

*Christmas
Wallflowers*

*His
Yuletide
Dove*

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

TABETHA WAITE

HIS YULETIDE DOVE
CHRISTMAS WALLFLOWERS

TABETHA WAITE



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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About the Author](#)

*For anyone who might be struggling. Remember, you are
never alone.*

CHAPTER ONE

*M*eriden, England

December 1811

LORD CAIN WYNDHAM, Viscount Markel, was on the hunt for salvation—particularly for his libertine soul. While most of his fellow peers in London were proud to be rakish ne'er-dowells, a life of debauchery and sin was starting to catch up to his conscience, so he decided it was time to make a change. He couldn't count how many times he'd woken up in the bed of a barmaid he could not remember swiving, with a pounding headache that felt as though the local blacksmith had taken a hammer to his skull. But when the pints of ale continued to flow like the River Jordan, it was no wonder he generally had no recollection of the previous night's events.

Not until he was on his way back from Birmingham where he'd attended the funeral of his old school friend who had perished from his salacious lifestyle, suffering the horrid fate of syphilis, had Cain realized he needed to adjust his current path. Granted, his mother had long noticed the signs of danger and had likely been praying for his soul the past several years,

ever since the death of his father. After he'd inherited the title, she'd been harping continuously about doing his duty and settling down, which was why he seldom spent his time in London anymore, because it was a den of conniving mothers eager to gain a wealthy viscount for a son-in-law.

Forever eschewing the dreaded matrimonial state, Cain had paused when he had received news of James' death. Suddenly, everything was... different. The earl had been a member of Cain's inner circle, and they had shared every confidence during their school years and beyond. They would have given the Hellfire Club some steep competition had their licentious ceremonies still been in practice. The affairs Cain and James had conducted had been the stuff of legend, but a few months ago, the earl had retired to his country estate after complaining of an "ailment." He had kept the secret of his diagnosis quiet, but Cain had eventually discovered the truth. It wasn't until he'd made plans to visit James, that he'd received word of his demise. He'd been too late.

The visit to the estate for the funeral had been strained and awkward, for James' parents had never cared for their son's friendship with Cain, but they had greeted him nevertheless and thanked him for attending. Not until Cain had ridden away from the lonely gravesite, which was already being covered with the cold, winter earth, did he realize that could have, just as easily, been *him* being laid to rest that morning.

It was enough to make him veer off course on his journey to London, where he fully intended to lay himself at his mother's feet and beg for mercy and find a wife posthaste.

First, however, his intentions were to seek forgiveness with the closest vicar—and his heavenly employer.

Riding along the “Old Road,” he found himself deposited at the village of Meriden. He hadn’t really chosen this particular place to plead on behalf of his wicked soul, as Coventry would have likely been a better choice since it was rumored to be the birthplace of St. George, a dragon slayer and patron saint of England. For someone so selfless, surely Cain could find his path to redemption there—as long as he didn’t come across any versions of Lady Godiva, who had ridden naked through the streets to protest the injustice of oppressive taxations.

While the Holy Trinity Church might have been preferable for redemption, as it was a tribute to the Gothic Medieval structures of the time, the moment Cain spied St. Laurence Church, the rectangular, brick Tudor style structure sitting calmly at the base of a hill in the midst of the picturesque village, he couldn’t help but grin.

It was perfect.

He tied his mount outside and walked toward the main entrance. He wasn’t sure if anyone would be around at this time of day, considering it was a brisk, Tuesday morning, but he supposed there was no harm in trying.

He refrained from whistling as he walked up the steps, eager as he was to save his eternal soul, but when he reached the wooden doors, he hesitated. He hadn’t been to a church service since he’d been out of short pants, so he wasn’t sure if

he should knock or just walk inside, but the decision was made for him when it abruptly opened for him.

A slight, feminine gasp greeted him from the interior of the chapel, but it was the lady herself that quite took Cain's breath away. With a few golden curls peeking out from beneath her plain, straw bonnet, the rest pinned into a neat little knot at the nape of her neck, her blue eyes wide with surprise, and her delicate, feminine figure attired in a dark green pelisse, she was quite literally the embodiment of everything that he'd ever made it a point to steer clear from.

And yet...

An innocent, virginial lady couldn't be more of a perfect quest to test his new resolve.

His grin widened. "Good day, madam. I should hate to trouble you, but is the vicar in? I should like to save my mortal soul."



MISS DOVE MERIWETHER frowned lightly at the gentleman standing on the church steps, because while she had always greeted anyone who came to her father's parish with a welcoming smile, she wasn't sure that this man was a good fit for their congregation. Granted, he was attired smartly in his greatcoat with dark brown trousers and a matching jacket, a gold waistcoat, and white shirt and cravat which proclaimed him to be a man of substance, but it was his direct gaze, a mix of green and gold flecks that quite unsettled her.

And the fact he seemed oddly... *delighted* about salvation. In her experience, most people had to be led to the altar, but apparently, not this one.

She cleared her throat and said evenly, "I'm sorry, but my father is away at the moment. Perhaps you might leave your card? Or even try the neighboring village of Coventry, which is but a short ride—"

He shook his head and kept that dazzling smile on his face, and she realized it wasn't the sunny and mild December day that had abruptly taken her breath. "I'm quite content to wait inside."

Very odd, indeed. "I do apologize," Dove returned demurely, noticing that his eyebrows were the exact same shade as the thick, mahogany hair on his head. She glanced away. "But I have somewhere I need to be."

He stood a bit straighter. "In that case, perhaps I could accompany you until your father returns?"

Dove's eyes widened. "Oh, that's not necessary, truly. There's no need to trouble yourself." She held out a hand and started to move past him as she spoke, but he would not be dissuaded so easily and fell into step beside her.

"Nonsense. It is no hardship, I assure you." He held out his arm to her. "Since it appears you don't have an escort at the ready, and I need to remain here until I am assured of redemption, it shall be no hardship at all to act as your protector."

