told herself you should move on. That man was not for her. Dogs were her family friends, all rolled into one.

“Have you lived at Belldale long?” he asked.

“Since I was eight,” she replied. “Sir Roscoe Banfield became both guardian at that time.”

“I have heard the name but never met the man.”

“He passed seven years ago and left Belldale to me. Banny was all for dogs and taught me about them.”

“Springer spaniels are hunters, aren’t they?”

friend,” “Yes, they are. Some of the best in England. They are brave and energetic. Loyal to their owners to the point of suffering when they are separated from them. They are strong and can work in rough conditions and heavy rains. These Honeyfield spaniels are high-spirited but they obey commands well. They are not only good hunters but also serve as excellent guard dogs.”

“Are these two you have bred, or do you take in dogs to train?”

son, he “I used to accept dogs for training, but prefer now to train those bred and then sell them when they are a year old.”

in fetch “You hate parting from them, don’t you?” he asked softly.

the and “How did you know?” she asked, startled by his observation.

“Since I lost the sight in my right eye, I have become more attuned to my other senses. I also listen better and pick up more than I did when I was one eye-brash, confident man leading others into battle.”

“Oh! So, it is a war injury you have suffered.”

“Yes. I was shot in the head.”

again, I Finola didn’t know what to make of that. “I should leave you alone to get your privacy,” she said, looking to where Bertie played with Athena and Pops. “Give me a moment.” He touched her forearm lightly, causing something foreign to

with Histhrough her.

“Would you come see Bertie and me again tomorrow? And bring
and Pollux with you? The boy is starved for company other than my
e rather would make him happy.”

She wondered who this man was. How Bertie was related to him.
had never been one to pry.

self, as “All right,” she agreed. “It will most likely be a new pair of pu
self she accompany me. I take them out in pairs when I exercise them.”

ily and He smiled—and that smile stole her breath.

“We will be happy to meet more canine friends. Please. Just come.

“I will,” she promised.

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Bertie ran with them and petted them both on the head.

“I will see you tomorrow, Bertie,” she told him. “I will bring a fe
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“Yes!” he cried excitedly.

“Heel,” she told her dogs, and they left the clearing, cutting thro
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“Would you come see Bertie and me again tomorrow? And bring Athena and Pollux with you? The boy is starved for company other than my own. It would make him happy.”

She wondered who this man was. How Bertie was related to him. But she had never been one to pry.

“All right,” she agreed. “It will most likely be a new pair of pups that accompany me. I take them out in pairs when I exercise them.”

He smiled—and that smile stole her breath.

“We will be happy to meet more canine friends. Please. Just come.”

“I will,” she promised.

Then in a louder voice, she called for the dogs to come and had them sit. Bertie ran with them and petted them both on the head.

“I will see you tomorrow, Bertie,” she told him. “I will bring a few more of my dogs with me for you to meet.”

“Yes!” he cried excitedly.

“Heel,” she told her dogs, and they left the clearing, cutting through the copse again and returning to Belldale.

As Finola exercised the remaining dogs in pairs, she couldn’t help but think about the handsome, one-eyed stranger and why he was staying in the Duke of Margate’s hunting lodge.



CHAPTER FIVE

CY COULD NOT quit thinking about the woman he had met yesterday.

The one he hadn't known was a woman to begin with.

He had been caught up in seeing Bertie's pleasure and watch an English springer spaniel, which had appeared from nowhere, lick his face with unbridled enthusiasm. Then he had heard someone call in a low voice which he had not distinguished as either male or female. He had seen a blur emerge from the copse and as it came toward him, he made out a man, wearing a greatcoat, accompanied by another dog.

When the figure came closer, however, Cy's heightened senses picked up the scent. Her scent. The woman was dressed as a man would be, in trousers, and Hessians. She had not given her name. He had not provided any.

She had an air of calm authority about her and handled the dog, he called Pollux, with a quiet firmness in her tone. It had not surprised him when she said that she bred and trained English springer spaniels. He had been even more surprised when she allowed Bertie to play with the two dogs accompanying her. More than anything, Cy looked forward to her visit and speaking once more with her. She had not mentioned when she would come, only that she would, and he suspected it might be near the same time as yesterday. Bertie, too, had been taken with her as much as he had when she had talked about her upcoming visit much of yesterday.

The two of them were settling into the hunting lodge, yesterday had been their first full day in it. Mrs. Hargraves and her staff had worked a miracle. Cy had accompanied the housekeeper and several maids to the lodge and had seen the condition it was in. By day's end, though, the place shone with cleanliness, and he and Bertie lacked for nothing. The lodge was isolated, though. It had been at the edge of Melrose lands, not close to the tenants' cottages and as far from the main house as was possible. Mrs. Hargraves offered Bertie and him a place to live. He had decided one way to pass his time was to begin educating the boy, teaching him to read and write. For

they would need to go into Adderly. He needed to do so anyway because he wished to see Mr. Timmon about new clothing.

While in the village, they could stop at Mr. Simon's general store to purchase a slate and chalk, along with a basic reader or two if they were available. Since the woman they had met yesterday was from this area, she might be able to direct them regarding those purchases.

He went and stirred the porridge, which sat in a small pot now boiling over the fire, and used a thick cloth to lift the pot from its resting place. He then dished out some for each of them, adding a sprinkling of cinnamon and a pat of butter to each wooden bowl.

Bertie sat at the table and picked up a spoon as Cy placed the porridge in front of the boy.

"Stir it well," he said. "It will mix the butter and cinnamon in the porridge."

"I've never had cinnamon," Bertie said after one bite. "It makes the porridge taste ever so good."

"We have Mrs. Hargraves to thank for that spice. She brought some and spices for us when she filled the larder. You and I will have to learn to cook together. We are two fine, intelligent men and should be able to figure things out for ourselves."

Bertie laughed as only a child could. "I'm a little boy, my lord. No dogs at all."

"You will grow into one sooner than you think," Cy told him. "We want you to be the best man you can possibly be. Educated. Kind to others."

He frowned. "I don't know about educated. I can't even sign my name, my lord. My mother said education wasn't for folks like us."

"I think education should be for everyone," he declared. "I will send for your tutor, Bertie, and I have a feeling you will be an excellent pupil. It is never too old to learn. Do you wish to know how to read and write?"

Since they were seated close together, Cy could see the boy's face. "I would very much like that, my lord."

They finished their breakfast and washed and dried the dishes, having fetched water from the nearby well before the meal, which proved to be convenient.

"Do you think she will come with the dogs soon, my lord?"

"I hope so. I think we are both eager for some company, be it human or canine."

ause he canine.”

“What’s canine?”

ore and Cy laughed. “A fancy way to say dog.”

y were “Rich people talk funny sometimes.”

ea, she He laughed again. “I would not call myself rich, Bertie. Yes, my was wealthy, and so I was well educated as a boy, but my army salary was modest, despite the fact officers are paid more than enlisted men.”

ace. He “Do you not have any money of your own?” the boy asked, his eyes full of doubt.

“I still have a few coins, and I should be receiving the funds from my commission any day now,” he shared. “I gave Major-General my address here at Melrose and once Parker has seen to the sale of your commission, he will make certain those funds come to me.”

“Father said you would also get money from the army for being shot,” Bertie said. “That is true. A small pension should come to me. I don’t know how much monthly or quarterly.”

“What’s quarterly?”

Cy liked how the boy asked questions when he wasn’t familiar with the term and knew Bertie would make for a fine pupil when they began lessons, full of curiosity and questions to be answered. After explaining that a man quarterly meant, he suggested they go outside to get some fresh air and for their visitor.

They moved outdoors and once more sat on the fallen log in the clearing.

They didn’t have long to wait. He felt the woman’s presence before he actually saw a blur emerge from the woods. As she drew closer, he

Bertie’s excitement and smelled the subtle scent of lavender wafting from her as the wind blew the smell of her in his direction. When she had come close, he remembered the soap she used yesterday, it had been the same scent and he supposed the soap she used contained bits of lavender.

She was dressed similarly, still wearing the greatcoat, which was unbuttoned, revealing a white shirt tucked into dark trousers. The trousers Bertie wore were tucked into her Hessians. He did not know bootmakers even made them for women. Then again, she was the first woman he had met who dressed like a man.

“Good morning,” she said. “We are going to start a bit different from yesterday, Bertie. Pollux introduced himself, but I would prefer to tea

the proper way to meet a dog you have never seen before.”

He noticed that she had kept her attention on the boy and wondered if he felt any of the attraction he did toward her.

“Just as when meeting people, you do not immediately rush up. It is the same with an unfamiliar dog. Never touch a strange dog unless you have been introduced. Some have been trained as guard dogs and would snap at you or sink their teeth into your hand if you tried to touch them. Yes, full.”

“Pollux wasn’t like that at all,” Bertie protested.

“That is because Pollux is only seven months old and still in training. The proper thing to do is wait for a dog’s owner to tell you a bit about his or her dog. Then if it is acceptable, the owner will invite you to pet the dog. So go ahead and begin. Hello, Bertie. I would like to introduce you to two of my friends. They came from a litter of eight, which was born last summer, in late June. There were six males and two females. On my left, is Demeter, one of the females. If it is all right, Cy noticed the dog perked up at hearing her name.

“On my right, is Hermes.”

This time Bertie commented, “He knows his name.”

“Yes, that is one of the first things in training a dog. It is to teach them their his or her name and use it frequently as you train them, so they know what you are speaking to them. Both Demeter and Hermes are friendly dogs. Even if you never should pet a dog unknown to you. The best thing to do is hold your hand palm out, like this, cupped.”

Bertie mimicked her gesture, and she held her hand under Demeter’s nose. The pup nuzzled it.

“Dogs can smell many times greater than what humans can. They can smell their sense of smell as much as they do their eyesight. To get to know a new dog, offer them your hand in this manner and let them sniff it.”

Bertie brought his cupped palm to Hermes’ snout, and the dog placed his nose in it, sniffing it. Then Hermes licked the boy’s fingers, delighting in the contact.

“Do the same with Demeter now,” encouraged the woman.

Bertie offered his free hand since Hermes was still licking the other. Demeter sniffed it gently and then looked up at the boy. Cy could have sworn as the dog smiled at Bertie before she, too, began licking his palm.

“See? You have made friends with them in the proper fashion. Now turn to Cy. “Would you like to do the same?”

“I would.” He turned up both palms and held them in front of his face.

dogs left Bertie and came to Cy now, smelling him and obviously afraid if shehim because they licked his fingers, as well.

“This is a way a dog makes friends,” the woman said. “Now, you can play with Demeter and Hermes if you wish.”

“Both girl dogs have brown on them, but the boy dogs are dark,” she noted.

“Yes, their mother Hera is liver-colored, while their father, Zeus, is mixed with white.”

“Go on and play with the pups,” Cy encouraged, and Bertie got up and away, the pair chasing after him. He turned to the woman. “Might I offer you a seat?” he asked formally but with a teasing tone.

She laughed, a rich sound which caused the hairs on his nape to stand up. There end.

“Why, thank you. It is nice to have furniture outdoors and take advantage of it.”

He laughed, too, and they sat on the log. Cy knew little to nothing about this woman, but he did not think she would be comfortable in the presence of a dog duke’s son. Instead of introducing himself with his courtesy title, he said, “I mentioned to you that I was an officer in His Majesty’s army recently. You cannot see, thanks to the eye patch I wear, that I bear a scar here where I was shot.” He pointed to just above his brow.

She shook her head. “I am still in awe of the fact that you lived after a meter’s a wound.”

He smiled. “The army surgeon who operated on me said my odds were slim. It did affect my eyesight, however. I still cannot see out of my right eye. Dr. Sheffley believes the bullet caused a bruising—a swelling, if you will, that is pressing against my optic nerve.”

“He believes you will regain your sight?”

Bertie. Cy smiled wryly. “Sheffley is an optimist and tried to turn me into a soldier. My commanding officer, however, did not believe my sight would return. An officer cannot lead men being so vulnerable.”

He waved his right hand next to his face. “I have no peripheral vision. I would not know if someone charged me from this side. I have agreed to sell my commission. Even if by chance my eyesight returned, who would I see clearly from the eye or if my vision would be permanently impaired?”

cepting “At least you have the sight from your other eye,” she said. “That is
of some relief.”

are free He decided to be honest with her and said, “The vision in my left
also been affected. I used to see things sharply in the distance
, Bertie however, objects are blurry to me. It is only when they come closer than
see any detail. In fact, I mistook you for a man yesterday because
is dark dress.”

“I have found it easier to train my dogs dressed as I am. I live
alloped except for two servants, and they do not judge me for my attire.”

ffer you “I hope you do not think that I judge you.”

She studied him a long moment. “No, I do not believe you do.”

tand on “I am Cy,” he told her. “Short for Cyrus. I do not wish to use my old
rank now that I am a civilian. Since we are to be neighbors, I would
vantage you do me the courtesy of calling me Cy.”

She grew thoughtful. “You do look like a Cy to me. I am Finola.”

g about “Finola is an unusual name, but it suits you, as well. Now, we
ence of longer strangers to one another.”

he told He offered her his hand, and she took it. Cy meant to shake it,
y until contact between them was electric. He froze. She gasped. Finola tried
r a scar her hand from his grasp, but he recovered enough to shake it a few
before releasing it.

er such “I am glad we are neighbors, Finola,” he said evenly, his heart

“Thank you for bringing Demeter and Hermes to visit with Bertie. He
ls were a bit of a lonely life. His father came to war, bringing his wife and B
ght eye. tow. The boy has grown up on the move, with he and his mother fo
t will—the army every time we changed locations. I am his friend now, but
he was thrilled to meet you yesterday. You and your pups.”

“Why is Bertie here in England with you if his parents are still
ito one. Peninsula?” she asked.

urn. An “He was charged by his father to care for me because of my d
eyesight. My batman fussed over me as if I were a helpless child and
ion and son with me to help watch over me as I am healing.”

reed to “Will you send him back to the fighting eventually?” she asked.

knows “No, Briggs knew that was no kind of life for a boy and left him
anent care, asking that I help Bertie find a new life. I knew I was cor
Melrose, and Bertie has shown an interest in horses. Perhaps the du

must be allowed the boy to join the grooms and be trained as one of them.”

“Why did you come to Melrose, Cy?”

“I am a relative of His Grace’s,” he replied. “We have never been here before. Now, though, I had nowhere else to go when I left the army and came here, and His Grace would help find me a place. He has given me use of this part of your lodge.”

“I have never met Margrave,” Finola said. “The former duke rarely came alone to Melrose and Banny—Sir Roscoe Banfield, that is—was never able to socialize with him. When Margrave passed and his son became the new duke, the neighborhood has seen little of him. There are even rumors this past winter that he is quite ill.”

“He is ill,” Cy revealed, “He was not amenable to having me as a guest at his home. I am thankful, though, that this hunting lodge was available to me to acclimate to civilian life better on my own. With Bertie, of course.”

“You say you are having some trouble with the eye you can see? You can have an eyewash which I use with my dogs. It might do you some good.”

“Would you like me to make it up for you and see if it helps? It is made from chamomile flowers and rose water.”

He sighed. “I would be grateful if you did so. It is frustrating to have my vision from only one eye and be limited with that.”

“Then I will return to Belldale and bring the herbs back with me. I will also bring racing with two new dogs for Bertie to meet. Since the boy lacks in human friends, I will supply him with canine ones.”

Cy took her hand in his, once more feeling a rush race through him. “Thank you, Finola. From both Bertie and me.”

She gazed at him, something unreadable in her face, and then she turned away, breaking the contact between them.

“I will see you in less than an hour’s time, Cy. Put on a small pot of water to boil if you would. I will use it when I return.”

Bringing her fingers to her mouth, she whistled sharply. The dogs immediately ceased their play and hurried to her side, Bertie following them.

“I must return to Belldale, Bertie, but I will return again shortly. I have already met four of my latest litter. I will bring the other four with me. I would help me greatly if you would play with them while I help Cy with something.”

“I can do that,” the boy said eagerly. “Maybe I could come with you.”

help bring them back?" he asked hopefully, glancing to Cy. "May I go

"If it is all right with Finola, you may accompany her."

close, "I would appreciate your company, Bertie." She glanced back at C
hoping will not be long."

hunting "I will wait inside," he said. "Simply enter the lodge when you retu

Finola called the dogs to heel, and he watched as she and
y came disappeared into the thick grove of trees.

sked to His instincts had sharpened with the loss of his vision, and he list
w duke, his gut more than he had in the past. Without a doubt, Cy believed that
ast year would play a large role in his present.

And hopefully, his future.

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help bring them back?” he asked hopefully, glancing to Cy. “May I go?”

“If it is all right with Finola, you may accompany her.”

“I would appreciate your company, Bertie.” She glanced back at Cy. “We will not be long.”

“I will wait inside,” he said. “Simply enter the lodge when you return.”

Finola called the dogs to heel, and he watched as she and Bertie disappeared into the thick grove of trees.

His instincts had sharpened with the loss of his vision, and he listened to his gut more than he had in the past. Without a doubt, Cy believed that Finola would play a large role in his present.

And hopefully, his future.



CHAPTER SIX

FINOLA LED BERTIE back to Belldale. The house was only about ten minutes from the hunting lodge. She took the boy to the dog run, where she let the six dogs she wasn't exercising, and they returned Demeter and Hera to the pen. She then introduced him to the four pups he had yet to meet—Apollo, Castor, and Atlas, as well as Zeus and Hera. Athena and Artemis remembered Bertie and greeted him with licks to his face, delighting the child. The pups all took to Bertie, as she knew they would. She worked with him a few minutes, telling him a few word commands which she used with the dogs, and then told him he could play with the pups while she gathered the herbs she would need.

Going into the house, Finola found the chamomile and rose petals she would use to make the eyewash for Cy's eyes. She couldn't imagine the trauma he must have experienced, having been shot in the head—and surviving the experience. He was fortunate to be alive, but she knew he would be hurting mentally and emotionally now. He was a large, imposing man who had an authoritative air about him, marking him as a former military officer. To have his career stripped from him must have been an incredible blow.

She still wondered how he was related to the Duke of Margate. Banny had told Cy earlier, Banny never fraternized with the old duke or the new one. She was glad at least Cy had had a place to come home to after leaving the army. Still, it would be a lonely life for him, with only a small household company. From what Cy had said, eventually, Bertie would leave the hunting lodge and go to Melrose proper and work in the stables.

Finola was acquainted with several people in the area but didn't have any close friends. Being an earl's daughter—and yet one who earned money for her living—put her in a category that was more than unusual. Yes, she lived in Belldale outright but did not truly socialize with the gentry in the area. She did go into Adderly each Sunday to worship at the local church and was known to the parishioners there, but she did not have any true friends.

Until now.

She hoped she and Cy would become friends, good friends.

And yet she had an innate sense that they might be destined to be more than friends. Much more. That thought took Finola by surprise, and she found it hard to shove it away.

Because it frightened her.

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She had never felt the touch of a man since that horrible Lord Croft had duped her, making her foolishly believe that a handsome, titled man might be interested in a life with her. She was no longer that naïf girl though. She was a woman of five and twenty years of age, one who had a life perfectly suited for her. A life with no room for a man in it.

And yet she had almost melted as quickly as butter in a hot pan when he had touched her.

Could she be friends with a man?

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She didn't know if that was possible between a man and woman. Of course, she had been best friends with Banny, even though he was her guardian. A mixture of parent, friend, and teacher all in one. Finola had learned all she knew about the care and training of dogs from Banny. They had been inseparable companions for many years, sharing their work with the dogs and everything else life had to offer.

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Finola promised herself not to let her fancies take flight and think she could be anything other than a friend she saw occasionally. She would ignore the crazy notions flying through her head and treat him as she would any other man. She put a generous portion of the herbs into a small pouch, intending to leave the mixture with him so he could use it daily for at least a week.

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boy for
hunting

Going outside once more, she claimed Bertie and the four puppies. They would accompany them to the hunting lodge, allowing them to go out and exercise for the day. She had Bertie give the verbal command, and they all heeled as asked. As they moved away from Belldale, however, she allowed the animals to run ahead and stretch their legs.

"Your dogs have funny names," Bertie noted.

ave any
ney for
owned
ea. She

"I named this litter after Greek gods. I try to give each group a set of common names. Do you know anything of the Greeks, Bertie?"

nd was

"No. I never heard of them. Who are they?" he asked, clearly curious.

She told him a bit about ancient Greece and before she knew it, they had reached the copse and traveled thorough it, the hunting lodge appearing in the distance.

before them.

“Do you think you might play with the dogs while I help Cyrie morebrought a few toys for you to do so.”

he tried Finola slipped the satchel from her shoulder and opened it, showing Bertie the balls and bits of rope she used as pull toys. She also told him he could do as he had earlier and toss sticks, allowing the dogs to retrieve them for him.

discount “I will be right inside if you need me, Bertie.”

ve girl, He looked at her solemnly. “Thank you for trusting me with your dog.”

ad built She ruffled his hair and then went to the door, knocking on the entrance and entering it. Looking about, she saw it had a small parlor, a kitchen Cyleft and a kitchen area with a table and chairs to the right. Cy sat at the table.

“I brought the herbs I told you about, chiefly rose petals and chamomile.”

He rose. “I put the water on to boil as you suggested.”

ran. Of “I will get it. Thank you.”

was her As Finola worked, she explained to him how to steep the herbs and how much to use of them each time he did so. As they steeped, she asked him about where he had been stationed, and he told her a few stories of his work with the Peninsula.

“From what you say, it sounds as if you believe the tide is turning against Bonaparte.”

He nodded solemnly. “While I do think we will defeat Bonaparte sooner than later, there will still be dark days ahead. Battles which must be fought in order to restore the balance of power in Europe again. Men will die, and we will have to deal of them.”

ps who “You regret not being there for your men, don’t you?” she asked quietly.

et their “I do. I thought my future was one I was comfortable with. I trained as a dog officer after university and immediately went to war. I have served His Majesty the past eight years and had intended to do so the rest of my military career.”

“As you said, though, we will not always be at war. Bonaparte is no longer a threat now, or soon will be. Even if it does take a few more years to defeat him.”

What would you have done after the war?”

us. “A good portion of the foot soldiers would have returned to their homes. Officers, such as me, would have been assigned to posts throughout Europe, including Scotland and even beyond, to places as far-flung as India. I would have been assigned to India.”

continued training men under my authority and worked with the local
side? Ion drills, as well. My future had been planned until my retirement
decades down the line.”

howing He shrugged, a lost look now present on his face. “I have no id
him hewhat the coming years will bring.”

re them Finola rose and tried to lighten the mood. “I am certain you will fit
place at Melrose. Give it time, Cy. You only just arrived. Think back
beginning of your army days. It took a while, I am certain, for you
logs.” your footing as an officer. This will be much the same. In the meantime
lodge’ssee if this gives you some relief.”

r to the She poured the steeped mixture into a bowl and dipped one of the
table. she had brought into it, soaking it.

omile.” “Would you mind removing your eye patch, Cy? I can fold this sa
cloth so that both eyes can be ministered to at the same time.”

He did as she asked, slipping his eye patch from his head, and lo
nd howher with his intense eyes. Finola demonstrated how much to wring fr
ed himcloth and how to fold it and then stood and draped it over his eyes, l
his timeher palm flush against the cloth. Being so near to him caused her l
flutter in the way she had supposed it should do so all those years ag
g in ourCrofton was paying her special attention. She lifted Cy’s hand and
hers from the cloth, replacing it with his.

sooner “Hold this against your eyes gently,” she cautioned.

ught in “For how long?”

a good “I would say a good ten minutes each time. Fifteen would be better

She took a seat at the table again and said, “You might want to bra
uietly. elbow against the table.”

rd as an He did as she instructed, and she told him to use the water steepe
red Hisanother two times, spacing out doing so throughout the day.

military “I brought enough herbs for you to place in boiled water each morn
the rest of this week. I hope it will bring you some comfort and d
; on thegood.”

at him. “Already, I can feel it soothing my eyes. Ever since the bullet ente
forehead, my eyes have been itchy and red. This concoction has calme
homes.—and me.”

England They talked as they waited the quarter hour to pass. She told him
ld haveabout the local village, and he mentioned wanting to have some new

militiamade up, having left his officer's uniforms behind in Spain with a frie
several fit into them.

"I also want to teach Bertie how to read and write," he shared with
ea now was thinking of going into the village to see if they had any materials
use to do so."

nd your "Mr. Simon does run a general store and might have some of w
k to the need, but I have everything already and am happy to lend it to you. Y
to find Banny became my guardian when I was orphaned at eight years of a
ie, let's not only taught me how to train dogs for the hunt, but he also served
tutor. I know I still have my old slates and the books we used at Belld
e cloth had a room dedicated as a schoolroom. It gets good light, better th
hunting lodge does. Perhaps you and Bertie would care to walk
aturated Belldale each morning and have your lessons there."

"Wouldn't that inconvenience you?"

oked at Finola laughed. "Not in the least. I spend a good majority of
rom the outside with the dogs I train. If the weather is rainy or cold, I work wi
holding inside the stables. Otherwise, they are in the dog run playing, and I
heart to them one at a time to work with them individually. Once they have m
o when a certain behavior, I will take them out in pairs and train them toge
slipped well as walk them several times a day."

"I told you that Bertie was interested in horses and that I might
him to have a place in the Melrose stables when I am more recov
wonder instead, since he seems to have an affinity for your dogs, if yo
:" "I have more need of him."

ce your She grew thoughtful. "It is interesting you mentioned that, because
been thinking of the same thing. Not about Bertie specifically since I
d today know him, but I was thinking of hiring one of the local village lads
with the training. Bertie does seem to have a way with the pups. I tau
ring for a few verbal commands to use before we returned here. Perhaps we
o some him work with the dogs more and see if it is something he might
pursue.

red my "You could come for lessons in the makeshift schoolroom, ar
ed them Bertie could stay on and spend a few hours with the dogs and me. Wo
be able to make your way back to the hunting lodge on your own?"

a little "I have nothing here to occupy my time, Finola. Might I watc
clothes lessons? Or possibly even help with the dog training? I simply wish t

nd whom myself useful.”

She could understand that better than most people and said, “If I were to ask her, I would welcome your help and that of Bertie’s, too. It might be that I could you settle in more at Melrose.”

And allow me to spend time with you.

What you see, Briskly, she said, “Enough time has passed. Go ahead and remove the cloth from your eyes.”

Cy did so, peeling away the fabric and looking up. He blinked several times and then said, “My eyes feel more relaxed than they have in weeks. We He slipped on the eye patch once more and looked about the room, his gaze finally settling on her. A warm feeling trickled through her.

“I do believe my vision is slightly improved than before this treatment,” he declared.

“I am glad to hear it, Cy.”

Then Finola thought of Mr. Colgate, who had gone off to war many years ago and returned last summer. He had been wounded in the service and his leg and had come home blind, as well, but recovered his sight after a few weeks at home. Perhaps it would be good for Cy and Mr. Colgate to meet, as with one another. She would mention it to Cy and see if he would be amenable to such a meeting.

“Shall we join Bertie?” he asked, rising from the table and pulling a chair for her.

He offered his hand, and she slipped hers into it, her belly flipping once again at the contact between them. Cy did not mention it, though she didn’t think she should address it.

They went outside, where Bertie was frolicking with his new help friends.

Cy said, “I hear I have four new dogs to meet, Bertie. Would you care to honor me by introducing me to them?”

Bertie looked to her and Finola nodded, saying, “Do as we did before.”

The boy took his time, instructing Cy how to hold his hand and then calling over each dog one at a time, allowing them to sniff the hand as he expected, all four accepted Cy and licked his hand, and he petted and scratched them between their ears.

“Did you know Finola named all of them after Greek gods?” he asked.

“She did, did she? Tell me about them,” Cy encouraged.

It warmed Finola’s heart to hear the boy repeat all she had told him. He kept all of the facts straight and did not confuse each god she had used in naming this litter. He kept all of the facts straight and did not confuse even one attribute of each god. Bertie was a very clever boy and would excel in both his studies and with her litter.

Bertie ended with, “And they all have the same mother and father,” and frowned. “I forget those names, Finola.”

“Zeus and Hera,” she prompted. Turning to Cy, she added, “Bertie is the dam and sire when he came to Belldale.”

“We shall be visiting Belldale on a regular basis,” Cy told the boy.

She listened as Cy explained how there were books and slates that she had used as a young girl in her own education and that she was willing to share these with Bertie.

“Instead of bringing them all here, we shall go and have your lessons at Belldale,” Cy said. “Afterward, Finola said she will allow you to help with training this litter.”

Bertie jumped up and down, unable to contain his excitement. “I like dogs even more than horses.”

Her gaze met Cy’s, and they both nodded at one another.

“Perhaps when Cy doesn’t need your help, you might come and visit with me at Belldale,” Finola suggested.

Cy interjected. “You always have a place to live with me at the farm, but you could travel to Belldale each day and help Finola with the work. Would you like that better than working in the Melrose stables?”

“I think I would,” said the child.

“We do not have to settle anything now,” she said. “For the time being, you and Cy will come to Belldale each morning for your lessons. The afternoon I will give you lessons of a different kind.”

“I intend to join in those lessons you have with Finola,” Cy told her. “It won’t hurt with eight pups to have extra sets of hands. I might find then working with animals myself.”

“Then it is settled,” she declared, excited about the prospect. “I know the way to Belldale now. It is less than a quarter-hour from the hunting lodge, Cy.”

“Bertie and I will have our breakfast and appear at Belldale shortly,” Cy promised.

Finola already looked forward to spending some of each day with her about pair. She was eager to teach Bertie all Banny had taught her about dog training, even more keen to spend time in Cy's company.

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Finola already looked forward to spending some of each day with the pair. She was eager to teach Bertie all Banny had taught her about dogs—but even more keen to spend time in Cy’s company.



CHAPTER SEVEN

CY SLIPPED HIS eye patch over his right eye and rose quietly from the bed, stepping over Bertie, who insisted upon sleeping on a pallet next to Cy even though there was a second bedchamber upstairs in the hunting lodge. The boy had been tuckered out after playing with all of Finola's puppies yesterday and had talked constantly about Finola and her large litter, telling him more about the names she had given the pups. Cy had told Bertie as much as he could about each of the Greek gods and goddesses and had also recalled the twelve labors of Heracles, one of his favorite series of stories. As he had gone through each labor, Bertie had sat enthralled by the heroic deeds of the hero.

Cy eased the door closed and went downstairs, where he fetched water from the well and put a small pot on to boil. He had used herbs twice more yesterday after Finola departed, and looking out across the kitchen this morning, he swore the sight in his left eye had improved slightly. The steeped herbs seemed to bring him relief, cooling his itchy eyes. While no miracle had occurred overnight, for the first time since the bullet entered his head, the right eye did not seem to be as swollen and irritated. He—like Dr. Sheffley—held out hope that his eyesight would return. Maybe not as sharp as it previously been, but he would be happy to have the right eye see as well as the left one now did. If he did regain it, it might be worth a trip to London to see an eye specialist and even to wear spectacles that might help him to see distant objects more clearly.

He took the pot off the fire and added the herb mixture into the water, stirring and letting it steep as Finola had yesterday. Then when it cooled, he dipped a cloth she had brought into the doctored water. After wringing out the excess from it, he removed his eye patch and placed the wet cloth against his eyes.

He now had a quarter-hour to think, since he could do nothing else. What he wanted to think about was Finola. He had never been so taken

woman, much less anticipated seeing one as he did her this mornin most military officers, he indulged infrequently with the fairer sex, sa appetite with a local widow or one of the camp doxies who follow army from place to place. Believing he was married to the army and woman would never permanently enter his life, Cy had not thought of with a woman in it. He had never pictured himself as a husband, much he bed, father.

y's bed Bertie was beginning to change that. The boy was bright and friend
; lodge. Cy instinctively had a good way of handling him. It had made Cy cur
's dogs to whether he might be a good father to children of his own.

asking Then Finola had entered his life, and things had radically shifted.
Bertie as only known her for a couple of days, and yet it seemed he had know
id even lifetime. He could not imagine her absent from his life. Yes, the
ies as a neighbors and would be seeing one another frequently, thanks
by the generous offer to allow him to tutor Bertie using the materials Sir Ros
once used to teach her. Finola had mentioned being orphaned at eight

id fresh of age, and Cy wondered how she was related to Sir Roscoe. Obviou
mixture man had not wed and produced children. Instead, he had left his prop
oss the Finola, which was highly unusual. It gave her a certain independence
proved very few women had in English society. He was eager to see what F
heated, looked like and watch and learn from her as she trained her litter of pu

ie since He removed the damp cloth from his eyes, realizing he had not hac
ollen or his blinding headaches for several days now. That alone made him op
would about his future.

appy to Going into the larder, he claimed several eggs and half a loaf of
sight in Mrs. Hargraves had told him when the maid came to clean the lodg
n obtain each week, she would bring with her items to restock the larder, in
freshly baked bread from Cook. He removed a crock of butter and one
and placed them on the table as Bertie entered the kitchen area, rubt
e water, eyes sleepily.

oled, he "You should have gotten me up, my lord. I would have mac
ing the breakfast for you."

inst his "I had to get up and make the concoction Finola wishes for me to
e. What my eyes," he told the boy. "I did not mind getting our food on after tha

with a Bertie seated himself at the table. "Finola is really nice, isn't she?]
do a good job learning from her."

g. Like “You would like to work with her and her dogs?”
ting his The boy nodded as he buttered some of the bread. “I think so. But
ved the to stay with you, my lord, for now.”

l that a “About that, Bertie,” Cy began. “I know you used to address me
his life when I was an officer. I think I would like you to do that when we are
h less a Finola,” he suggested.

Bertie’s brows knit together. “Why?”

lly, and “We are not standing on formality with Finola,” he explained. “I
rious as would simply be better if you referred to me in that manner.”

What Cy did not express was that he thought his relationship
He had change with Finola if she knew him to be a duke’s son. Others in the
n her at treated him differently once they learned the rank his father held. For
y were reason he could not articulate, he wished for Finola to only know him
to her Cressley, a former army officer and now resident of a small hunting loca
coe had a country estate.

it years “All right,” said Bertie brightly, showing how flexible the young
sly, the be.

erty to They ate their breakfast, and then Cy took some of the water
e which heating and shaved. He encouraged Bertie to use some of the tooth
Belldale and decided to buy the boy a brush when he went into the village. Cy
ps. he might do so this afternoon while Bertie was working with Finola
l one of dogs. Although Cy was eager to learn from her, as well, there were things
timistic needed to accomplish in Adderly.

He reminded Bertie to comb his hair and even suggested he use
bread water to smooth down the cowlick that sprang from the back of the
e twice head.

cluding Once they were ready, Bertie led Cy through the copse and
of jam emerged, the boy said, “We’re on Belldale land now. That’s what Finola
ing his me. She said it’s not very large, but it’s all hers.”

The land was very similar to that of Melrose, but obviously Finola
le you have any tenants. As they drew closer to her house, he saw a vegetable
garden and then a large, enclosed area which he assumed was the dog
use on used during some of her training and for the dogs to run about a bit a
it.” while she worked with individual ones.

I hope I “We should knock at the kitchen door,” he told the lad, leading Bertie
way.

As they approached the door, Finola was coming out and exclaimed, "I need there you are! Good morning to you both."

They replied in kind and she said, "Why were you coming to the door as *sir*?"

"I realized it is still early and did not want to disturb you," Cy thought your cook might be up, however."

She laughed and he felt a warm rush run through him hearing the sound. "We rise early here at Belldale," she told him. "We have dogs and a cow along with a horse to milk and a horse to care for, as well. Come in through the front door if you will."

Finola led them around to the front of the house and opened the door. Some servants were in sight. As they went through the house, Cy saw it was not as large as the dower house at Melrose but had a cozy feel to it which the dower house lacked. She led them to a small room.

"This is next door to Banny's study. It is where I took my own lessons. I could sit at this very table. The light is quite good for reading, and sometimes I read to Hargraves and Gilly, my servants, polish the silver in here. I will be glad to have certain they do not disturb your morning lessons, though. Those tasks are powder accomplished in the afternoons, when Bertie—and you, too, Cy—thought outdoors with me."

She went to the table, and he saw several books stacked upon it along with a few slates, chalk, and rags to wipe them clean.

"I went through the cabinets after I left you yesterday and pulled out a bit of the basic readers out. Do you know your alphabet, Bertie?" she asked.