Dove slid him a sideways glance, wondering if he wasn't a bit touched in the head. Never before had she had such a... strange conversation. "I have known most of the people here all of my life. I'm not afraid to walk down the street on my own."

"That may be so." He rubbed the back of his neck as if he was actually embarrassed to admit it, and yet she had the feeling that little shocked him. "But perhaps you will grant mercy on a wayward soul hoping to mend his wicked ways?"

She refrained from rolling her eyes but slipped her arm through his. She tried not to react to the strength beneath her gloved fingertips. *Focus!* She cleared her throat. "The first step toward deliverance is that you are willing to make a change, so that is certainly in your favor."

"Yes," he murmured. "Very good point, Miss...?" He lifted his brow as he waited for her to supply her name.

She hesitated only a moment. "Meriwether," she returned. "And you are?"

"Cain Wyndham, Viscount Markel," he happily supplied.

She nearly missed a step. It wasn't often that a member of the peerage appeared in their quiet little hamlet. She yearned to find out how he had managed to end up in Meriden, but since her father had always warned her not to pry into the business of others, especially that of a noble, she remained silent.

He winked at her. "So where are we off to?"

Dove knew, in that instant, that this man was trouble, as his easy mannerisms announced that he was a rake of the first order, but she told herself that he would soon tire of his quest and find his way back to London. However, that didn't mean she couldn't make the most of his journey and let him observe how common people spent their days. It certainly wasn't dancing in a ballroom or riding in Hyde Park like the aristocracy.

"We're headed to the local dispensary to visit the sick and infirm."

She noted that this time he was the one who made a misstep. "The... um... *what?*"

"You might consider it as something of a hospital, Lord Markel, although it is nothing so grand as St. Bartholomew."

"I know what a dispensary is," he returned dryly. "But, why must we go there?"

"Because the church is responsible for most of the charitable funding, so I've made a point to try to attend to those less fortunate." She paused to allow that to sink in. "That *is* why you said you are here, is it not? To save your soul? Part of that process is to put others' needs before your own."

"Well, yes, I suppose..." He grimaced slightly. "But I didn't imagine that it would be quite so... involved."

She couldn't stop a laugh from bubbling forth. "Do you think Jesus thought of dirtying his hands when he washed his disciples' feet?" She looked at him and saw that he was

attempting to decipher her words. “You’ll find that kindness goes a long way, my lord,” she added softly.

He rubbed his jaw in apparent thought and then said, “You are rather insightful, Miss Meriwether, for one so young.”

She bristled slightly. She certainly didn’t want to appear as a child in his eyes. “I’m one and twenty, my lord, but I have been a vicar’s daughter my entire life. I’ve merely learned to care for those who require my help since I was very young.”

He snorted. “And your mother doesn’t take objection to her daughter visiting sick rooms rather than setting up her own nursery?”

A pang of longing shot through Dove’s heart. “My mother died several years ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said quietly, his countenance more solemn than before. “Do you have no siblings, then?”

She shook her head. “No.”

He nodded. “How unfortunate. I daresay I could not imagine life without my younger brother or sister around to bedevil me.” His lips turned upward in the corners, as if recalling some fond memory. “Although it has been some time since I have seen either of them, we were close when we were younger. At one point we were all quite troublesome when it came to one particular governess. But—” He held up a hand. “In all fairness, she wasn’t the most pleasant woman to be around. Entirely too strict.”

She laughed again. “I can certainly imagine what the poor lady had to endure, especially if your siblings are anything like

you, my lord.”

He narrowed his gaze and muttered, “I’m not sure if I should be complimented or insulted by that remark.”

“I assure you it was not meant in a disparaging way.”

“That’s a relief.” He gave a mock sigh. “I was starting to worry that I’d lost my ability to converse with a lady with even a modicum of charm.”

Dove did not reply, but in the short time she had known him, there was no danger of him failing in that regard, for he had quite impressed her already.

CHAPTER TWO

Cain wasn't sure what he'd been expecting when he arrived at Meriden, but it certainly hadn't been this intriguing, young woman. True, she had beauty, but it was her wit and compassion that intrigued him above all else. Most of the ladies he knew of her age were only interested in the latest fashions, and yet, as he entered the modest hospital at Miss Meriwether's side, he had to admit that she truly seemed to... *care* about others.

He attempted to find some sort of fault in her mannerisms as she stopped and visited with each of the patients, some longer than others depending on their illness, but it didn't take long before he realized there was little about the lady that wasn't genuine. It was as if he had finally inhaled his first breath of fresh, clean air. Perhaps his search for salvation wouldn't be so terrible after all.

Once their visit was concluded and they were back outside, she glanced at him and the light hit her eyes just right, turning them a sparkling sapphire. "That wasn't so bad, was it, my lord?"

He blinked, thinking that she had somehow read his mind, but then he realized she was referring to their visit. “Not at all.” He cleared his throat. “I should like to go back again.”

Her eyebrows rose as she started walking. “Really?”

He fell into step beside her and clasped his hands behind his back. “Don’t look so shocked, Miss Meriwether. I may be a rake when it comes to you and God, but I’m not a complete scoundrel. I have done things for others. Why, there is a charity event each year and I am very generous about emptying my pockets.”

She nodded. “That is very selfless of you, I agree. What is the charity for?”

Cain opened his mouth to answer but found himself at a loss for words. In truth, he had no idea, because he’d never really paid attention, but since he couldn’t admit that to her, he muttered, “Orphaned children of London.”

“Very admirable,” she noted. Cain grimaced, because he was quite sure he would have to do more than just ask forgiveness for his blackened soul for lying to such a pure creature as the lady at his side.

Hoping to maneuver the conversation away from his own failings, he asked, “Where to now?”

“I thought you might like a bite to eat. It is nearly lunchtime, and the Queen’s Head Pub is not to be missed when visiting Meriden.” She hesitated. “Or while just passing through.”

He glanced at her, but she was looking straight ahead. Either way, he discerned that she didn't expect him to stay in town for long. But then, if the vicar had been around when he'd arrived, who was to say he'd wouldn't already be on his way to London?