"No, Finola. I don't know anything about reading and writing."

"That is what I am here for, Bertie," Cy declared. "We will start with the alphabet and once you master it, use it to learn simple words. We will also teach you on your vocabulary as we go. I also wish to teach you basics in mathematics."

Who knows? If you are educated, you might one day even be employed as a clerk in some office."

Bertie shook his head firmly. "No, sir, I know I want to work with animals. Either dogs or horses."

He was grateful that the boy had remembered not to address him as *lord* and smiled. "It won't hurt for you to get the basics of an education. Bertie that if you are working with animals. Why, you could talk to them. I always talk to my horse." He looked to Finola. "Bertie and I spoke more about

d, "Ah, mythology. I think we could even do a few lessons in history and geography if he is interested."

The boy grinned. "I heard all about Heracles and his twelve labors. He cleaned the king's stables and cut off the heads from the hydra." He said. "I've read good stories."

Finola smiled indulgently. "I am not certain that I know all those stories. You might need to tell me about these labors later today, Bertie."

Her gaze met that of Cy's, and he knew she was quite familiar with the twelve labors and merely wished to indulge the boy.

"I will leave the two of you on your own. We both have our own work to do. No performance, even if they aren't as heroic as those of Heracles. Whenever you finish your lessons, come outside."

"I thought Bertie and I could work mornings and then take a short break before we came to you," he said. "Today, though, I believe I will leave the lessons to you and Bertie. I want to go into Adderly and see the tailor and also Mrs. around in the general store to see if there is anything we are missing. I'll make hunting lodge. I will catch up on lessons with you later."

Finola left them and Cy took one slate and gave the other to Bertie. He talked a little bit about letters and the difference between consonants and vowels, trying to draw from his own lessons many years ago. He drew a few letters, along one at a time, and had Bertie imitate what he saw on Cy's slate. As expected, the lad picked up things rapidly and in a short time, had some of the letters of the alphabet memorized and could draw them with ease. Cy had noticed since Bertie proved to be such a sponge that he would start with a short lesson and add to it.

He wrote *AT* on his slate and Bertie said, "That is an *A* and a *T*. I'll build them close together."

"You are correct. They go together to form a word. Let us sound them out as sounds they make."

Cy demonstrated, and Bertie quickly caught on. Soon, they were writing with all kinds of letters in front of *AT* and within minutes, Bertie was writing and sounding out words such as cat, mat, sat, and fat.

"This is easy," the boy said. "And fun."

"I always thought learning was fun myself and am happy to hear you say the same. Let us see if you can think of another letter we can put in front of these two. Go through the alphabet and see what you come up with."

ography “A,” Bertie said, thinking. “No. *B*.” He sounded out *B* in front of the word. “Bat!” he declared.

s. How “Very good,” Cy praised. “And what is a bat?”

. Those Cy had asked for a brief definition of every word Bertie had come with, and the boy now said, “That is part of batman.”

e tales. “Yes, that is a much larger word.” He wrote *bat* on his own slate and added *MAN* after it. “That is what your father is.” Covering the word with all syllable, he said, “This word is bat. Are you familiar with what a bat is?”

The boy shook his head, and Cy explained what a bat was and what tasks it could be found.

ver you “Try again. See if you can think of another word to add to our list.”

“I know!” Bertie cried. He wrote an *R* with his chalk and then the word *Rat*. “Rat,” he declared. “Rats are nasty little creatures that run around and bite things. They should be avoided. Mum told me if a rat bites you, you can get very sick, so look out.”

“That is true. One more lesson and then we will be through for today.” Sometimes, you can put two letters in front of a few to form a new word.

He took the cloth and erased his slate before writing *AT* again. Then Bertie headed *FL* in front of it.

nts and “Sound it out, Bertie,” Cy encouraged.

letters, He listened as the boy blended *F* and *L* together and then added *A* in front. “Flat,” Bertie said, “Flat,” with enthusiasm and rubbed the top of the table. “This table is flat,” he said.

thought “I think you have done an outstanding job for your first day of school,” Bertie said. “If you would like, you may go outside. I am going to put away the materials we have used. I know Finola had left them out for us, but it is important to always pick up your things and not leave a mess for other people, especially important in this instance because we are a guest in Finola’s house and do not want to leave things messy.”

“I can help,” Bertie insisted.

adding “No, go outside. I don’t mind putting things away. It will help me investigate what else is here and see if there might be other things I can use in order for our lessons.”

The boy left the makeshift classroom, and Cy began erasing slate by opening cabinets, finding a place for everything and investigating what was in there. Then he sensed a difference in the air and turned, finding a small box with a key.

he rootstanding in the doorway.

She crossed the room and came to stand before him. “How did t
lesson go?”

ome up He smiled. “Even better than I had expected.”

Briefly, Cy outlined what he and Bertie had done that mornir
nd then Finola expressed delight at how much the boy had accomplished in
secondfew hours.

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re theyhe was quick to pick up on the commands I use with the dogs. He wil
to be an excellent pupil, both in the classroom and outdoors with my d

’ “I believe you are correct,” Cy said, enticed by her nearness. Th
AT afterscent of lavender, which clung to her, only increased temptation. He
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ck.” point at her throat. He gazed deeply into Finola’s eyes, and suddenly k
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Then he He kissed her.

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standing in the doorway.

She crossed the room and came to stand before him. “How did the first lesson go?”

He smiled. “Even better than I had expected.”

Briefly, Cy outlined what he and Bertie had done that morning, and Finola expressed delight at how much the boy had accomplished in such a few hours.

“I suppose I should not be surprised, knowing Bertie as I do. Yesterday, he was quick to pick up on the commands I use with the dogs. He will prove to be an excellent pupil, both in the classroom and outdoors with my dogs.”

“I believe you are correct,” Cy said, enticed by her nearness. That faint scent of lavender, which clung to her, only increased temptation. He wanted to bury his nose against her neck and inhale her sweet scent. Kiss the pulse point at her throat. He gazed deeply into Finola’s eyes, and suddenly knew he couldn’t breathe another breath until he did the unthinkable. Something he had told himself he would never do—but did now.

He kissed her.



CHAPTER EIGHT

HIS LIPS TOUCHED hers . . .

Finola had not expected this when she came into the house. Bertie appeared, and she had given him a task and then couldn't help herself. She longed to see Cy again. She *needed* to see Cy.

She had made her way into the house, deciding to ask him if he was returning to Belldale after his errands in the village or if she should bring Bertie back to the hunting lodge after they had worked together that afternoon.

Instead, she had felt the air riddled with electricity between them.

And now his mouth was on hers—and the most delicious sensation rippled through her.

Finola wasn't certain what she was supposed to do. Lord Crofton's kisses had been light, brief, and chaste, and his body had not even touched hers. Cy had slipped his arms about her as his lips moved over her face, the warmth enveloping her. She placed her palms against his chest and found it as hard as a stone wall. She refused to wonder why he kissed her, not for the doubts from long ago, which had plagued her for all these years. She would not ruin this magic moment. Cy's lips caressed hers, and then his tongue traced across her bottom lip, as if he tasted her. The thought intrigued Finola.

And she wanted to taste him, too.

Tentatively, she moved her own tongue along his lower lip and a deep groan emerged from him. He held her more tightly, and his own hands teased her mouth open. His next move was unexpected and yet it brought her incredible sensations to her.

His tongue slipped inside her mouth. It swept through her leisurely, exploring her without rushing. Every nerve within her body was on alert as a marvelous tingling swept through her.

This was heaven . . .

Suddenly, he broke the kiss and moved his head from her, still . . .

her to him possessively.

“I must apologize, Finola,” he said, his voice husky. “I do not know what came over me.” He paused, his one green eye searching her face for some answer to a question he had yet to ask. Then he said, “I knew what I was doing. And I still want to kiss you.”

His arms fell away from her, leaving her bereft. Desperate, she caught the lapels of his coat when he tried to turn away from her. Their gazes

“I don’t want you to stop, Cy. I want you to kiss me again.”

Finola had never made such a daring statement and was afraid Cy would be too much of a gentleman and leave her now. She would do what she could to prevent that from happening. With a boldness she did not know even possessed, Finola yanked hard on the coat she grasped, his body crashing down on hers. Once more, his arms encircled her, holding her against his hard, muscular body. He did not hide his hunger for her; in fact, he celebrated it. Finola opened to him—to this unknown world—she kissed her with a sense of desperation, mingled with desire. She knew this combination because she felt the same. It was as if she had been set adrift at sea many years ago, alone and with no hope.

Until this man appeared in her life, making her think hope still existed. She learned from him as they kissed, mimicking what he did, hoping he found as much pleasure in it as she did. Finola could not have known how long the kiss went on, only that it was the greatest moment of her life. When Cy broke the contact between them, he rested his brow against hers; they both panted like one of her dogs after a long run.

She kept her eyes closed, reveling in his nearness. His warmth. His

Finally, he lifted his head from hers, and she opened her eyes, smiling at him.

“I should not have done that,” he said lightly. “But I would kiss you a thousand times more.”

His words caused her face to flush. “I would be a most willing partner for each of those thousand kisses,” she told him.

Finola had always been one to keep her feelings to herself. Her father had not liked her and had been quick to anger anytime she was near him; his behavior toward her had trained Finola to contain her emotions with a stoic expression. Even all those years spent with Banny, relaxing ones in which she knew she was loved, she always held back. The one time she had not done so was

she had made herself vulnerable to Viscount Crofton. Once that
what occurred, coupled with Banny's sudden and unexpected death, she
as if retreated inside herself, building a wall so strong that no one would
, "No, I breach it.

Until now.

latched It wasn't as much as Cy had knocked those walls down as it had been
met. willingness to open the gates to him. To open her world to new possibilities.

Still, the lessons from yesteryear lingered in the forefront of her mind.
would she was afraid to voice how she truly felt to this man.

tever it "I am going to release you, Finola," he said.

ow she She nodded in agreement, and he did so but still remained so near
mouth that she could feel the heat emanating from him.

er flush "I had hoped to be your friend," he told her. "A good friend. I hope
and in not ruined that with my actions now."

-and he She asked, "You apologized for kissing me. Do you regret having
new these?"

adrift at He smiled wryly. "How could I regret the most wonderful moments
life?"

sted. His hand came to her face, his knuckles caressing her cheek
to her, absorbed what he had said.

ive said "I do not know what the future holds for me, Finola. I cannot control
er life, you at this time, despite what we just did."

hers as "I appreciate your honesty, Cy, and I am not expecting a commitment
from you. I know you still need to find your place in the world. You
scent. continue on that journey and see where it leads you. When you do finally
ling up you wish to do, then we might speak again."

He shook his head. "I should offer for you now. That would
do it a gentlemanly thing to do."

"No one witnessed our kiss," she assured him. "I will speak to no
participant. I meant what I said, Cy. You are at loose ends and need to discover
you wish to spend the rest of your life. Before, your future had been planned
her had out for you, and you did not have to even think about it. Now, he
im. His things are quite different. I will not hold you to any kind of commitment
in her, me, other than the friendship we have established."

ew she "You are as kind as you are beautiful." He stroked her cheek a firm
is when and then his hand fell to his side. "You are a good and wise woman, F

disaster am blessed to count you among my friends.” He sighed. “You and Bertie had my only friends now. I left behind boyhood friends years ago when I went to England to go to war and haven’t a clue what happened to any of them. I’ve made some friends among my fellow officers over the years but doubt I’ll ever be in their company again.”

She smiled. “So, you count an eight-year-old servant and a female trainer as your entire circle of friends.”

Cy chuckled. “I do—and I find they are the best friends I will ever have.”

The mood lightened now, Finola asked, “Will you return to Belldale when you go into Adderly? Or will you go back to Melrose? I thought that you would know whether or not to keep Bertie here or send him home to your mother.”

“I will come here again once I am done if that is agreeable to you.”

“I would like that,” she said. “I never work with the pups once they arrive each day. I think it important to give myself a break from them when I’m done. Like, you and Bertie are welcome to stay for tea this afternoon.”

“I will be happy to be back from the village by then.”

He took her hands in his and lifted them to his lips, pressing a fervent kiss against her knuckles. “Thank you for accepting me as I am now, Finola, as a former soldier. A broken man. One who searches for who he is to become.”

His words touched her deeply and she, in turn, lifted their joined hands and pressed her own kiss upon his knuckles.

“Thank you for befriending me, Cy. I have lived in this area my entire life but other than Banny, I have never truly been close to anyone. It is good to have a friend I can count on. A friend I trust.”

They gazed at one another, and Finola understood there were many unspoken questions between them. For now, though, she was satisfied with where their relationship stood. He was in no state to commit a lifetime to her and she wasn’t sure she wanted that. She would let the weeks and months unfold and hopefully see if she had a future with this man.

Her how

planned

however,

ment to CY BID BERTIE farewell, promising the boy he would return, and went

stable. Finola had offered him use of her horse so that he didn’t have to

travel time into Adderly and back again. It would save him considerable time. Finola

Finola. I



rtie are into the barn and became acquainted with the horse, saddling it and
n I left the saddle was one a man would use and not a sidesaddle. He suppose
n. I did Finola did ride she did so astride since she dressed in a masculine f
t I will The thought should have bothered him. Instead, he was more tempted
because her breeches showed off her rounded bottom and slender l
ale dog could imagine being in bed with her, his hands cupping and knead
buttocks, her legs locked around him.

have.” He shrugged off the sensual image as he grew hard.
le after Finola needed to remain as forbidden fruit for now. Impulse had l
ask so I to kiss her. He had tried to do the gentlemanly thing and step away a
ou.” kiss, but she had pulled him to her, and he simply could not resist. Th
' of lavender still filled his nostrils as he mounted the horse and tu
teatime toward Adderly.

. If you She had told him about the village and its residents. Guilt filled h
should have told her he was born here and quite familiar with the area.
still had a nagging feeling that Finola would skitter away like a feral ca
ent kiss learned his true identity.

nola. A He reached town and went straightaway to Mr. Timmon. Enter
me.” tailor’s shop, he greeted the man by name.

l hands Mr. Timmon squinted at him, as if trying to establish how he kr
stranger in his shop.

tire life “It is Lord Cyrus Cressley, Mr. Timmon,” he revealed. “Have I c
nice to that much?”

The tailor broke into a huge smile. “Lord Cyrus! How long has i
re still Why, the last time I saw you, I prepared a wardrobe for you to go
ed with university.”

to her, “I do believe I was one of the best-dressed students at Cambridge
month she sobered. “I have returned from the war, Mr. Timmon, and am now
at the hunting lodge at Melrose for now.”

Cy held his arms out. “As you can see, I am wearing the only c
could find that came close to fitting me as I left Spain. I am in need
services.”

t to the “I can certainly take care of you, my lord. First, though, we must n
to walk you. Though I still have your previous measurements in my ledger, it l
le went if you have grown even taller and broader than the last time you wer
shop. You left here a boy—and have become a man.”

noting The tailor assisted Cy in shedding his tailcoat, and soon when measurements were recorded. Mr. Timmon began mentioning all fashion would make up for Cy.

l by her “No, I am not going to town and doubt I will socialize much here. I have far too many items. I am still waiting for the return of my commissioning heris what I will be living on. I can pay you a little now, Mr. Timmon, rest once the sale of my commission comes in. For now, though, I need a quarter of what you have mentioned and none of the formal evening wear.”

led him “I see,” the tailor said. “Well, I know you are good for the funds after the Cyrus. Let us come look at some fabrics now and see what you might like.”

ie scent He shook his head. “No, that is unnecessary. I never consulted with you before because you have impeccable taste, Mr. Timmon. Make us what we’ve agreed upon in whatever materials you see fit. When might I see you for a fitting?”

Yet he “I can send word to Melrose, my lord, and let you know.”

at if she “Remember, I am not staying with His Grace and have been given the hunting lodge. I do not wish to inconvenience His Grace or any of the Melrose servants.”

“Why don’t you return in a week’s time, then, my lord? We can see what is finished then.”

“I will see you in a week’s time then, Mr. Timmon. It was good to see you again.”

Cy went two doors down and entered Mr. Simon’s shop, the largest in the village. He recognized the owner, who hadn’t changed much apart from speaking with a customer. Cy browsed the aisles, placing a few things in a basket he had claimed by the door, including a bilboquet for Bertie.

.” Then Mr. Simon completed his sale, and Cy gave a friendly nod to the shop owner who passed him, a curious look on her face.

As she left the store, he made his way to the counter and placed his purchases on it. “Good afternoon, Mr. Simon. I am—”

of your “Lord Cyrus!” Mr. Simon declared. “How good it is to see you here.” The shop owner frowned. “It looks as if you’ve been sent home from war with a measure of injury.”

ooks as “I was wounded. Shot in the head. I have lost the vision in one eye, but I at least held on to the eye itself. The army surgeon who operated on me saved my life and believes my vision might return. Until then?” He shrugged.

new the height of fashion with my eye patch.”

that he “Always the joker,” Mr. Simon said. “What have you here?” he looking into the basket.

That is “A few things for the hunting lodge. His Grace has graciously gi , which the use of it.”

and the The older man’s face soured. “You are not staying at Melrose?”

ed but a “No. It was . . . inconvenient for His Grace,” he said diplomatically ear.” Mr. Simon harumphed as he began removing items from the bas

s, Lord toy, my lord?” He grasped the cup and tossed the wooden ball, attack like.” string, up in the air, catching it in the cup.

ith you “I have a young boy with me. My batman’s son. He has been assis p what as I settle in.” Cy pointed to his eye patch, not wanting to discuss th stop in eye’s impaired vision. “I thought he might find it amusing.”

“Ah,” Mr. Simon said, nodding his head. “Will the boy return father anytime soon?”

use of “No. Briggs wanted a better life for his son than traipsing after th of the After all, who knows how long our war with Bonaparte will go on?”

They chatted for a few more minutes as Mr. Simon recorde fit you purchases and gave him the total. He tried not to wince, knowing ho purchases would deplete his meager funds.

l seeing “Might I pay for half now and the other half later?” he inquired.

The shop owner smiled broadly. “Not a problem, my lord. You v st in the honest boy—and they become honest men. There isn’t much here ad wassimply include this on the monthly bill to His Grace.”

igs in a “No,” he said sharply, causing Mr. Simon to jump. Tempering h he added, “I wish to not find myself indebted to my brother.”

woman “Very well, my lord. Then I will establish a separate account f You may pay a portion of it at the end of each month.”

ced his “Let me pay you something now, and I will settle up with you in fu —”

1.” The “It is not necessary, my lord,” the older man insisted, handing with a basket, which was full of his items. “Just bring the basket back the ne you come to shop. That is all I ask.” Smiling, he added, “It is very ; , but at have you home, my lord. I hope the boy likes his toy.”

e saved “Thank you,” Cy said, moved by the shop owner’s generosity.

l. “I am He left the store, carrying the basket, and on his way out of the

couldn't help but stop and gaze into the window of Mrs. Carroll's bakery. He asked, "I decided to step inside and purchase something for today's tea."

Opening the door, he spied Mrs. Carroll, who pursed her lips at him. "If you hadn't come inside, my lord, I was about to go out and get some," she said, chuckling.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Carroll," he greeted. "You were always so good to me."

"Are you home for good, my lord?"

He pointed to the eye patch. "I am. It seems His Majesty's army need half-blind officers running about a battlefield."

They spoke for a few minutes, Mrs. Carroll catching him up on the other side of the village, and then he said, "Do you have any of your lemon cakes?"

"I have dreamed of those for years. I tried several different bakeries, but none came close to yours."

She smiled, a pleased look on her face. "You are in luck, my lord. I have a few left. Baked them fresh this morning. How many do you want?"

She moved to where they were, and he saw three were left.

"I will take all three," he declared, thinking each of them might have been good during tea today.

"Anything else?" Mrs. Carroll asked.

"Not today." He grinned. "But I will back for lemon cakes—and I'll be in the future."

She wrapped and handed them over.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing," she proclaimed. "It is my welcome home gift to you."

"Ah, Mrs. Carroll, you have given me far too many free sweets for years. Let me pay you for these now. The boy I was did not have the funds to do so, but the man I have become did earn a salary from His Majesty a while ago."

"No," she said, crossing her arms before her. "I am just happy to see you home, my lord." She grinned. "Besides, I know one bite of my next time cake, and you'll be back. I'll get my money from you on a regular basis."

They both laughed, and he thanked her, exiting the bakery and placing the cakes in the basket he carried. Cy returned to his horse and mounted it up the reins and balancing the basket on his thigh.

It had been good to be back visiting with the people of Adderly again.

ery. He hadn't realized he had missed them. They were a link to his past, a fon

n. He turned the horse in the direction of Belldale, looking forv
n. sharing the lemon cakes.

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hadn't realized he had missed them. They were a link to his past, a fond one.

He turned the horse in the direction of Belldale, looking forward to sharing the lemon cakes.

And being in Finola's company.



CHAPTER NINE

FINOLA WATCHED CY ride off toward Adderly and then turned her a back to Bertie.

“Cy told me how well you did at your lessons this morning. Are you ready for a different kind of lesson?”

“Like before? When you taught me different words to say to the dog?”

“Yes, that’s exactly right.”

The boy grew thoughtful. “But don’t they already know all the things you’re going to teach me?”

She couldn’t believe how perceptive the boy was for one so young. It is true, but with dogs—especially pups such as these—reinforcement is a key not only to learning and then mastering a behavior. It is essential to making certain that behavior is never forgotten. Even if you were not with me, I would be going over the same voice commands with the lit on a regular basis.”

He nodded. “That makes sense. What do I need to do?”

“Banny taught me there are five commands that are considered the most important ones which you teach a dog before anything else. Then you continue to use those commands, giving them praise and reinforcing their good responses with those commands with treats.”

She went to the satchel that lay nearby on the ground and opened it, removing a sack with a strap upon it. Taking it to Bertie, she slipped it over his head so that the strap fell diagonally across his body, and she tucked it under his chin between his hip and knees.

“You’ll wear this whenever you are working with the dogs. Inside the sack will find tiny treats for them. They are what you use to encourage good behavior. And what is the one thing you never do when you are working with an English springer spaniel?”

Quickly, he said, “Don’t scold them. They don’t like that.”

“That is correct. You may ignore them if they’ve behaved poorly.”

dogs, especially this breed, never respond well to a raised voice. If you yell at them and shout at them, they will grow fearful of you and withdraw.”

“I promise I won’t lose my temper, Finola.”

She didn’t think this sweet-natured boy could ever do so. “Just do your best. Now, what do you think are the basic commands we want our dogs to respond to?”

“Well, I know you’ve taught them their names, and they should respond when you call them. That’s one. And sit and stay are two and three. Heel is four. Heel is paused, thinking a moment. “Heel. You always use that when we begin to walk. But that’s only four. What’s the other one?”

“You left out down. Some trainers use lie down, but I have had success keeping with one-word commands.”

Finola went to the dog run and called for Athena and Apollo. The two were the brightest of the litter and caught on quickly to commands. The two were running, and she let them out from the pen.

“Call them to you, Bertie.”

The boy did so, and she followed after them. “These two are very obedient. Walk several paces away from us and then call for one of them. Take them through the five commands.”

He did so, summoning Athena, who quickly responded to each command. Bertie rewarded her and Finola called the dog to her so that Bertie could play with Apollo. The pup responded to Bertie well, and she led Athena and Apollo the pair when Bertie had gone through all the commands.

“Nice work!” Finola praised. “I actually have a sixth command I want to teach after those five. It is a very hard one to teach and difficult for a pup to master. These two have, however.”

Quickly, she explained the principal of leave it, where a treat that is placed on the ground—and they are commanded *not* to touch it.

“This is a very difficult behavior for a pup to learn, Bertie. They will respond to a treat more than anything and have to sit and look at it. Do you like sweet treats?”

He grinned. “Mum says I’ve got a sweet tooth. I’m mad for anything with a bit of sugar in it.”

“Then think of your favorite sweet sitting on the table in front of you, close enough for you to pick it up. The smell wafts to your nose, tickles you, teasing it. Your eyes focus on it. Would it be hard to simply sit in front of it and not grab it?”

berate “It would, Finola.”

“It is the same for these pups. Shall we try that behavior?”

She called Athena to her side and motioned for Bertie to test Apollo. The boy placed a treat next to his foot, and the dog inched toward it.

“Leave it,” Bertie said, never taking his eyes off the dog, just as he was focusing on the treat less than two paw lengths away from him.

“Leave it,” the lad said again when Apollo grew twitchy and wiggled his ears.” Hebottom.

“Good, Bertie. You saw him moving and anticipated. That takes practice and practice.”

Keeping his eyes on Apollo, Bertie asked, “How long do I have to wait for him to wait?”

“Long enough to test him. A minute at this age. No longer than that. Almost that now. Pick up the treat, and place it in your palm.”

Bertie did as requested.

“Tell him he’s a good dog and award the treat.”

The boy stroked Apollo’s head with his left hand, and said, “Good boy.” He offered the treat in his right. The pup gobbled it down, and he praised him again. Bertie’s way with the dogs wasn’t something that could be taught. The boy simply had a natural instinct on what to do and say. A lad could be taught how to train dogs, but Bertie’s gut would take him far over to choose to work with Finola after he finished caring for Cy, she believed he might become one of the premier dog trainers in all of England.

But she wouldn’t push him now. His loyalties lay with Cy. When the young lad came for the boy to make a decision, though, she would encourage him to work with her.

“Try now with Athena,” she suggested.

Bertie went through the paces with Athena, who gracefully nibbled the treat from Bertie’s hand when she was allowed to do so.

They then took turns removing dogs from the dog run and letting them work with each of them on the basic commands. All but Pollux and Triton successfully demonstrated all six behaviors correctly. Triton almost brought it out. He left it, but snatched the treat seconds before Bertie gave him the command to do so.

“That’s all right,” she assured the lad. “Triton merely anticipated you would say. That is not necessarily a bad thing at this stage.”

As for Pollux, his natural curiosity did not allow him to even think of leaving the treat alone. Bertie was frustrated and turned his back as he walked. This suggested.

“Ignoring Pollux will hurt him far more than you shouting at him,” Apollo said. “Of all this litter, Pollux is the most inquisitive—and the one who gets his feelings hurt more than the others.”

The pup came around to Bertie and bumped the boy’s leg several times. “No, do not look at Pollux,” she warned. “Being indifferent to him will only teach him.”

Although the boy ignored Pollux, Finola could see it was difficult to make him.

“Speak to him gently now. Have him heel, and place him back in his crate. It is run.”

Bertie did as asked, Pollux happily sticking close to the boy’s side. He placed the dog inside the pen.

“How did the training go?”

She turned and saw Cy approaching. Immediately, Finola’s mouth went dry, and her heart slammed against her ribs in anticipation. She could feel his mouth on hers. His tongue stroking hers. His rock-hard body against her soft one.

Swallowing, she waved. “Very well, Cy.” Looking to Bertie, she said, “I think we are done for the day. We can wash up at the water pump there.”

Bertie ran to Cy. “I have to wash for tea. Finola says we are taking him to training now.”

“Very good. I cannot wait to hear about your adventures with the pup.”

Finola joined Cy. “You have a full basket.”

“I did a bit of shopping. I even stopped at the bakery for lemon cakes we can have for tea.”

“Oh, Mrs. Carroll makes the most heavenly lemon cakes. Thank you, Triton, for bringing them, Cy. I haven’t had one in some time.”

“Thank you for the loan of your horse. I rubbed him down and fed him a good bit of oats just now. Riding him saved me a good deal of time.”

“Were you able to see Mr. Timmon and be measured for some new clothes?”

He eyed her. “Are you saying you are tired of seeing me in what I am wearing?”

k aboutwear?”

Finola She realized he was teasing her. “As a matter of fact, I am. I hope new clothes will be made up soon.”

n,” she “I am to return in a week’s time for a fitting.”

Who can “Mr. Timmon does excellent work.”

“I will take Bertie with me to my fitting. I want the tailor to create things for him, as well as for me. I would have had Bertie accompany me today, but he was so eager to be with you.”

“You mean the dogs. He did a wonderful job, Cy. He has good instincts and an even temperament. If he chooses to do so, he would make for a dog trainer. Here, let me wash up, as well, and then we can go inside for the dog.” She did so and they went into the house and to Banny’s study. She thought of the room as her guardian’s, despite the fact he had been legless for seven years now.

“Oh, I didn’t think. There are only two seats in here. I have my tea every day. We should go into the parlor. I so rarely have guests, I suppose I grew out of practice with entertaining.”

They accompanied her to the parlor, and Cy handed over the white cloth with the lemon cakes inside.

Finola accepted them and said, “I will take these to Cook so she can include them in the tea she is preparing for us.”

Going to the kitchens, she passed the baked goods to Gilly and asked them to be part of the tea which would be served in the parlor.

“Ooh, Mrs. Carroll’s lemon cakes,” the maid said as she unwrapped the cloth. “They make my mouth water.”

“Since there are three here, take one and you and Cook split it for tea.”

“Oh, thank you, my lady.”

Finola stilled as Gilly addressed her. She had not used her title with him and wondered if he might think differently about her if he knew she was the daughter of an earl, one who worked for her living. It shouldn’t matter to him if they would stay friends, or they wouldn’t. She couldn’t help wonder what her origins were, much less the fact she needed to earn her living in a new order to pay for Belldale’s upkeep and her two servants.

Still, she waited in the kitchens as Gilly and Cook placed items on the tray. Now and then Finola offered to take the tray in herself, sweeping it up.

“I can do that, my lady,” the maid protested.

“I know you can. Stay here and enjoy that lemon cake while I go and get my guests.”

She had told her two servants that a former army officer and his servant would be using the schoolroom in the mornings for the foreseeable future. She had not introduced the pair to Cy and Bertie, though.

Entering the room, Cy leaped to his feet and met her, taking the tray from her hands.

“Where do you wish me to put it?”

She indicated a table. “Here will be nice. We can gather around it for tea.”

Bertie’s eyes grew large. “Look at all the food!” he exclaimed.

“I have a rather hearty tea each day,” she admitted. “I am always gone hungry after a day’s work with the dogs. Tea is really my biggest treat. At night, I usually have soup and bread, and that is enough to fill my belly here the next morning.”

Finola poured out for them. She thought Bertie might like a cup of coffee and had brought one for him, but the boy said he preferred tea.

“Mum says tea soothes the soul. I like the tea in England. We had coffee in Spain, but it didn’t taste like this.”

“Make up a plate for yourself, Bertie,” she encouraged. “Have as much as you’d like. You, too, Cy.”

He took a plate and began placing items on it, then he frowned. “I see two lemon cakes. I could have sworn I had bought three.”

“You did. I gave one to Cook and Gilly to split for their tea.”

His gaze met hers, and she saw approval.

“You are indeed extremely kind, Finola. Why don’t the two of you have one of the lemon cakes? That way we both can have some—and Bertie and I don’t have to share.”

“Oh, I have had Mrs. Carroll’s lemon cakes before. I want you to have one, too.”

An odd look crossed Cy’s face. It was there for but a moment and then it was gone.

“If you insist,” he said quietly.

They filled their plates and had a most enjoyable tea together. Bertie then handed Cy a tray with all about the five crucial commands and how he had practiced them with each pup. Then he explained the sixth one and how two of the dogs had

master that behavior.

“They will,” he said, nodding to himself. “They are good pups and will learn to listen to Finola and me.”

She was touched that Bertie already thought of them as a team, visible together just as she had apprenticed under Banny. She looked to Cy and saw that he, too, was aware of the same thing.

Cy then told them about what he had done in the village, leaning over the basket and producing a bilboquet.

“I found something you might like at Mr. Simon’s store. I had these as a boy and enjoyed playing with it.”

He demonstrated to the boy how to hold the cup and toss the ball in the air, catching it in the cup.

“Thank you, sir. Thank you so much.”

Cy handed over the toy, and Bertie asked if he could play with it now. “Away from the tea things,” Finola cautioned. “Move over to the other side of the room.”

Bertie did so, joyfully tossing the ball up in the air and trying to catch it. “That was very thoughtful of you, Cy.”

“I spent hours playing with mine when I was a child. I have never seen anything like Bertie with a toy. When I spotted it as I browsed the general store, I simply had to buy it for him.”

“A toy and dogs. What more could a boy want?” she asked, smiling as she watched Bertie.

A sudden pang hit Finola. She had never thought to have children of her own. Never thought she would pass down the skills she had learned from Banny. Now, though, a deep yearning filled her, one which asked to be satisfied. To have children, though, she must first have a husband. She had shied from the thought of marriage after Lord Crofton had made an utter mess of it, along with his rakish friends.

Yet here with her now was a good man. A quiet one. One who was not damaged from his time at war. Could she help make Cy whole again? Should she truly consider a life with her?

Just as patience was required in dog training, Finola would need to exercise massive amounts of it now, especially after her last conversation with private Cy. He still had much to work out, becoming accustomed to a life that was unfamiliar with him. But the kisses she had shared with

made her heart sing. The thought of spending a lifetime with this man, and with him, bearing his children, made her almost weep.

Finola blinked away the tears forming in her eyes and turned working "More tea, Cy?"

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Finola blinked away the tears forming in her eyes and turned to him. “More tea, Cy?”



CHAPTER TEN

A WEEK HAD passed. It had been the happiest of Finola's life. She had found her work with her dogs rewarding, but had not realized how so life she had led ever since Banny's passing. Being around Cy and made her look forward to each day. The boy was simply joyful in eve he took on and was a delight to teach and work with. She had mov teaching him hand commands after the voice ones. Now, all it took raised hand from Bertie and a dog would stay, or two claps and t would come to him.

They had continued working on those basic commands with the li had progressed to things such as agility training, which required condi concentration, and a sense of teamwork between human and canine. Th of training built up a dog's endurance, which would be useful wh began hunting. They had great success with fade the lure, as well. Th were getting old enough now to work on their eventual roles of flushin and retrieving it for their masters. It was extremely helpful that she had to help train this litter. The pups caught on faster because they sper time with an individual. This first group produced by Zeus and Hera be the most successful to date.

As for being around Cy, just looking at him brought happiness to Not only was he excellent with the dogs and Bertie, but he was a plea be around. Interesting. Funny.

And extremely nice to look at.

She had spent hours thinking about the kisses they had shar wondered when the next might come. She had even done what Lord (had accused her of so many years ago, taking her pillow and kis pretending it was Cy. She had dreamed of him almost every night tl week, awaking with her body flushed with heat, aching to be held in h once more.

Today they had reversed their schedule, and Cy and Bertie wo

working with her and the litter this morning because he was scheduled to return to Adderly this afternoon for a fitting with Mr. Timmon. He wanted to take Bertie along to have new clothes made up for the growing boy.

When Bertie had been told of the outing, he begged the two of them to allow him to skip his lessons in the schoolroom just this once so he wouldn't miss out on working with the pups. Cy had readily agreed to Bertie's progress as nothing short of amazing. He told Finola how he knew both his upper- and lower-case letters and drew them with precision on his slate. Bertie's vocabulary was growing, and he was learning to form one-syllable words, such as can, man, and ran. Yesterday, Cy had shared blends with him, and the boy had moved from words such as mop to flop, and stop. Finola had even sat in for an hour of their lessons and was thrilled at the progress Bertie made.

Cy's lessons continued outside the schoolroom, as well. While Finola was teaching the child and man what she knew of dogs and how to handle them, Cy continued his job as tutor when they went on the long walks. With them, they would take out the entire litter of eight pups and even Zora and Hera at the same time. On these excursions, Cy would talk to Bertie about history. She had chimed in when she could when the lessons were about Greek mythology, which had been a favorite topic of Banny's.

Cy's lessons went far beyond her knowledge, though. He had taught her the history and philosophy of the ancient Greeks on these walks, along with the history of ancient Rome. He had also started teaching the both of them the history of England and the British Isles. How it had started with the prehistoric times including the Bronze and Iron Ages and the changes made when the Romans came to settle it. He talked of Hadrian's Wall and she longed to see it someday.

Yesterday, he had described in detail the invasion of the Normans into England and the crowning of William as the first Norman king of England. He said that line had died out, replaced by the Plantagenets and followed by the others. She was shocked to learn in the previous century when George came to the throne, he was not an Englishman, but a Hanoverian from a German state. Since Finola had never had any lessons in history, she was so eager for the information as much as Bertie. She hoped to hear more history today.

Finishing her breakfast, Finola went outside, finding Cy and Bertie already here, allowing the pups to leave the dog run two at a time to

uled to after their breakfasts.

anted to “Good morning,” she called, and they returned her greeting.