The inn had a charming, two-story white exterior which had adopted the striking Tudor style with half-timber, dark brown beams. Inside, it was the same, with a few chairs and tables scattered about but only a handful of patrons even though it should have been a busy time of day.

The moment they walked in they were greeted with a broad smile from the lady behind the counter. She didn't fit the typical buxom barmaid that Cain always seemed to find. Rather, she was slender and had dark hair, just starting to turn silver, pulled back into a simple bun. She wiped her hands on her apron as she walked out from behind the bar.

"Miss Meriwether! It's not often I get the privilege of seeing ye during the week." She glanced curiously at Cain.

"This is Viscount Markel, Mable." Miss Meriwether preformed the introductions. "My lord, this is Mrs. Mable Decker. She runs the pub with her husband, Herbert."

Mable offered him a warm greeting, if not a bit flustered in the way she put a hand to her heart and began to ramble. "My goodness! A true viscount right here in Meriden! Please, come and sit here. It's our best table. We also have rooms for let upstairs, and while I'm sure they're not as grand as what you're used to, I can assure you that they are clean and comfortable."

Cain was used to getting special treatment when it became known that he was a member of the peerage, but it wasn't until this moment that he felt almost... humbled by this woman's attention. It was obvious she was willing to bend over backwards to ensure his comfort.

"I'm not sure how long the viscount wishes to remain in town, Mable," Miss Meriwether was quick to point out. "He was wishing to speak to my father. I'm sure he'll be eager to continue his journey once their conversation has concluded."

Cain wasn't sure what made him deny her claim, as it was what he'd originally intended. But as life had a way of teaching him, sometimes plans change. As Mable handed him a list with a selection of items to look over, he adopted a casual air. "On the contrary, Miss Meriwether, I may just extend my visit. I'm finding that your village is rather charming."

"Oh, that would be wonderful!" Mable clasped her hands together. "There are plenty of interesting things to see! Castle ruins and—"

As the innkeeper began to extol the many virtues to be had in Meriden, Cain risked a glance at Miss Meriwether. Although her expression was clear of any sort of response, he had the feeling she wasn't very pleased he would be staying longer.



IT WAS all Dove could do to keep her composure as Mable gushed about having a viscount in her inn. She prayed it didn't disrupt the order of things, because the village was neat and proper without having a man like Lord Markel around to cause chaos. Granted, he hadn't done anything to disrupt their tightknit community yet, but she knew men of his sort. They might initially believe that they wanted to ask forgiveness for their many sins, but they generally didn't pass the first test of their newfound character and quickly reverted to their old ways. She'd witnessed it time and time again, and nothing proved to her that the viscount was any different. Just because he hadn't left after visiting the infirmary, didn't mean anything. He would leave eventually; if nothing else, just because duty demanded it.

“Will you be staying for lunch as well, Dove?”

“Dove?” She glanced at the viscount who was looking at her rather curiously. “That's your given name?”

“Yes,” she returned, feeling suddenly self-conscious. “Is there something wrong?”

Mable gasped, as it was rather bold of Dove to reply in such a manner when she was normally more demure. However, Lord Markel didn't seem to mind. “Not at all. I suppose it was just... unexpected. It's not a name I hear very often, and yet, it suits you.” Dove wasn't sure what to make of that, but she didn't have time to ask as he shifted his focus to Mable. “The lady will be joining me.”

“Actually—” Dove held up a hand, but Mable had already scurried away. With a sigh, she sank down onto the chair

opposite the viscount and glared at him. “I wasn’t intending to stay, my lord. I still have other things to attend to today.”

“And supplying your body’s demands for food isn’t one of them?” he countered with a lifted brow.

“Of course, but I don’t live that far—” She broke off as Mable returned to set down a pint of ale before him, while Dove was handed a glass of water. After she reluctantly gave the lady her order, Dove took a small sip of her drink.

“Let me guess, you never imbibe during the day?”

She lifted her gaze and noted that the viscount was looking at her intently. In truth, it was quite disconcerting. She shifted in her seat. “I’ve never consumed any spirits.”

He had just taken a hefty drink of his ale, but after her admission, he swallowed hard. “*Never?*” he echoed in disbelief. “What of wine?”

“I suppose I do have a bit of wine with communion,” she conceded.

He blinked. “That’s all?”

“I didn’t really see a need for it otherwise.” She shrugged. “Besides, I’ve never much cared for the taste. It’s much too bitter for my liking. I prefer a cup of tea.”

She thought she heard him mutter something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like, “Unbelievable,” but she couldn’t say that for sure.

He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands over his midsection. Since her gaze was drawn there, she couldn’t help

but notice he was rather trim. She quickly averted her eyes.

“Tell me about yourself.”

Dove frowned. “I’ve told you everything you need to know. Besides, I’m sure my past hasn’t been nearly as eventful as yours.” She sat up straighter. “Why don’t you tell me about London.”

“London.” He snorted and ran his forefinger around the edge of his glass. She found it oddly hypnotizing. “It’s a smelly, dirty town, and when it rains you don’t know if you’re stepping in mud or refuse.”

“My, you paint such a... poignant picture,” she murmured. “But what about the British History Museum, and the Tower, and...” She trailed off, afraid that her enthusiasm over visiting the city would become overly apparent.

He tilted his head to the side. “I suppose there is a lot to see if one is a tourist, but for someone who has walked the streets countless times, I guess it just doesn’t hold that much appeal for me.” He paused. “Have you never been?”

“I haven’t left Meriden,” she found herself admitting. “But I always thought it would be nice to see the city that has been around since the time of the Romans, the one place that makes you appreciate the trials our country has endured over the years.”

“Hmm. I suppose I never thought of it that way.”

Dove immediately felt as if she’d overstepped, as his expression seemed rather grim. “I’m sorry if I—”

He held up a hand. “No, please. No apologies are necessary. I have long ignored the things around me that are most important.” He looked at her intently. “Thank you for finally opening my eyes up to my surroundings. Perhaps I will learn to appreciate the gifts I’ve been granted a bit more.”