Finola outlined what they would be working on this morning. Them always liked them to have an overview of what the day’s training session that he would involve.

, citing Before they could start the dogs’ lessons, however, she spied a carriage Bertie the distance. As it approached, she saw it was the finest carriage she had seen on the road and assumed it must belong to some duke.

n many Cy came to stand beside her and asked, “Did you have visitors impressed for today?”

o drop, “No, I did not. Most likely, it is someone wanting one of my Horn and Wasspaniels. This litter is spoken for, however, and there is even a waiting list for the next one.”

ola was Finola was not telling the entire truth. The current litter only had five pups, the pups reserved for members of the nobility. She had learned over time that sometimes pups were stillborn or they weren’t strong and did not live more than a few days or weeks. Once she knew the number of a litter, she kept a few in reserve in case there was a death among them. Hera’s first litter had been exceptionally hale, however. While she planned to keep Athina to breed her in a couple of years, it still left one of the pups available to be shared.

shared “I will go see what our visitors want.”
th facts She told Cy and Bertie what to work on during her brief absence and then headed toward the carriage. She wished to meet the carriage alone in the private era, she knew the visitors would refer to her as Lady Finola. She could not tell them why she was still hiding her social status from Cy and fully intended to see more of her background to him when the proper moment occurred.

The footman on the vehicle’s back jumped to the ground and approached her, a folded parchment in hand.

ngland. “I need to deliver this to Lady Finola Honeyfield.”

wed by “I am she.” Finola held out her hand for the parchment.

I came The footman’s eyes swept up and down her, obviously noting her German of dress, but he recovered quickly.

king up “Of course, my lady.”

ay. She broke the seal and read the contents.

Bertie
piddle *My dear Lady Finola –*

I have heard marvelous things about your Honeyfield spaniels and wish to purchase one immediately. I would ask that you come to Stonecrest at your earliest convenience and bring one of your dogs with you. Normally, my wife and I would come to you—but she is heavily with child and due to give birth in late April. Although we are but ten miles from you, I do not wish for her to be jostled about in a carriage in her delicate condition.

If you would be so good as to let my footman know when you might visit us at Stonecrest, we will send a carriage for you and we eagerly await your visit.

Stoneham

Finola knew the Duke of Stoneham's name and had heard a bit of about him. Stoneham had not come from the gentry. In fact, he had come to her attention when he learned he was a duke. She did not know the entire story since Stonecrest was ten miles from Belldale and its inhabitants did not go shopping in Gramsby, the village closest to them, not Adderly.

She owed this duke nothing and looked to the footman, saying, "I am sure the current litter is spoken for, as well as half of the next. Please inform me when the litter is born, and I will write to him in the future, once that litter is born, and he is still interested in one of my Honeyfield spaniels. Thank you," she said dismissively, turning around to return to her dogs.

She heard the carriage door opening and a deep voice called, "Waiting here." Turning, she saw an imposing man leap to the ground and stride toward her. As he drew near, she was drawn in by his ice-blue eyes and dimpled chin.

"I thought you might say that, Lady Finola. That is why I decided to come in person and hope to sway you. I am the Duke of Stoneham."

He might be elegantly dressed, but there was an air about this man that he were still rough around the edges, showing his working-class roots. His manner looked extremely strong. Not from boxing at Gentleman Jackson's but from physical labor. She actually liked him more for it.

Suddenly, Cy appeared at her elbow and asked, "Is there something I might help you with?"

The duke turned his gaze to Cy and said, "I am Stoneham. From my ramrod posture, I gather you have served in His Majesty's army."

and "I did," Cy said bluntly. "I was Lieutenant-General Cressley."

to "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Cressley, and I thank
logs your service to our king and country."

is "Why are you here?" Cy demanded, his tone neutral and yet three
live at the same time.

in a "My duchess carries our first child," Stoneham said, his voice soft
you as he spoke of his wife. "She has always longed to have a dog and want
and bring up our children with dogs in the household as pets. I came here to
Honeyfield spaniels have the best reputation far and wide. Not only
excellent hunters of game and fowl, but as dogs with pleasant dispositions.

am The duke turned back to Finola. "This dog will not be a hunter. Instead
will be a family member." He grinned, his harsh features softening, his
gossiphim even more handsome. "I am sure my duchess will pamper the
been know Honeyfield spaniels are also good guard dogs. I want my
re story always looked after and kept safe."

id their Finola found herself liking this man quite a bit. "I would like to meet
Grace if I could."

g, "My The duke gave her a wry smile. "You want to inspect the both of
rm Hisbelieve we will pass muster. Nalyssa charms everyone she meets.
d see if rough and tumble character such as me."

he said The love for his wife shone in this man's eyes, and Finola knew
pup would go to a good home.

tl!" "I may actually have one dog in the current litter which is unsold
toward Although I do have a list of waiting names, Your Grace, it is for hunting
e in his not pets."

"Might I persuade you to accompany me now so you could meet
ided to wife? I do not expect you to bring the dog with you. I want you to meet
two of us and see our household before you commit to us."

in, as if She looked to Cy. "Would you and Bertie continue with this meeting
ots. He training while I accompany His Grace to Stonecrest?"

ut from "I can do so—or I can go with you."

She liked that he felt protective of her. "I think your time would be
thing I spent with Bertie and the pups."

"If that is what you wish." He turned to the duke. "It was an honor
m your meet you, Your Grace."

"Likewise, Lieutenant-General Cressley."

Cy shook his head. "It is plain Cressley now, Your Grace. My days and nights are long behind me. If you will excuse me."

Finola watched Cy stride away, and she turned to the duke. "If you will give me a few minutes, Your Grace, I will change into more appropriate attire."

"That is unnecessary, Lady Finola. In fact, Nalyssa will be delighted to see you dressed in such a manner. Come with me now and meet her because I will have you back with your dogs by noon."

"All right," she agreed.

She accompanied him to his grand ducal carriage. Seeing them instead, the footman quickly put down stairs, and the duke handed her up, joining her inside the vehicle.

"I have heard nothing but good things about you, my lady, and the children you train. One of my neighbors has a Honeyfield spaniel. That is why the duchess got the idea of having a guard dog and companion for our children. Her name is Her—" "You are certainly planning ahead, Your Grace, since your first baby is yet to arrive."

The duke smiled broadly. "Oh, we plan to have many children. A boy and a girl will be brought up in love. My mother raised my sister and me. You have heard some of the local gossip. I do not hide the fact that we came from the working class. Mama and Pen owned and ran a millinery shop, which was next door and catered to gentlemen of the *ton* and gentlemen of the middle class. I only recently became the Duke of Stokers and which was quite the surprise to me. Nalyssa worked with men such as clerks, doctors, and others outside of the *ton*—who suddenly met themselves members of it. I learned quite a bit from her."

His smile softened. "And that included learning I could not live without her."

Finola sighed inwardly. "I do believe that is the most romantic I have ever heard, Your Grace."

"Nalyssa has brought things out in me that I never knew were in me better within. I do know that life is better with love in it. She is my soulmate and I will love her until the end of time."

The duke's words moved her. Finola wondered if she were capable of such an all-consuming love. Thinking of Cy, she decided she definitely would—and only prayed when he found himself that he, too, could imagine

military with her by his side.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

AS THE DUKE of Stoneham handed Finola down, she saw that Stoneham had a handsome property, the house the largest she had ever seen. Then again she had yet to catch sight of the Duke of Margate's home. Perhaps one day she might walk her and Bertie about Melrose so that she could get a glimpse of his relative's ducal seat.

Stoneham led Finola inside, where they were greeted by a butler.

"Her Grace is in her sitting room, Your Grace," the butler informed the duke.

"This way, my lady," the duke said, taking her to the sitting room and gently knocking on the door before entering.

"My love, I have brought Lady Finola Honeyfield home with me," the duke announced, leading Finola across the room to where the duchess sat in a chair, her feet propped upon a padded footstool.

Stoneham bent and brushed his lips not against his wife's cheek but against her lips, causing Finola to blush. She was unused to seeing any affection between married couples of the *ton* but thought it a good thing.

Even seated, it was obvious to see the duchess was a tall woman. Her auburn hair was gathered on the sides with jeweled combs, which kept her hair away from her face, showing off the woman's excellent bone structure. Her sapphire eyes were vivid, and Finola thought immediately that all her children would all have some shade of blue eyes.

The duchess smiled up at her husband. "You are a miracle worker, I had no idea you would bring Lady Finola home with you." She smiled at Finola, offering her hand. "I am delighted to meet you, my lady. Please forgive me for not rising. It takes forever to stand these days, and I am not comfortable right now."

"No apology is necessary, Your Grace," she said, taking the duke's hand. "I understand you will give birth soon."

"Late April is what the midwife tells me, so about ten weeks." R

her belly, the duchess added, "I hope she is wrong and that this litter comes sooner. We are so eager to meet him."

"Or her," interjected the duke. To Finola, he said, "I am hoping for what My duchess thinks, though, that she carries a boy."

Again, this duke surprised her. Most titled men, especially dukes, for their firstborn to be male and their heir apparent.

"We truly wish for a healthy babe, male or female," Her Grace said. "If it is a boy, then hopefully I will produce a girl the next time."

The duke laced his fingers through his wife's. "I am going to let two of you to chat. Lady Finola and I had plenty of time to do so in the carriage."

He lifted his wife's hand and kissed it, his eyes burning with passion. Finola found the couple to be infinitely fascinating.

"Shall I have tea sent up?" the duke asked.

"Yes, darling. Please do so."

Once Stoneham left, the duchess said, "Oh, please, have a seat, my dear. I did not mean to leave you standing. Sit in that chair if you would. I think you better that way."

She took a seat, and the duchess said, "You look so comfortable in the clothing you wear. I envy you for fitting into breeches like that. Is it easy to train your spaniels dressed in such a manner?"

"It is why I dress this way, Your Grace," she replied. "I can move more easily. Bend. Sit on the ground and play a bit with my pups."

"Tell me about them," the duchess urged.

Finola shared how her current litter was the first for Zeus and Hera, and how she had named each of their offspring after Greek gods and goddesses.

"They are seven months now and have mastered their basic behaviors. They have started their additional training recently, teaching them the things they will need to know to become good hunters of both fowl and prey."

"How long have you been training dogs?"

"Almost my entire life."

She explained how she had been orphaned at a young age and had to live with Sir Roscoe Banfield, who trained dogs for a living.

"He was the best of guardians, educating me in academics and the art of and training of dogs, as well. I lost him seven years ago and have continued his work. Banny used to train various breeds, but I have chosen to excel in the training of spaniels."

the onework with English springer spaniels because of their nature and intellig

“Yes, we have heard of Honeyfield spaniels, my lady. You have q
r a girl.reputation.” The duchess paused. “Might you have any pups that w
take on at present? I would love to do so before our child arrives. I wo
wishedthe dog to have time to acclimate to us and Stonecrest before th
comes.”

d. “If it “His Grace said you were looking more for a pet, one who
children could play with, and a dog who would protect them.”

ave the “Yes, that is correct. Pierce has never hunted a day in his life. He
in thelaborer for several years, saving money so that he might open h
haberdashery. It is a long, convoluted story, but he actually became a
hunger.little over a year ago. I was hired to train him, so to speak. It was wh
for a living.”

“You *earned* your own living?”

Her Grace smiled confidently. “I most certainly did. You see, my
r lady. Ithe Earl of Starling, was a gambler. A charming man who lost his
can seefortune and couldn’t face what he had done—so he killed himself.”

Finola gasped. “I am sorry,” she apologized, a bit taken aback
e in theopenness of the duchess.

asier to “No need to be. We were not close. Unfortunately, *his* scandal l
my own. Polite Society rejected me—until I turned my cousin, the ne
ve withStarling, into proper *ton* material. Suddenly, I had a reputation to upho
I earned my living preparing men who had unexpectedly come into
training them and polishing their ways so that they might take their pla
era andmember of Polite Society.”

esses. She could have listened to the duchess speak all day. The woman’s
vivors. Iwas cultured, and she was most charming and down-to-earth.

gs they “I was all about business, Lady Finola. A practical woman who
room for love in my life. I never let others grow close to me. I was t
and direct. A survivor. I had to be—because I had no other choice.”

The duchess paused when a maid brought in a tray of tea, pouring
d comethe two of them and then leaving the room. The duchess picked up her

“Then my life changed radically. I met a quick-witted, intellige
he carewho didn’t suffer fools. He was loyal and loving to his family and
ntinuedtrust outsiders. He was a most reluctant duke, one who did not wish
usivelythe *ton*.” She smiled. “Pierce absolutely stole my heart. I polished him

gence.” would a diamond in the rough and thought he would make an excellent addition with a well-bred lady of society.”

“But he chose *you*,” Finola said, her heart telling her that the pup would like meant to be together.

The duchess sighed. “I like to think we chose one another.”

If she’d had any doubts before, this woman had dispelled them.

“I think you and His Grace are perfectly suited for one another and make for excellent parents.”

“Thank you, my lady. I have had a late start, marrying at my advanced age. I will turn thirty this year, and we are hoping to have as many children as we can. I have come to love the country and see us spending a good deal of our time here. I wish for my children to have dogs. Not hunting dogs but dogs they can love. Dogs who will be their companion and best friend.”

“I believe I have the perfect pup for your family, Your Grace. His father, Pollux. He is a very smart dog and quite playful and affectionate but a bit curious, though, so you will have to keep a close watch on him at all times in order to keep him from mischief.”

“Pollux sounds lovely,” the duchess declared. “He will spend most of his days with me for the time being. I don’t go far afield.”

“He will need to be exercised regularly, Your Grace.”

Finola detailed how often and how far the pup should be walked each day, and day, sharing how Pollux excelled at the commands he had been taught, how he was eager to please.

“Pierce will enjoy walking Pollux. I will join him once I am able to walk more than waddle,” the duchess teased. “When might we claim Pollux?”

“How about tomorrow morning? His Grace said that he would bring Pollux in a carriage. I could bring Pollux to you, along with a few toys. It would give me time to write out detailed instructions as to his feeding and care. I will also focused make a list of commands he is familiar with and has mastered. I will use the same voice and hand gestures and hope you will keep to those. I could demonstrate them when we arrive tomorrow.”

“Oh, this sounds wonderful, Lady Finola. I cannot thank you enough for giving us the opportunity to raise Pollux.” She smiled, mischief in her eyes. “Perhaps we can add another dog to the household every time a child is born.”

Finola laughed. “We should see how you do with Pollux, Your

It might match. One Honeyfield spaniel might be enough for your family.”

They talked another half-hour about a variety of topics. She liked the other woman’s manner was.

“It feels as if we are old friends,” the duchess noted. “I cannot remember the last time I felt such a strong connection with another woman. You are that far from us, Lady Finola. I do hope we will see each other on a regular basis.”

Tears stung Finola’s eyes. “I would like that very much, Your Grace.”
The duchess grinned. “We are far from the social restraints of children. Why don’t you call me Nalyssa?”

“That is a beautiful name, Your Grace.”

“I hope it is one you will use often.”

“Then you must call me Finola.”

“I shall. Another very pretty name. Perhaps you can help me choose one. He is with a good name for our child. Do not tell Pierce—but I *do* believe in his daughter. I tease him all the time that it is a boy simply because he is a girl this first time.”

“I will work on male and female names, Nalyssa,” she promised. “I have already used to coming up with names for each litter. I try for a theme each time with Greek gods and goddesses.”

“What is next? Will you breed Zeus and Hera again soon?”

“I plan to do so and will start later this week. I am also keeping one from this litter. It will be two years before I can breed her, but she is a bit temperamental and highly intelligent, as well as the pup who has nurtured others from their beginning. I think Athena will make for a wonderful addition when her time comes.”

“Then I hope our second Honeyfield spaniel comes from Athena’s litter.”

By the time the duke returned, they were laughing and chatting like old friends.

“I promised I would have Lady Finola home by noon,” Stoneham said. “We should leave now if I am to keep to my word.”

Finola reached over and took Nalyssa’s hand. “It was a great pleasure to meet you.”

The duchess’ eyes misted. “I feel the same, Finola. I will see you tomorrow morning.”

“Ah, so we have a pup coming, do we?” the duke asked.

“We do,” his wife assured him. “His name is Pollux, and you walking him twice a day.”

“As long as I do not have to hunt with him. I enjoy getting are not walking for exercise. I look forward to having Pollux as my regular companion.”

He bent and gave his wife a lingering kiss and then looked to e.” “Ready to return to Belldale, my lady?”

London. “Yes, Your Grace.”

The duke accompanied her outside and said, “My driver will ta home now. When would you like for my carriage to call for you morning?”

“Eight o’clock will do, Your Grace. You will both need to come up yourselves available so I may demonstrate all of Pollux’s behavior I carry commands. It won’t take long for you to catch on to things. And e want himself will help you.”

He took Finola’s hand. “Thank you, my lady. I see my duchess ha . “I am to you. She could use a friend.”

, as this “As could I.” She hesitated a moment and then said, “We have agr to stand on formality and address one another by our Christian names I do not expect to call you anything but Your Grace, I would ask that y Athen name Finola.”

s even- The duke nodded. “I will do it on one condition, Finola.”

red the “What?”

mother “That you call me Pierce.”

“Oh, I could not—”

a’s first “You most certainly can. I get enough of Your Grac-ing as it is. Fr grow weary of it. If you are to be friends with my wife—and I belie ; as old will be good friends—then please do not stand on ceremony, Finola. you agree to my request?” He smiled charmingly. “After all, I am a m said. believe dukes are supposed to get what they want.”

Finola burst out in laughter. “Yes, I will stop Your Grac-ing you asure to stop my lady-ing me.”

His smile was genuine as he said, “My name is Pierce. Use it.”

u again The duke handed her up and closed the carriage door. “Until ton my lady.” He motioned to the driver and the vehicle began to roll.

Finola decided it would be fine now to bring Cy and Bertie with her tomorrow. It would be a good test of Bertie's growing skills. She would like the boy demonstrate the correct voice and hand commands for their walk out and And it would give her an excuse to spend more time in Cy's walking company.

Without him worried about her being a lady.

Finola.

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Finola decided it would be fine now to bring Cy and Bertie with her tomorrow. It would be a good test of Bertie's growing skills. She would have the boy demonstrate the correct voice and hand commands for Their Graces. And it would give her an excuse to spend more time in Cy Cressley's company.

Without him worried about her being a lady.



CHAPTER TWELVE

CY GAVE UP trying to work with the dogs and watched Bertie put through their paces. He was having trouble concentrating because he not stop thinking of Finola. He didn't like the fact that she had gone to the Duke of Stoneham. Yes, she earned her living training spaniels for such as Stoneham, but he was unhappy she'd had him stay behind. He couldn't help but feel protective of her.

That's when he knew that he loved her.

Obviously, he couldn't tell her he did so. He couldn't ask Finola to commit to him. Not in the current state he was in. Although his brother had loaned him the hunting lodge, for all intents and purposes Cy was homeless. He needed Parker to sell his commission and get the funds to him. He needed to take care of Finola and couldn't do so as a penniless, half-blind ex-officer. They had left things between them after they'd kissed, both agreed they needed to find himself.

He had done so. In a quiet way. Basking in the glow of happiness that Finola brought to him. Cy had thought he would need to regain his eyesight before approaching her again. Find a new occupation and purpose. Now he realized it didn't matter if he could only see her with one eye. Being with her and working with her Honeyfield springer spaniels brought him satisfaction more than even being an officer had.

Of course, even if Finola did agree to wed him, most likely she would wish to continue living at Belldale. He didn't know how he felt about being a kept man, while his wife was the homeowner and supported the two of them. He wanted to protect her not only physically—but financially. He had to know how much she earned from her dog training. Still, if he could contribute to the household expenses with his income—pay the servants, purchase necessities and other necessities—then he would not mind staying at the manor. Belldale was a small, beautiful property, and he would not want to lose Finola from her home of so many years.

The more he thought about it, the more Cy realized that he did not want to spend the rest of his life with Finola. But was that fair to her? He believed he could do much better than a broken-down man, injured physically and emotionally battered by his long years at war. Yet there was something between them. Not just the spark of physical attraction—but something that led him to believe they were soulmates. Cy determined to see the physician today when he took Bertie into Adderly to see if the physician might do something Dr. Sheffley had missed. If his eyesight could be restored, he might feel more like the confident man he had once been.

And more worthy of Finola.

He heard the carriage before he saw it, and his heart sped in anticipation of seeing Finola again. He watched the ducal coach drive up the manor house and stop. Cy began walking in that direction to meet her. She descended from the carriage with the footman's help, and Cy realized that Stoneham had not accompanied her back to Belldale. Relief washed through him. He didn't know why he had not wanted her in the company—and then realized he knew exactly why he did not.

Jealousy.

The feeling had been previously unknown to him. He chided himself silently, knowing the duke was wed and had no interest in seducing her. Feeling ridiculous, he tamped down the jealousy, hoping she would learn he had felt it.

Finola gave a wave to the driver, who shouted down, "I'll be back tomorrow at eight o'clock, my lady."

Hearing her addressed as my lady caused Cy to pause. Then he realized it was mere courtesy on the coachman's part, and he picked up his pace toward Finola.

Looking at Finola Honeyfield was like breathing in clear, crisp morning air. He found it hard to believe a creature such as this could be interested in him.

"How was your visit to Stonecrest?" he asked.

She smiled, and the warmth from her smile filled him to the brim with happiness.

"It is a grand house. An absolutely lovely estate. More important than the duke and duchess are very gracious people."

"So, you found Her Grace to your liking?"

want to Her cheeks flushed. “I most certainly did. In fact, I believe I’ve become friends. Good friends. She envied me wearing my shirt and breeches and wished she could wear them herself. The duchess isn’t anything like I thought a duchess would be.”

ing that “What did you think she would be like?” he asked.

doctor Finola shrugged. “I didn’t truly know. I have never met a duchess like her. She was a practical woman. Friendly. Amusing.” She paused, a slow smile spreading across her lovely face. “In fact, she actually earned her money before she met the duke.”

Inwardly, he gasped, thinking the duchess one of those rare, manipulative women—such as an actress—who sank her claws into a wealthy man and refused to let go. Concern filled him, and he did not want Finola on friendly terms with a woman such as this.

realized “She is like me,” Finola continued. “Whereas I train dogs, she washes men.”

duke’s Her remark puzzled him. “How so?”

“Nalyssa was touched by a bit of scandal.”

Finola briefly explained the duchess’ background and how she had built her reputation through no fault of her own, but through the scandal her husband had created with his suicide.

“Then she made a silk purse out of a sow’s ear and turned her unsuitable cousin, her father’s heir, into a dignified member of Polite Society. Thus, her career was born.”

“I am not certain I understand.”

She laughed. “It seems that sometimes the most inappropriate men are the ones who try to make a title for themselves. Her husband is the best example of that sort of man.”

Nalyssa took men who had inherited titles and knew nothing of the ways of the Polite Society and tutored them. Taught them, much as I train my puppies, how to be a certain place in a new world. She polishes them until they know the ways of the *ton* and can blend in effortlessly. This time, though, she fell in love with one of her clients.”

m with “Stoneham.”

“Yes, His Grace. Apparently, he was a most reluctant duke, and I had to do everything she could to cram lessons down his throat, with threats and cajoling him into behaving properly. She must be quite good at what she does, though, because Stoneham is a gentleman through and through and

ve will “You refer to the duchess as Nalyssa,” he said. “I am curious as
reeches you do so.”

ke what Her cheeks filled with color, making her look quite appealing to hi
And kissable.

Cy shoved that thought deep into the recesses of his mind, swear
before. to act on impulse again as he had before when he kissed her.

√ smile “It is most unusual, Cy, but we formed a lovely connection betw
: living Nalyssa does not stand on ceremony at all and begged me to call her
first name. I think both of us were searching for a friend, whether we
ulative or not.”

1 of the “So, you like her enough to hand over one of your spaniels to her?”

la to be “Yes, I have decided it will be Pollux. He is bright and inquisit
very affectionate. I do not know if his tender heart would allow him
trained true hunter. I do believe he will make an excellent guard dog and com
to the Stoneham children, though. I am to take Pollux to Stonecrest tom
morning when the carriage returns for me at eight o’clock. I kno
disrupts your tutoring schedule, but I would like for you and B
iad lost accompany me to Stonecrest. I want Bertie to be the one to put
r father through his paces and teach the duke and duchess the commands to u
their new dog. Would you be willing to move your schoolroom les
er most tomorrow afternoon so that the two of you might accompany me?”

Society. “I would be happy to oblige this change, Finola.”

“Good. Let me tell Bertie of the plans, and then I know you and I
to leave for Adderly.”

1 gain a They went to the boy, and Finola explained what she was asking o
tuation. the next day. Excitement lit his face.

√ays of “I know this is a lot of responsibility, but I believe you are ready f
is, to fit Bertie,” Finola told the lad.

ow the “I’d be happy to show Their Graces how to handle Pollux.” Then l
e fell in fell.

“What’s wrong?” Cy quickly asked, attuned to the boy’s moods.

Bertie sighed, and Finola put an arm about the boy. “This is the
Nalyssa part of what we do. Eventually, you have to let the pups go. Usually,
eedling when they are about a year old, and so I have more time with them
that she Pollux is not to be a trained hunting spaniel but a companion to a far
ow.” is certainly old enough to leave us.”

to why She ruffled the boy's hair. "The good thing is that we know Pollux is going to an excellent home. Also, we are not that far from Stonecreek. Perhaps one day we might be able to visit Pollux in his new home."

"I'd like that, Finola. How do you do this, though? Let them leave?"
"It is difficult, but I thoroughly investigate the owners my Horses and spaniels are to be sold to. Besides, it is the way I earn my keep. Between us, we have Belldale, along with a small inheritance, but I must continually pay for the upkeep on the house and property. I must also pay my servants and provide the food and the necessities we use. At least I am fortunate enough doing something I love."

"She smiled. "Besides, there is always the next litter to train. New puppies and name and get to know and work with. I find that highly rewarding. No one to be and Cy need to be on your way. I will take over from here."

Cy and Bertie walked the two miles to Adderly, Bertie clamoring for a new lesson in history as they went. Cy was reluctant to do so because he seemed to be enjoying their lessons on English history.

"Why don't we shift to modern times and talk a little of the current events of Bonaparte and the geography involved?"

"All right," said Bertie amiably, ready to learn no matter what the topic.
As they made their way toward Adderly, Cy talked a little of the French Revolution and the death of Louis XVI and his family. He spoke of Robespierre and the Reign of Terror and then how Bonaparte rose from the chaos, bringing order into the lives of Frenchmen. By the time they reached the village, Cy was to the point where the British had defeated Bertie involved in fighting the Little Corporal and told Bertie he would pick up the story on their way home to Melrose.

They went straightaway to Mr. Timmon's shop, where he introduced the boy to the tailor. Timmon had three tailcoats ready for Cy to try on his face with two shirts and two pairs of trousers. Only a few adjustments needed, and Mr. Timmon made notes in his ledger of them.

"I will finish the last bit of your wardrobe, my lord, and I also have the hardest something to show you."

The tailor excused himself and returned with a beautiful, gray greatcoat. "I did not ask for this to be commissioned, Mr. Timmon."

"No, you didn't, my lord, but you will need one all the same. Here it is, my lord, and let us see how it fits."

Cy slipped into it. The greatcoat fit him as a well-made glove did a
“No more being chilled, my lord,” Timmon said with a twinkle
eyes. “I should be through with the remainder of your things in two
time. Shall we say three to be on the safe side? You may come in
claim the rest of your things.”

“I brought Bertie along with me today because I wish for him,
have a few new things to wear.” He looked to the boy. “His sleeve
above his wrists, and his pants have grown too short in the time si
h to be left Spain. I have promised his parents that I would look after him
includes seeing him properly clothed.”

“Well, then, Bertie, we shall get you measured and see what his l
ow, you wishes for you to wear. Perhaps some type of uniform?”

“No, that is not necessary. Just a neutral shirt and breeches. A ves
ig for a dark tailcoat. Bertie is growing like a weed, so I only wish two outfi
: Finola made up for him. He can alternate between those.”

“Ver well, my lord.”

Once the tailor had taken Bertie’s measurements, he told Cy to
another week before they returned to the shop and that everything w
ready at that time. Cy thanked the tailor and then asked, “Who is th
French doctor these days?”

“That would be Dr. Addams,” Mr. Timmon replied. “He is youn
om the past thirty—and took over the previous physician’s practice recently.”

“If you would be so good as to give me directions to him, I told m
becomesurgeon that I would seek out a doctor when I returned to England.”

The tailor did as requested, and Cy and Bertie set off through the
again. Before they left, though, they called at Mrs. Carroll’s
ced the purchasing two cinnamon buns for them to eat later.

Bertie told Mrs. Carroll, “Your lemon cake was the best food I ha
is were eaten.”

“Well, let’s wait and see what you think of this cinnamon bun, la
so have will have to stop by and let me know what you thought of it.”

“We will!” cried Bertie enthusiastically, causing both adults to chu
tcoat. They left Adderly and went a quarter-mile, coming upon a tidy c

Cy rapped on the door and moments later, a servant answered.

“Here to see the doctor?” the woman asked.

“I am,” he told her.

hand. “Well, come on in, sir. You and the boy may wait here.” She indicated in his bench against the wall. “Dr. Addams is with a patient and will see you in a few days’ shortly.”

then to Ten minutes later, a door opened and a middle-aged man came in wearing a sling, his right arm cradled to his chest. A second man, younger, smiled and said to the first, “I will see you in a week. Remember to leave the arm in its sling, and do not take it off until I see you next. Even since we begin to feel better, it still needs more rest.”

n. That “All right, Doctor. Thank you.”

The man left and Dr. Addams came toward Cy and Bertie. The lordship rose.

Cy said, “Good afternoon, Dr. Addams.”

st and a “You must be Lord Cyrus Cressley.” The physician smiled at them. “The villagers are all abuzz about your return to England and Melrose. I am glad you stopped by for us to visit a bit.”

“It is more than a get-acquainted visit, Doctor. I promised the surgeon who operated on me in Spain that I would find someone to take care of me upon my return home.”

Cy turned to Bertie. “Wait here. I will return shortly.”

“Come with me, my lord,” the doctor said, ushering Cy into the examination room. It had a high table and two chairs. Adams indicated to take one of them.

“Tell me about your war injury, my lord, and what wounds you needed to be operated upon.”

Cy ran through his medical history from the time the bullet struck his eye, Dr. Addams occasionally asking a question. He even mentioned the herbs he did three times a day and the herbs he used, mentioning how it gave him much needed relief.

After Cy finished, he was asked to sit upon the table, and the physician removed the eye patch.

“Hmm.”

“Is that a good or bad remark?” he asked lightly.

“The eye is looking quite good,” Dr. Addams declared. “Surprising. And you say you cannot see a thing out of it?”

Depression blanketed him. “No. I cannot. But I do believe my vision is improving in my left eye. I can see things clearly now at a greater distance.”

icated than previously.”

See you “The eyewashes may have helped. Also, you might have less pressure on your optic nerve than previously. From when you say the wound occurred, the swelling has gone down on your brow and should be doing the same, much internally.”

Remember, Dr. Addams stepped back. “I wish to bring something up to you, even if I have heard of this condition and actually saw it in a Mr. Colgate, who was about five miles outside Adderly on a dairy farm with his daughter and her in-law. Mr. Colgate was wounded and also struck with blindness. They both discharged and returned to England several months ago.”

The doctor paused. “He survived his wounds—and he is no longer blind.”
“Was it a case of pressure on his optic nerve, as Dr. Sheffley said?”
“The Dr. Addams shook his head. “No, not at all. Mr. Colgate was shot in the right shoulder and stabbed with a bayonet in his calf. Neither wound was threatening.”

In the army Puzzled, Cy asked, “Then why was he struck blind?”

to work “That was the riddle. Naturally, the army released him, and he returned home to Adderly. I saw him upon his return. His blindness continued for some time, then suddenly vanished. He literally woke up one morning and could see again.”

For Cy “I am hoping for something similar to happen,” he admitted.

The physician looked uneasy. “I am going to say something that might offend you, my lord. Yes, you might have had swelling which pressed on your optic nerve. But after six weeks, that swelling should have been gone. You should be seeing now without any problems.”

eyewash “Then why I am not?” Cy asked, a trace of bitterness in his voice.

ive him “It is what I and another doctor friend of mine are calling *hybrid blindness*.”

ysician “What? I have never heard of such a thing. Frankly, it sounds like a hysteria delicate women suffer from. I am highly insulted.” He rose from the table, ready to leave.

“Sit, my lord,” Dr. Addams barked. “You will sit—and listen carefully. Because this is your life we are talking about. The quality of your life is at stake. I am assuming you wish to live one to the fullest.”

ision is Thoughts of Finola filled him. Cy sat.

stance “Thank you, my lord. Now, back to my friend. We have seen this in

men. Men who have returned from the war. Men *not* injured anywhere on their eyes.”

“But I was,” he insisted. “I told you the bullet entered just above the same eyebrow. You can still see the small scar I bear.”

“You were—but I still believe you show similar characteristics to other cases I have referred to. Dr. Mills and I have come to believe that severe emotional trauma can cause blood pressure to surge, making fluid seep into the capillaries, which are behind your retina. Even after the fluid is leaking or the swelling recedes, the emotional stress is manifested physically.”

“You are saying I suffered emotional trauma because of me?” emotional stress is causing a physical problem.”

The physician smiled. “Yes, you have grasped the situation quickly. The brain is a marvelous, mysterious thing. We learn new things about it every year in medicine. Dr. Mills and I believe the strain you have been through—that trauma from both fighting in the war and being shot in the head—has caused a type of stress-induced blindness. Your brain is dealing with the trauma by converting it into something physical. Either that or fluid has built up around the membranes in your skull, increasing pressure against the nerve endings or in the optical canal. That, too, could contribute to the blindness.”

He sat a moment, taking in what Dr. Addams had told him.

“You believe I truly can see? Or will be able to see one day soon?”

“I do, my lord. Once you truly feel safe—comfortable being in England—I have every belief that the blindness will subside. It did for Colgate.”

Shaking his head, Cy said, “But I was an officer. I went into battle countless number of times, leading my men. I wasn’t even shot during the fighting, but during drills being conducted.”

“It doesn’t matter, Lord Cyrus. You have suffered a great trauma. You are among a handful of men who have been shot in the head and survived to me. Your body needs time to heal, as does the emotional and mental part of you, post-you.”

He nodded to himself. “You actually think this will end?”

“Yes, I do. When you know you are secure in this life, I have faith that your vision will be restored. In the meantime, continue the eyewashes

are near day. Relax. Take time to walk. To think. Savor the air you breathe and
bite you take. Do what makes you happy. Pass your time in ways
any right please you. When you are truly content, I think your body will relax,
your brain.”

to these Cy grinned. He could think of something that pleased him greatly.
and that a *Kissing Finola . . .*

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day. Relax. Take time to walk. To think. Savor the air you breathe and each bite you take. Do what makes you happy. Pass your time in ways which please you. When you are truly content, I think your body will relax, as will your brain.”

Cy grinned. He could think of something that pleased him greatly.

Kissing Finola . . .



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FINOLA ROSE, HER heart heavy. Today would be the day she would have to say goodbye to Pollux go. All her pups were special to her, but none more so than the one born in the litter produced by Hera and Zeus. These were true Honeyfield spaniels in every sense of the word, and she would miss Pollux and his sweet, gentle nature. Still, she knew he was going to a loving home, one which would be filled with children.

The thought of children brought a smile to her face. She had a lot of love in her heart for her dogs and knew it would increase a hundredfold when she gave birth to a child of her own. She only prayed that Cy would be the man to father them. She had enjoyed working with him since his arrival at Melrose, as well as Bertie. It was the boy as much as the man who had made her admit what was in her heart—that she loved Cy and wanted to spend the rest of her lifetime with him. Bearing his children. Living and loving together.

She made her way down to breakfast and ate quickly so as to have time to spend with Pollux before Pierce's carriage arrived. She went to the barn and took the pups out in pairs in order to allow them to piddle and then she placed them inside the dog run to play. Pollux and Castor came last and when they had relieved themselves, she placed Castor with his littermates and left Pollux out. Finola sat on the ground, and Pollux climbed into her lap. She stroked him, telling him that he was going to a fine home, a place where he would be able to visit her.

As she petted him, she said, "You are going to be so happy, Nalyssa and Pierce will take such good care of you. They are loving and you will become as a family member to them. I will even come to visit you on occasion."

She caught sight of Bertie running in the distance and a chill ran through her.

Something was wrong with Cy.

Quickly, Finola rose and placed Pollux in the dog run. He took off

to rejoin his littermates as she closed the gate and hurried to meet Bertie. By the time she reached him, the boy was out of breath. He stopped, placing his hands on his knees and bending over as he panted, trying to catch his breath. She tried to remain calm, not knowing what the situation was.

“Deep breaths, Bertie,” she encouraged.

He pushed himself upright and said, “We cannot go with you to deliver Pollux to the duke and duchess. He’s in a bad way, Finola.”

“What does that mean, Bertie? Are Cy’s eyes troubling him?”

“No, it’s one of those headaches. He hasn’t had one since we arrived in Melrose. They’re awful, Finola. He just lies in the bed and moans, holding his head. He sent me to you to tell you he couldn’t go today.”

Tears formed in the boy’s eyes, and she enveloped him in her arms. Bertie started to cry, and Finola felt herself tearing up.

“He says I’m supposed to go with you today. That he wants me to go.”

Bertie raised his head and met her gaze. “But I can’t leave him, Finola. I just can’t. I know you were counting on me to show Their Graces where to go and how to handle Pollux. My father sent me to take care of—”

The boy’s voice broke, and he began sobbing. She held him to her, stroking his hair.

“It is all right, Bertie. You don’t have to leave Cy today. In fact, you won’t be going anywhere until both of you can come for his sendoff. I’ll come with you now to help.”

Just then, Finola heard the rumble of a carriage and told the boy, “Go tell the coachman we will need to arrange for Pollux to be delivered another day.”

She released Bertie and went to meet the carriage. As she reached the door, it swung open and Pierce emerged, surprising her.

“Good morning, Finola. I thought I would . . .” His voice trailed off.

“What is wrong?”

“It is Cy,” she said.

“Cressley? What happened?”

“I wanted Cy and Bertie to accompany me to Stonecrest today. I thought it would be good for Bertie to be the one to teach you and Nalyssa the correct voice and hand commands to use with Pollux. Bertie just arrived and told me that Cy is experiencing a debilitating headache. They have plagued him since he was shot in the head.”

rtie. By “In the head? Good God!” Pierce exclaimed. “No, Pollux must be
ing his another day. Shall I go for a doctor?”

breath. “That would be so helpful, Pierce.” She gave him directions to where
Addams lived and then added, “I am going to go and collect some herbs
which may benefit Cy. I will meet you at the hunting lodge. Why do you
oday totake Bertie with you? He can help facilitate things for you.”

“I will do so and see you there,” Pierce told her.

Finola waved Bertie over and said, “I am going to collect the herbs
I’ve gathered that may help Cy’s headache. I want you to go with His Grace and
be holding Addams to the hunting lodge. Can you do this for me, Bertie?”

The boy nodded, his eyes still filled with tears.

her arms. “Very well. I will see you soon. Be a good boy.”

She hurried away and entered the house, going to her stillroom,
” the kitchens. Quickly, Finola gathered the herbs she thought would be
helpful. In treating Cy’s headache, along with the herb mixture she had
gathered, she had prepared for him. He had told her how much relief the eyewash had
given to his eyes and how much better he could see from his left one since
he had again, been using it. She had already intended to send these herbs home with
him today.

Pollux Placing the herbs she had wrapped in handkerchiefs inside a
satchel, Finola left the house and made her way across Belldale and
to the copse to where the hunting lodge stood. She did not bother to knock
before she entered the abode. She found a bucket and took it to the well, drawing
water and returning to set it to boil in order to steep the herbs she would give
him.

Moving up the staircase, she heard his moans before she saw him. Turning
to the left, she entered a bedchamber and saw Cy lying in the bed. He was
propped up to the waist—and took her breath away with his sleek muscled physique
and the way he looked off. She went to his bedside. The heels of his hands pressed against
his temples as he grimaced in pain.

“I am here, Cy,” she said softly, doing her best to concentrate on his face
and not his body.

He opened his eyes, and she noted he was not wearing his usual
eyepatch. He was a handsome man in it, but without the patch obstructing
his face, she could see just how handsome he truly was. She cupped
his cheeks and pressed a kiss upon his brow.

“Why are you here?” he asked. “You need to be on your feet.”

It come Stonecrest now.”

“And leave you here when you are aching so badly? Never,” she
here Dr. him.

He herbs “No, Finola, I want you and Bertie . . . to go.” He winced.

“And I am my own person and have decided to stay with you.
already sent His Grace and Bertie for the doctor. They should arrive sh

He gave her a crooked smile, which touched her heart. She relea
s which face and took his hands in hers.

Dr. “When did the headache start?”

“A few hours ago. I have experienced blinding headaches since
shot. They usually come out of nowhere. The pain is fierce and unrele

“Dr. Addams may be able to give you something for it. I ha
just offbrought some herbs for you to ingest.”

helpful “I hate to be such trouble to you,” he said.

already “You are no bother at all, Cy.”

brought They sat in silence until she heard the door opening and
he haddownstairs.

ith him “Dr. Addams is here,” she told him. “Let me go down and spea
him. The water I put on to boil may also be ready, as well.”

a small Finola bent and pressed a soft kiss against his sensual lips, bri
through weak smile to them.

ck, and She left the room and went down the staircase, finding the duke, th
g water doctor, and Bertie.

to Cy. “I have been sitting with him, Dr. Addams,” she began. “I ha
ning to brought some herbs to use.”

as bare Briefly, Finola told the physician what she was going to do, and
ie. he would visit with his patient and return shortly.

inst his Once he left, Pierce asked, “How is Cressley?”

“I won’t lie to you. He is in a bad way.” She turned to Bertie. “Ho
his pain do these headaches last?”

“Usually, a few hours. But none of them seemed as bad as th
ual eye today.”

part of “You did the right thing in coming to me, Bertie.” She looked bac
ped his duke. “I am very sorry I cannot bring Pollux to you today. I take prid

training my pups undergo. It would not be right to give him to you
way to you being instructed in how to handle him properly. Please excuse

Nalyssa. Hopefully, we can have Pollux with you soon.”

assured “The pup is the least of my concerns,” Pierce said. “I simply
Cressley will be on the mend soon.”

“I hope so, too,” Finola said.

I have “Even if the headache leaves him today, he will be weak. Let us go
shortly.” tomorrow to recover, and then I will return the day after to see if he is
used his accompany you to Stonecrest. Is there anything else I might do for
Finola?”

“No, you have done enough. Thank you for fetching Dr. Addams.”

“I was Pierce nodded, “Then I will leave things to you.”

“Nothing.” She went to her satchel and removed the herbs. Bertie showed
me also container which held the mixture for Cy’s eyewashes, and she added
herbs to what little remained. Then she divided the water she had boiled
different bowls, one for the eyewash and two others for his headache
could bring relief to his eyes, that might help calm the pain in his head

voices Just as she had finished, Dr. Addams appeared.

“He is in severe pain at the moment but said it is now subsiding.
ask with laudanum for him to take but did not give it to him because I know
effective herbs can be. What are you using?”

“Nothing a “I have brought yarrow, which I am steeping by itself. The other is
of lavender and chamomile. They blend together well and have used them
to relieve local sooth the headaches I have experienced myself.”

“Then let him sip on what you have made. I agree that the eyewash
will also benefit him. Once he has ingested the herbs, however, give him some
laudanum. Sleep is restorative, and it will help him to gain his strength
he said again.”

“Thank you for coming, Dr. Addams,” she said, noting Bertie had
gone up the stairs to be with Cy.

“How long “I was happy to do so, my lady. I had just seen him yesterday, and
discussed his eyesight and these headaches. He shared that he had lost
his vision since his arrival at Melrose.”

“Do you think they will end? Or that he will regain his sight in his
eyes?”

“I think it is a good possibility, but only time will tell. Time is the
without gift he can give himself now.” The doctor smiled. “That—and patience
will come to call tomorrow morning and see how he is.”

The physician left the hunting lodge, leaving the laudanum behind by hopping telling Finola how much to give Cy. She waited for the herbs to steeping and then took everything upstairs on a tray she found, placed a wet cloth over his eyes, and having him sip the yarrow first and then the lavender and chamomile combination.

able to “Dr. Addams also left some laudanum for you to take now,” she informed him. “It will help you sleep.”

He reached for her hand and squeezed it. “The headache is subsiding. Just give me a touch of the laudanum. I have used it before and it makes my thinking fuzzy for a good day after.” He paused. “Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?”

led her “I will stay with you for as long as you wish, Cy.”

led into She stood and signaled for Bertie to follow her. They returned down the stairs. If she had she began mixing a small portion of the laudanum with some boiled water.

As she did, she said, “Bertie, I know you wish to stay with Cy, but I will use your help with the pups today. Would you return to Belldale and show how with them? Exercise and train them? I will have Cy drink the laudanum and he should fall asleep shortly after he does so. I can stay with him.”

s a mix Bertie nodded thoughtfully. “He likes you. He would want you to stay with them to him. I will go to the pups and take care of them all day.”

“You have been a huge help to me in training them, Bertie. When the time comes and Cy no longer needs your help, I hope you might consider coming back to work for me.”

strength He brightened. “Really? Do you mean it? It’s what I want to do, Finola. I have since the first day when I met Pollux and Athena.”

slipped “Then count on it. However long it takes, you have a place with me until you finish fulfilling your commitment to Cy.”

we had The child threw his arms about her. “Thank you, Finola.”

not had The gesture touched her. She knew Bertie would make for an excellent dog trainer someday. Already, he had learned so much. Coupled with his right natural instincts, she believed he would go far in this business.

She saw him out the door and then brought the laudanum up to help Cy to sit up and drink it.

2. I will “You will feel sleepy soon,” she told him. “Bertie has gone to care for the pups, while I stay here with you.”

ind and He cupped her cheek. “Will you lie on the bed with me?” He as
o finishknow it is unorthodox, but having you near brings me comfort.”

ing the “Of course.”

hen the She lowered Cy again and placed the dampened cloth against h
before she brought the bedclothes over him, admiring his magni
formedmusclcd chest before she covered him.

Finola climbed upon the bed. Cy slipped an arm about her and she
finallyresting her cheek against his shoulder, his warmth enveloping her, b
, and itcomfort to her when she wished to comfort him. She placed one hand
ou staychest, against his beating heart.

They lay there for some minutes until his breathing slowed and
asleep. Still, Finola stayed next to him. She told herself she was afraid
nstairs, stirred it might wake him. In truth, she cherished being near him a
of theasleep herself.

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He cupped her cheek. "Will you lie on the bed with me?" He asked. "I know it is unorthodox, but having you near brings me comfort."

"Of course."

She lowered Cy again and placed the dampened cloth against his eyes before she brought the bedclothes over him, admiring his magnificently muscled chest before she covered him.

Finola climbed upon the bed. Cy slipped an arm about her and she turned, resting her cheek against his shoulder, his warmth enveloping her, bringing comfort to her when she wished to comfort him. She placed one hand on his chest, against his beating heart.

They lay there for some minutes until his breathing slowed and he fell asleep. Still, Finola stayed next to him. She told herself she was afraid if she stirred it might wake him. In truth, she cherished being near him and fell asleep herself.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CY AWOKE AND was aware of two things. The headache had gone. A warm woman lay next to him.

Finola . . .

He lay still, the subtle smell of lavender in the air. Lavender always remind him of Finola.

The woman he loved.

Cy needed to tell her this. He needed to see if she felt a tenth of what he did. He lifted the cloth that still rested against his eyes and placed it on a table beside the bed. His hand touched Finola's hair, stroking her head as he stirred against him, igniting the desire within him.

Then she was awake. He sensed it in her breathing. And the way his body changed and became aware of him.

"Finola?" he whispered.

"I am here, Cy."

He continued stroking her hair, and then his hand moved to her head, cupping it, his thumb caressing it. The bedclothes slipped downward, and his hand touched his bare chest. It felt like fire, branding him.

"I want you to be mine," he told her. "I am already yours. In body and soul."

She stilled, not saying a word for a long time. He didn't know if she had made a mistake telling her how he felt.

Then she said, "I have always been yours, Cy. I always will be yours."

He turned her in his arms and gave her a slow, lingering kiss. He took his time, brushing his lips against hers, every fiber in his body screaming for her name. Still, he didn't know how far he should take the kiss.

It was Finola who changed things. Finola whose tongue ran against his bottom lip. Back and forth until he opened to her. Tentatively, she pushed her tongue inside his mouth and slowly explored each crevice. His arms tightened about her. His hand began stroking her long, slender

They kissed leisurely for a long time, and then he deepened the kiss, his fingers now stroked his bare chest, the heat overwhelming him.

Breaking the kiss, Cy said, "May I touch you? Intimately?" he added.

Her eyes widened at his request and then a slow smile curved her beautiful mouth. "Yes. If I may return the favor, as well."

A rush of heat rippled through him at her words, and his mouth came down on hers, hard and demanding. His hand moved to her breast, kissing it. She let out a small sigh, and he began teasing her nipple.

Finola gasped, and Cy knew he needed his mouth on her breast. He pulled the kiss and sat up, pulling her with him. She still wore the bulky tailcoat, but he eased it from her shoulders. It was not fitted as tightly as a gentleman's and came off easily. She helped him, and he tossed it to the floor. She pulled the man's shirt beneath it, tucked into her breeches, and Cy pulled at the ruffles until he freed the shirt. Unbuttoning and then lifting it over her head, he tossed it to the floor. She was now bare from the waist up, and her breasts were a thing of beauty.

Cy eased her back onto the mattress, following her, his mouth feasting on one breast, sucking hard. A low moan escaped from her, and he could only help but grin. He savaged the nipple with teeth and tongue, Finola squirmed beneath him, making the most delicious sounds. When he finally lifted his head, their gazes met, and he saw her flushed with desire.

"I cannot neglect your other breast," he said, and soon he feasted on the second. He had the first.

His lips finally left her breasts, returning to her mouth. As they kissed, his hands glided across her skin of silk. But Finola was also learning, and her hands brushed against his chest, enflaming Cy. Then she pushed against him and they switched places, her now hovering over him with a wicked grin. Finola bent and flicked her tongue across his nipple. He gasped.

She lifted her head and smiled. "What is good for the goose is even better for the gander," she told him, mischief flashing in her hazel eyes. He returned to the nipple, teasing it with tongue and teeth, causing him to rock-hard.

Finally, she paused and he pushed her down until she lay spread against him, his hands roaming her back.

"I want more of you," he said huskily. "You do not have to give it all up just yet, but I want you to know how much I need you. Desire you."

iss. Her Raising her head, she said, "I need you, too. Not just here and no
always. I have kept my feelings to myself, wanting you to have the ti
ed. needed to come to understand your place in the world. But I can no
ved herkeep silent, Cy."

He placed two fingers against her swollen lips. "Please, let me be t
h came to say the words aloud, Finola. I love you. I don't know how I hav
reading these nine and twenty years without you. But I want to share a lifetim
beyond—with you."

e broke Her hand took his, moving his fingers from her mouth. "I love
at, and well, Cy. I have never felt such happiness as I have being in your comp
eman's A wave of tenderness filled him, and he softly brushed his lips
wore ahers. The kiss was one full of unspoken promises to her. He knew
material meant to spend the rest of time with this kind, generous woman.

ie again Her hands began moving urgently over him, taking him in. He br
breastskiss and moved his lips to her throat, nipping at it feverishly.

"I want you, Cy," Finola called out, desperation in her voice. "I
stening couple with you."

ouldn't He paused, lifting his head until their gazes met. "We are not yet w
airming "We are in my heart," she replied. "I will marry you whenever yo
fted his—but for now? I pledge my body, my heart, and my soul to you."

Cy kissed her again, boldly now, knowing he belonged as much
on it as woman as she did to him. He tossed aside the bedclothes and kissed l
down her throat, along the valley between her breasts, and down to he
sed, hisAs he kissed her, he unbuttoned the breeches she wore.

and her He raised his head and said, "I will stop if you ask me to. I can wai
ist him, wish us to do so. I know how you have not done this before, Finola."

l smile, Her eyes held nothing but trust. "I love you, Cy. I want to be with
every way possible."

n better He pushed himself up and climbed from the bed, hearing he
es. She realizing he wore nothing, and it was the first time she had seen a nake
o grow Standing before her, he asked, "Are you pleased with what you see

The wonder on her face told him she was. Then mischief lit her ey
orawledshe smiled at him. "I am very ready to explore you."

He grabbed her ankles and quickly turned her in the bed, hear
it to mel laugh with abandon. He removed the boots she wore and then tug
breeches over her hips and down her legs. She was half-on and half-

w—butbed, her legs dangling, the most tempting morsel he had ever seen. Cy
me youtaking her thighs in his hands and kneading them, their gazes locke
longerone another. He saw the trust and love in her eyes, and it almost undid

Still looking at one another, he allowed his hand to slide up her t
he firstwhere her legs joined. He stroked along the seam of her sex and he
re livedbreath hitch. Still connected, his fingers stroked and explored her. W
e—andpushed a finger into her, Finola’s eyes grew large, her mouth trembl

caressed her lovingly, bringing her to the edge, and then she tumbled
you, asher hips bucking as she cried out his name, the orgasm tearing throu
pany.” When she stilled, she grinned at him, her satisfaction obvious.

against “I enjoyed watching you come,” he said roughly, his hands gripp
he wasthighs again. “Let us try this and see what you think.”

Confusion filled that lovely face of hers, and he hated that he wo
oke thebe able to watch her this time. His head bent, his mouth finding her cc
wriggled beneath him, protesting as he licked her. Then the protests d
want todelicious sighs replaced them.

Cy worked Finola into a frenzy, his tongue invading her, explori
red.” possessing her until she orgasmed once again. When she lay limp a
ou wishhim she could not move, he grinned wickedly at her.

“You do not have to move a single muscle. Let me take care of you
to this He lifted her, placing her head back on the pillow, and then climb
his wayher, his body covering hers. He was already thoroughly aroused from
r belly.watched her come and placed his cock against her. He had never
woman’s virginity but knew he should not prolong it and quickly push
it if youher.

She mewled a protest but by then, he was deeply seated inside
you inforced himself not to move and said, “Become accustomed to me first.

Finola nodded and said, “The pain is no more. It was fleeting.”

r gasp, “Now, it will only be pleasure for you.”

nd man. “I trust you, Cy. I know we belong together.”

?” Slowly, he withdrew from her and then pushed into her once mo
res, andtime, her gasp was one of pleasure instead of pain.

“Ooh, that feels marvelous.”

ing her “We can do better than marvelous, my love. I plan to take you str
ged herthe heavens.”

-off the “Is that a promise?” she asked, her tone teasing.

He laughed, threading his fingers through hers and bringing them down upon where they rested on each side of her head. Cy began moving against him. Finola caught on to his rhythm and their dance of love. He had never known such high physical sensations he did now and knew it was because of his extraordinary connection to this woman.

“I love you, Finola. Now and forevermore.”

Cy covered her mouth with his and pumped away, love pouring through him into her. They climaxed together, and he fell atop her, driving her into the mattress. He kissed her again and again, until they were both breathing and then he rolled to his side, bringing her with him, their bodies still joining her. “That was . . . indescribable,” Finola said, wonder in her voice.

“There is more,” he promised. “Much more. We will have a life together and explore one another and decide what pleases each other. My commitment to you is unbreakable. I may not bring a wealth of worldly goods into our marriage, but know that my love is the biggest gift I can offer you.”

He kissed her tenderly.

“Will you allow us to live at Belldale?” she asked quietly.

“It has been your home for many years, and I would not take you or your dogs. My commission will bring in some income for us to live on. You will need to continue training and selling your Honeyfield spaniels.”

“We,” she emphasized. “We will train them together. Perhaps we will have to rename them Cressley spaniels.”

The thought left a sour taste within him. Cy wanted no association with his brother or father touching their union.

“No, they are to remain Honeyfield spaniels. That is what they are. It will be your lasting legacy—that I am more than happy to contribute. I will help you in this work.”

She touched his cheek, stroking her fingers against it. “Bertie is happy about this turn of events.”

Cy chuckled. “He will, indeed. And speaking of Bertie, where is he? This I know he cannot be here.”

“I sent him to Belldale to work with the dogs today so I could stay with you.”

He kissed her softly. “Maybe he should stay there so I can keep him here.”

She laughed, the sweetest sound in his world. “I look forward to a

hem to being at Belldale together. But we should dress. Or at least I should
in, and should remain in bed. I cannot believe I haven't asked you how
felt the headache is."

otional "It is totally gone."

"I had no idea how debilitating it could be. I was very worried
you."

through "Dr. Sheffley said the headaches, like my eyesight, are results
er into bullet entering my head and the swelling and stress that resulted from
athless, hope if my sight returns that the headaches might end."

oined. Finola had risen from the bed and was redressing. Cy definitely
watching this process.

time to "Dr. Addams will return tomorrow morning to check on you."

ment to "What of Stoneham? And Pollux? When do you plan on deliver
nto our pup to him?"

"He knows I wanted you and Bertie to accompany me. He said he
send his carriage again the day after tomorrow, hoping you would be
recovered by then."

from it She bent and pressed a kiss on his brow. "I will go home now and
on, but Cy snagged her by the waist and yanked her down, kissing her aga
s." they were both breathless.

should He released her. "I would make love to you again, but you will be
it is, come tomorrow." Taking her hand, he brought it to his lips for a
on with kiss. "When will you wed me?"

"I suppose in three weeks. It will take that long to call the banns."

known "There are other ways to speed things up," he told her.

in to "You mean for us to go all the way to Gretna Green?"

He chuckled. "No, Scotland is much too far away. I knew of an
will be who obtained a bishop's license before he left for the war. It doesn't
quite the freedom a special license does, but that cost is a little too
s he? It is this retired soldier's blood. With a bishop's license, we can avoid call
banns. We could then wed in the local parish church during morning
ay with between eight and noon."

Cy kissed the tip of her nose. "Would you like me to pursue
ep you those?"

"I will share the costs with you," she said. "After all, we are both
ill of us married."

d. You Since he had no idea how much a bishop's license cost, he almost
w yourto her proposal. Still, his masculine pride would not allow him to do so

“No, I should be the one who provides the license. I will ride
Chichester tomorrow and meet with the bishop. That is, if you will let
me about the use of your horse.”

“Will you feel well enough to do so?”

of the He laughed and kissed her soundly. “I feel on top of the world, my
n that. I am to be married to the woman I love. One who loves me in return,
my being blind in one eye and homeless.”

enjoyed “I don't care about those things.” She paused. “Will you seek permission
from His Grace to wed?”

He frowned. “I *am* going to see His Grace, the Bishop of Chichester
regarding the Finola.”

“No, I meant your relative, the Duke of Margate.”

he would “No. I am a grown man,” he said harshly. “I have no need
for permission.” Seeing the surprised look on her face, he softened his tone.
They are related but have never been close. I will let him know when I visit
—” the hunting lodge but beyond that, I owe him nothing.”

in until What he did owe Finola, though, was the truth. It was time she
knew exactly who he was.

sore as “I need to—”

is tender But he heard the door open downstairs and knew Bertie had arrived.
“Get back under those bedclothes,” she said, hurrying to the other
end of the bed and sitting in the chair there.

Cy pulled the bedclothes to his neck. Moments later, Bertie entered
the room. “Hello, Bertie,” Finola called brightly. “Cy is awake now and no
officer has his headache. I was just going down to put on some water to boil
for you. I'll give you next eyewash, and then I will leave.”

rich for “I can do that, Finola,” the boy said, always eager to please.

ling the “All right,” she agreed. “We are to go to Stonecrest the day
after tomorrow and take Pollux to the Duke and Duchess of Stoneham.”

“I have business to conduct tomorrow,” Cy added, “so you are
not to have lessons again and work with Finola.”

“Shouldn't I come with you?” Bertie asked.

getting “I will be fine. Finola is lending me the use of her horse again.
Cy glanced to her, and she nodded. “We will have to make up the lessons

agreed are missing. Is that understood?"

The lad nodded and then said, "On the way to Stonecrest, you can get into some more of the history of England."

"I will do so with pleasure," Cy told them.

"I am glad you are feeling much better," Finola said, rising from her chair. "Bertie, I will expect you tomorrow morning. In fact, come and have your breakfast with me, and then we will begin our work for the day, despite the dogs."

She turned to Cy. "I will see you the day after tomorrow, Cy. Be ready for our trip to Stonecrest."

"I look forward to it, Finola."

Cy watched his new fiancée leave. He would have to speak with her privately after he returned from Chichester and let her know exactly what he was marrying. He didn't think it would make a difference now because of his loved one another.

Still, the sooner she knew he was the second son of the deceased Ithamar of Margate, the better.

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“I look forward to it, Finola.”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FINOLA WAS ALREADY waiting outside when Cy and Bertie appeared. She brought out all the dogs, and they were now in the dog run, including Pollux. She left the pup to play with his littermates until the last minute. Still, she seemed to understand something had changed and followed Pollux nuzzling against him and then pawing him playfully.

She greeted the pair as she saw Pierce's carriage arriving.

"If you will get Pollux from the pen, Bertie, I will collect his things," Bertie raced off and Cy said, "What do you have for the pup?"

"Just a few toys for him to play with and some treats. A small blanket I let him and Athena sleep upon last night, which can be placed next to him as he sleeps in his new space. Athena's scent will remain on it for a while. That should be a comfort to him."

"Pollux will miss you," Cy said.

She chuckled. "I believe he may miss Bertie more."

Cy looked to the boy coming toward them, Pollux heeling nicely next to him. "Bertie will certainly miss Pollux."

She lifted the satchel, and Cy took it from her. The trio made their way toward the carriage and the coachman called out a greeting as they stepped down the stairs and opened the vehicle's door. They climbed inside, sitting next to her and Bertie across from them. The boy held the pup close to him, his eyes bright with tears.

As they started up, she said, "Remember, you still have seven other pups to work with. And Athena will definitely be staying with us. I also hope Zeus and Hera try for a second litter soon. That will give you something to look forward to."

"What will you name them?" Bertie asked. "Like all these have the names of gods and goddesses."

"I have already been thinking on that," she said. "I may aim for a few Viking gods. How would you like to work with Thor, Freya, Loki, or

Or we could think about English kings and queens since Cy is teaching two of us about England's history. Edward. Henry. Mathilda. Eli. Eleanor."

"Harold," Bertie added. "Mary and Lady Jane. I like both ideas, I think. He thought a moment. "Could we keep with the Viking names this time? They like the sound of them."

"Then we shall save English monarchs for another litter. The next litter will be Norse gods and goddesses," she said. "We will make a list, separating the names into male and female. Once the litter is born, I will let you choose the name of each pup."

"You will?" Bertie asked, surprise on his face.

"I think it would be a good reward for all the hard work you have done with this litter. I also think by the next time Hera's pups are born, you will have come to work for me."

They had not spoken about when to tell Bertie their good news. Finola would keep silent until at least the bishop's license had been purchased.

The child quickly turned to Cy. "Would that be all right with you, Cy?"
Cy chuckled. "As long as you let me come and help. Hopefully, she will continue to allow us to use her schoolroom and supplies in the morning and then we can help train the pups in the afternoons."

"There will be a bit of a break when they first arrive," she said. "They are incredibly small. Their eyes won't even be opened. They will do little more than eat and sleep. I do like to be around them at that age, though. I think talking to them up and holding them, talking to them, helps you to create a bond with them. That bond comes into play later during their training."

"So, a little more schooling while the pups are young then," Cy said.
"And a little less once they are older and ready to be trained."

They reached Stonecrest, and she watched as Bertie brushed her hair against Pollux's head. She understood exactly how he felt. Other than her dogs had been more companions to her than people. She loved them and they lived for them.

But now she had Cy. Her love for him was boundless. She was curious to ask how his trip to Chichester had gone, hoping he had been able to get the bishop's license. They also needed to talk about when they would get married. Finola assumed there would be a time limit on the marriage license.

ing the after the banns were called, couples had a timeframe in which they must marry, else the banns had to be called again. She wondered what the parameters were of the bishop's license he had acquired.

Finola." The door opened, and Cy bounded out, handing her down at the same time? Iswinging Bertie and Pollux to the ground. She turned and saw both the duke and Pierce standing there to greet them and was touched by the effort they shall be made.

ing the "Good morning," Nalyssa called, coming and embracing Finola. She rose then looked to the man and boy. "My husband tells me you were unwelcome at Cressley. I am sorry to hear that."

He bowed. "I am much improved, Your Grace." He indicated Bertie and Cy put in also bowed, causing both Finola and the duchess to smile. "This is my dog, you will Briggs, who has been helping me ever since I returned from the Peninsula."

"Bertie also has begun working with my Honeyfield spaniels," the duke now added. "He has promised to come and work with me once Mr. Cressley has been more settled. In fact, it will be Bertie today who will take Pollux through the commands and teach them to you."

sir?" Nalyssa moved to Bertie and petted Pollux. "My, aren't you a handsome Finola boy? I hope you will like living with Pierce and me."

ornings The duke had joined them. He reached out and scratched Pollux between his ears, and the dog closed his eyes in bliss.

hey are "Ah, I see he likes that," Pierce said. "Well, shall you come inside but eat should we stay out here to learn how to handle Pollux?"

picking "The morning is not nearly as cold as I had thought," Nalyssa said and with don't we go to the lawn in the rear of the house? There are seats there for you.

I tire and still plenty of room for Bertie to show us how to be good dog owners to Pollux."

By now, Bertie had set the pup on his feet and said, "Heel." Pollux followed his lips close. As they began to walk, Bertie and Pollux fell into step behind the duchess, who led the way into the house and through it, exiting out the front door. Finola and Cy took seats and turned over things to Bertie. She was

incredibly proud of the boy as he first asked the duke and duchess to show him how to handle the dog. Bertie then told Pollux to do the same. Bertie explained the daily regimen that should follow with the pup, from when Pollux should be fed and allowed to relieve himself to the times the dog should be exercised.

Even "Exercise is important," Bertie told them. "Pollux will feel his best when he is exercised."

ist wed,he’s walked twice a day. Honeyfield springer spaniels have a lot of ametersWalking helps tire them out. Pollux will be calmer and quieter bec these walks. They’ll also help him keep at a good weight and h id thengrowing muscles.”

Nalyssa The boy thought a moment and then added, “Walking and playin the pairjust good for movement. It helps Pollux to think. For his mind to grow give him confidence and keep him from getting into trouble.” Bertie g he then“I’d say Pollux is a little like me.”

ell, Mr. The four adults chuckled.

He explained how important a routine was to have and how Pollux ie, who look forward to their walks if they kept him on a schedule of walki ; Bertieplaytime.

ula.” “He’s to be fed twice a day, in the morning and the evening. Ar Finolaneed to piddle soon after he eats. On walks, let him smell things. Span ssley iswith their noses as much as their eyes. He’ll want to sniff everything.”

ugh the The lad looked to her. “What else should I tell them, Finola?”

“About his ears.”

darling “Oh, yes.” Bertie lifted Pollux’s ears. “See how long and floppy th You need to check his ears each week. If he’s rubbing his head on the etweenor scratching them, he might have something in them.” He explained clean them.

ide? Or “How long do they live?” Pierce asked.

Bertie looked to Finola, who replied, “Usually an English s . “Whyspaniel’s typical lifespan is twelve to thirteen years. If you don’t ha in casefurther questions, Bertie can now show you the commands Pollux know

od dog Over the next hour, Bertie demonstrated each of the basic comma had both the duke and duchess repeat them several times. He starte x stoodvoice commands, as Finola had done with him, and then moved t ind thegestures.

back. “You’re both very smart,” the boy praised. “You’ve learn he wascommands quickly.”

sit and Finola saw the pair bite back smiles, the duke even coughing i en theyhand, stifling a laugh.

owed to “I hope you think we are worthy to have Pollux come and be a mei our family, Bertie,” Nalyssa said.

st when “I’m sad to see him leave the litter, but I think he’ll be happy here.

energy. Bertie then demonstrated how to use the various toys and the cause of stomach rumbled loudly.

“Why don’t I send you to the kitchens with Pollux, and he can keep you company while Cook gives you something to eat?” Nalyssa suggested. “It isn’t as if you’re going to be staying here. It will be asking for the boy to be taken to the kitchens. Bertie told Pollux to help him, and they grinned. They accompanied the servant inside.”

“Oh, he is a delight,” Nalyssa declared. “So bright and sweet. I’m sure he’ll be a joy to have around—but Pollux is also the same.”

“I had questioned my wife’s intentions in bringing a dog into our home, but Pollux has certainly changed my mind,” Pierce said.

“The pup may test you a bit,” she warned. “Once we are gone, he’ll be all we are all he has known. He will be in a new place with unfamiliar surroundings. Simply keep to the training Bertie taught you—and shower Pollux with love.”

“Why don’t we go inside?” Nalyssa suggested. “I could stand to have my feet propped up and a hot cup of tea.”

Her husband leaped to his feet and helped Nalyssa from her chair. He then swept her into his arms.

“I am perfectly capable of walking, Your Grace,” she said lightly.

“And I am perfectly happy carrying you, Your Grace,” Pierce replied.

As they approached the door, the duchess said, “Why don’t you show me your new horse, Pierce? That way Finola and I can have a good talk.”

“As long as you promise to say only good things about me,” the duke said, “let me see you settled in your sitting room.”

She and Cy followed the duke, who led them to the same room Finola had visited in last time. Pierce eased the duchess into a chair and lifted her feet onto the footstool.

“I will tell Cook on our way out that tea is to be sent to you.” He pressed his lips against hers. “Come along, Cressley. I am only beginning to tell you about horses, but even I can tell what a beauty I have.”

Cy accompanied the duke downstairs, and they stopped in the kitchen where Stoneham requested tea be sent up to the sitting room. Bertie was eating a ham sandwich, and he and Pollux were being fussed over by the scullery maids.

As they left the house and made their way toward the stables, Stoneham said, "I know you know nothing of me, Cressley. I was a haberdashery owner. The only time I had anything to do with the members of the Society was when one of them entered my store five miles outside Bampton. I wasn't given anything in life. I worked years at manual labor, saving up to open my shop. Mama and Pen, my sister, were milliners, and the shop was located next to mine. This whole thing of being a sudden duke is a bloody surprise.

"And I couldn't have done it without Nalyssa."

"Finola mentioned to me that she worked with men, such as you, to acclimate them to a life in Polite Society."

The duke chuckled. "She did, indeed. She is still training me to behave in certain circumstances. I'm taking riding lessons from my friend since I had never had the opportunity to get on the back of a horse."

By now, they had reached the stables and entered. The duke waved to his eager groom, telling him they were just here to see the new horse.

Down a long aisle, they finally reached the stall. Immediately, Cy saw the horse and the duke was so excited by his new horse.

He whistled, low. "What a beauty."

"She is as smart as she is beautiful. Just like my duchess," the duke said proudly.

They entered the stall, and he ran his hands over the horse's neck. "Whatever you paid for her was worth it," Cy told the other man.

"She was expensive. Spirited. Affectionate. I have enjoyed learning to ride her."

Cy was stroking the horse between its ears when the duke said, "How long have you been in love with Finola?"

He started. "What would make you say that?"

Stoneham's wicked smile spread. "Because I am a man in love with my wife, man. I recognize all the symptoms. You are me. I am you. How do you feel?"

"I did two days ago. Yesterday, I rode into Chichester and purchased a bishop's license." He did not add that it had taken all the money he had saved.

The duke slapped Cy on the back, offering his hand. "Good for you, Cressley. When is the wedding?"

Stoneham “We have yet to discuss that. Soon, though. The license is only good for fourteen days.”

Polite “I hope you will consider inviting us to the wedding.”

ristol. I “It will be small. Held at the village church in Adderly.”

enough “Just send word, and I will be there. I cannot guarantee Nalyssa's presence. You see how round her belly already is. I have no wish to be jostled about in a carriage. I would be happy to attend your nuptials, though.”

“We will let you know what our plans are.” Cy hesitated a moment, not knowing he didn't know this man, and yet he decided to seek his opinion.

helping “Do you think if you would have been a mere haberdasher that He would have wed you?”

how to Stoneham grew thoughtful. “I would like to think so. Of course, if I were a groom then I never would have met Nalyssa. If you are thinking she wed me because I am a duke, let me assure you that is not the case. We are soulmates and she is off unrecognized it. Why do you ask?”