MISS MERIWETHER CAST her eyes downward yet again, and Cain yearned for her to keep her focus fixated on him. When it came to being a woman who was decidedly younger than him, by at least a decade, she had already given him a new awareness regarding the selfish way he’d been living. While the modest atmosphere around him might have had something to do with it, he knew it was this comely, innocent girl who had managed to sneak past the barrier around his tough exterior to warm his heart. Oddly enough, she had no idea the power she was wielding over him.

But he did.

“Here ye are!” He glanced up to see Mrs. Decker was placing a steaming, delicious meal in front of him. The scents wafting up from the dish tempted him more than anything that the famed French chef, Marie-Antoine Carême, might have cooked up during his many trips to Paris.

He dug into the fare with gusto, while Miss Meriwether ate a bit more sedately. Little was said until he set down his fork and knife, the plate perfectly clean. He smiled broadly and said, “I don’t know if it was because I was hungrier than I’d imagined, but I haven’t had anything that wonderful in some

time. I may just have to steal your Mrs. Decker away to come cook in my kitchens.”

He winked at his companion and was pleased when a slight blush covered her delicate cheeks, but she merely wiped her mouth with her napkin and said, “I’m sure she will be overjoyed by your compliment.”

The door to the inn opened, and Miss Meriwether’s eyes instantly lit up. “Papa!” She got to her feet and rushed over to the man of middle years who had entered.

He removed his hat as she embraced him fondly, but Cain noted some weariness around his eyes. No doubt his recent travels had taken their toll, but his lips curved upward in a happy smile when he looked at his daughter.

“There’s someone I’d like you to meet. He’s been waiting all afternoon to speak with you,” she added.

Miss Meriwether led him over to Cain. He rose to his feet respectfully and offered the older man a bow, regardless of his rank. “Papa, this is Viscount Markel. My lord, this is my father, Mr. Edmund Meriwether, the village vicar.”

“A viscount?” The vicar’s bushy gray brows rose toward his receding hairline. Dressed in plain, brown clothes, he looked about as unassuming as Cain imagined Jesus might have been in his day, walking the streets of Galilee. “What an honor to have such a distinguished gentleman in our midst.” He glanced toward his daughter. “I hope that Dove has been kind to you.”

Cain’s lips twitched. “She has.”

Again, that charming blush stole over her cheeks.

“I daresay I’ve been curious as to how Miss Meriwether got her name.”

Her father chuckled. “She never has been particularly fond of it, but her dear, departed mother and I couldn’t have chosen anything more suited to her gentle nature and devout faith toward the Lord.”

“I see.” Cain couldn’t ascertain if Miss Meriwether approved of this depiction, as her face was wiped clear of any sort of expression. As a gesture of good will, he decided to offer his own Christian name. “I fear I was gifted with the name of Cain, and I daresay I have lived up to the reputation.” He exhaled heavily. “It is the reason I sought you out today, Mr. Meriwether. After attending the funeral of a fellow comrade, I realized that certain... aspects of my life need to alter. I am prepared to return to London and do my duty and find a wife and leave my rapacious past behind, but I need your help to do that.”

The vicar inclined his head. “Of course. I am always eager to direct a child of God back into the arms of the flock. Shall we retire to—?” He suddenly paused and blinked rapidly, putting a hand to his forehead.

“Papa?” Miss Meriwether’s voice sounded concerned. “Are you well?”

“I—” It was all her father managed before he collapsed.

CHAPTER THREE

“*I* believe it is nothing more than exhaustion, Miss Meriwether.” The village doctor put away his instruments and turned to her solemnly. “But you must understand that he is of an age where certain ailments might strike more often. It is imperative, for his health, that you discourage him from venturing such long distances from now on, and to keep his visits within the village. His faith is best served when he is still on the earth with us.”

“Yes, of course, Dr. Meyer,” Dove returned softly. After the doctor prescribed bed rest and a restorative tea, she escorted him back downstairs, from where he took his leave.

She shut the door with a heavy sigh. She had long noticed that her father was working himself entirely too much, traveling farther and farther to pray with those who needed him, but it was starting to come at the cost of his own health. Dove didn’t wish to be selfish, but she wasn’t sure what would become of her if he passed. She had no other family to turn to, and while she might be able to prevail upon the charity of others for a time, it wasn’t something she was looking forward to doing, nor would it last forever.

The time had come where she had to start thinking of her own future.

“How are you doing?”

She turned to see Viscount Markel standing in the doorway of her parlor with his arms crossed and a slight furrow on his brow. He looked so tall and... intimidating standing there, so out of place, that his overwhelming presence quite took her breath for a moment. She clasped her hands together in front of her and adopted her usual mien, the one she had chosen when addressing the congregation in the past. “Thank you for helping my father back home, my lord, but as you can see, he is not fit to offer absolution at the moment. As I suggested earlier today it might be best if you continued on to Coventry, otherwise you might be waiting longer than you were anticipating.”

Dove waited, because she could see that the viscount was considering her words. In the end, he surprised her by saying, “Indeed, you are correct that it could be some time before the vicar is well enough to attend to me, but I don’t mind waiting a few days until he is recovered. Frankly, I would be worried about his health should I leave now. I believe that I shall take Mrs. Decker up on her offer to let a room at the inn.”

“Of... course. If that’s what you wish.” Dove wasn’t exactly sure what to say to that. She certainly hadn’t been expecting it. She thought for sure he would be like any other entitled lord and continue on his way, eager to pray away his sins before eagerly committing them again in London. But this

man was different. It was as if he truly was concerned, and not only over her father.

He inclined his head. "I will take my leave of you now and make the necessary arrangements with Mrs. Decker." He walked forward and grasped her hand then brought it upward and pressed a gentle kiss along her bare knuckles.

Instantly, a shock of awareness shot up her arm.

"Good day, Miss Meriwether."