Going “Because I haven't exactly been honest with Finola.” He saw the way her eyes spark with anger. “No, I have not deliberately lied to her. Yes, I was Cyrus Cressley, and I served as a lieutenant-general in the Peninsula. Yes, I was wounded and told I must sell my commission and return to England.”

“But?” the duke pressed.

s flesh. “I am *Lord* Cyrus Cressley, second son of the deceased Duke of Melrose and brother to the current duke. Margate and I are years apart in age and though we are never close. In fact, when I returned from Spain, he did not even want me residing in his house. The best he offered was the use of a small lodge on the edge of Melrose. The lodge is only a short distance from Melrose at Belldale.”

“Why would you not share this with her?” the duke asked, looking puzzled.

ive you He shook his head. “I had a sense from the beginning that the clash which sprang between us rather quickly would be lost if Finola knew I was the duke's son. She is an orphan and raises her Honeyfield spaniels and she does it because she loves dogs, but she must work for her keep. While her grandfather left Belldale to her, she has shared that no income accompanied that title for you, and only a small amount of funds was included. I believe if she knew I was the duke's son, even if it is a courtesy, she would view me differently.”

ood for The duke studied him a moment. “I think the two of you should be completely honest with one another. The sooner you both share your secrets, the better your chances are of having a successful marriage.”

 “I love her. I know she loves me,” Cy insisted. “Yet I am filled with dread at having to tell her who I am.”

see her “Do it as quickly as possible, my lord. Else I warn you that things will become distant between you.”

ent. He He sighed. “You are right. I will tell her when we reach Belldale.”

 Cy offered his hand, and the duke took it. “Thank you for your advice.”

r Grace As they shook, Stoneham said, “Let me know how the situation turns out.”

I were, Cy hoped it would be nothing of consequence and that Finola would because accept him. Love him. Marry him.

tes and Determination filled him. He would talk with her today.

 No more excuses.

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The duke studied him a moment. "I think the two of you should be completely honest with one another. The sooner you both share your secrets, the better your chances are of having a successful marriage."

"I love her. I know she loves me," Cy insisted. "Yet I am filled with dread at having to tell her who I am."

"Do it as quickly as possible, my lord. Else I warn you that things might become distant between you."

He sighed. "You are right. I will tell her when we reach Belldale today." Cy offered his hand, and the duke took it. "Thank you for your advice."

As they shook, Stoneham said, "Let me know how the situation plays out."

Cy hoped it would be nothing of consequence and that Finola would accept him. Love him. Marry him.

Determination filled him. He would talk with her today.

No more excuses.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THEY REACHED BELLEDALE and thanked the coachman for returning. Finola hurried to the dog run, the pups jumping and barking, eager to see Cy. Cy wanted her full attention for the conversation they would have and now was not the right time. She would want to devote the entire afternoon to her dogs.

Immediately, she began releasing the dogs from their pen and told Cy and him that the pups were due for a long walk since they had not exercised this morning.

“I like when we take all of them out,” Bertie said happily.

Cy was glad to hear Bertie sounded in good spirits since he had been a bit glum during the carriage ride home from Stonecrest. He knew Bertie couldn't help it. Pollux was the first pup Bertie had lost and a very special one, at that.

Finola let the dogs run about for a few minutes before calling them back and then their entire party set out. Cy decided to pick up where they had left off in the English monarchy and began telling them about the chaotic but feckless Stephen, who violated his oath by seizing the throne, and how this action caused Matilda, the rightful heir, to plunge the country into war.

After they had traipsed about Belldale, they reached the copse, and Bertie said, “We should let you go to the hunting lodge and soothe your eyes with one of the eyewashes.”

He had come to appreciate the relief the eyewashes gave him and Bertie. They led the dogs to the copse, and Finola gave them their heads, allowing them to run ahead until the dogs reached the hunting lodge. As they emerged from the wooded area, he saw a footman nervously pacing and clearing his throat. Relief broke out on the servant's face as he hurried to meet Cy. Cy had not waited this long to tell Finola his identity, only to have it confirmed by one of the servants from Melrose.

He turned to his companions. "Wait here," he said firmly, hurrying to meet the footman.

When Cy reached the servant, he said, "What is wrong? Speak quickly if you would."

The footman glanced over Cy's shoulder and then met his gaze. "Your lord, His Grace is quite ill. He has asked to see you. Hours ago. When I was not here, I hurried back to Melrose and informed Mr. Arnold."

He recognized the name of the butler. "Go on."

"Mr. Arnold sent me here to wait for you, no matter how long it takes. I must go immediately to Melrose."

"Go without me," he instructed. "I will follow you shortly. I promise." "Very well, my lord."

The footman rushed away, and Cy returned to Finola and Bertie.

"His Grace is asking to see me. The footman said the duke wanted to see me." Looking to the boy, he added, "Bertie, you are to stay at Belldale until I return for you."

The boy shook his head. "No, sir. My place is with you."

He saw the stubborn set to the boy's jaw. Although Bertie was a special case, he had become much more to both Cy and Finola. Even if he ordered him to remain at Belldale, he knew the lad would disobey those orders. He was not willing to set up the boy for failure.

"All right. I will go to Melrose and see what His Grace wants. You stay with Finola and the pups until the usual time, and then you are to return to the hunting lodge. I will get here as soon as I can."

Bertie nodded in agreement and then left, returning to the dogs to give them sticks for them to retrieve.

Cy looked to Finola, who asked, "Do you know what His Grace wants with you?"

"I haven't a clue. The footman merely said the duke wished to see me. His moods are quite mercurial. By the time I get to Melrose, he will probably have forgotten he even sent for me."

"Then I will send Bertie home at the end of our training. He can have your supper waiting for you."

Cy regretted not being able to speak to Finola about what was in his mind. He took her hand and squeezed it. "I have things we must discuss tonight. They have been put off long enough."

g off to She smiled at him, a sweet smile that made him want to gather her
his arms and never let go.

quietly if “If it is a wedding date you wish us to choose, I am ready to do so
will see you tomorrow morning.”

e. “My He released her hand and gave a wave of farewell to Bertie before
then you and following the Melrose footman. With his long strides, Cy came
sight of the servant but saw that the footman trotted along, wanting to
Melrose as quickly as possible.

ok. We When Cy got to the main house, he did not have to knock. The butler
was waiting for him outside.

se.” “His Grace is gravely ill, Lord Cyrus. The doctor is with him now
and we are all fearful of the outcome.”

The news took him aback. Yes, Cy had seen his brother was
ill.” during their visit upon Cy’s arrival at Melrose. He had not thought
he would come ill to the point of death, however.

“Is it His Grace’s gout which is acting up again?”

“The gout is a large part of his woes, my lord. Each attack seems
stronger, and its effects last longer. His Grace also has a fever which
I cannot seem to shake it.”

Cy was Arnold turned and led Cy into the house, where he saw Dr. Addams
descending the stairs. He waited for the physician, who came to
you with a worried look on his face.

“I assume you have been summoned by His Grace,” the doctor began
here “Yes, I am told that he asked for me.”

“The gout will never kill him. It merely makes his life miserable.
His
joints are hot and swollen, tender to the touch. This latest attack’s pain
is the most severe case I have seen. It has reached a point where the disease
has progressed so much that His Grace cannot move his joints in a
normal fashion. He cannot hold a cup to drink from or cut anything with a knife
reliably.”

Dr. Addams raked a hand through his hair. “It is the fever which has
struck him that worries me.”

Cy frowned. “It is that serious?”

“It is more than serious, my lord. I fear His Grace may not survive
his heart. Cold fear pooled in his belly. He had never cared for his brother
and never envied Charles for being the heir apparent and now I
am at Margate.

er up in *What if Charles died—and Cy became the new duke?*

“I will go to him now.”

o, Cy. I “I plan to return tomorrow morning. Send for me if I am needed
that.”

turning “I will.”

within Cy mounted the stairs, dread filling him at the prospect of Margate
o reachIf he did so, Cy’s world would turn upside down. He shrugged a
terrifying thought and made his way to the duke’s rooms. He had nev
ler wasinside them, though he had been brought up in this house. His fat
rarely at Melrose and when he was in residence, he didn’t want to
ow. Wesons, much less in his private quarters. Cy could remember being a
boy and coming to stand in front of the door now before him many
in painwanting to open it and go inside. Fear had ruled him then. He ha
Margatefrightened of the duke and had never invaded his father’s space.

He did not bother to knock, knowing there were two outer rooms
the bedchamber, thanks to servants’ gossip, and he doubted any
s to getwould be present to answer his summons. Cy pushed open the do
i set in.closed it quietly. He found himself in a study, complete with desk, sett
two chairs. He didn’t know of anyone outside the family who ha
Addamsinvited into this private sanctuary and went through the open door to
him, aroom. It was a sitting room for the duke’s use alone. Ahead, he saw
door and assumed his brother lay beyond it.

an. Cy went and tapped on it lightly, thinking Margate’s valet would
him. He was right, as a servant answered the knock.

All his “My lord, thank you for coming. I am Hunt, His Grace’s valet. Hi
n is thehas been asking for you all day.”

ase has “I had left Melrose and only recently returned.”

normal The servant nodded. “I will give you privacy with His Grace and
fe.” the corridor. Call if you have need of me.” Hunt left the bedchamber.

as now With trepidation, Cy stepped over the threshold and closed th
behind him. Turning, he saw how enormous the room was. The curtain
drawn, however, leaving the bedchamber dark. A lone candle burne
it.” bedside table, and he crossed the room to where a huge bed sat. Marg
but hadlying in it, pillows propped behind him. The bedclothes were bunche
duke offoot of the bed, and his brother was naked except for a cloth draped ac
loins. Cy could see the immense rolls of fat and how pale his brother

except for his face—which was flushed a bright red from the fever.

He stood at the foot of the bed, studying Margate for a moment before the duke's eyes were closed, and he whimpered softly.

"I am here, Your Grace," he said quietly.

The duke's eyes fluttered open, and he grimaced. "It took you a long time dying, enough," he grumbled.

off that Leave it to Charles to start the conversation with a complaint.

er been "I was not at Melrose when the footman came to fetch me. But I am here now, Your Grace. What can I do for you?"

see his His brother's face scrunched in pain, and he groaned loudly.

young "I am sick and tired of this evil disease dominating my life," Margate said, bitterness in his tone. "I cannot even have the bedclothes touch my joints because they have been joints are so enflamed that even the feel of them brings me to tears."

"Dr. Addams said it was not only your gout acting up. That you also had a fever."

servant "Yes, that young fool has told me the gout cannot kill me. It only makes my life a bloody misery."

ee, and Margate began coughing violently as Cy stood helplessly watching.

id been "I hated him, you know. I think we both did."

another Cy understood his brother spoke of their father.

another "He was the most selfish man I ever encountered. And yet I wanted to be just like him. I looked like him. I spoke like him. I merely wished for a better version of him. Instead, I followed his same path, reveling in my bachelorhood and bachelorhood. He did not wed until he was almost forty, you know."

s Grace A bitter smile crossed Margate's face. "I thought I, too, could enjoy my newfound wealth and live a debauched life until it was time to settle down and produce an heir for the dukedom."

wait in The duke fell silent. Cy had nothing he could say.

Finally, Margate said, "I waited too long. I have wasted my entire life because I have been a terrible duke and ignored my people and my responsibilities." His gaze pinned Cy's. "Tell me that you will be better at this than I ever was. Promise me you will make the Cressley name stand for something good again. Assure me that you will wed quickly and produce an heir. That you will raise him well and teach him right from wrong. That you will shower him with the love our father never bestowed upon either of us—"

Margate's eyes closed. Cy did not reply. Instead, he moved to the

the bed and sat upon it, placing his hand over his brother's for the first time. Thee ever.

He kept vigil beside Charles for a few hours, listening to his breathing and moans of pain. Then the breathing became even more languid and suddenly ceased. He knew there was nothing Dr. Addams could do to prevent this death. Cy only hoped that his presence had comforted Charles at his end. With a heavy heart, he rose and exited the bedroom. He passed through the sitting room and study and opened the door to the corridor, where he found the valet and butler waiting together.

"His Grace is gone," Cy said softly. "I sat with him and held him until the end. His Grace was not alone when he passed. He had family here to comfort him. Do what you must now to prepare him. I will send a message to Dr. Addams and the local clergyman and consult Mrs. Arnold as to how to have mourners returning to Melrose after His Grace's burial."

"Of course, Your Grace," Arnold said, addressing Cy with the title. "I bring snow hung about his neck like an albatross, much as the suffering sailor in Coleridge's famous poem.

He was the Duke of Margate. Nothing could change that.

Cy only prayed this change in his life would not cost him Finola.

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the bed and sat upon it, placing his hand over his brother's for the first time ever.

He kept vigil beside Charles for a few hours, listening to his labored breathing and moans of pain. Then the breathing became even more erratic and suddenly ceased. He knew there was nothing Dr. Addams could have done to prevent this death. Cy only hoped that his presence had comforted Charles at his end. With a heavy heart, he rose and exited the bedchamber. He passed through the sitting room and study and opened the door to the corridor, where he found the valet and butler waiting together.

“His Grace is gone,” Cy said softly. “I sat with him and held his hand until the end. His Grace was not alone when he passed. He had family at his side to comfort him. Do what you must now to prepare him. I will send a message to Dr. Addams and the local clergyman and consult Mrs. Arnold as to mourners returning to Melrose after His Grace's burial.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Arnold said, addressing Cy with the title that now hung about his neck like an albatross, much as the suffering sailor from Coleridge's famous poem.

He was the Duke of Margate. Nothing could change that.

Cy only prayed this change in his life would not cost him Finola.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FINOLA AND BERTIE brought all the dogs back to Belldale. She thought the boy a bit distracted, which would not do well in training. She knew not only sad and missing Pollux, but he was worried about Cy.

“You know what, Bertie? I think you and I need to go into Adderly

“Really? Why?”

“Sometimes, it is good to give your dogs a day off from their training. The rest is good for both you and your pups, and it also will see if they have mastered what you have been working on, taking a slight break. They have gotten their exercise for now, and I think we should go into the village to see if Mrs. Carroll has any lemon cakes available.”

That did the trick because Bertie broke out into a huge smile. “Come on, Finola? I really liked those lemon cakes. And we also got some cinnamon buns from her the other day when we went to the tailor’s shop. They were also very good.”

“Let’s put the pups into the dog run, and then we can go into town.

They called to the dogs, who had been frolicking, and led them into the pen, seeing them safely inside. Finola secured the gate and then asked Bertie if he would care to walk or use the cart to go into the village.

He pondered it a moment. “Do you have shopping to do, Finola? If so, we should take the cart and put your goods into the back of it.”

“I do have a few things I could pick up for Cook,” she told him. “I’ll go to the barn then.”

She showed the lad how to hitch the horse to the cart, and they set off for Adderly. On the way, she decided to have a talk with Bertie.

“Things are going to be changing some,” she began. “You see, Cy and I have decided that we will wed.”

Bertie beamed at her. “I knew it! I told you that he liked you, Finola. I thought a moment. “Will you come live at the hunting lodge with us?”

“No, His Grace has only lent the use of it to Cy. I own Belldale, but

land and the house. The house is much bigger, and so we can live there

“Can we keep training the dogs?”

She laughed. “Of course. It is the way I earn my keep. I hope you will keep helping me in this work. I know you like horses, too. You help care for mine, even if it is only the one. You also might help milking our cow. Gilly does that twice a day now.”

“I could learn how to milk,” Bertie said eagerly. “When are you going to get married?”

“It is something we will discuss tomorrow when things get back to normal. You and Cy can continue to hold your morning lessons, and I can work with the pups in the afternoon together. Perhaps we’ll discuss wedding plans over tea tomorrow and arrive at a day and time. Of course, we will need to check with the Adderly clergyman to see when it would be most convenient for him, as well. We could stop by the vicarage while we are in Adderly.”

They arrived at the village and stopped in front of Mrs. Carroll’s bakery. She asked Bertie if he would stay with the horse and cart while she went inside the bakery.

“I’m happy to watch the horse, Finola. What is his name?”

“It is Autumn,” she said as they both climbed from the cart.

Bertie went straight to the horse, stroking his side, as Finola collected the baskets she had brought sitting in the cart’s bed. She entered the bakery, the sweet scent invading her nostrils as she inhaled deeply.

“Ah, Lady Finola. I haven’t seen you in a good while. How are the pups?”

“They are coming along nicely, Mrs. Carroll. Thank you for asking. In fact, I just delivered one this morning to the Duke and Duchess of Stoneham.”

The baker pursed her lips in thought. “He’s the one who owns the haberdashery, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is. Both Their Graces are lovely people.”

She glanced about the bakery, taking in all the goods.

All business now, Mrs. Carroll asked, “What can I get for you today, my lady?”

“I spy lemon cakes and simply must have them. I see you have four. I’ll take all of them—and try not to eat one on the way to Belldale.”

.” They both laughed and Finola moved about, pointing out a few items, including some tarts she thought they might have at tea tomorrow and Cy afternoo. Mrs. Carroll wrapped up the goods, and Finola handed out a basket she had brought, allowing the baker to place the items into it.

out by “It was good seeing you, Mrs. Carroll.”

“Come anytime, my lady.”

going to Finola exited the bakery and saw Bertie in conversation with A

She felt the boy was much like her, befriending animals and trusting Jack more than people. It had taken her years to get past the cruel tricks Crofton and his friends had played on her, but she was glad she had reassured her heart to Cy. She knew Banny would have liked the former army nurse, very much and been relieved that Finola had found someone to love.

ould be Bertie looked up as she placed the basket into the back of the cart. “Are there lemon cakes?”

“There were. I was even able to get enough for Gilly and Cook. I’ll have one of our own, and no one need to share. Shall we go to Mr. Simon’s store now?”

“I don’t know where it is. I haven’t been there before. We only visit the tailor and the bakery.”

“You may walk Autumn the few doors down if you like,” she said, pointing to the right.”

red the The lad took Autumn’s bridle and led the horse as Finola walked alongside them. She pointed out which was Mr. Simon’s store and then Bertie brought the horse to a stop.

“I will be back in a few minutes. I just have a few things to get.”

king. In She entered the general store and greeted the store’s owner, picking up more tea and a small bag of sugar, placing both on the counter. She went back to a section and found a ledger, thinking it was time for Bertie to graduate from his slate to writing with a quill in hand.

After chatting briefly with Mr. Simon, he placed the goods in the basket she had brought inside. Finola returned outside and placed the basket on the cart’s bed, next to the baked goods.

lay, my She heard the beating of horse’s hooves and looked up as a rider came down the main thoroughfare of Adderly. He wore elegant livery, and she guessed he came from Melrose. Again, she wondered what the duke was doing with Cy. Rumor had it that His Grace was in poor health since he was

more seen, and she thought for a moment that the duke might be dying. She narrowed her eyes and wondered who was next in line to assume the dukedom and would never think about his visit to his relative when she next saw him.

As they climbed into the cart, Bertie said, "I know him. He's a fool." Bertie Melrose. He took me to the kitchens and got me something to eat when he first arrived."

Autumn. "Do you mind if we stop now at the vicarage?"

Lord. "Not at all. I like seeing new places."

Lord. Finola took up the reins and flicked her wrists and Autumn started. She opened the door and drove the length of Adderly, reaching the end of the village where the officer's graveyard stood. Next to it was the church and beyond that, the vicarage. She had not been to visit Banny in some time and felt the sudden urge to go. "Were she had noticed the horse that had passed them now stood tied to the front of the vicarage. Its rider was nowhere in sight. That meant he was on his way of delivering his message to Reverend Hall. It would give Bertie and her a chance to go down and see Banny before calling upon the clergyman.

"Would you mind if we visited Banny's grave first?"

Lord. "No, Finola. Should I stay in the cart?"

"Why don't you come with me? I would appreciate your company."

Lord. "It is fine." They secured the horse and walked through the graveyard, straight to Banny's burial place.

Lord. "This is his headstone. Sir Roscoe Banfield was his name."

Lord. They paused, and she touched the stone, saying, "It's me, Banny. I came to visit you and introduce you to Bertie Briggs. He is helping me in tending my Honeyfield spaniels."

Lord. Bertie looked at her wide-eyed. "Do you always talk to him?"

Lord. Finola smiled. "I do. Banny and I came to be a family of two when he was only eight years of age. We always talked to one another about everything. I feel close to him when I come here and like to have a conversation with him." Bertie grinned. "Even if it is one-sided."

Lord. The boy laughed. "I miss talking to my parents—but I don't miss them around the war. So many people died or were hurt. Mum and I were never far from picking up and following the army. I like being in one place. I like being with you and how to read and write and how to train dogs."

Lord. "When the war ends someday, your parents might come to visit. I would like to see them. Would you like that?"

ig. She He nodded solemnly. "I'll let you finish talking to Banny, Finola."
ask Cy Bertie turned and left the graveyard, leaving her alone. She looked
at the headstone.

man at "Banny, you will not believe it—but I am going to be wed soon.
hen we found the most wonderful man in the world. We understand each other
paused. "I love him. And he loves me. I will bring him here so he might
your final resting place. Cy knows how important you are to me
wanted to tell you how happy I am, Banny. We'll live at Belldale
ted up. continue training the dogs. Oh, you should see this latest litter."

ere the Finola told Banny about each of the pups and then bid him farewell.
ge. She returned to Bertie, who stood at the gates of the graveyard, waiting for
to do so. "The rider came out of the vicarage and is gone, Finola. In case
post in wanted to stop in and ask about a wedding date."

s inside "Let's do so. That way, I can tell Cy what days and times are available
time to when we speak tomorrow."

They walked back to where Autumn stood, and Bertie took up
beside the horse. She went to the door and knocked.

Mrs. Hall answered the knock, her face flushed with excitement.
" Finola liked Reverend Hall and found him to be a humble, unassuming
right to his wife was another matter. She was always the first to bring up and
gossip. Finola did not enjoy being in the woman's company.

"Ah, Lady Finola, you're coming when we have a bit of excitement
. Come on."

training Reverend Hall appeared in the doorway behind his wife. "Hello, n
What brings you to see us? I am afraid I do not have time to visit with
now. I must get to Melrose at once."

n I was Mrs. Hall stepped aside in order to allow her husband to pass and
thing. If Finola could excuse herself, the woman took Finola's elbow and said,
n." She in, my lady."

"I only wanted to visit with—"

s being "Nonsense. You must come right in. I can get you a cup of tea."
always She did not want to be there for as long as it took to brew and con
earnings cup of tea and said, "No, I really do need to get back to Belldale.

wanted to ask Reverend Hall a quick question. I can do so at a later time
Melrose. Trying to look important, Mrs. Hall said, "Well, my husband will be
the next few days." She paused, waiting for Finola to ask why and when

didn't, the clergyman's wife blurted out, "His Grace is gone. Dead, he d downlike that."

She had suspected there was a reason Cy had been summoned to Melrose. I have Then she recalled that the footman had said the duke wanted to see her." She once.

ight see That could only mean the Duke of Margate had died while Cy was in Melrose. The rider they had seen—the footman Bertie had recognized—had brought the news of the duke's death to Reverend Hall. He must be going to Melrose to discuss details regarding the funeral. She wondered what she might help with the arrangements.

her. "I am sorry to hear of his passing," she said politely. "I never met you Grace."

"Well," the woman said, "it is most convenient that Lord Cyrus was available when he did."

A cold chill ran through Finola. "Lord Cyrus?" she asked weakly. "Yes, His Grace's younger brother. There were only the two of us. I am surprised you have not heard of his return. Some war injury, and he was booted from the army. I heard His Grace gave his brother the use of a hunting lodge on the estate. They weren't close, you know. The news spread won't be needing that now." Mrs. Hall chuckled. "Not with a house as large as Melrose."

it going Nausea washed through Finola. "I must leave, Mrs. Hall."

"Why, my lady, you do not look well at all. Why don't you sit down for a few minutes and let me get you that cup of tea?"

ith you "No," she protested, shaking her head vigorously. "I must go. Now."

Rushing to the door, she threw it open and went through the doorway without bothering to close it behind her. She raced toward the cart.

"Come in," she shouted, scrambling into the cart, and taking up the reins.

"What's wrong, Finola?" Bertie asked, clearly puzzled by the change in her as he left the horse and climbed up beside her.

She urged the horse on, turning the cart and returning the way they had come. She did not speak until they had left Adderly behind. Once they were

I only clear of the village, she pulled to the side of the road and drew up, blocking the way for the others." "What's wrong?" she asked.

be busy Looking at Bertie, she asked, "Is Cy Lord Cyrus Cressley?"

hen she His eyes grew wide, and he nodded.

is. Just “He is the brother of the Duke of Margate?”

Again, the lad nodded.

Finola. “Why do you not address him as Lord Cyrus then?”

“He asked me not to do so. I have always called him sir, Finola.”
Cy at
swallowed hard. “It’s what my father called him. Lord Cyrus asked I
was at same when we were in your company.”

—had Bitterness filled her. He was just another man who had toyed w
now beShe had fallen in love, thinking she could trust Cy implicitly. No
d if Cy learned of this horrible betrayal.

She could never wed a man who had lied to her.

net His *Who had used her . . .*

Finola had given her virginity to this man. To a liar. She doubted l
eturnedwished to marry her. It had all been a game to him, one even more cru
the one Viscount Crofton had played upon her. No, worse—because s
never loved Lord Crofton.

them. I And she loved Cy with all her heart.

he was She took up the reins, and they traveled to Belldale in silence. Wh
of thereached the barn, Bertie climbed down and said, “I can help you rul
w dukeAutumn.”

s grand “No,” she said sharply. “Return to the hunting lodge and wait
Grace to come.” When Bertie gasped, she said, “Yes. He is now the I
Margate. That is what Mrs. Hall told me. His brother died today. That
t a fewReverend Hall did not have time to speak with me.”

Sadness filled the boy’s face. Finola hated to hurt a child, but sh
.” not be around Bertie—because that meant being around Cy. No, His
ay, notHe would never be Cy to her again. He would only be a stranger. She
not allow him to have any sway over her. In fact, she never intended to
eins. speak to him again.

abrupt “Do not return to Belldale, Bertie. Tell His Grace the same.
nothing to do with either of you.”

ey had Tears flooded Bertie’s eyes, and he looked as if he wanted to prot
ey weregaze met hers, and the boy realized she meant what she said.

ringing “Goodbye, Finola.” He turned and walked away, his head hung in s
She unhitched Autumn from the cart and brought him into his stall
she rubbed him down.

Then Finola sat in the stall and wept a river of tears.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHEN CY RETURNED to the hunting lodge, it was close to seven evening. He had meant to send word to Bertie so the lad wouldn't That good intention had been forgotten, though, as he was pulled in direction. He met with the Arnolds to discuss the funeral arrangements were familiar with the surrounding community and knew more about the of service which should be held and who should be invited to it. Mrs. had opinions on what to serve to mourners when they returned to Melrose after the burial.

He finally told them he would open the service up to anyone who to attend—tenants, servants, neighbors, and villagers alike. Cy didn't know how many people might show up. He didn't know any of his brother's friends and thought it useless to place an obituary in the London papers. The duke was dead this time of year and would only come to life in spring once the rains began. He decided he would place a death notice then so that the men of the *ton* would know the Duke of Margate had passed.

By opening the funeral to the public, he realized some would come out of curiosity. Some would like the chance to say they had attended the funeral of a duke. He worried if he didn't, though, the turnout of mourners would be small enough to count on one hand. Though he and Charles had never been close, he hated the thought of there not being a goodly number of people present at the service.

Cy had sent a rider to Dr. Addams and Reverend Hall with the message asking both men to come to Melrose at their earliest convenience. The Arnolds had then helped compose a list of prominent neighbors in the village that should be invited. Word of mouth would do for the rest. He composed brief notes to send to the local gentry, with all but the time and date of the funeral listed. Arnold was dispatched to speak to the Melrose steward who would get word to the tenants on the property. Cy also dashed off quickly to the people in the village he'd had contact with since his return.

Simon, Mrs. Carroll, and Mr. Timmon. He would count on them in spite of the word that the funeral would be a public one, held in the church at Adderly.

Dr. Addams was the first to arrive and asked to examine the body, which was in the middle of washing it and stopped so the physician could examine the deceased duke. Dr. Addams returned to Cy and offered his condolences as Arnold informed Cy that the blacksmith had finished with the coffin and was ready to bring it into the house. Arnold suggested His Grace be taken to the downstairs parlor, and Cy agreed to the request.

By then, Reverend Hall had arrived. He was new to Cy, as the doctor had never been, and a calming presence. The three men retreated to the study, Cy taking his place behind the desk for the first time. They discussed an appropriate time for the funeral and settled on the day after tomorrow at ten o'clock. Reverend Hunt said his wife and her ladies' guild would handle preparations at the church.

"I am happy to speak during the service, Your Grace, but would you prefer to do so, as well?"

He thought of getting up in front of a large group and trying to speak words about a man he hadn't truly ever known.

"No, I will leave the eulogy to you, Reverend Hall."

They discussed the hymns to be played, and then the two men said good-bye and took their leave. Cy asked the clergyman to wait a moment. Once Dr. Addams was safely out of the room, he closed the door.

"I have one other matter to discuss with you," he began. "In fact, I am coming to see you about it tomorrow. Of course, things changed today and your life drastically has altered its course."

"Of course, Your Grace. You have experienced many changes recently, I am sure."

Cy knew the clergyman referred to Cy's vision and nodded brusquely. "I was planning to wed and had gone to Chichester, where I obtained a bishop's license. I was told it was good for two weeks."

The older man nodded. "Yes, Your Grace. A bishop's license allows a couple to wed on the day of your choice, as long as the ceremony is performed inside a church and occurs between the hours of eight o'clock and noon. Did you have a specific day in mind?"

"No—and I feel others might believe it highly inappropriate if I

reading quickly after my brother's death. I have never had to take into account church or opinion regarding my actions and decisions, but my new title is otherwise."

My. Hunt Reverend Hall shook his head. "I can subtly put out the word that I see the marriage was already planned, Your Grace. That the two of us had discussed just spoken and arranged the details of the ceremony. No one will think anything of you going through with your plans, especially now because it is important to be laid out to wed in order to produce an heir."

"Unlike my brother."

My lord had "The previous duke was . . . shall we say . . . not one who was interested in taking in Melrose or its people. I already have a far different impression of you, Your Grace. Perhaps it is because of your service to crown and country. I believe you will take your duties as the Duke of Margate seriously."

My lord replied "I plan to," he said, determined to do as Charles had asked and be a better duke than his father or brother had been.

My lord asked "Since the funeral is set for Thursday, would you like the wedding ceremony to be performed on Friday morning? The church would already be decorated with flowers for the occasion and need no further decoration."

"Yes, that would be satisfactory. Could we say eleven o'clock?"

He hoped Finola would not mind that he was going ahead and scheduling their wedding without her input. Still, he knew she was as eager as he was to cement the bonds between them and become husband and wife.

And it would give him time to tell her how their lives were about to be transformed in ways neither of them could imagine. Cy was only going to be a duke. My lord and Finola would make this transition together. Having Finola by his side would give him the confidence he needed to lead as the Duke of Margate.

My lord replied "I won't speak of this for now but when the time is right, I will subtly put out the word that we already had these plans in motion."

My lord replied "I am grateful, Reverend."

My lord asked "Think nothing of it, Your Grace. I do hope we will be seeing you and your duchess every Sunday morning. I will also expect you on the lawn every morning with your bride. Might I ask who she is? Perhaps a charming young lady?"

My lord replied "No, I left no sweethearts behind when I went away to war. In fact, I had not thought to marry at all, being married to the army and my service to His Majesty. As for my bride? She is a local who is well known for raising

t public Honeyfield spaniels.”

e says The clergyman smiled. “Ah, Lady Finola. She is a delight.”

Lady Finola?

hat the The older man’s brow creased. “Is there something wrong, Your G

already “No,” he said, trying to hide the shock that rippled through him.

less of Reverend Hunt sighed. “Lady Finola is quite a lovely young wom
tant for has a sweet nature and is kind to everyone she meets. She is also
worker and dependable. I believe Lady Finola will make for a fine duc

erested the army. Do you know how Lady Finola came to be here?”

of you, “Oh, that was long ago. From what I recall hearing, her fathe
y, but I Leppington, died with no heir, and so his title reverted to the crown.”

“And Lady Finola had no family?”

a better Looking sheepish, the clergyman said, “None that would take he
Grace. She stayed with my predecessor for months while she awaite
wedding from her family. When they refused to take her, a local gentleman
eady be up.”

“Sir Roscoe Banfield,” Cy supplied.

“Yes, I believe that was the name. An agent of the crown sol
eduling Leppington’s estate. I don’t know if the king ever awarded the earl’s
was to another or not.”

He did not recall a Lord Leppington, but then again, he had
it to be Melrose other than to visit Adderly on rare occasions. Cy would hav
lad that away at school when Finola was orphaned. His heart ached for her,
would all those months, only to be told no one wanted her. But why had she
the fact that she was an earl’s daughter?

ertainly Then guilt rushed through him, knowing he had also kept from her
was a duke’s son.

And now a duke.

rou and The clergyman told Cy what time to have his servants bring the c
Friday the church on Thursday morning and then excused himself. Cy quickl
ildhood in the date and time of the funeral on the notes he had previously writ
then slipped the signet ring from his finger to seal them with the M
t, I had seal. Hunt had sent the ring to Arnold, and the butler had given it
e to His earlier.

ing her Ringing for Arnold, he asked that the butler send out riders to del.

messages and informed the servants when the funeral service would be

“Have Mrs. Arnold and Cook decided on the menu for the mourning

“They have, Your Grace. Your rooms have also been prepared. All the furniture of the previous Duke of Margate have been removed. Shall I have servants sent to the hunting lodge to pack your things?”

an. She “Not until tomorrow morning, Arnold. I will spend a last night there

a hard Surprise flickered in the butler’s eyes, but he kept his opinion to himself. “Very well, Your Grace. When would you like for the servants to arrive

ity and “Nine o’clock,” he said crisply. “I may not be there so have them sent inside and gather everything. Make certain one is Maisie. She has done a first-class job cleaning the lodge since I took up residence there.”

“Certainly, Your Grace.”

The butler left with the notes to the neighbors, and Cy sat in the chair behind the desk once again, needing to absorb what he had just learned

and news Finola was an earl’s daughter. She was Lady Finola. Of course, he had stepped back and realized it by the way she conducted herself. Her posture

and gracefulness. Still, he worried about why she had held the knowledge from him. She must have had her reasons, as did he. He wondered if he should

and Lordher know he knew of her origins and then decided he wouldn’t mention it. What was important was for him to share that he was now the Duke of

Margate—and that nothing had changed between them—other than that they wouldn’t live at Belldale, as planned. Instead, they would move to Melrose after their wedding.

waiting He left the house and returned to the hunting lodge, seeing the light glowing through the window. When he entered, Bertie jumped to his feet

“There you are, my lord. What kept you?”

that he “Sit, Bertie.”

The lad took a seat, and Cy did the same.

“His Grace has passed. I am the new Duke of Margate.”

offin to “I know,” the boy said quietly.

y filled Fear seized him. “How? How do you know?” he demanded.

ten and “Because Mrs. Hall told us. She’s the clergyman’s wife.” Tears filled Bertie’s eyes. “We went into Adderly this afternoon. Finola wanted to

to Cylemon cakes to cheer me up. And she told me . . . that you were to wait until you stopped at the church to ask about days you might be able to get married

iver the Bertie began sobbing. Cy reached for the boy and brought him in

She held him in her lap, whispering comforting words to him.

"She acted funny when we left. And then she asked if you were still traces of Cyrus Cressley." Bertie raised his tearstained face. "I had to tell her, didn't I mean, Your Grace?"

"Of course, you did," he assured the boy.

"She was so angry. She didn't even look like Finola. And she told herself never to come back to Belldale. You—or me. She doesn't want to see me again."

Bertie began to bawl, and Cy rocked the boy, even as tears formed in his own eyes.

He had not had the chance to be open with her. He had not been able to tell her he was Margate's son.

And now *he* was the Duke of Margate.

Cy pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Bertie. The boy blew his nose into it and mopped his eyes. He wriggled from Cy's grasp.

"What are you going to do, Your Grace?"

Grim determination filled him.

"Whatever it takes to win her back."

The lamp
glowed.

His face
was filled
with
to buy
ed. She
ed."
into his

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

FINOLA BAWLED AS a lost sheep for a long time, curled into a ball. Finola forced herself to sit up and angrily swiped at the tears. Tears were getting her nothing. She had cried copious amounts in the past, and they had brought her nothing but naught. She remembered crying nightly in bed after her father's death because she missed him—but because she was worried about her future. Even at the tender age of eight, her gut had told her that her situation in Scotland would not want her—and she had been right. If Banny had stepped up and volunteered to take her in, she didn't know what would become of her.

She had also cried a river of tears after the cruel trick played on Lord Crofton and his cronies. That experience had led her to be untrusting of all men.

Until Cy had appeared.

She knew now that he lied just as other so-called gentlemen did. She had fallen for his lies. His sweet words of love. Finola had given him the precious gift she had to give.

All for naught.

She could forgive herself for thinking she had a future with Vane Crofton. She had been young and foolish and hadn't known any better. The hurt now was that she had not learned from that previous experience and was caught in Cy's web of deceit. That's what hurt now. He had made her fall in love with him. With Lord Crofton, she had not had the emotional investment.

But with Cy, damn him to Hell, she still did love him. Or at least the man she thought he was.

None of this did her any good. Finola understood she was not meant to be loved or to love. That her life was to be a lonely one. Yes, she would have her dogs, but even then, she could not become too emotionally invested in them because they, too, would always leave her one day.

Pushing to her feet, she swiped at the remaining tears on her cheeks.

pulled herself together. She collected the two bags from her visit to the village and returned to the house, entering through the kitchens.

"I have lemon cakes for you," she said brightly.

"Lemon cakes!" squealed Gilly, her joy apparent. "Oh, thank you, my lady."

Cook studied her wordlessly as Finola handed over what she had bought at Mr. Simon's store.

"I feel a bit of a headache coming on," she told her servants. "Some food for me, some tea and a lemon cake might help, but I would like a hot bath after I've been for some tea."

"I will put the kettle on, my lady, as well as water for your bath," Gilly replied, handing over the ledger Finola had purchased for Bertie. "The future will be for you."

"Thank you," she said, accepting it.

Going to Banny's study, she placed the ledger inside one of the drawers and sat, forcing her mind to stay blank until the tea and cake arrived.

"The water's on for your bath, my lady," Gilly said. "I do hope you'll be better soon."

Finola smiled weakly and sipped the tea. She tried to force down the lemon cake unsuccessfully. When she finished her tea, she returned to the kitchens and then entered the stillroom. Cook was pouring water into the tub. Finola never made her servants bring the tub and hot water for her. Instead, the three of them used the same tub, which was kept in the stillroom since it was just off the kitchens.

"I'll leave you to it, my lady," Cook said, exiting the room.

She stripped off her clothes and stepped into the tub, sinking until the water came up to her chin. The scent of lavender surrounded her, and she knew Gilly had added some of the oil to the bath.

She couldn't help it. The tears came again and she let them, hoping they would be the last time for them. She would have to put on a stoic face for the world, but for now, she allowed herself to wallow in pity.

Finally, she scrubbed herself and stood, rinsing away the soap and drying off with the bath sheet Gilly had left for her. Wrapped in the bath sheet, Finola returned to her bedchamber and dressed in her nightgown, placing her dressing gown over it, and belting it at the waist. She brushed her hair and left it undone.

Going to the parlor, she removed a book from the shelf as the gran-

to the clock, Banny's pride and joy, chimed eight times. The household went early since they rose well before dawn each morning. Usually, Cook and Gilly were asleep by eight, while Finola would read until half-past eight, then her head to bed. Tonight, though, the book remained open and under her lap. She decided to seek refuge in her bed although she knew sleep would most likely not come for hours.

As she replaced the book on the shelf, a loud pounding sounded from the door.

"I hope so."

Cy. "It could be no one else."

Cook. "Gathering her courage, she stepped from the parlor and saw Gill into the foyer."

"Go back to bed," she ordered. "I will deal with this."

The servant hesitated. "Are you sure, my lady?"

Finola nodded and Gilly left.

The pounding continued, and she moved to the door, steeling herself before she opened it. Cy stood there, a lantern in one hand, wearing a look of desperation.

"Finola."

"I suppose you did not understand the message I gave to Bertie, saying to say it to your face, Your Grace. I want nothing to do with you. I have nothing to say to you. I wish never to see you again. Please do not call at Belldale again."

She closed the door. Or at least tried to. Cy had stuck his booted foot in the door so that the door would not shut. Opening it again, she slammed her palm against the door, forcing him back. Finola closed the door behind her, not wanting to be overheard by lurking servants to hear what she had to say.

"I did not think you to be so thick, Your Grace. You are not welcome at Belldale. You are a liar. I want you to leave."

"Do you, Lady Finola?"

She drew in a quick breath.

"Yes, I have learned your identity, as you have learned mine."

"It doesn't change things between us, Your Grace."

"Why didn't you tell me you were an earl's daughter?"

"Why didn't you tell me you were a duke's son?" she countered.

"I didn't think we could be friends if I did," he said. "Something"

t to bedway you spoke of the *ton* led me to believe you had a very unfak
ok andimpression of them.” He paused. “I didn’t lie to you, Finola.
ght andLieutenant-General Cyrus Cressley. I was wounded and forced to :
read incommission and return to England. I did come to my childhood home
) woulda brother I was never close to wanted nothing to do with me. Margate
even want me staying in his house and only reluctantly allowed me us
on thehunting lodge.”

Cy sighed. “I found a friend in you, Finola. And then even more
you.”

She shook her head, doubt filling her as she saw nothing but hor
y comehis eyes. She hardened herself, not wanting to be duped again by sweet
words.

“Even now, when you are suddenly a duke, you still play games w
I have been down this path before, Your Grace. Yes, I made my cc
many years ago. I was an overweight, idealistic young girl and th
herselfmight have a chance to make a match. To become a wife and mot
look ofhave a family I could love. And Viscount Crofton paid me special at
Fool that I was, I thought he would offer for me.”

Bitterness filled her. “Instead, it was all a game for him and his wo
o I willrakehell friends.”

nothing “What did he do?” Cy asked quietly.

3elldale “He raised my hopes. He kissed me—and then he laughed at me f
thinking he might want someone like me. A chubby no one, with a mi
foot sodowry and no social connections. This was in front of all of his friend
into hischose a girl each Season and one of them pursued her, making her th
wantingwas wanted when she was not.”

longer “This man humiliated you,” Cy said, fury in those piercing green e
“He did. But he taught me that no man could be trusted. I lost n
respect that night, along with Banny, who died that same night. It ha
me years to come to find my self-worth again. I will not let you or
like you tear me down again.”

Finola locked her gaze with his. “I will not be the fool again. Leav
Grace. And never come back.”

She whirled and hurried into the house, slamming and locking th
Leaning her back against it for support, hot tears flooded her eyes and
g in the down her cheeks as she slid down the door to the floor. Cy knocke

vorable pleading for her to open it, telling her that he loved her and they could

I wash things out. She hardened her heart and held her ground, not moving a

sell my Finally, the knocking stopped.

, where He was gone.

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but being shunned by his older brother. He had lost his place in the wo

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needed to speak to her about something important tomorrow. She su

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et, false have then told him she was a lady. It had been wrong for the both of

hide such a secret from the other, especially after they had fallen in lov

with me. But it was too late for them. Even if she did love him, Finola coul

me-out marry him now. He was a bloody duke. He needed to marry a woman

ought I charm and beauty. One who had been raised in the cradle of Polite

her. To and knew how to maneuver through it. The Duke of Margate ne

tention. woman who was comfortable among the *ton*. Who could step forth a

leader. Duchesses were women who set the fashion of the day. Held t

orthless, balls and parties. Sparkled and shone brighter than the sun.

Finola was a woman who worked for a living. Who traipsed a

men's clothing. Who had no friends or family and absolutely no

or even connections. She wasn't comfortable among people and only wante

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d on it,

pleading for her to open it, telling her that he loved her and they could work things out. She hardened her heart and held her ground, not moving a muscle.

Finally, the knocking stopped.

He was gone.

Doubt filled her. No, not doubt. She realized that Cy had loved her. He had been a man lost when he returned to Melrose, receiving not a welcome but being shunned by his older brother. He had lost his place in the world and thought he had found a new life with her. She did recall him saying he needed to speak to her about something important tomorrow. She supposed he was going to confess he was a duke's son before they wed. She would have then told him she was a lady. It had been wrong for the both of them to hide such a secret from the other, especially after they had fallen in love.

But it was too late for them. Even if she did love him, Finola could never marry him now. He was a bloody duke. He needed to marry a woman of great charm and beauty. One who had been raised in the cradle of Polite Society and knew how to maneuver through it. The Duke of Margate needed a woman who was comfortable among the *ton*. Who could step forth and be a leader. Duchesses were women who set the fashion of the day. Held the best balls and parties. Sparkled and shone brighter than the sun.

Finola was a woman who worked for a living. Who traipsed about in men's clothing. Who had no friends or family and absolutely no social connections. She wasn't comfortable among people and only wanted to be around her dogs.

In other words, Lady Finola Honeyfield was the absolute last woman the Duke of Margate should wed.



CHAPTER TWENTY

CY FOLDED THE clothes he had and placed them on the bed for them to be taken back to Melrose. Heaviness weighed upon his heart. Each day now felt like this.

A day without Finola.

He had tried to convince her last night that he loved her. Cy read Finola's eyes that he had betrayed her, much as that viscount she had met of last night. He couldn't begin to fathom the cruelty Lord Croft had shown to Finola, giving her hope of a union between them, only to lead her to embarrassment and a crushing humiliation. Worse, she had met that her beloved Banny had died on that very night. How she had survived such a betrayal and come to be the lovely, gracious woman she was to him. Then again, it shouldn't. Finola was remarkable in every way.

Regret filled him. He wanted to apologize for what he hadn't revealed and wanted her to give him a second chance. She was too bruised from her previous experience, though, and he doubted that would ever occur.

Bertie had waited up until Cy returned the previous evening. He had seen the look of hope in the boy's eyes and hated stamping it out. Cy hadn't said a word. He'd merely shaken his head and gone up the stairs. For the first time since their arrival at the hunting lodge, Bertie had not slept on the floor next to him. He needed to do right by the boy.

And that meant seeing Bertie placed in Finola's care.

As a duke, he would no longer have time to tutor the boy each day as he intended to see Bertie educated, though. He also wanted the lad placed in Finola's care. Bertie had a way with the pups and should not be kept from his litter.

Or from Finola.

Perhaps they could lean upon one another and begin to heal.

He went downstairs and saw Bertie was slicing bread for them, as part of a ham Maisie had brought to them from the Melrose kitchens.

“I have breakfast for you, Your Grace,” the boy said quietly, non-usual energy and sense of fun in play. “I have also steeped the herbs for eyewash.”

Taking a seat, Cy said, “Thank you, Bertie. Servants will be here at six o’clock this morning. They will move my things to Melrose.” He paused. “I am going to see Finola and ask that she take you in.”

The boy had been staring at his untouched food and quickly looked up. “But I am to stay with you, Your Grace. Father said so.”

“You had done an admirable job caring for me, Bertie. The thing is, I don’t have a legion of people to care for me now that I am a duke. I told you I would see that you had a profession to follow. We both know your profession lies in training dogs. I know you love Finola as much as her dogs. I would like to speak to her on your behalf and ask that she make you her apprentice. I wanted to do so before all this mess occurred. Is it still what you want?”

Bertie’s eyes filled with tears. “It is, Your Grace,” he whispered. “I am being with the pups. It just . . . feels right.”

“Then I will make it so. Stay here. Help in any way you can while the servants arrive. When I return, you and I will go into Adderly. Your clothes should be ready by now.”

“Will Finola be angry that you have come again?”

Cy chuckled. “I will wager she will.” He ruffled the boy’s hair. “I will willingly face her wrath on your behalf.”

He removed his eye patch and then applied the wet cloth to his forehead, resting his hand against it to keep it in place as he ate. He worried that the boy would not speak to him and so decided he would write to her instead. His only problem was that he had no writing materials at the hunting location. He would have to convince Gilly to let him into the schoolroom.

Removing the cloth, he gave Bertie a smile and left for Belldale. He ran through the copse but then had to give a wide berth in order to avoid the house. He came to the front of the house, thankful he had not been seen or knocked.

Gilly opened the door. Her jaw dropped, and she sputtered something she did not understand.

Taking control of the situation, Cy said, “I know I am not supposed to be here. That Lady Finola has given you strict orders to slam the door in my face. I must write a letter to her, though, and I had no materials to do so.”

of his want her to take on Bertie. You know how good the lad is with the
for your Gilly. In my letter, I will ask your mistress to allow Bertie to stay

Belldale and be her apprentice. Would you let me in so that I might write
at nine letter? I fear if I approach Lady Finola, she will not hear me out.”

used. “I He paused, playing on the girl’s sympathies. “It is for Bertie I
Please.”

ked up. “All right,” Gilly said, reluctance in her voice. “But be quick and
Your Grace.”

s, I will Cy went to where he had schooled Bertie and removed an inkwell
r father quill from a cupboard. He found parchment and scribbled out a brief
r future Finola.

Might I When he finished, he found Cook standing outside the door. She had
e? She kind to Bertie and him.

” “Are you trying to make it right with her ladyship, Your Grace?”

“I love He shook his head. “For Bertie, Cook. Not for me. I fear I have
Lady Finola’s trust. She wishes to have nothing to do with me.”

hen the “It was hard for her. Coming here after her father’s death. Those
ur new up in Scotland not wanting her. Sir Roscoe was good for her lady, and
was good for him.” Cook paused. “I think you would also be good for
Your Grace. Try to mend things between you.”

“But I “I am fighting first for Bertie, Cook,” he told the old woman.
second. Once Bertie is taken care of—and Lady Finola has some
is eyes, ponder our situation—I will try again. I will never keep trying, Cook
Finola the love of my life.”

ad. The The servant nodded in approval. “Give me the letter, Your Grace
lge. He see it in her hands and make certain she reads it.”

He gave her a spontaneous hug. “Thank you, Cook. I will wait at the
Cy cut of the copse. Lady Finola can find me there and give me her reply.”

the dog She pinkened. “I want what’s best for Lady Finola. I think that is y
en, and Cy watched the woman waddle off and slipped from the house
more, he gave a wide berth to the back of the house and the dog
hing he doubted Finola would come close to exercising the dogs near the
which is why he thought it safe to wait there.

ed to be He reached the edge of the woods and began his vigil.

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do so. I

e dogs,
here at



rite that FINOLA FINISHED WORKING with Triton and returned him to the dog run
called to Hermes and the dog came running, eager to leave the pen
do this, today's work. She had him heel and was leading Hermes away from
run when she saw Cook coming her way. That in itself was odd. Cool
bout it, left the kitchens, must less the house.

"A note for you, my lady," the servant said, handing over a folde
rell and of parchment.

note to She accepted it, wondering who might be sending her a message. |
the ones she received were sealed by the signet rings of the aristocra
ad been opened it and glanced down the page for the name of its author.

Cy . . .

broken Refolding it, she thrust it at Cook. "Take it back," she demanded.
"I cannot do that, my lady. Because you haven't read it." Cook
her arms and stared at Finola, stubbornness written across her face.

sisters "Is he here?" she asked, her voice shaking.

and she "He was. He left. But I promised him that you would read this."

for her, "You had no right."

Cook's eyes flashed. "I have every right, my lady. I have watch
"I am grow up these many years. You are the closest thing to a daughter I w
time to have. I have seen you smile. Laugh. Play. And I have seen you wour
. She is others. I have fed you and listened to you and burst at pride with w
have become. The least you could do for me to repay me for all thos
I will invested in you is to read the note." She paused. "Read the note, my
the old woman encouraged.

he edge Reluctantly, Finola opened it again.

ou." *Lady Finola –*

Once *I know you do not wish to hear from me, but I have a final favor to as*
run. He *you. It regards Bertie.*

copse, *I will have many servants to look after me now. Bertie's heart lies i*
you and your pups. We both know the lad has an innate sense of hou
handle a dog and the way to draw the best from him or her. He also
grown fond of not only your pups—but you.

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I ask that you take Bertie in and allow him to apprentice with you. You will find a tutor for him so that he might continue his morning lessons then work with the litter each afternoon. I know I can trust you to keep safely under your roof and care for him.

Please put aside any hard feelings you have toward me. Bertie is blameless. Do what is best for the boy.

If you agree to this, meet me now at the edge of the copse.

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Finola re-read the contents again and looked up. "I will go and meet Grace. He is asking that Bertie Briggs join our household. His Grace will provide a tutor to continue the boy's lessons and then Bertie will work with me and the dogs each afternoon. Would you please have Gilly prepare for Bertie to sleep?"

"I will, my lady."

Cook left, and Finola decided to keep Hermes with her. She led him from the house and toward the edge of Belldale, where the woods began, dividing her property from that of the Duke of Margate. As she drew close, she recognized Cy's familiar figure pacing in the distance. He caught sight of her and came to a halt, watching as she approached.

Her heart began to ache, a physical pain in her chest, as she drew near. He looked so handsome. She thought of the kisses they had shared. The ones they had made for their future. It almost caused her to collapse in the years. Instead, she pressed on, her mouth set in a firm line.

"Thank you for coming," he said when she reached him. "Will you bring Bertie?"

"Of course. He has a way with the dogs that simply cannot be taught more than instinct. It is intuitive on his part."

"He would be miserable if I took him away from the dogs. Or you. I agree to have him come to Belldale, Your Grace, but you are not allowed to visit him there. If you wish to see him, it will have to be at Melrose."

"I understand. Could you . . . would you send me a monthly report on the fares?"

Finola would sooner stab herself in the heart than write to this man she still loved.

u. I “No, but I can send him to Melrose once a month and he can show you himself how he is doing. Of course, you will be in London for a portion of the year, with the Season and whatnot.”

His brow furrowed. “Why would I wish to partake in the Season?”

e is She felt her face grow warm. “Naturally, you will wish to find a duchess, Your Grace. Heirs do not grow on trees.”

The heat in his eyes nearly undid her as he said, “There will be no duchess, my lady. No children. No heir.”

Cy “Why not?” she asked, her body beginning to tremble, her voice sweet. He let her breath unsteady.

ice will Cy gave her the saddest smile she had ever seen. “Because the only woman I wish to be in that role is you.”

a place She flinched at his words. No, he did not mean it. She was not an heir. She could be duchess material. He would change his mind. Cy was a man who would take his duties as Duke of Margate seriously. He would want to ensure that everything in his away certain his people were looked after and not leave that to chance. To avoid a distant family member or even letting the title and lands return to the crown. He would come to see all this in time.

caught And then he would find a worthy woman to wed.

“Send Bertie to me as soon as you would like, Your Grace,” she said formally.

e plans “We have talked. He wants to be at the funeral with me tomorrow. The funeral will be held in the church at eleven o’clock tomorrow morning.” Cy heard

“Reverend Hall also agreed to perform our wedding Friday morning at the same time. In case you change your mind.”

Her face now flamed, and she shook her head violently. “You are right. It is wrong to speak to him of such a thing,” Finola protested.

He smiled wryly. “At the time, I thought we still loved one another. I wished to wed. I even told Reverend Hall for the first time I was not interested in what others thought, with us marrying so soon after my brother’s death. He assured me he would make it known that he knew of the wedding arrangements before His Grace’s untimely death.”

of how Cy reached for her hand and took it. She tried to pull away, but he threaded his fingers through hers.

man. A “We can still marry on Friday, Finola. Or the day after that. Or the day after that one. The license is good for two weeks. I know I hurt you

re with sharing who I was, but I had planned to do so before we spoke our
a goodam sorry I did not tell you I was Margate's son. Or that I was brothe
new duke."

His brother had been duke for several years. She supposed Cy had
id your known of his father's passing and only learned of it when he returned
the war.

be no The thing is, Finola did still love him. She could easily forgive Cy
telling her of his rank in Polite Society. After all, she had not told
haking hers. She also realized he hadn't even considered that he was his brother's
heir and that Margate's death had caught him by surprise.

ie only But it was *because* she loved him that she could no longer marry him.
deserved a woman who would fit seamlessly into the world of the duke and
d never become one of its ranking members. Banny had teasingly called Finola
an whatomboy, and she knew that's what she was. Not a woman of beauty or
o make or style or grace. She was the antithesis of what Polite Society would
mother, in a duchess.

crown. Yet she knew Cy would never accept such reasoning. If she shared
him why she hesitated to marry him, he would convince her to do so.
could never allow that. It would be difficult enough for Cy himself
he said into a role he never expected to be thrust upon him. The proper wife
smooth the way for him and help him make friends and see that doors
It is too easily to him. She could never make those things happen because she
sitated, the kind of woman a duke—or any gentleman—married.

at that "Let the past be the past, Your Grace," she told him. "I will attend
funeral and take Bertie home with me tomorrow."

u were Cy stiffened. "His things will be back at Melrose. Would you come
coming there after the funeral? Arnold told me it is expected for me to
her and the house and allow the mourners to come and gather."

worried "Yes, I can do so. Have Bertie pack his things. I won't stay long."

s death. Cy squeezed her fingers. "Thank you for taking the lad, my lady.
wedding worships you and would have been forlorn if kept from you."

He released her and took a step back. Finola longed to step to him
but he wrapped her arms about his neck and pull her down to him for a long, deep
kiss. She had to bite her lip and stand her ground so that she wouldn't
the day toward him and ruin everything.

by not "Until tomorrow, Your Grace," she said.

vows. I Finola hurried away, calling Hermes to come with her. She didn't
r to the turn back and look at Cy.

But she knew he was watching every step she took away from him
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Finola hurried away, calling Hermes to come with her. She didn't dare turn back and look at Cy.

But she knew he was watching every step she took away from him.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CY ALLOWED HUNT, the valet he had inherited from his brother, to finish the cravat. Once done, Hunt helped Cy slip into his new tailcoat, and Mr. Timmon had been waiting for him yesterday when he'd taken Bertie to the tailor to get his new clothes, as well as pick up the last of his own clothing at the tailor's shop. He didn't care if others thought it odd that the son rode in the ducal carriage with him. They were going to the same place where he would enjoy Bertie's company for the short time they had left together.

Mr. Timmon had told Cy the minute he heard that the Duke of Melrose had passed, he knew the new duke would need appropriate funeral garments. The tailor had made up the sober, severe black coat. The tailor had allowed Bertie to try on his new clothes and while the boy did so, Mr. Timmon told Cy he would need to order many more clothes.

When he questioned why he would do so, the tailor had looked at him for a moment and then told him a duke needed ten times the wardrobe he owned, including evening clothes for social occasions. Cy informed the tailor that he would send word if anything else needed to be made up in the near future and that Mr. Timmon had his measurements to do so. The tailor asked for the Season and all that would be needed since it was right around the corner.

That was when Cy informed him he had no plans to attend this Season or any other.

His words had caused an abrupt halt to their conversation. Bertie appeared then, and Mr. Timmon fussed over the boy a bit before they returned to Melrose.

Mrs. Carroll had dashed out with a basket telling him she had more cakes for him as she pressed the basket's handle into his hand. She had thanked him for opening the funeral to the public, telling Cy that a number of the villagers would be in attendance. Not for the dead duke.

But for Cy, the new Duke of Margate.

He had thanked the baker, and then he and Bertie had climbed into the carriage.

ducal carriage to return to Melrose. It had felt wrong of him riding something so grand. Cy was a man of simple tastes and the vehicle looked to him like something the King of England would travel in.

Glancing into the mirror, he saw he looked appropriately dressed and thanked Hunt.

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“It is a pleasure to serve you, Your Grace.” Then worry filled the face. “That is, if you wish me to serve you. I will understand if you let another valet.”

“I have no other valet in mind, Hunt,” he assured the servant. “You’re stuck with me.”

Hunt beamed. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Cy dismissed the valet. He didn’t truly want a valet but knew a man in his position was expected to have one. If he let Hunt go, the servant would be out of a job. He would just have to get used to one and told him to think of it as another Briggs, a batman for civilian life.

Going downstairs, he entered the breakfast room. Arnold greeted him and asked what he would like.

“Anything Cook makes will suit me.”

Arnold signaled a footman and sent him to the kitchens and informed Cy that the coffin had been delivered to the church for the morning’s service.

“Thank you for handling those details, Arnold,” he said.

“Of course, Your Grace.”

As he sat, a footman pulling out his chair for him, Cy doubted he would ever hear his name again. Already, he had been called Your Grace countless hundred times.

Besides, the only person who might have used it was no longer sitting at the table left to him.

Cy ate, looking over the London newspapers that rested next to him. They were a few days old. Arnold had told him the former duke had delivered twice a week to Melrose. He supposed he better start reading them thoroughly so as to be informed.

A footman entered the room and spoke briefly to Arnold, who prompted him to come to Cy.

“Your Grace, Mr. Solway is here.”

“Who might that be?”

ding in “He is your solicitor, Your Grace.”

cle had “Have him wait in my study.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

sed and Cy finished his breakfast, which had been delicious, and refrained from rubbing his left eye. He had not done the eyewash this morning and his valet’s already tell his eyes were dry and irritated. He chuckled to himself, bearing in mind the mourners in attendance at the funeral would think his reddened eyes were due to tears. No, he would shed none for Charles. If any came, they would be for the dream he would have given up.

A life with Finola.

He wasn’t ready to do so just yet. Cy still held out hope that her feelings for him remained as strong as his feelings for her. That given time, he would see he was the same man he had been before a ducal title had been bestowed upon him.

A thought occurred to him. They had made love the one time.

What if a child resulted from that coupling?

He hoped it did—because that might be the one thing which would convince Finola to wed him. She would love a child and would not keep her from their father, much less all the wealth and entitlement that would come by being the offspring of a duke.

Or would she?

Turning to Arnold, he said, “Have my carriage readied. I will not be waiting for Mr. Solway for long. And have young Bertie summoned. He will accompany me to Adderly. Be sure you allow plenty of time for the staff to reassemble to a church, as well.”

Finally, Arnold’s exterior showed the faint sign of a crack. “Your speaking might you make the boy a page? Or he could be placed in the stables and could be trained to be a groom and eventually a driver. I know you are a good plate of the lad but—”

“Bertie will be leaving us today, Arnold. He will be going to accompany them with Lady Finola Honeyfield and work with her in training her stables. Now, tell the stables to prepare my carriage *and* summon Bertie.” He proceeded and lowered his voice so only the two of them and not all the footmen could hear. “And please keep your opinions to yourself.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the butler assured him.

“Yes, Your Grace,” the butler assured him.

Cy left the breakfast room and went to his study. It was a room

comfortable in, likely because he had no sense of Charles having ever

He entered, and a man with light brown hair and hazel eyes rose.

Grace, I am Solway. My father has been the Cressley family solicitor for many years, but he recently took a tumble and broke his leg. I work with him now and so have come to Melrose in his place."

Believing "Are you familiar with my holdings?"

My eye was "I am, Your Grace. Quite familiar, seeing as how you are our most important client."

"You have a quarter-hour to say what you came to say."

Quickly, the solicitor ran through the list of estates owned by the Earl of Margate and the location of each. He was informed that he owned two estates, Finola and that trade was brisk and profitable. Solway gave Cy a figure and said it had been what was deposited in the Bank of England.

"Of course, you also draw yearly income from Melrose, as well as your steward can help familiarize you with the workings of Melrose, Your Grace. You might also go through the ledgers with him and have him explain what the estate produces and what portion of that is due to you."

My eye on him "I will. Anything else, Mr. Solway?"

It would "No, Your Grace. I plan to return to London now." The solicitor produced a card, and Cy took it. "You may write to Father or me at this address, and we will come whenever you need to speak with us."

He was with Cy found it curious that the man would come this far and not stay in the company of a funeral service.

Each the "You are welcome to attend the funeral, Mr. Solway."

"I really had no relationship with His Grace, Your Grace. My father's Grace, better spent back at the office in London."

My eyes. He "Then good day to you."

My eye fond "Thank you."

He decided that his new solicitor had no fondness for the previous one. It caused him to wonder who might show up at today's service.

My eye on the panels. When Cy went outside, he found Bertie awaiting him beside the carriage. He paused "To the church," he instructed the coachman, thinking he would present learn the man's name, as well as meet all his other servants and tenants.

In the carriage, Cy told Bertie, "Lady Finola will be at today's service. She will return to Melrose with the mourners and when she leaves, she will take you with her. Be sure to take all your belongings."

used it. Tears formed in the boy's eyes, and Cy said, "Don't worry. You
"Yourhow much fun you will have living with her and working with the pu
itor forhas agreed that you can come to Melrose every month to visit and upc
ith himon what you have been doing."

Bertie now began to cry. Cy placed an arm about him. "I may need
train a pup for me. Just think—I could be the owner of a Honeyfield
ir mosttrained by Bertie Briggs."

The lad smiled through his tears. "I'd be happy to do so, Your Grace
They arrived in Adderly a short time later and after they left the c
Duke ofhe said, "Go inside the church, Bertie, and stay. I need to find Reverend
o shipsand speak with him."

aid that They entered the church, and he saw the coffin standing at the f
man in his early twenties came to greet them, explaining he was the cu
l. Your "Where is Reverend Hunt?"

Grace. "He is still at the vicarage, Your Grace."

in what "Thank you."

Cy went next door and knocked on the door. A servant answered
him to the clergyman's study. The door was open. He lightly tapped
roducedframe, and Reverend Hunt motioned him in. Cy entered and closed th
ss, andbehind him.

"Have a seat, Your Grace. I was just reading over my eulogy."
for the "I wanted to visit with you before the service began. I would ask t
do not mention tomorrow's wedding to anyone." He hesitated ar
added, "There may not be one. In fact, I highly doubt there will be."
time is "I see. If and when there is, I will be here and ready to perfo
ceremony."

He liked that Reverend Hall did not press him on the issue.
"I also will not mention anything to my wife. She has, shall I
s duke.tendency to let her mouth run away with her. If the time comes, thou
you and Lady Finola do wish to speak your vows sometime in the n
rriage. weeks, I can summon Mrs. Hall as a witness if need be."

need to "Thank you. I have one other issue to discuss with you."

3. Briefly, Cy explained how he been tutoring Bertie every morni
funeral.then the boy had been working with Lady Finola in training her Hor
she willspaniels.

"He is the son of my batman. Bertie has become very dear to me."

u knowlike to continue the present arrangement, with Bertie focusing on his ps. Shein the morning and dog training in the afternoon. Do you know late mecandidates who might serve as the boy's tutor? I would pay handsome the position were all day."

l you to Reverend Hall steepled his fingers. "I have the perfect candidate in spanielYour Grace. My wife's nephew. He is finishing his university education the end of this term and is looking for work as a tutor. The boy also ce." himself a writer. This position would allow him to earn his keep and g arriage, plenty of time to discover whether or not he has what it takes t nd Hallpublished author."

"He sounds perfect for the position. Would you write to him and s ront. Ais interested? If so, I will contact him myself and explain the situati rate. salary. I could even allow him use of the hunting lodge where I stay recently. It is only a short walk to Belldale from it."

"I will do so, Your Grace. Thank you. It is a most generous offer."

Cy excused himself and went outside, seeing a few people stair and ledenter the church. He noticed Stoneham standing beside his carriage an on thehis way to him.

he door "Your Grace."

He grimaced at the address and asked, "Do you ever tire of heari title used over and over? As if people are thrilled to be speaking to hat youand can't help but let the title roll from their tongue."

id then Stoneham laughed. "I understand better than most and yes, I tiresome and distracting. Why don't we decide to forego using it when orrm thealone? I am Pierce."

"I am Cy. Thank you. You might be keeping me from goin Pierce."

say, a "Shall we walk?"

gh, and They fell into step together, moving away from the church. Cy kne ext twohad a good half-hour before the service began.

"So, you find yourself in my shoes. Suddenly a duke. At least yo the heir and not taken unaware as I was. From haberdasher to duke ing andblink of an eye."

eyfield He shrugged. "From soldier to duke. I truly did not expect this. I h gone from England a long time and assumed my brother had wed. I wouldarrived, I found our father had died several years ago and my brother

studies extremely poor health. You would think I would have realized with
of anything so sick and without a son that I should have considered the possi-
ly, as if that I might become the next Duke of Margate.”

“But you didn’t.”

n mind, “No. I was too busy adjusting to life outside the army and with o-
ation at eye to see the world.” He paused. “And falling in love. Oh, I have
fancies mess of that, Pierce.”

ive him “Did you tell Finola of your new status? How did she react?”

o be a “You mean *Lady* Finola? I am certain you and your duchess were
of that fact.”

ee if he Pierce nodded solemnly. “We were. That is why I encouraged you
ion and keep secrets from one another. I was speaking of Finola as much as yo-

ed until “I tried to tell her the day we returned from Stonecrest. She was t-
on her dogs, however, and then I was called away to Melrose. My
died a few hours after I arrived.”

rting to “So, she learned you were a duke before you could tell her you
d made duke’s son.”

He shook his head. “Worse than that. While I was at Melrose, si-
Bertie into the village to cheer him up from being parted from Pollu-
ng your Hunt, the reverend’s wife, is a gossip. *She* is the one who shared with
a duke that Margate had died—and his brother, recently returned from the w-
now the new duke.”

find it “Ouch!” his new friend declared.

we are “Things went from bad to worse, Pierce. Finola wants nothing to
me. I tried to explain how I had tried to tell her. How nothing need
g mad, between us. Yes, we would both have titles, but we were the same peo-
have always been.”

Cy shook his head. “Nothing I said mattered. I had broken her tru-
ew they revealed she had been hurt years earlier by a man during her cc-

Season. A man who betrayed her in the worst way. Finola feels
ou were betrayed her. And in her mind, that is an unforgivable sin.”

e in the Pierce placed a hand on Cy’s shoulder. “Would you like me to s-
her? Or Nalyssa?”

ad been “No, that is kind of you to offer, but I don’t wish to hurt her fri-
When I with the two of you. If you spoke on my behalf, it would be as if y-
was in chosen sides. *Not* her side. She needs a friend who will be loyal to

Charles botched things badly. I will give her time. I am hoping that will heal visibility between us and that Finola will realize love can conquer all. I vow not to think about loving another woman except Finola, and I will certainly not love anyone who is not her.”

“Only one,” Pierce squeezed Cy’s shoulder. “Know I am here for you. We do need to make a special place for those who never expected to be one—need to stick together.”

“Thank you for your support.” He looked around. “We should go to the church. I invited the public, fearing Charles was so disliked that no one aware would attend if I did not open it up.”

“You’ll have a seat,” Pierce assured him. “A duke always does. Do not to perk of our position.”

“Yes, Cy.” They crossed the road and went into the church, which was just past the gate. Reverend Hall gestured to them, and they made their way up the aisle to the first row, which was empty.

“See? I told you,” Pierce said. “Of course, this is the ducal pew. A duke is expected to help maintain things, such as the roof of the church. He attends.”

Reverend Hall caught Cy’s eyes, and he nodded to the clerk. Mrs. figuring it was time to start the service. Cy did his best not to turn around. He had not spied her as they walked up the aisle.

He hoped she would come. He hoped she had changed her mind. Bowing his head, he prayed she would forgive him.

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botched things badly. I will give her time. I am hoping that will heal the rift between us and that Finola will realize love can conquer all. I vow never to think about loving another woman except Finola, and I will certainly not wed anyone who is not her.”

Pierce squeezed Cy’s shoulder. “Know I am here for you. We dukes—especially those who never expected to be one—need to stick together.”

“Thank you for your support.” He looked around. “We should go inside the church. I invited the public, fearing Charles was so disliked that no one would attend if I did not open it up.”

“You’ll have a seat,” Pierce assured him. “A duke always does. It is a perk of our position.”

They crossed the road and went into the church, which was packed. Reverend Hall gestured to them, and they made their way up the aisle, sitting in the first row, which was empty.

“See? I told you,” Pierce said. “Of course, this is the ducal pew and the duke is expected to help maintain things, such as the roof of the church he attends.”

Reverend Hall caught Cy’s eyes, and he nodded to the clergyman, figuring it was time to start the service. Cy did his best not to turn around and look for Finola. He had not spied her as they walked up the aisle.

He hoped she would come. He hoped she had changed her mind.