THAT NIGHT, in his temporary rooms, Cain lay on the bed with his arms crossed behind his head and stared at the stark white ceiling above him. Mrs. Decker had been more than accommodating to his needs, ensuring that a steaming, hot bath was prepared for him as well as tea and several delicacies for his choosing. Much more time in the lady's presence and he would surely gain a stone or two.

He couldn't recollect a time when someone had actually cared so much for his comfort, just because he was a human being. While his title went far to see closed doors opened to him, he was aware that although Mrs. Decker was treating him kindly because he was a member of the peerage, that wasn't the only reason. She would likely treat a simple pauper the same way. It was what he'd always liked about the country hamlets. They were so far removed from the chaos in larger towns, where people were eager to smile in your face one

moment, and then turn around and step over your wounded body in the street the next.

But it was Miss Dove Meriwether that had been the most enticing surprise. She was pure and innocent and—everything he should avoid. He sighed.

Unfortunately, he couldn't make himself get on his horse and ride out of Meriden without exploring the lady in more detail. Not only had the attraction been immediate, but he believed it was the same for her. When he'd kissed her hand farewell, he'd caught the hitch in her breathing, had seen her skin flush with color. And while Cain had enjoyed his share of liaisons, none of the previous women he'd bedded had kept his thoughts longer than the mutual satisfaction. Yet, here he was, at nearly three in the morning, and wide awake because he couldn't get that light golden hair out of his mind.

He slipped one of his hands under the sheets and told himself it was a good thing he slept nude.

As Cain stroked his partially erect cock, he closed his eyes and pictured Dove in the room with him. She would place her soft hand on his chest and look at him with those wide, blue eyes and then slowly remove her clothes. He groaned, imagining her breasts when they were revealed, their tight peaks just aching for his mouth to suck them. He obliged, teasing one fleshy globe, and then the other, while she made little mewling sounds of desire. He was fully hard now and his teeth clenched as his fantasy continued to grow.

Next, he would kiss his way down further, past her ribcage and her navel, over the curve of her hip and along her thighs,

until he found the center of her desire. There, he would tease and torment her with his tongue, until she convulsed. While she was still wet and sated, he would crawl back up her body and kiss her passionately as he slowly slipped his cock into her, every slow inch a painful pleasure.

His strokes became more fervent as he cupped her breasts in his imagination, squeezing them lightly as he began a rhythmic thrust and retreat. Each time he pulled away, she would moan in anticipation, and when he seated himself fully into her body, she would sigh with bliss, the pleasure already starting to build again...

Beads of sweat broke out on Cain's forehead as his legs stiffened seconds before he erupted. He lay there for a moment as he attempted to catch his breath, and then he reached for the handkerchief that was on the side table and cleaned himself. Afterward, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. Although what he'd just done was supposed to calm him down in order to think more clearly, it had actually unnerved him. The orgasm he'd just experienced was powerful and like nothing he'd ever had before, at his hand or from another.

He shoved his palm through his hair and stood. He donned a pair of trousers and his shirt, realizing that there would be no sleep that night.

It was time for a drink instead.



DOVE WAS STANDING ON A STOOL, reaching for a pitcher on the top shelf in the kitchen when there was a knock at the front door. She muttered something under her breath that her father would likely not approve of as she abandoned her task and went to answer the latest summons. All morning it had been thus. She was grateful that the villagers had expressed an interest in her father's health by calling to see how he was doing, some of them even offering their own herbal remedies, but it was difficult to get anything done when she was continuously attending to the latest visitor.

Nevertheless, she put a welcoming smile on her face as she prepared to greet their guest. She clutched the latch in her hand with a white-knuckled grip when she saw Viscount Markel standing on the other side. When they had parted ways the day before, he had told her that he had planned to remain, but she hadn't really believed it. No one generally stayed long in Meriden.

"My lord." She dipped into a slight curtsy and moved aside for him to enter.

He offered her a dazzling grin that put the sun shining outside to shame as he walked through the door. He was dressed in black trousers and boots, an emerald waistcoat and jacket that perfectly brought out the bits of emerald in his eyes and complimented his mahogany hair. "Good day, Miss Meriwether. I assume your father is doing well?"

"Yes, he is. Thank you for asking." She hid her hands within the folds of her skirts, that dreaded, awkward pause interceding. She had never been much for small talk when it

wasn't something about the church or her duties as a vicar's daughter. Standing in front of this devastatingly handsome man, she was even more unsure of herself. "Would you care for some tea?" she blurted finally.

His grin widened. "I would love some. If it's not too much trouble."

"Not at all. I'll just put a kettle on." She was actually grateful for the chance to have something to do that would take her farther away from him. "Feel free to wait in the parlor and I'll bring out a tray."

She quickly walked away and took a restoring breath as she set about boiling water for tea. Once that was started, she turned her attention back to the dreaded pitcher that she couldn't quite reach. Lifting her skirts, she got back on the stool, determined that it wouldn't elude her this time. Why her father had ever thought it necessary to shove it so far back in the cabinet she would never know.

Daring to rise on her tiptoes, Dove had nearly grabbed hold of the handle when the stool decided to scoot on the floor. Her balance was immediately in peril and she started to fall forward. With a cry of alarm, she closed her eyes, bracing herself for the impact—but it never came.

A strong pair of arms caught her.

She hastily opened her eyes to discover the viscount was at just the correct level to lock gazes with her. Her hands had managed to find their way to his shoulders and his were around her waist to steady her.

“You should be more careful,” he said huskily, as he slowly let her slide down his length until her feet touched the floor.

She blinked, because she hadn’t expected him to follow her into the kitchen. “You’re... here.” It was all her blank mind could think of to say.

“Yes.” His focus never left her face, but more particularly, her mouth.

Aware of his regard, she dared to moisten her lips, and his gaze darkened with something entirely dangerous and... enticing. Dove had never felt this sort of wicked temptation before and she had to admit it was rather exciting. And when he started to move closer to her, she couldn’t find it in herself to stop him.