Bowing his head, he prayed she would forgive him.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Seven weeks later . . .

CY LEFT FOR London immediately after his visit with Bertie. He had to do a lot of business in town—and he did.

Revenge.

He had spent the weeks since he had parted from Finola by learning all he could about what being the Duke of Margate meant. He had spent a great deal of time closeted with his steward, gathering information about Melrose and its tenants. He had gone through the ledgers for the last decade, back to his father's time as the duke, to see what the estate produced and how much it cost to maintain. He began to do what he thought should be done by a duke, meaning to improve the land for others on Melrose lands, but others in the area, as well.

Though he didn't have time at the present to visit his other holdings, he had written to the various stewards on these properties and had them come to Melrose, where he questioned them about the estates they managed, gathering information about everything he could and promising to visit these properties in the near future.

He had also met with Reverend Hall, and they had come up with a program for improving the church. He also wanted to do things to improve the town of Adderly. He had even socialized some, inviting neighbors to dine with him and his family so that he might get to know them and build relationships.

All the while he did his, he pined for Finola.

Cy decided if she were ever to move on from the wrongs done to her by Lord Crofton that the viscount would have to be put in his place.

And who better to do that than a duke?

Cy had journeyed to London, stopping at Stonecrest on his way. He had spent a few hours walking the land with Pierce and Pollux. Taking Lord White's friend's advice, he had gone to White's after he reached town, invoking his membership and becoming familiar with the club's staff. It was here that he first laid eyes upon Lord Crofton. Cy did not approach the viscount.

ask for any kind of introduction to him. Instead, he avoided Crofton and he went to Bow Street.

This was the place Pierce had said Cy would have the most success carrying out his plans. He learned that Bow Street runners were a private police force, men who investigated others and crimes which had committed. They also found people—ones who had run away or were missing, up to ones who had become heirs to a title and needed to be located. They investigated robberies, assaults, and even murders.

Cy had met with a Mr. Franklin, who listened to Cy's request. He told the certain he did not reveal his plans for revenge, merely saying he had background information regarding Viscount Crofton, everything that Cy had found about the man.

Mr. Franklin had not asked why Cy was interested in the viscount and his merely introduced him to the Bow Street runner who would take care to his Surprisingly, the agent was a woman.

He had been thoroughly impressed with Miss Shelby Slade. She was caring attractive and intelligent, the only female runner employed by the organization. Miss Slade had asked for a week to investigate and collect information about Lord Crofton. He thought it a reasonable amount of time and agreed to the arrangement.

Cy had gone about his business, seeing his solicitor and getting a grasp of the immense wealth he had stepped into. He spent a full two weeks with a Mr. Solway's company, finding out the extent of his various investments and even meeting with his banker about the accounts and monies held for him so he would not be the lazy duke Charles had been. He would use his position and wealth for good, both for the people on his estates and even distant strangers.

He did not know what charitable actions he might take in London. Given time, he knew he would decide.

Hopefully, with Finola by his side.

Cy had also gone to obtain a special license so that he and Finola could wed at a moment's notice. The sum he paid to purchase it was outrageous. Yet he wanted to be prepared in case she might change her mind. If it ever passed that the license expired, he would merely renew it, again and again, never giving up hope that they might eventually marry.

He had actually enjoyed going to the Cressley townhouse, having

even as seen it before. His staff appeared competent and a bit curious about the employer but kept a courteous, professional distance from him.

Now on his fifth day in town, he was breakfasting when his secretary informed him that Miss Slade had arrived, and Cy asked that she be admitted to his study. Anticipation filled him, knowing the agent must have discovered something of interest since they were not scheduled to meet for another two days.

Cy left the breakfast room and went to meet with Miss Slade, who was seated in a chair, patiently awaiting his arrival. He closed the door, not wanting his conversation to be overheard.

She rose and nodded brusquely to him. "Your Grace." She took a seat again.

When he had first met her, he had found her attire most interesting. She had been dressed similarly to the way Finola did, wearing a man's clothing.

telling him it helped her move about London and other places more easily. Today, though, she was dressed in a typical gown, looking quite feminine.

He took a seat behind the desk and said, "I suppose you have something interesting to tell me, Miss Slade."

She handed him a sheaf of papers, and he accepted them as she indicated.

"This is my background report regarding Lord Crofton. You may read it at your leisure. I do, however, have someone I wish for you to meet. A gentleman I have come across that has an interesting story to share with you. He is Lord Sears now, but he held no title when he was acquainted with me. Cy Viscount Crofton. I think after you hear Lord Sears' story that you will have all the information you require in which to confront Lord Crofton."

"You believe I wish to confront him? I have never expressed any intentions toward the viscount."

A knowing look shone in her eyes. "A gentleman does not ask for everything possible about another gentleman unrelated to him unless he has something in mind. Based upon Lord Sears' account, I would say you might want to revenge, Your Grace."

Cy started to protest and then knew that would insult the runner. He came to want to hurt Lord Crofton. Someone very dear to me was hurt by him.

"Are you available at two o'clock this afternoon, Your Grace? If so, I will bring Lord Sears here to you."

"That would be agreeable, Miss Slade. Would you be able to stay with me tonight?"

“Your Grace, I will read your report now? I might have questions for you.”

“Of course, Your Grace. You are currently my only case. I believe that once you meet with Lord Sears, my work will be done.”

Cy turned his attention to the agent’s report and began reading about Lord Crofton. He learned the man was the only son of an earl and that he had several older sisters, both married with children. Viscount Crofton’s mother had passed when he was a boy, and his father was in poor health now. Cy expected that the earl would soon be gone, and his only son would assume his father’s title.

That was important because Lord Crofton had racked up numerous gambling debts. His anticipation of receiving his father’s title and the money that accompanied it was the only thing keeping his creditors and the law at bay.

He learned that the man was four and thirty and had kept a steady stream of mistresses until the past two years, when his debts forced him to give up the luxury. Crofton went to the occasional brothel now, where his tastes were nothing known to be what the report termed unique.

Cy finished reading and looked to Miss Slade, asking, “What does the agent mean by unique, in regard to Crofton’s sexual appetite?”

“I did not want anything on the page of this nature, Your Grace, but I will tell you that Lord Crofton enjoys abusing his partners. Not only verbally, but he is known for his rough play with the conveniences. Women who have suffered blackened eyes. Broken bones. Burn marks. A litany of complaints. His stomach turned, thinking of the poor lightskirts who had no choice but to service such men as Crofton.

“You talk of mistresses, mentioning several of them by name.”

She pursed her lips a moment and then said, “It seems Lord Crofton no longer affords to keep a mistress, due to his financial situation. The former mistresses who granted me an interview both spoke of his cruelty and were glad to be done with him.”

Cy shook his head. “It appears Viscount Crofton is even more cruel than I had imagined.”

Her gaze met his. “Whatever you have planned for him, Your Grace, I cannot hesitate to see it carried through. This man is evil personified.”

“He hurt someone I love,” he revealed to her. “I need him to pay for what he did to her.”

Miss Slade rose. "I will leave you to your day, Your Grace. Leave after Lord Sears and me at two o'clock. I can see myself out."

The Bow Street runner left Cy's study, and he returned his attention to Lordher detailed report, reading through it again slowly to make certain he had not missed anything. His strong sense of justice wanted to avenge not only her had—but those poor unfortunate women who had suffered under Lord Crofton. It was hard.

Hours later, Cy had gone to the drawing room, anticipating his visitors.

He had told his butler to have tea brought when his visitors arrived and he wanted absolute privacy as he spoke to his guests.

At two o'clock up and down, the teacart appeared, along with his gaming and Miss Slade, who was accompanied by a man appearing to be in his twenties or so. He had nondescript brown hair and eyes and was thin and gangly.

After introductions, Cy asked Miss Slade to pour out for them and as they were they all had their cup of tea, he looked to Lord Sears.

"Tell me your story, my lord."

Lord Sears' hand trembled, causing the cup and saucer he held to rattle.

He set it on the table next to him and took a deep breath, slowly exhaling. "Your Grace, I will preface my remarks by saying I am a different man now—than I was when these events took place."

"I am not here to judge you, my lord. I merely seek information regarding your complaints." Lord Crofton.

Lord Sears nodded in understanding and reached for his tea again, taking a sip before speaking.

"I was newly graduated from university, a naïve young man, twenty-two years of age. I had flown through my coursework. Academics always interested me more than people, to be honest. I am not saying this as an excuse, merely to let you understand of my youth and inexperience."

Lord Sears swallowed, collecting his thoughts.

"Because I was inexperienced and easily influenced, I looked up to my cousin, my aunt's oldest boy. He was almost ten years my senior and what I understood, ran with a fast crowd. I did not imagine myself to be a rake by any stretch of the imagination. At twenty, I had yet to ever had a woman. Still, my cousin was dashing and debonair, as were his friends. Season had already begun by the time I reached town, and my cousin

ook forme into his circle of friends.

“Immediately, I knew I was out of my depth. These were men who spent their time in the gaming hells once they left each other had no social affair. I went with them to these various *ton* events—balls, *Finolamusicales*. I then accompanied them to the gaming hells, never playing a single bet.”

“And Lord Crofton was a member of this group?”

“He was not only a member, Your Grace. He was their ringleader and the head of their club.”

“Club?” Cy asked.

Sears nodded. “Yes. Not a social club such as White’s or Brooks’. It was a mid-club of their own creation. They called it the Epsilon Club, but Lord Crofton jokingly referred to it by another name. The Enticement Club.”

The viscount then outlined what the Epsilon Club did. How they would choose one woman a year, one who was making her come-out. They were wallflowers, young ladies who oftentimes had lost one or both parents and were lacking in confidence and friends.

“I know once I arrived and became one of their companions, I was allowed to dance with a Lady Finola. I did so, finding her to be sweet and unassuming. I learned that she was the prey of the Epsilons that Season. No member of the club would pay her a bit of attention, but one member had been chosen to woo this particular prey.”

He hid his shock in hearing that the story unfolding featured a young woman taking herself. Lord Sears again reached for his teacup, his hand shaking. By the time the tea had cooled, and he downed the cup’s contents. Cy knew the man was trying to calm himself and gather his thoughts and refrained from speaking. The viscount continued to stare into space, so Cy softly encouraged him to “Continue, my lord.”

That broke the other man’s reverie, and he said, “I could not be a part of what they were doing, Your Grace. I thanked my cousin for inviting me to share a friendship with his companions, but I told him I had received word from home that I was needed at home. I left him with the impression that my father was ailing and left town as quickly as possible. My parents rarely attend the Season, preferring the country and their horses and dogs. Mama had been a kiss away from encouraging me to go to London for the Season, thinking a little London polish might do me some good.”

The viscount shuddered. “Instead, I never attended the Season and do not know what they did to Lady Finola. My cousin only spoke to her one night, saying Crofton would have a bit of fun with her and then put her in a safe place.”

Cy didn't care how the Bow Street runner had found Lord Sears and his daughter. “Thank you for coming forward, my lord. My butler will see you out.”

Only Viscount Crofton.

“I have told no one this story, Your Grace. Not even my wife. I married the daughter of a local squire shortly after my return home. We have a son and daughter.” Lord Sears' eyes welled with tears. “I think of my son—how I would feel if a group of bored men played such a vicious, cruel trick on her.”

The viscount paused. “I am not a violent man—but I would have done anything if my girl were hurt.” He sighed. “It is why I have come to you tonight after Miss Slade's urging.”

Cy didn't care how the Bow Street runner had found Lord Sears and his daughter.

“Thank you for coming forward, my lord. My butler will see you out.” He rang for the servant and asked the butler to see Lord Sears to the street and once they were gone, he turned to Miss Slade. “You are right. I do not need anything further.”

She nodded. “If you do, I spoke to two of Crofton's former mistresses.

They are willing to meet with you—for a price. I also had a conversation with one of the women targeted by the Epsilon Club. Why now, did not wish to share her story with you, she did tell it to me and a man could pass it along to you.”

The agent shook her head. “As for the other members of this club? It has been disbanded. They moved on. Each has wed. Except, for Lord Crofton.”

“It is unnecessary to speak to the woman. She has suffered enough and my work here is done.”

Cy rose, as did Miss Slade. He offered her his hand.

“You have done a remarkable job in a short amount of time, Miss Slade. While I hope I have no further need of your services in the future, please let me know where to go if I ever have a problem which needs to be solved. I will be good word with Mr. Franklin regarding your work on my case.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. I hope your loved one will heal, know it

again. "Crofton has been made to pay for his sins."

He thought of Finola—brave, beautiful Finola—who had been driven by the horrible prank played upon her by Crofton and his Epsilon Club to leave their company and find her beloved Banny dead and gone.

Cy would avenge Finola.

He would bring Viscount Crofton to his knees.

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Crofton has been made to pay for his sins.”

He thought of Finola—brave, beautiful Finola—who had been devastated by the horrible prank played upon her by Crofton and his Epsilon Club, only to leave their company and find her beloved Banny dead and gone.

Cy would avenge Finola.

He would bring Viscount Crofton to his knees.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CY COULD HAVE asked one of his footmen—or even Miss Shelby Slade to go about buying up the markers at the various gaming hells which Lord Crofton had frequented. Instead, he wanted to do it himself. He didn't know the word reached Crofton or not.

In fact, he hoped it would.

He made certain to get to a London tailor Pierce had recommended to him, telling the man he needed evening clothes. Though Cy wanted them ready by the next day, a feat which should have been impossible during the Season, he discovered anything could be managed once he informed the tailor that he was a duke. In fact, the tailor practically begged Cy to allow him to make up a new wardrobe for him. He agreed to a few items, knowing it would be wise to establish a relationship with a tailor in London, but not, he preferred the bulk of his money going to Mr. Timmon. The tailor was well known to Cy and had done excellent work over the years. He believed in supporting the craftsmen close to him.

Combing through the report compiled by Miss Slade, he was pleased to find thorough her work was. It contained a list of debts owed to each gaming hell. He didn't want to ask how she had managed to come up with firm numbers, especially such as these. After all, magicians didn't reveal the magic behind their tricks. He would not ask her how she had delivered the vast amount of information to him in so short a time.

Cy merely visited one of them from the list, the establishment where Lord Crofton's debt was the greatest. He met briefly with the club's owner, and he wished to buy up all of Lord Crofton's markers at six o'clock that evening, and asked that the man put out the word. If any owners were interested in having Crofton's markers purchased by the Duke of Margate, they were to attend the meeting he would hold at this particular club.

Returning promptly at six that evening with his solicitor, the club's owner took him to a private gaming room filled with eager faces of other club members.

The room's conversations abruptly ended as he explained to his audience that he would be buying any marker in Viscount Crofton's name. In gold.

A buzz erupted, and he saw everything from joy to relief on the faces of the various attendees.

"This is a one-time opportunity, gentlemen. My offer expires in one week. If you are interested in selling these markers of Lord Crofton's to me, please fill out the forms here."

Cy bit back a smile as men rushed to line up. The line consisted of a single man in attendance.

He joined Mr. Solway at the table that had been set up, per Cy's request. "Be quick about it," he told the solicitor. "Make certain you record the name of each gaming hell, its owner, and the amount paid to him."

"Yes, Your Grace."

He went to stand against the wall, observing the proceedings. When the final man left with his gold, Cy returned to Solway.

"Make a copy of that if you will. Keep the original one, and send the other to me at Melrose."

"Will you be returning to the country soon, Your Grace?"

"In a day or so."

Solway handed over the markers, and Cy placed them in a satchel found in the study of his London townhouse. He returned there and requested water for a bath be sent up, as well as something to eat. He then shaved, taking time out to eat before he dressed himself, having a hunt in the country. The valet had not approved of being left behind, but he wisely had not gone against his employer.

Tonight, a ball was being held at the Duke and Duchess of Westfield's townhouse. When Cy had met with Pierce, Westfield's name was mentioned. Pierce had provided, telling him that Westfield was a friend and counted on as an ally. Pierce promised to write to Westfield and tell him of the situation, and Cy and urge the duke to help in any way he could.

It seemed providence when Cy arrived in town and combed through mounds of invitations addressed to the Duke of Margate, finding one from the Westfields, inviting him to a ball which would be held this very evening. At least he had remembered to send the death notice to the newspapers. The *Margate* would know Charles had passed and that a new Duke of Margate was on the way.

hushed arrived in town.

me. He had written a note to the duchess, explaining that he had only r
arrived in town and would only be attending one event.

aces of Their ball.

Since the couple lived only two blocks from him, Cy thought it rid
ie hour. to take his carriage. The April night was cool and inviting, and he
the line only a few minutes after he'd set out, happy that he'd left his cari
home. The roads and pavements were teeming with people in their ba
f every finery.

Instead of making his way inside, he crossed the street and walke
quest. blocks before returning, wanting the receiving line to have died down
ord the he joined what remained of it, no one fell into line after him.

As he got closer to meeting his hosts, he studied them. The D
Westfield was an imposing man, at least three inches over six feet. H
hen the black hair was slightly longer than fashionable, and his gray eyes see
take in everything about him. The duchess was close to six feet, unusu
end the woman. She had fiery red hair and a ready smile. When he reached th
was drawn in by her moss green eyes.

The duke offered Cy his hand. "We are two weeks into the Seas
have yet to make your acquaintance, much less see you at one of th
he had events already held. Might you be Margate?"

ow and "I am, Your Grace. I assume you have received Stoneham's letter."

bathed Westfield turned to his wife. "Darling, this is the duke Pierce wro
ing left about."

ind but She smiled warmly at Cy. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Your

Thank you for your note. I believe you mentioned that you are in to
stfield's briefly."

the one "Yes. This is the only event I will attend. I wish to be introdu
ould be Viscount Crofton."

him of The duchess wrinkled her nose. "He is a rake, through and through

"Years ago, he caused great distress to the woman I love. I am her
ugh the that he pays for that."

ie from Her eyes lit up. "Oh, it sounds as if a scandal is brewing. I wo
vening, pleased if Lord Crofton were taken down a notch or two. The man is
, so the himself."

ate had "I do not wish to ruin your ball, Your Graces. I will confront (

away from prying ears and eyes. If he chooses not to accept my recently however, I may ask you if I can address your guests and speak m regarding him and his odious behavior.”

Westfield placed a hand on Cy’s shoulder. “Stoneham thinks hi iculously you. No one of quality thinks much of anything regarding Crofton. I o arrived that you wait until after supper before making any kind of announce riage at would like our guests to enjoy a bit of dancing and a meal before any all room might fly.”

“I can wait, Your Grace,” he promised. “I am a patient man.”
d a few The duchess caught Cy’s hand and squeezed it. “I would like t . When your wife.”

“She is not my wife. Yet,” he added, holding on to hope.
Duke of Her Grace patted Cy’s hand. “I have a suspicion she will be. : is coal—rather than later. Good luck to you, Your Grace.”

med to She released his hand, and the duke said, “Shall we go ins ial for a ballroom? If you will let my duchess and I dance the first dance, I w iem, he take you to meet Lord Crofton, Your Grace.”

Cy followed the couple at a distance as they entered the ballroom ion and the orchestra was playing, and he watched his host and hostess dance e many obvious the couple was deeply in love, just as Pierce and his duchess v

Could he find the same love and happiness with Finola?

The dance ended, and the Westfields made their way toward h te to us could feel the eyes of the *ton* following them and then landing upon

buzz started about the room as the members of Polite Society strained Grace him and figure out who he was.

vn only When his hosts reached him, he took the duchess’ hand and kissed smiled at him—and winked. The duke then kissed his wife’s cheek, : uced to sailed away.

“Walk with me, Margate,” Westfield said, his voice just loud en .” carry several feet.

e to see The scramble to pass Cy’s name through the crowd was almost c to watch, and he found himself, along with his companion, laughing al

ould be The duke led them onto the terrace through a set of open French d ; full of the musicians struck up another piece.

“Can you share with me what Crofton has done?”

Crofton He supposed he owed as much to this man who had welcomed h

terms, his home, despite the fact that Cy had informed the duke that he may truthfully do something that would cause a figurative explosion at this ball.

“This happened long before I returned to England. My best guess is probably for six years ago.”

Cy explained how he’d hired a Bow Street runner to learn everything about Viscount Crofton and how he’d put the pieces together after she reported her report.

“I came home from the war broken in spirit, the eyesight gone in consequence. Lady Finola helped me find a reason to live again.”

He went into detail about how he and Bertie had met their neighbor and how they had begun to help her in training her dogs.

“They wouldn’t happen to be Honeyfield spaniels?” the duke asked. Sooner, “The very ones.”

“I have heard of them and been considering purchasing one.”

“They are remarkable—as is Lady Finola.”

“Even if you had not told me, it is obvious you love her when you mention her name. What did Crofton do to Lady Finola?”

Again, he related what he had learned between Finola and Miss Westfield. It was seeing the anger and disgust shadow Westfield’s face.

“I knew Crofton ran with a group of rogues, but I had no idea the extent of their ill behavior. This is outrageous. To think they call themselves gentlemen.” The duke shook his head. “Expose him if you wish, Marjorie. It is understandable why no lady has ever come forward to accuse him. I am glad to see his Epsilon Club villains chose their victims well. Either those who were involved withdrew from Polite Society, as Lady Finola did, or they have never spoken of it. I shudder to think of the horrors they experienced. I will support you in how you wish Crofton and his cronies to be punished.”

Westfield frowned. “Come to think of it, I don’t see Crofton with any of his friends these days.”

“Perhaps the others tired of the game—or outgrew such childish, comical games,” Cy said. “Miss Slade’s report mentioned the names of the other gentlemen, saying they all had wed. I merely know that Crofton was their leader. I hope to see him as satisfied if he is the only one who suffers.”

“I have a small group of close friends—all dukes, ironically. I will speak your word, and we and our duchesses shall give the viscount the cut direct. I hope it will never darken another London ballroom again. Once he is removed from

right doge lists, no one in Polite Society would be mad enough to invite one of their social affairs.”

is five “Let me think on it this evening, Your Grace.”

“You’d better think fast. Speak of the devil.”

rything Cy glanced up and saw none other than Viscount Crofton coming readingway. He steeled himself for their encounter.

“Your Grace,” Crofton said as he gave a curt bow to the Duke of Westfield. Turning, he cast a venomous glance at Cy. “Who the bloody do you think you are?”

bor and Maintaining his composure, Cy replied, “And whom might you lord? We have not been properly introduced.”

d. The viscount cursed low. “You know I am Lord Crofton, Margate. cannot fathom is why you are out to blacken my name.”

“Well, since you now know one another, I shall leave you to attend guests.” Westfield nodded at Cy and left the terrace, returning to the ballroom.

Once the duke was out of sight, Crofton glared at Cy. “I want to know, Slade, what you’re up to, Margate.”

“I am not up to anything. If you are referring to the markers bearing the name which I have purchased this evening, it was done quite openly.”

Crofton’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, the news reached me rather quickly. I do not know one another. Have never spoken to each other. Why, you and I only recently returned from the war and gained your title. Our paths never crossed. I want to know why you’re being such a prick—and why you chose to buy up only *my* markers.”

“You are troubled at my purchasing your markers?” he asked nonchalantly.

“Bollocks!” the viscount cried. “What do you want with those markers? And with me?”

“What did you want with all those innocent women you humiliate other men,” asked, his voice low and deadly.

That did the trick. Shock filled Crofton’s face. His jaw went slack for a moment. Then he steeled himself. “I haven’t the foggiest idea what—”

“Don’t go there, you slimy bastard,” he warned. “Do not deny what I will have done for years. Taking innocents and tearing them to shreds.” He stepped forward, so close his nose almost touched that of his enemy’s. “Did you

him to amusing to destroy the lives of weak women? Did it make you feel
and important? Did you ever for one minute—even one second—c
how you were destroying women who had done nothing to deserve
wrath?”

ing their He took a step back, not hiding his disgust. “Of course not. Yo
vile, desperate, little man. The term gentleman does not apply to
duke of should go into that ballroom and tell the entire *ton* what you have been
dy hell for years. How you have crushed the life out of sweet wallflowers. Sh
what spirit they had. Damaged them almost beyond repair.”

be, my Panic filled Crofton’s face. “You cannot do that. You wouldn’t da
have no proof.”

What I “Don’t I?” Cy asked, looking the viscount up and down. “Yes, my
know all about your Epsilon Club. Or forgive me—should I s
d to my Enticement Club?”

to the “You couldn’t,” the man sputtered, his face now turning brig
“None of those women would dare come forward. If they admitted th
o know been a part of our games, they would be ruined.”

“I would never ask them to publicly admit they had been duped l
ng your But I could step through those doors and make my accusations in fron
of Polite Society. I could give what information I have discovered ab
dy. We to the newspapers’ gossip columns. I am a duke, Crofton. You are
ou have viscount. Men such as me squash vermin like you. Stomp on them un
is have are nonexistent.”

why you Fear caused Crofton’s body to tremble. “Please, Your Grace,” he s
tone now beseeching. “I have done nothing to harm you. I don’t eve
asked you.”

“But I know someone you hurt. Deeply. Someone I hold dear. I
arkers? destroy you, Crofton, if only to please her.”

“I will pay you,” sputtered the viscount. “I will pay you.”
d?” Cy “Pay me?” scoffed Cy. “Pay me? I own all of your markers, you
Close to twenty thousand pounds’ worth.”

slack a “As soon as my father is dead and I am the earl, I will gladly p
, every farthing owed,” Crofton declared confidently.

hat you He knew, though, that would never come to pass. While he had
moved with his banker about his own funds and investments, Cy had asked
think it those of his enemy’s father. Discreetly, of course. And because Cy

strongduke, he was able to obtain the information he sought. He had learned that the earl was in dire straits.

“Why do you think your father retired to the countryside several years ago?”

The other man appeared baffled at the question. “He told me he had to leave town. Why? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Everything. Your father no longer had the means to maintain a household in London,” Cy said. “When you meet with his bank solicitor upon his death, you will find the truth. That he had to shut down his London residence because he could no longer pay his servants. If you go inside the townhouse now, you would discover everything of value he had left behind. Isolated. Paintings. Rugs. China. Furniture.”

Crofton shook his head vigorously. “No. No. You are wrong.”

“The same is true at his country estate. Only a skeleton staff remains. He is in poor health and has no reason or means to entertain other than his family. In this, Cy was only guessing since he believed a man such as Crofton would not have visited his only parent.

“I . . . I can wed. A woman with a large dowry.”

“Even if she brought twenty thousand pounds into the marriage, none of it would all be owed to me. And then what would you live on? None of it would be found out during the marriage settlements negotiation until they paused. “Face it, Crofton. You have been living beyond your means for years, anticipating you would inherit a fortune—which you will not. You have taken advantage of innocents, toying with them and ruining them emotionally if not physically.”

A sob escaped from the viscount. “What do you want of me, Margery?”
“To begin with, I want you to leave London and never return. No more attending glittering society affairs. You are to lead a quiet life in the country, caring for your father until his death, and then doing your best for the children you inherit. If not? I shall call in your markers and when you cannot pay, have you thrown into debtors’ prison.”

Crofton shuddered, tears streaming down his cheeks now. Cy hoped the other man would not question the bluff. Cy had not checked with his solicitor and doubted that an earl would ever be placed in prison. But Crofton seemed to know this. Let the thought of languishing forever in debtors’ prison haunt him.

ned the “A second thing you must do so that I will not call for you to pa
markers to me is to write a letter to each young lady you wronged c
l to theyears. For the entire existence of your Epsilon Club.”

“I don’t know if I could even remem—”

tired of “You do recall every one of them,” he said bluntly. “A man li
collected women’s hearts as other hunters acquired their own trophic
ntain a will write a short but sincere letter to each one and give these to me. I
ker and they are delivered to wherever that victim now resides. You ruined pl
tter his lives with your Enticement Club, Crofton.”

ou went Cy waited a moment, letting his words sink in, and then said, “M
as been request is that you deliver one of those letters in person. To Lady
Honeyfield.”

Understanding flickered in Crofton’s eyes. “She is the one you ar
ains in all this for, isn’t she?”

ers.” “She is,” he affirmed. “But she is no less important than the other
Crofton wronged. That is why I want you to write to all the wronged wome
hand over your apology—your sincere apology—in person to Lady Fir

The viscount angrily swiped at his tears. “And after I am hum
y lord, What then, Margate?”

Jo, you “I have told you. You are to retire to the country. You are to care f
is.” He estate and its people. If you are of a mind to try and change your nat
ans forrepent from your many sins, perhaps you might be fortunate enough to
ot. You local woman. But you are never to darken a London ballroom again, n
; them, I hold your markers. I will not hesitate to call them in if I see you.”

Cy studied the broken man now before him. “Do you agree to my
ate?” Crofton? A simple country life, repenting and learning to become a
o more man—or do I walk through those doors and at supper tonight
ountry, members of the *ton* what a wicked man you are? Of course, they will
tenants about you for years to come as you languish in debtors’ prison.”

ot pay, Another sob burst from the viscount, and he wept openly. C
unmoved, however. This evil man had destroyed lives. It was tim
ped the Crofton paid the piper.

olicitor “Yes.”

did not “Yes, what, my lord?”

’ prison Crofton met Cy’s gaze. “I will do as you ask. Write those bloody
And go see Lady Finola.”

Cy flashed a satisfied smile. “Then if I were you, Crofton, I would have written them myself together and find my hosts and thank them for a lovely evening at home and write those letters tonight. Every single one of them. Do not forget to give the one to Lady Finola, though. I wish to read it before you do so.”

He flicked an imaginary piece of lint from his sleeve casually. “Your carriage will be at your rooms at eight o’clock tomorrow morning. Be sure to have every letter ready. We will leave London and journey to Blandford where you will make amends to Lady Finola.”

With that, Cy turned his back on Crofton and left the terrace. Entering the ballroom, he saw it swirling with dancers. He watched them for a moment before the Duke of Westfield joined him.

“Did you have a productive conversation with the viscount?”

He nodded. “I got what I came for. After tonight, Polite Society will no longer be seeing Lord Crofton at their events. Ever. He is retiring to his country to care for his ailing father.”

“And upon the earl’s death?” Westfield asked.

Cy smiled. “Crofton will remain at his new country estate and manage the best of it—else I will call in his markers. Twenty thousand pounds’ worth at once.”

“I am assuming he could not pay them or if he did, it would leave him in financial ruin?”

“You have a clear understanding of Crofton’s situation, Your Grace. He will be leaving London tomorrow morning. With Crofton. The viscount will be apologizing in person to Lady Finola.”

Westfield smiled broadly. “I wish you the best of luck with Lady Margate, and I hope you and your duchess will come visit us. Either at Westwood or in town during next Season, where I am certain you will be able to show off your bride to Polite Society.”

“Your belief in my powers of persuasion surprises me, Your Grace,” Cy said. “I only hope that I can win Lady Finola’s hand.”

The Duke of Westfield laughed heartily. “Oh, Your Grace, I have no doubt you will achieve everything you wish in life.”

letters.

Cy flashed a satisfied smile. “Then if I were you, Crofton, I would pull myself together and find my hosts and thank them for a lovely evening. Go home and write those letters tonight. Every single one of them. Do not seal the one to Lady Finola, though. I wish to read it before you do so.”

He flicked an imaginary piece of lint from his sleeve casually. “My carriage will be at your rooms at eight o’clock tomorrow morning. Be packed and have every letter ready. We will leave London and journey to Belldale, where you will make amends to Lady Finola.”

With that, Cy turned his back on Crofton and left the terrace. Entering the ballroom, he saw it swirling with dancers. He watched them for a moment before the Duke of Westfield joined him.

“Did you have a productive conversation with the viscount?”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

FINOLA AND BERTIE climbed into the carriage for their visit to Pier Nalyssa. They had made this trip every two weeks.

And it had been what had saved Finola's sanity.

Two months had passed since she had assumed responsibility for and he had moved in with her and her servants. Finola had continued lessons as best she could, devoting an hour after breakfast in the school with him, working on spelling, grammar, and basic computation skills. They would spend the bulk of their day with the litter, which was progressing nicely in their hunting skills.

After tea, Finola would read to Bertie for an hour and sometimes would read to her from very simple primers. She had not wanted a tutor for his education. The tutor would be arriving soon, a gentleman who was Reverend Hall's nephew. It had been arranged for him to live in the lodge at Melrose. The young man would spend mornings with Bertie. His salary completely paid for by the Duke of Margate.

Finola had not seen Cy except from a distance these past few months, although he had sent her a few notes. They were formal and held no personal in them, simply informing her when to send Bertie to Melrose for his visit. This month's visit had actually occurred a week early because Cy had written that he had business which would take him to London. Bertie had gone to Melrose as expected. He came back from these visits in an excited state, yet he never mentioned a word about the duke. Finola suspected he had asked Bertie not to speak about him to her.

Everywhere she went, though, there was talk of the new Duke of Margate. How kind he was. How generous he was. How different from his predecessors. The duke had arranged for a new roof to go over the church and new stained glass to be commissioned and installed. He had the money to replace most of the roofs of his tenants' cottages and visited every single person on his land, learning their names and those of their children.

She missed him every single day.

When Lord Crofton had humiliated her, Finola had buried herself in work, grieving for the loss of Banny, as well as that of her lost inn. This time, however, her work with the pups wasn't enough. Yes, she enjoyed the training of them and especially having Bertie's company; she did so. Yet nothing had been the same since she pushed Cy from her life. If not for the visits to Nalyssa and Pierce, Finola did not know how she would have the strength to go on.

Today, they would have a visit and take tea before Pierce's carriage returned them to Belldale. Although Finola had never asked Bertie about Cy on these trips to Stonecrest, she did so now.

"How did you find His Grace, Bertie?"
The boy looked startled at her question. "His Grace is well, my lady. Bertie no longer called her Finola, and she knew this was at Cy's request. When the boy said no more, she pressed further, asking, "Does it seem as if he has settled in at Melrose?"

The small boy shrugged. "I think so. This last time, His Grace put his horse with him and took me all about the estate. I got to meet other children my own age." He hesitated and then added, "Everyone calls him His Grace."

Her gaze met his, and Finola asked a final question. "Does he ever talk about me?"

Bertie shook his head vigorously. "No, my lady. His Grace asked me to mention you. Sometimes, I can't help it, though. I'll tell him what the pups is doing and how you taught him the trick. Or how you're going to me learn how to train them as hunters. He never scolds me when I do so."

"I am sorry if I made you uncomfortable talking about His Grace, Bertie. I will not ask about His Grace again."

Finola saw the pained expression on the boy's face and turned to go to the window, hurt in her heart.

When they arrived at Stonecrest, Pierce handed her down, a huge smile on his face.

"You are looking at a proud new father, Finola. Nalyssa gave me Bertie yesterday morning."

She could see the pride on his face and said, "You should have seen me to me, Pierce. I would have postponed this visit. Nalyssa needs me."

recover.”

“Ah, my duchess is a hardy one—and ready to show off our daughter’s innocence, you.” He turned to Bertie and ruffled the lad’s hair. “Why, I think even he still might wish to see the babe.”

They went upstairs to the rooms designated for the duchess. Nalyssa lay regally in bed, holding a small bundle and cooing to it softly. When she showed them, she smiled.

“Oh, I am so glad that you are here, Finola. Come meet our girl. You’ll like her.”

She and Bertie moved toward the bed, and the boy gazed down, his eyes wide.

“She’s so tiny.”

Nalyssa chuckled. “She won’t be for long. Mary is eating well. The doctor has been to see her and said that all is well.”

“Bertie, why don’t you and I take Pollux out for a nice, long walk. It will give these two time to visit properly,” the duke said.

Pierce called, and Pollux came to him. Finola realized the dog must have been lying on the floor on the other side of the bed, out of her sight.

After they left the room, Nalyssa asked if Finola wished to hold the baby. “I have never done so,” she admitted. “What if I do something wrong?”

Her friend laughed. “There is nothing you can do wrong. Here, take her.”

She bent and accepted the swaddled babe, bringing Mary close to her. She did not gaze at her. A wave of tenderness washed over her, seeing such a tiny creature. She moved about the room slowly with the infant, talking and helping to soothe her as she had heard Nalyssa do. Finola thought what it would be like to give birth to a child of her own. She had wondered if she might be able to do so, after her encounter with Cy and felt disappointment when her pregnancy had come. Of course, if she had been with child, it would have complicated their situation immeasurably. She should be grateful that it had not occurred.

Still, holding this tiny babe tugged at her heartstrings.

A servant appeared, and Nalyssa explained that she was the wet nurse. Finola handed the babe over to be fed and then took a seat by the bed. She reached out and squeezed Nalyssa’s hand.

“You look wonderful for having only given birth yesterday morning.”

Laughter filled the room. “You should have seen me then. I was in a

twenty hours and was dripping with sweat by the time things ended. My midwife told me it was a good labor, however, and that I should not have a Bertie problem in the future. I hope that is the case. I am thirty years of age now, and Pierce and I want to have several children while we can.”

Myssa sat “I noticed Pollux was in the room.”

She saw “That pup has grown very dear to me, Finola. I am certain most members of the *ton* would be shocked, but he was in the bed with me the entire night, too, struggled to deliver. Pollux sensed my distress and did what he could to comfort me, not leaving my side during the entire ordeal. His walk today will do him some good.”

“I am certain it will do Bertie good, too, seeing the pup again.”

“How is it having Bertie with you?”

Myssa. The Finola explained their daily schedule and how the tutor would be starting early next week to take over the schoolroom duties.

Myssa? That “It is remarkable that you are educating him. Very unusual for a servant to have give Bertie time out of his day to continue with his lessons. He is quite intelligent and a rapid learner. Giving him the gift of being able to read and write will help him go far in life. I can see Bertie leaving me one day, becoming a dog trainer on his own.”

Myssa. “Though that was many years down the line, a wave of sadness washed over her.”

Myssa a tiny “Have you spoken to His Grace?”

Myssa and “I have not. I have seen him a few times at church. Naturally, he is seated like to at the front in the ducal pew and others of the nobility and gentry are seated with him. I slip inside just as the service begins and sit on the back row and quickly leave once things conclude.”

Myssa. “I know we have never spoken of this, Finola, and that you must have had not betrayed by Margate. By the fact you hadn’t a clue he was the hereditary dukedom. You do realize that you, too, had kept a secret from him, as I have.”

Myssa. She nodded. “I did feel a sense of betrayal, one I had felt many years ago when I was a nurse and told you of.”

Myssa. “I recall your disastrous come-out Season and the lengthy trick played upon you by Lord Crofton and his fellow rakes.”

Myssa. “Up until that point, I had been very sheltered. Banny was my only companion in labor and my entire world. Losing him on the same night I was jilted

ed. The viscount changed something in me. I only trusted in my furry
have a Nothing changed—until Cy—that is, His Grace—came into my life.”
ge now. She swallowed hard. “I have actually forgiven him. Not to his
course, but in my heart. I know he wasn’t deliberately misleading me a
he had no idea he would so quickly become the Duke of Margate. Fro
embers I gather, though, he is doing an excellent job. Everywhere I go, his
e time I on others’ lips, and they sing his praises.”

ould to Nalyssa frowned. “Then I don’t quite understand. If you say yo
lay will forgiven him and that you believe his intentions toward you were hor
then why are you not together? I can tell you still love him, Finola. Pie
seen Margate a few times, and he tells me Margate feels the same
you. That he never intends to wed. What are you not telling me?”

arriving A sob escaped her and once it did, Finola lost control. Sh
profusely. Nalyssa signaled for her to move to the bed, and Finola p
rvant.” upon it, allowing her friend to wrap her arms around her as she cried.

merely Finola reminded herself that tears never solved anything and took
e bright of herself once more. She pulled away, but Nalyssa took Finola’s ha
and do said, “Talk to me, my friend. I can tell you still love him and are
lay and unhappy. What is preventing you from being together? Othe
stubbornness—or pride.”

washed “Neither,” she replied. “I cannot be with Cy now that he is a duke
realm. Look at me, Nalyssa. I am dressed like a lady today simply be
have come to visit with you. It is one of the few times I don a gown
sittingsighed. “I am a woman totally unsuited to be a duke’s wife.”

close to Nalyssa’s eyes widened. “Is this the reason you will not wed Marg
w, then She nodded, shame filling her.

“Does he know this?” Nalyssa demanded.

ave felt “No, we have not spoken since I agreed to take Bertie into my hou
eir to a His Grace has sent me the occasional note, but I have never even rej
well.” them. They are short and merely inform me of something, such as w
ars ago wishes Bertie to visit.”

“How could you think you are unworthy, Finola? You have such
played nature and are so generous and loving. You have an innate goodnes
you. You would make for a most wonderful duchess.”

y friend She snorted. “You really believe the *ton* would accept someone lik
by the traipse about the countryside dressed as a man. I indulge in no l

friends. activities, other than reading. I spend a majority of my day outside, v
to train my Honeyfield spaniels to become hunters. I am the last wom
face, of should be a duchess.”

and that Nalyssa’s gaze pinned hers. “And you think that I was con
m what appropriate duchess material? I, who was painted with the brush of s
ame isthanks to my father’s suicide? Not a gentleman in the *ton* would have
father gambled away my dowry, and I was left with absolutely nothin
ou have death. I had to reinvent myself, and do you know what? I found th
iorable, strong. Strong enough to withstand gossip. To create a new life for
rce has Yes, earning my own living.”

toward Nalyssa searched Finola’s face, and she grew warm under the s
The duchess then said, “I fell in love, my friend. Head over heels in lo
e wept Pierce. I cannot imagine spending a single moment when I did not lo
perched Yes, he has been an unconventional duke, especially choosing some
me to be his duchess. But you love Margate—and he loves you. It is
control for you to waste your lives apart from one another when you coul
ids and something solid together. Will the *ton* gossip about you? Undoubt
deeply know they have about us. Yet we do not live for others, Finola. Pierc
r than live for ourselves. For each other. For our daughter now, and the far
are creating together. Only a minuscule amount of time is spent am
e of the *ton*. The majority of our time is with each other. You should not l
:cause I Polite Society thinks prevent you from being with the man you love.
n.” Shedo, you are as blind as Cy is in his right eye.”

Why hadn’t Finola thought of this before? Why was she lett
ate?” thought of what others believed keep her from her one, true love? I
was right. Her reasons were ridiculous to have driven such a wedge b
she and Cy.

sehold. They loved one another—and she finally realized that love could c
plied to all.

When he “Your love will be enough,” Nalyssa continued. “But you will not
go facing Polite Society alone, Finola. Among the *ton* are a few other
a sweetsuch as me. Women who also worked for a living—and still do so. Be
s about or not, they also hold the lofty title of duchess. And they are my
Good friends, whom I cherish and trust immeasurably.”

e me? I “Duchesses . . . who are employed?” she asked, finding the conce
adly like to imagine.

working “Absolutely,” Nalyssa replied, her enthusiasm apparent. “I can
an who for you to meet them. Hear a song Fia has composed. See a portrait M
has painted. They will not only become your friends, dear Finola. The
sidered their dukes—will be more like family to you and Margate.”

scandal, Her friend chuckled. “Dukes, it seems, must be forgiven for all the
me. My Even if it is the sin of wedding a most inappropriate woman. Polite
g at his has learned to accept these dukes also means to accept their duchess
at I am group shares close bonds of friendship and love as we knock the tradi
myself. the *ton* upside down.”

She was stunned by what Nalyssa shared.

crutiny. Her friend took Finola’s hand in hers. “You and Margate will fit
ve with with our group.” Nalyssa paused. “But you must speak to the man yo
ve him. Open your heart to him, Finola. Your love—and the support of frie
eone as and new—will allow you to start your lives together.”

foolish Squeezing Nalyssa’s hand, Finola said, “You are right and reassu
d build that speaking up is what I must do. I have been blind. Even foolish.
tedly. Itell Cy that my feelings for him have remained unchanged and that if
e and I have me, I would be honored to be his duchess.”

nily we Finola only prayed that it was not too late for them to find happine
ong the
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Nalyssa
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friends.

pt hard

“Absolutely,” Nalyssa replied, her enthusiasm apparent. “I cannot wait for you to meet them. Hear a song Fia has composed. See a portrait Margaret has painted. They will not only become your friends, dear Finola. They—and their dukes—will be more like family to you and Margate.”

Her friend chuckled. “Dukes, it seems, must be forgiven for all their sins. Even if it is the sin of wedding a most inappropriate woman. Polite Society has learned to accept these dukes also means to accept their duchesses. Our group shares close bonds of friendship and love as we knock the traditions of the *ton* upside down.”

She was stunned by what Nalyssa shared.

Her friend took Finola’s hand in hers. “You and Margate will fit right in with our group.” Nalyssa paused. “But you must speak to the man you love. Open your heart to him, Finola. Your love—and the support of friends old and new—will allow you to start your lives together.”

Squeezing Nalyssa’s hand, Finola said, “You are right and reassured me that speaking up is what I must do. I have been blind. Even foolish. I must tell Cy that my feelings for him have remained unchanged and that if he will have me, I would be honored to be his duchess.”

Finola only prayed that it was not too late for them to find happiness.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

FINOLA COLLECTED BERTIE, and they went to Pierce's waiting carriage. Bertie told Pierce farewell, and he arranged for Finola to come again the next time to visit with Nalyssa.

"Since I don't want my duchess to travel for a while, I am grateful that you have agreed to come to her again so soon," the duke said.

"I would be happy to visit her anytime. And hold your wife and daughter."

He smiled. "I see you are as taken with Mary as we are. Mama and Papa will be coming to visit in the next few days. They will be staying long enough for you to meet them."

"Then I look forward to my next visit to Stonecrest for several reasons," Bertie said. Pierce looked to Bertie. "Thank you for the tips regarding Pollux."

The duke handed her into the carriage, Bertie climbing up behind her. The boy chattered nonstop on their way home, telling Finola all about his dog and two new tricks he had taught both dog and duke. She listened with half an ear, though, her thoughts centered on Cy.

She needed to see him as soon as possible and tell him what was on her heart, hoping he still felt the same about her as she did him. That she had endured the foolish separation of her making. Then she recalled that the duke had informed her that Cy had gone to town on business.

"Bertie, do you know when His Grace was supposed to return to Melrose? I simply wondered how long his business might take."

The boy cocked his head. "No, my lady. He didn't tell me. I did not know when he would be able to see him again next month. He said yes."

At this point, Finola decided if Cy were not currently in residence at Melrose that she would make the journey to town and call upon him. Her bold action alone should convince him of her intentions.

She decided to send Bertie to Melrose when they returned to Blythe. The boy could inquire if Arnold knew when his employer might be re-

to the country. If the butler revealed it would be soon, Finola would be in time. If Arnold had no idea, though, then she would leave on tomorrow's mail coach. It came through Adderly a little before noon each day.

The carriage began to slow, and Finola felt good about the decision she had made. Cy would soon know her true feelings.

The vehicle's door opened, and a footman handed her down. She got up. She
next week
ful that
nderful
nd Pen
ig long
ions.”
nd her.
Pollux
ith only
s in her
eir love
l Bertie
turn to
ask if I
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n. That
elldale.
turning

A grand carriage stood in front of her house, one just as elaborate as the one she had just exited. She hoped beyond hope that it was Cy's carriage she didn't know, having never seen it before.

She called up a thanks to the coachman for returning them to Belldale and then found Bertie's hand, squeezing it tightly.

“Is that His Grace's carriage?” Bertie asked softly.
“We will soon see,” she told the boy, moving them toward the vehicle.
Suddenly, the door to the carriage flew open, and Finola stopped on the tracks. Her heart began to beat violently against her ribs as she saw the man who had caused her immeasurable grief climb from it.

Viscount Crofton.
Quickly, she wheeled, releasing Bertie's hand to rush to the house.
“Wait, my lady!” called Lord Crofton.

Finola froze at the sound of his voice and then turned, determined to confront him after so many years. She marched toward him and when she reached him, slapped him hard, stunning herself and the viscount.

His gaze met hers. “I suppose I deserved that,” he began.
“There is no supposing to it, my lord,” she said coldly. “You did not deserve the injury many years ago. I only wish I would have been mature enough to recognize you for the loathsome creature you are. But I am a different person from that meek, cowed wallflower you knew. I determined after I left that I would become strong. That I would never make the same mistake again. I have built a good life for myself, my lord. I am content, with more than I can say for you.”

She paused and studied him a moment. “The years since our encounter have not been kind to you, I see. Your late nights of drink and love of food are showing. Where once your belly was flat, a paunch now hangs there. Your eyes are bloodshot. Your hairline receding. You were not the man of your looks and charm. With your looks fading, you and your Enticement Club will not be able to bamboozle poor, unsuspecting young ladies.

side her now that I had spoken out against you back then. Yes, I would have
orrow's my reputation by doing so—but you and your friends would also have
ruined.”

ion she Finola paused, the blood pounding in her ears. “I have no idea what
have come to Belldale, but I want you off my property. Yes, my lord
asped. property. Sir Roscoe left me the house and estate so you can see
e as the managing quite well on my own.”

age but Finola turned to leave, and Lord Crofton called out, “Please. W
lady.”

lale and The use of the word *please* intrigued her, having never heard it p
viscount's lips. She whirled, facing him once more. “I will ask why you
here, my lord.”

icle. He pulled a folded piece of parchment from his pocket and hand
l in her hand.

ow who “This, Lady Finola, is my written apology to you. I also wish to s
to you in person.”

A wave of emotion flooded her. Her throat constricted. She willed
not to cry in front of this man.

“My letter states things more eloquently, my lady, but I will say
ined to you now.”

ion she Crofton paused and then dropped to his knees, thoroughly shocking

“I—and the Epsilon Club—did a great disservice to you, my lady
other innocents, as well. The club was all my doing. I fully regret what
ie great done to you and the other women we misled. No, duped. I will have
then to with that regret the rest of my life. I do not come to be absolved of my
wo man do not ask nor beg for your forgiveness because you should not give it
eft you I know I destroyed your life that night. You are much stronger than
mistake believed a woman could be, though. You have risen like a phoenix from
which is ashes. I recognize the name Belldale because it is home to Hor
spaniels. I understand that you are the one who trains them. You
our last reached a pinnacle of success few women—or even men—do. You
ing and even though I tried to break you in spirit, merely for the fun of it.

ow sits “I am sorry for what I did all those years ago, Lady Finola. I will n
ing but it again. I am leaving London and Polite Society permanently. I will r
cement my father's country seat. I must learn to live with the pain I have cau
I wish to move forward and become a better man.”

ruined. Tears brimmed in her eyes as she said, "I do forgive you, my lord. You have been you did was awful, destroying the lives of so many, but you seem re now. Perhaps you have matured. I know it is wrong to hold a grudge. Why you such as that fester. They eat up a person's soul. Get up, my lord."

Lord, my Lord Crofton came to his feet and said, "I do not deserve, I am forgiveness, my lady, but I thank you all the same for it. You are a person than I ever hope to be." He paused. "And you deserve every last bit of happiness you might find. I bid you good day."

As the viscount left her and headed toward the carriage again, the coachman swiftly came to Finola's side. She wrapped an arm about the boy and you are watched Lord Crofton ascend into the carriage. To her surprise, Cy climbed from the vehicle and called up directions to his coachman. The driver nodded but did not start up the carriage.

Then Cy turned and called out, "Bertie, come here. I have need of you." The boy scrambled to the duke, who placed his hand on the small shoulder and bent, talking to him a moment. Bertie nodded several times. Then Cy rose.

Looking to her, Bertie said, "Don't worry, my lady. I will be here for you this to tomorrow."

The driver leaned down, offering the boy a hand. Bertie took it and she was propelled into the seat next to the coachman, who took up the reins. Cy flicked his wrists, starting the vehicle.

As it drove away, Cy came to her. Finola swallowed, emotions welling up to live inside her, overwhelming her so that she couldn't even speak. Her eyes were wet with tears.

He reached her and took her hands. "I heard everything you said to me. I ever Crofton. You were magnificent, my lady."

Then he raised her hands, and his lips brushed against her knuckles, doing her. Finola burst into tears and fell against Cy, who wrapped his arms about her.

"There, there," he comforted, stroking her hair.

Her tears dampened his shirt and waistcoat as she clutched him, in a way she never did with his familiar scent.

Raising her head, her gaze met his. "I was such a fool," she said, looking at him through her tears.

"You were no such thing. You were a young girl, treading the

l. Whatinfested waters of the *ton*. A charming, handsome man paid attention
pentantYou had no way of knowing what games a man such as Crofton played
Things Finola realized Cy thought she was talking about being duped
viscount and shook her head vigorously. “No, Cy. I mean now. Pushi
e youraway. I was foolish to throw away what we had.”

a better “You do not have to say that, my lady, simply because I brought
sting bithere to apologize to you. You owe me nothing. I merely wanted to
wrong righted. I know his apology comes years too late, but—”

. Bertie “Stop talking and kiss me,” she commanded, yanking on his crav
as theyhis mouth slammed against hers.

ly then She wrapped her arms about him, holding tightly. Still, he lif
in. Themouth from hers, confused.

“Wh—”

you.” “I love you, Cy,” she said simply. “I never stopped loving you. Ye
ll boy’ssurprised when I learned you were a duke. But that is not why I se
ies, andfrom you.” She smiled wryly. “After all, I had not been totally hones
my own identity.”

ie back “Then why would you wish to keep us apart, Finola?”

She sighed, hearing him call her by her name once more, knowin
nd wasright it felt.

ins and “Because I did not see myself as good enough for you. I am
woman Polite Society would envision a duke marrying.”

lling up Wonder filled his face. “You did this . . . for *me*?”

as filled “Yes,” she admitted. “I did not believe I was good enough t
duchess. Your duchess. I—”

said to Her words were cut off as he took her mouth. The kiss was dem
seeking everything from her.

uckles, Finola was more than willing to give all to Cy. To the man who h
ped hisheart. She answered his kiss with everything she had. Her love f
poured from her—and it was returned. She knew without words being
that this man, this former army officer, now a duke of the realm, lov
nhalingTruly loved her.

When Cy finally broke the kiss, they were both breathless.

, barely “I love you,” he said, panting. “I will always love you. And in m
you are the perfect woman to be my duchess. Yes, you might not fit th
shark-for what other dukes seek in their wives, but Finola Honeyfield, you

to you, duchess of my dreams.”

l.” “Then we should make those dreams come true,” she told him. “Can I go by the side to Chichester and beg the bishop to issue another license? I can’t wait for three weeks for the banns to be called.”

He beamed. Releasing her, he withdrew something from his inn pocket.

o see a “What’s this?” she asked, her heart beating rapidly.

“This, my love, is a special license I obtained from Doctors’ College while I was in London. I purchased it in the hopes you might change your mind about marrying me. I intended to renew it every time it expired. It lasted his many months—or years—as was necessary.”

Her fingers toyed with the hair on his nape. “You were willing to spend that much money on the hope I would someday consider wedding you?”

s, I was “I would spend every farthing I had if it would bring you to me,” he replied, taking her in his arms again and kissing her hungrily.

st about This time she was the one to break the kiss. “When do you wish to be wed?”

“I would say now—but I do not see a clergyman or any way of getting how standing about.” He laughed. “And I would have us climb into my coach and head into Adderly to see Reverend Hall, but I told my coachman to wait for the last of Lord Crofton in the village and then stay until he puts the viscount’s mail coach tomorrow morning.”

Finola stroked his cheek. “That was awfully impressive. You find it so convincing him to come to Belldale and issue an apology to me.”

“I knew despite how successful you have become, you still hurt from the time so many years ago. I wanted him to stop plucking new victims. I’m assured, he will never darken a *ton* event again.”

ield her “How did you do it, Cy?”

or him He grinned. “Do you really want to keep talking about Crofton? Or do you spoken you be interested in saddling Autumn and riding into Adderly and marrying her, duke?”

Finola kissed him over and over. “Yes, marriage to a duke sounds like a wonderful idea.”

ly eyes, “Bertie is at the inn there, along with my footman.” He framed her face in his hands. “I believe we can steal Bertie away for a bit, though, so that the ladies can be wed.”

Cy led her to the barn and readied Autumn. He mounted the horse and when the youth reached for Finola, bringing her up and nestling her against him.

“We are actually going to do this,” she said, smiling.

“We are. When we leave Adderly, we shall be husband and wife.”

Cy kissed her, a sweet kiss full of sincerity and love.

The trip to Adderly only took a few minutes. It would have been a short ride, but Cy stopped the horse halfway there to kiss Finola some more. They reached the church and found Reverend Hall just outside its doors, pulling the carriage by the handles.

He set down his cloth as they approached. “Do I have a wedding ceremony to perform, Your Grace?”

“You do,” Cy said, confidence brimming in his voice. “We need to retrieve Bertie from the inn. Does the lad count as a witness?”

“He is welcome to attend the ceremony,” the clergyman said. “Witnesses need to be of legal age. I can fetch Mrs. Hall.”

“Do that,” Cy said. “We will also bring a few others to witness the nuptials.”

Cy threaded his fingers through hers. “Shall we?”

They walked to Mr. Timmon’s shop first and then called to invite Simon and Mrs. Carroll to the ceremony. Cy gave a coin to a boy who passed, asking him to tell Doctor Addams to hurry to the church. The boy laughed as the boy took off running.

By the time they doubled back and crossed the street to the inn, the streets were flooding with people, Bertie one of them. The boy ran to them, smiling on his face.

“Is it true, Your Grace? You are marrying Lady Finola?”

“I am. We were coming to get you,” her fiancé said. “We couldn’t do without your presence. Come along.”

Bertie ran ahead of them, joining the others who were entering the church. Although Finola would have liked to have Nalyssa and Cy witness the ceremony, she was happy to wed Cy now.

“Stay here,” he said. “I will go and see if everything is ready.”

Mrs. Hall came out from the church, carrying a small bouquet. “Thank you, my lady. We don’t want a wedding without flowers now, do you think?”

She gave Finola the bouquet and then said, “It is so nice to see you in your gown, my lady. You look lovely. You should wear one more often.”

rise and Cy came out and obviously overheard the woman's last remark. 'My duchess looks lovely no matter what she wears, Mrs. Hall.' He raised one eyebrow. 'And no doubt she will look beautiful in nothing at all.'

Mrs. Hall gasped. 'Your Grace!'

He gave the woman a boyish smile. 'I am simply looking forward to a shorter, wedding night.'

The woman turned, her face beet red, and fled back into the church. Cy laughed. 'Everything is ready inside.' He glanced about. 'It is if everyone in the village who has heard is already inside, the exception being Dr. Addams. I see him coming, though.'

Glancing over her shoulder, Finola saw the physician galloping down the road to remain thoroughfare on his horse. He pulled up near them and looped the reins around a post.

'I hear there is a wedding ready to take place. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Congratulations, Your Grace. Lady Finola. I will see you inside.'

Cy caressed her cheek. 'I am sorry we did not have time to have our marriage contracts drawn up. We can see to those immediately, my dear. I will always take care of you and any children we have.'

'I never doubted you would,' she told him.

'I will tell you now that I want everything in writing, love. You are to sit with my solicitor as he draws up the marriage settlements to make sure he gets everything correct. Belldale will remain your property, and all the land within it. The same goes for your Honeyfield spaniels.'

His words stunned her. 'That is most generous, Cy.'

He brushed a soft kiss against her lips. 'You do not have to change who you are, Finola, because I love you just as you are. And that means I want you to keep working. Just because you will be a duchess does not mean you should stop training your dogs. It is what makes you happy, and you are bloody good at it.'

A warmth began to glow within her. 'You do not mind a duchess training her dogs as your wife?'

Kissing her again, he said, 'Not only do I support your endeavors, but I expect a healthy discount from you on any dogs I purchase from you in the future.'

She saw the teasing light in his eyes. Love for this man spilled from

‘I think and Finola grabbed his lapels, pulling him down for a lingering kiss. Cy was the one to break the kiss, and she saw the emotion on his face. “Are you ready?” her betrothed asked. “To begin our adventures as husband and wife?”

“I will always be ready for you, Cy.”

He kissed her lightly and then escorted her inside the church. The priest descended over those gathered. They walked up the aisle, and smiles greeted them on the faces of the villagers. Her own smile was being reflected in her utter happiness at the turn of events. She had awoken this morning as Lady Finola Honeyfield, an unattached woman of some fortune and independent means. The day would conclude and see her become the Duchess of Margate.

With the love of her life forever by her side.

They reached the altar, where the waiting Reverend Hall greeted them. “I am most pleased to perform your marriage ceremony, Your Grace,” he said. “Did you give him the license?” Finola asked.

“I did, my love.”

“Then I suppose we should begin,” the clergyman said jovially. He stepped out at the gathered crowd and said in a sonorous voice, “Dearly beloveds, you are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this holy congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which God has joined together. Let them abide together as certain as the sun, moon, and stars, till death do them part. Who has the ring?” Finola glanced up at Cy, and he smiled down at her as Reverend Hall that he walked them through the steps of the ceremony. When it came to produce a ring, Cy turned, calling up Bertie. The boy bounded toward him, opening his palm. Cy plucked the ring from it, Bertie grinning from ear to ear, bouncing with excitement before he returned to his seat.

“It is but a simple gold band,” Cy said softly, “but I can always replace it with something else.”

“It is perfect,” she told him.

As he placed the wedding band on her finger, Finola knew she would never remove it. Not in life. Not in death. For she and Cy were always to be together.

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om her,

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He kissed her lightly and then escorted her inside the church. A hush descended over those gathered. They walked up the aisle, and she saw nothing but smiles on the faces of the villagers. Her own smile was wide, reflecting her utter happiness at the turn of events. She had awakened this morning as Lady Finola Honeyfield, an unattached woman of small but independent means. The day would conclude and see her become the Duchess of Margate.

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EPILOGUE

The next morning . . .

CY AWOKE AND for the first time in his life, he knew utter contentment.

Finola lay nestled in his arms. His wife. His life. The mother of his children.

And the woman who had saved him in every way.

They had returned to Melrose after their impromptu wedding yesterday afternoon, promising the town's citizens they would be invited to a wedding breakfast the next week. They had told Bertie he was to go ahead and to Belldale and that he should exercise the pups as usual tomorrow morning putting them through their paces afterward.

When the boy asked when they would arrive, Finola told him that they would be taking the day off to celebrate her marriage with her new husband. She assured Bertie that she trusted him implicitly, and there would be no need to a more normal routine the day after.

Cy knew it would be important for Finola to keep up her training with the pups, but it might prove more convenient to move them to Melrose soon in the near future. These were all things that could be discussed later.

Now, he wanted to make love to his duchess.

The room was still dark, the heavy curtains keeping out any sunlight. He relished Finola's warmth against him and inhaled the scent of lavender which always clung to her. Slowly, he began stroking her bare back, the delicious curve the most marvelous thing he had ever felt.

She began to stir, and he kissed the top of her head. Her palm caressing his chest, and then she playfully tweaked his nipple, sending a surge of desire through him.

"Are you too tender for us to make love again?" he asked, confident because they had done so thrice already. Once upon their return to Melrose. Again after they had eaten a leisurely supper in bed. A third time during

middle of the night when they had reached for each other hungrily.

“I will never tire of your touch, Cy.”

He kissed his wife long and deep, amazed this beautiful creature finally all his. As his hands roamed her curves, he said, “With the candle burned out, I wish to see you. Might I open the curtains?”

“Only if you are gone but a moment. Any longer and I cannot see you.”

He kissed her, his mouth feeling the curve of her smile. Cy then pulled back the bedclothes and made his way to one of the windows and tossed the curtains, Strong sunlight poured into the room. Turning, he saw she had pushed herself to a sitting position, her long, cinnamon-brown hair tumbling about her.

He took two steps toward her and froze.

No. It couldn't be.

“What is it, Cy?” she asked worriedly.

He moved to the bed, a slow smile spreading across his face. Perched on the bed, he framed her face in his hands.

Gazing into her eyes, he said, “I see you.”

“Of course, you see me, you silly goose. You opened the . . .” He cut off abruptly and her eyes widened. “Do you mean . . . that you see me? With both eyes?”

“Yes. Yes. Yes!”

Cy kissed her everywhere. Her brow and nose. Her cheeks and the sensitive spot just below her ear. Joy filled him.

He made love to his beautiful duchess with enthusiasm, kissing her—every inch of her. They both reached their peak together, and collapsed atop her, quickly rolling to his back so that she was astride his back, the

“How can this be, Cy? I don't mean to question a miracle but . . . how did it begin?”

“I think a visit to Dr. Addams is in order. Also, I would like to tell you that we have a new baby at Stonecrest today and share our good news with Pierce and Nalyssa.”

“Oh, you do not know since you have been gone. Nalyssa had the baby. She is a healthy girl. They named her Mary.”

He kissed her hard and fast. “And I hope we have made our own baby today. You will be a wonderful mother, Finola.”

Her palm cradled his cheek. “You will be the best of fathers because you have so much love in your heart.”

Cy rang for hot water, and he and Finola washed. He had already told her that they would be sharing the duke's rooms, though all her clothing was stored in the duchess's bedchamber. She could dress there.

“We must see about getting you a lady's maid,” he said.

“Do I really need one, Cy?”

“I think my duchess should have one. Maisie would be a good

While you don't often wear gowns, there will be occasions now when you will need such as when we entertain our neighbors for our wedding breakfast next week. That reminds me, you will need to sit with Cook and work out the menu for the occasion.”

“We have other things to discuss.”

“I know,” he said. “We can do so after we see Dr. Addams and are on our way to Stonecrest.”

Cy had sent two footmen for Finola's things, and she went to her room to dress. He followed her, playing lady's maid to her and helping her with her undergarments and a gown. She was then valet to him, kissing him on each cheek each piece of clothing he put on. Once dressed, they headed down to breakfast.

Arnold looked pleased at their arrival, and Mrs. Arnold also appeared to be in good spirits. “Welcome to the breakfast room.”

“I am happy to give you a tour of Melrose today, Your Grace,” the housekeeper told Finola.

“We need to save that for tomorrow, Mrs. Arnold,” his duchess said. “We are going to Stonecrest today to share our good news with the Duke and Duchess of Stoneham.”

“If you will have the coachman ready the carriage, we will leave immediately after breakfast,” Cy informed his butler.

“Soon, they were on their way, with Cy having told the driver to find the house to go to Dr. Addams' house.”

This time when Cy knocked, the servant who answered the door recognized him and curtseyed.

“How are you today, Your Graces?” she asked. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Might Dr. Addams be available?”

“He is, Your Grace. Let me take you to him.”

Finola hung back, and Cy took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers.

told her “I want you with me to hear what Addams has to say.”

could be They were led to the examination room he had previously been
the servant disappeared, promising the doctor would join them momen
Cy took the opportunity to kiss his bride.

He broke the kiss and grinned. “I will never tire of kissing you, my
choice. “That is good to hear—because I feel the same,” Finola said
you do, kissing him.

ist next Hearing a throat being cleared, they sprang apart, and he saw Dr. A
a menu had arrived.

“Ah, the newlyweds. What might I do for you today, Your Graces?”

“I can see again, Dr. Addams,” Cy informed the physician.

on our A pleased and knowing look appeared upon Dr. Addams’ face.
will sit on my examination table, Your Grace, I would like to look
room eyes.”

don her Finola took a seat in one of the available chairs as Cy climbed o
etweentable. Dr. Addams intently studied Cy’s eyes and then stepped back.

airs for “It is as I suspected, Your Grace,” the doctor said. “It coul
combination of two things. You and I—along with your army docto
ared indiscussed the pressure which might have built up on your optic nerv
has passed since the bullet struck your head, and the swelling most lik
e,” the totally subsided. That in and of itself could be the answer to the ric
have been asking regarding your sudden blindness. With the eye rel
id. “We the pressure, it allowed your vision to return.”

ike and “And the other factor?” Cy asked.

“We had also discussed the strain you had been under. Being force
directly all that was familiar to you, into a new life. I believe the strain yo
under was also affecting your sight. Or lack of it. Finding a bride, c
rst stop obviously love, has lifted the curtain of depression, uncertainty, and
which you were feeling.”

e door “You were saying happiness was the cure all along?”

Dr. Addams smiled broadly. “Once again, I don’t think we r
lations question things too closely, Your Grace. Your eyes look fine to me, a
are seeing clearly. I would continue the eyewashes you have been doi
you can taper off when you find you have no more need for them. I thi
would help give you some relief for now.”

gh hers. The physician added, “Congratulations, Your Grace, on your m

and having your eyesight fully restored.”

to, and Dr. Addams then turned to Finola. “Your Grace, I believe I have tried to suppress a grin and failed. “Along with the love you have given me, I would be most grateful if you would share the herbs used in the preparation of each. I am always looking to add to my knowledge in order to help my patients in their recoveries.”

Dr. Addams smiled radiantly. “I would be happy to do so, Your Grace. I will write out the specifics and send them to you. Perhaps you might like to have them on us tomorrow for tea, and I will have it ready for you at that time.”

“I would appreciate it, Your Grace,” said the physician. “Good day to you both.”

Cy and Finola returned to their carriage, and he pulled her into the carriage, kissing her leisurely the entire way to Stonecrest.

When they arrived, they were met by Pugh, the Stonecrest butler.

“I know we are unexpected visitors, but if Your Graces are available, I would be glad to be introduced to you and I would like to visit with them.”

Pugh gave them a welcoming smile. “Of course, Your Graces. Please come in.”

They were led to Nalyssa’s sitting room. The French doors were closed, and Pugh went through them, announcing, “His and Her Grace, the Duke and Duchess of Margate.”

Cy and Finola stepped through the doors, seeing Pierce and Nalyssa sitting at a table in the sunshine. Both rose and embraces were exchanged.

Pierce clapped Cy on the back, saying, “You sly fox. You did it.”

The four of them sat, and another pot of tea was brought out. Cy caught their friends up on the events of the last twenty-four hours.

“It would have been nice to have you at our wedding,” Finola said. “It was so spontaneous. Fortunately, Cy had the foresight to purchase a license, making the wedding possible.”

Cy shared what Miss Slade had found and how he had brought Crofton back with him from London.

“He apologized in person, as well as giving me a letter of apology,” Finola told them.

“Did he sound sincere?” Nalyssa asked.

“As sincere as someone such as the viscount could be,” Cy said.

course, with the threat of being exposed and humiliated in front of your guests at the Duke and Duchess of Westfield's ball, he had little choice but." He "As long as you hold his markers, you have leverage over him," for one pointed out.

and the "I do not know if he can change, but being forced to remain in the country and trying to rebuild his father's estate should make a man of him," he said.

s. I will They spoke of the wedding and how there would be a wedding banquet to call the following week. Nalyssa assured them that she and Pierce would attend.

"I will be up for traveling by then. It will only be a few hours away from you the babe. Or we could even bring Mary and her nurse with us," she murmured.

"Speaking of Mary," Pierce said.

his lap, Cy looked over his shoulder to see a nursemaid bringing the infant to her mother.

The duchess said, "No, give her to the Duke of Margate. I think he will be able to enjoy holding a babe."

He accepted the swaddled newborn and looked down at her. Mary's eyes opened, and she stared with curiosity at the man who held her. A wave of tenderness rippled through him. If he could feel this for his friend's child, what would it be like to hold his own flesh and blood?

like and "I believe you are seeing her with both eyes," Pierce said. "I note that you are no longer wearing your eye patch. When did your vision return?"

Nalyssa Holding out a hand to his wife, Finola took it.

ged. "It came suddenly," he explained. "This morning. We have just returned from Dr. Addams, and he said it could be a few things. I don't question as they merely celebrate it."

Nalyssa smiled. "I think it is love which cured you, Cy. It took time, but your soulmate and lasting happiness to bring about this miracle."

special Cy squeezed his wife's fingers and gazed down once more at the newborn in his arms, who still studied him with interest.

it Lord "We will do our best, Mary, to give you a playmate as soon as possible," he told the babe.

ology," Pierce and Nalyssa laughed at his declaration.

But Cy was looking at Finola as he said it, seeing her love reflected in her eyes.

id. "Of "I look forward to the children we will have, my love," he said.

all the knowing their lives were only just beginning.

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About the Author

Award-winning and internationally bestselling author Alexa , historical romances use history as a backdrop to place her characters in extraordinary circumstances, where their intense desire for one another leads to the treasured gift of love.

She is the author of Regency and Medieval romance, including: *Distinction*; *Soldiers & Soulmates*; *The St. Clairs*; *The King's Cousin*; *The Knights of Honor*.

A native Texan, Alexa lives with her husband in a Dallas suburb. she eats her fair share of dark chocolate and plots out stories while she reads every morning. She enjoys a good Netflix binge; travel; seafood; and getting enough of *Survivor* or *The Crown*.

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