Her pulse fluttered the moment his mouth touched hers. She held her breath as his lips gently caressed hers with expert precision. He knew exactly how to entice her to open up to him, as his tongue slid along the seam of her lips. She gasped and he took the opportunity to explore what she offered, however unknowingly. As the kiss deepened, Dove clutched his jacket and held on as her head began to spin. It was hard to discern if her feet were still on solid ground, or if she was floating somewhere above her body.

The slight tinkle of a bell slid through Dove’s conscious, but it didn’t completely register in her mind until the viscount drew back from her. Only then did it become apparent where she was—and what she’d been doing.

Immediately, she disentangled herself from Lord Markel as she jumped down from the stool. “That’s my father. I gave him a bell to ring when he needed me... Oh! The tea.” She couldn’t seem to think straight, still flustered from his kiss.

As she put a hand to her forehead, he said, “Tend to your father and I’ll take over the tea.”

She glanced at him curiously. “You’re a guest. I couldn’t possibly—”

He gave her a gentle shove toward the doorway. “Go.”

Her shoulders slumped and she nodded. “Very well. I shall return in a moment.”

Dove walked up the stairs and paused at the landing, clutching the railing as she did so. Her lips were still tingling with Lord Markel’s kiss. She had never been kissed like that before. Most of the village boys gave her a wide berth since she was the vicar’s daughter. That’s all she had ever been and it had been enough.

But today...

She shook her head. It was merely an impulse in the moment and nothing more. Lord Markel was not a permanent part of her life, and she would not settle for anything less. He could have his peccadilloes with other ladies. She was quite sure that he didn’t lack for feminine companionship and she would not become his latest conquest.

With her resolve in place, she straightened her shoulders and walked into her father’s room.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cain didn't know what had possessed him to kiss Miss Meriwether, whether it was still the remnants of his fantasy swirling about in his mind, or that the opportunity had merely presented itself, but he told himself it wouldn't happen again. He was not here to satisfy his lust, but to try to curb his lewd lifestyle so that he didn't end up like James.

He shuddered, feeling as if a rabbit had already run across his grave, and turned his attention to the tea kettle which was steaming. He poured most of it into the teapot and set the tea to steeping, and then gathered the few things he could find and placed them on a tray. Before he carried it to the parlor, he glanced up at the pitcher that Miss Meriwether had been struggling to obtain. He reached up and easily got it down and set it on the counter, hoping it could be the olive branch for his behavior. He gathered the tray and headed for the parlor.

Cain had just taken the first sip of his tea when Miss Meriwether returned. She looked slightly harried. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Yes. Papa just needed me to stoke the fire. He was starting to feel a chill in the air." She pointed at the tray and

frowned. “Why did you bring that in here?”

He glanced at the offending item in question. “I thought I was invited to tea,” he noted dryly.

“Well, yes, but I didn’t expect you to—”

“Lend a helping hand?” he finished for her. He rolled his eyes. “Really, you would think that as a viscount I am completely helpless. I grew up with servants attending us, but that didn’t mean I didn’t also follow them around and pay attention to what they were doing.”

Her face flushed a charming rose pink. “Of course. I didn’t mean to infer that you weren’t capable—”

“Sit down, Miss Meriwether,” he commanded gently. “And enjoy some tea with me.”

She hesitated only a moment and then sat down on the settee next to him, although he noted she made certain not even the hem of her dress was in danger of brushing his trousers. She poured her tea and added sugar, but no cream. However, it was the moment she took the first sip and made a small sound in the back of her throat that Cain froze. He couldn’t move. His teacup was halfway to his mouth, but that noise was something from his nightly imagination and his cock instantly pulsed to life. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to look away to gain control of himself.

“How did you sleep at the inn?”

Cain’s gaze snapped back to hers, and he wondered if she had read his mind, but when she merely glanced at him with a friendly curiosity, he relaxed slightly. “Very well,” he lied.

“Mrs. Decker makes sure I want for nothing.” This time he spoke the truth.

“I imagine not.” Her lips twitched as she took another sip of her tea. “She is very awed of you, I think.”

“Whereas you’re not?”

This time, the cup was halfway to her mouth. *Blast.* Cain hadn’t meant to speak so boldly, when he’d just convinced himself he wasn’t going to engage in such empty flirtation, but now that the words were spoken, it wasn’t as if he could pretend they weren’t floating in the air between them.

She seemed to weigh her next statement carefully. “I admit that it is quite intriguing to imagine the sort of life you must have led, but as far as being impressed by a mere title—” She shrugged. “I’m afraid not.”

He laughed. “That doesn’t surprise me at all. From the moment we met I could tell you weren’t the sort of female to be swayed by flowery prose.”

“Oh, don’t mistake me,” she countered. “I enjoy a good book of poetry from time to time, but I daresay I wouldn’t believe it if there was an ode to my ‘glorious locks.’” She rolled her eyes without humor.

He tilted his head to the side, thinking there was something else hidden in her admission. “Why not?”

“Pardon?”

He leaned back, throwing an arm against the back of the settee. While there was still plenty of distance between them, he could tell the action made her wary. “What makes you

believe that there couldn't be a verse written about you? Personally, I beg to differ." He cleared his throat and adopted his best theatrical impression. "*‘Oh, lady, so fair and true. Won't you e'er be my true love? With hair as golden as the sun and eyes that shine with the glory of sapphire blue, there is no other I would choose to be my Dove.’*"

The laughter that followed was worth his efforts. She even set aside her cup and clapped lightly. "Bravo! Really, my lord, you might have a career on the stage. Or at the very least, surely you could pick up a pen."

He gave a mock wince, although he was grinning. "If my father were still alive, he would likely take my name in vain if I did either. He wasn't a fan of the arts, but when it came to shooting grouse or fox hunting, he was determined not to return to the manor without a sack full of his spoils."

"How old were you when you lost your father?"

He had to think. "I suppose it's been about twelve years or more now. I had just turned eighteen."

Her expression was compassionate. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "It's not as if we were particularly close. Not like you and your father seem to be at least. When you are groomed to be a viscount since you are born, expectations are more foreseen than affection."

"It must have been dreadfully lonely for you," she said quietly.

Cain thought of the first time he'd lain with a woman. It had been one of the kitchen maids when he'd been fifteen.

After that, he made it a point to charm every woman he could find, just because he knew he could do so. “I found ways to pass the time,” he said evenly. “The question is, if I get lonely in Meriden, will you be the one to comfort me, Miss Meriwether?”



DOVE HAD BEEN HAVING a civil conversation with the viscount until that point. In truth, she was quite enjoying his company, but now, she had to become the cool hostess once again. “I fear you shall have to turn your attentions elsewhere in that regard, Lord Markel.”

She set aside her tea and made to rise, but he grabbed her wrist. Not enough to hurt, but enough to give her pause. “Please, don’t go. I’m sorry I seem to keep overstepping myself. I fear old habits can be difficult to break.”

He appeared so earnest that she couldn’t help but relent. “Rest assured there’s no harm done, my lord. But I do need to get some things completed this afternoon.”

“Of course.” He released her and got to his feet. “Thank you for the kind companionship, Miss Meriwether.”

He started to depart and she found herself saying, “Will you call again tomorrow?”

He offered her that grin that weakened her knees. “Nothing could keep me away.” He gave her a scandalous wink and then he was gone.

She resisted the urge to put her hand against her heart and slump back against the settee. Instead, she gathered up the tea items and headed back for the kitchen. As she laid the tray on the counter, she noticed that the pitcher she had been trying to reach was sitting innocently to one side.

For some unknown reason, tears stung her eyes. Foolish, because why she might be shedding any sort of tears over such a mundane object was ridiculous in the extreme, and yet, a single drop coursed down her cheek all the same.

Dove reached out and ran a finger down the handle of the pitcher, as if by doing so, she could connect with the viscount once more. She knew it was a dangerous, carnal path that she was walking toward, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. For years she'd prayed for a man to come along that would love her as much as he loved God, and someone who wouldn't make her choose between his devotion and caring for her father. She couldn't leave him when he had no other family, nor would she want to.

And yet...

Lord Markel was everything that she had always avoided, the aristocratic libertine who only thought of marriage as a last resort, someone who would stray once they were wed and leave her to rot in some abandoned estate somewhere. She had met one man like that, and it hadn't ended well. In truth, he had quite broken her heart three years ago when she had been eighteen. He, too, had ventured through Meriden before Telford's Road had bypassed their village. He had been

charming and handsome, everything that the viscount was, but after she gave in to him, he left without a second glance.

Of course, her father was oblivious about the entire affair, and there were times she could almost pretend that nothing untoward had ever occurred. But she had regretted that lapse in judgment for years, which was why she did her best to repent for her sins by devoting her life to the written word and caring for others.

And spurning the advances of men like Lord Markel.



CAIN WAS PARTICULARLY EXCITED the next morning when he left the inn. He'd had a fabulous start to his day, courtesy of Mrs. Decker and her extraordinary way around a kitchen, but it was the urge to see Miss Meriwether again that put a certain spring in his step.

Even though the air had more of a bite to it than it had the last couple of days, and the clouds threatened something even more ominous than rain, he merely smiled. He was having a grand time in Meriden and didn't have any plans to depart soon. Not only that, but he had to wait for the vicar to recover so that the man could help him save his blackened soul, because he fully intended not to make the same mistake that James had. He wanted to live long enough to complain about his gray hair and his body's aches and pains. But in order to do that, he had to ensure he wasn't taken down by his sordid lifestyle.

When he reached the vicar's cottage, he knocked on the door and waited patiently. It took some time, but it was finally answered. However, to his surprise, it wasn't Dove. "Mr. Meriwether." He inclined his head.

The vicar stood there with a blanket draped across his shoulders, although he hadn't appeared to be quite so stooped over the first time Cain had met him; it was as if he'd aged a decade during his recuperation.

"Good day to you, my lord."

Cain frowned when he wobbled slightly. He reached out a hand and laid it on the vicar's shoulder to steady him. "Are you sure you ought to be out of bed?" He offered a sideways grin. "I daresay your daughter would have both our heads on a platter if she knew."

The vicar smiled, however wearily. "She has long lived with my stubbornness. I don't know about you, but I can't lie abed all the day long. I have responsibilities to which I must attend and sermons to prepare for my flock."

Cain lifted a brow and said dryly, "Don't you think God would forgive you if you were too ill to carry out your duties for a brief time? Your health seems a valid excuse to me."

Mr. Meriwether merely shook his head. "I haven't missed a single Sunday service, and I don't intend to start now."

Cain could tell that there wasn't any arguing with him. His mind was set.

The vicar looked at him with a knowing glint in his perceptive gaze. "Nevertheless, something tells me you didn't

call in order to chastise an old man.”

“I *did* intend to check on your welfare,” Cain corrected.

“And to see Dove,” the vicar added, and Cain knew that the older man saw more than he was comfortable sharing.

Rather than delving into something that was still relatively new to him, he said evasively, “I shall come back to check on you tomorrow, Mr. Meriwether. Perhaps then you will have gained more sense.” He lifted a brow, and then started to leave.

“She’s at the church.”

He halted mid-step and glanced back.

Dove’s father shrugged a little too innocently. “If you would like to pay your respects.”

Cain didn’t reply, but merely offered a parting bow. As he started walking down the street, he told himself that it would be best if he just returned to the inn.

Of course, he altered his direction and headed for the church.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dove was kneeling down in prayer by the altar when she heard the doors of the church open behind her. She got to her feet and turned to greet the newcomer, as many of the villagers liked to come there during the week for the peaceful sanctuary it offered.

It didn't take her but a moment to ascertain that the towering figure standing in the middle of the aisle couldn't be anyone other than the viscount.

Her fingers instantly yearned to brush against her lips, which tingled in awareness the moment she saw him there. Instead, she tied her bonnet on her head and clutched the folds of her pelisse as she stopped before him.

“Good day, Miss Meriwether.” His velvety baritone skated over her skin and caused gooseflesh to break out on her arms. Thankfully, he wouldn't be able to see the impact a few spoken words had on her. “I stopped by the cottage and your father told me you were here. I admit I was surprised to see him moving about already.”

She gave a melancholy smile. “He has always been very independent.”

He scratched the side of his jaw. “I believe he used the word *stubborn*.”

She laughed. “Yes, that too.”

As the merriment subsided, something shifted between them—turning more intense. Dove realized how close they were standing to one another, so close that she could feel the heat radiating off his body and wrapping her in his warmth.

She stepped back. “I should be going,” she muttered and lowered her head.

When she would have made her way past him, he said, “Mrs. Decker told me that I should see the Kenilworth Castle ruins. Or Maxstoke Castle because it has a moat surrounding the keep. Which one would you suggest?”

She paused and turned back to him. “I’ve always loved Kenilworth, and it is a popular destination for most travelers.”

He inclined his head. “Then that is where I shall go.” He paused. “I don’t suppose you could find time to play hostess to this wayward traveler once more?”

Dove knew she shouldn’t get drawn further into his charm, but he looked so hopeful in that moment, like a child waiting to be handed a sweetmeat. And if there was one thing he could have tempted her with, it was the castle. She had been there several times since she’d reached her majority, as it was but a short ride, and one of her favorite places to reflect other than her father’s sanctuary.

A smile tugged at her lips. “I would be delighted.”

Cain grinned broadly and offered her his arm. Together they headed for the stable at the inn so he could collect his mount, while Dove borrowed one of Mrs. Decker's mares. The lady had always allowed her the use of her horses since Dove didn't have one of her own. After sending off a quick message to her father, they settled in their prospective saddles and urged their horses into a gentle gait.

It didn't take long before Dove was feeling the chill from the ride. Her cheeks were likely already pinkened, and she shivered as a gust of wind tried to slide up her skirts. "It will probably snow soon," she noted, not realizing she'd spoken aloud until the viscount answered.

"Indeed, I believe you may be right." He glanced at her, his own cheeks barely changed from the weather, although his hair was slightly disheveled. "But then, it is nearly Christmastide, so it would not be unheard of, would it?"

"Not at all," she concurred. "In truth, I always yearn for the snow to fall at this time of year. It makes everything appear so... altered that you begin to look forward to new beginnings."

"Is that what you desire, Miss Meriwether?" Lord Markel asked softly. "A fresh start?"

She lifted one shoulder haphazardly. "Not usually, no. I'm content with my life as it is, but I suppose a small part of me might wish for something..."

"More?" he finished.

She turned her head. "Yes. More."

He studied her intently, to the point she faced forward once more, lest he see how much she truly yearned for... more. From him.

To try and bring the conversation back to neutral ground, she said, “Did you know that Meriden was not the original name of our town?”

“Really?”

She was glad when he appeared genuinely intrigued. “Indeed. It was called Alspath. It means ‘Aelle’s Path.’”

“Hmm.” He appeared to seriously ponder this for a moment. “I wonder who Aelle was?”

“I honestly can’t say. I haven’t found any trace of that name in the church records, but then, they have a way of getting ravaged by wars and fire.”

“Very true,” he agreed. “So much history has been lost. I shudder to think of how much we might have uncovered now had the Library of Alexandria not been burned during Julius Caesar’s time. Even the Serapeum Library, which many have referred to as the daughter of the Library of Alexandria was not spared its share of turmoil, as most of it was also destroyed.”

The viscount’s obvious passion for history was quite admirable, if not a bit surprising. She would have thought, for a man so fervent about saving his soul, that such things wouldn’t interest him, but apparently, he wasn’t as shallow as she’d first imagined. Not only that, but they had found something in common. She, too, had always lamented the loss

of so many precious documents, forever swallowed up by time.



“I COMMEND YOU, Lord Markel. That was a very impassioned speech.”

Cain had felt foolish after his abrupt outpouring of emotion, but when he turned to Dove, she was regarding him with something he could only discern as respect. Suddenly, he didn't feel quite so idiotic. “I'm glad you think so, Miss Meriwether.”

Silence fell for a time as they continued their trek across the countryside, until finally, the silhouette of the keep could be seen from the hillside. Dove reined in her mount and said with something akin to awe, “That is Kenilworth Castle.”

Cain tried to view the ruins as she obviously did, with absolute devotion shining out of her eyes, and he had to admit that the scene it presented was quite impressive. As they rode closer, Cain started to gain a semblance of why this was so sacred to Dove. It had an almost... spiritual quality. A large, red sandstone structure that boasted both Tudor and Renaissance architecture, it had suffered its own share of tragedy, just as Egypt's libraries had. It was said to have held off combating forces during the English Civil War and had the longest siege in Medieval history. Once a magnificent edifice, it had fallen prey to cruelty over the years, and the proud towers now stood as hollow shells to a forgotten age.

They stopped before the castle gate and dismounted, tying their mounts nearby. For a moment, they each stood and took in the site, imagining the sounds of days gone by.

“I first became fascinated with this castle when I read ‘*A Concise history and description of Kenilworth Castle.*’” Dove said quietly. “When I realized we were so close to the ruins, I begged Papa to let me see it. It wasn’t until after I reached my majority that he finally acquiesced.”

Cain frowned. “He didn’t wish to escort you here himself?”

Dove didn’t look at him, but kept her focus firmly fixated on the keep. “My father was too busy attending to his flock.” She shook her head, as if combating a painful memory and turned to him with a slight smile. “I don’t fault him for not wanting to shirk his duties. He became a vicar not to please his family, but to help others.”

“But you are still his daughter,” Cain pointed out. “Doesn’t blood make a difference?”

Instead of replying, she turned back to the castle and changed the subject. “The first time I beheld it...” She released a sigh. “I fell in love. I must admit that a part of me wishes that it could be restored to its former, original glory, that it wasn’t falling into decay and used as a farm and tourist attraction for the masses. And yet, I find I appreciate the stillness of it, as if it has finally found peace.”

Cain was captured by the play of emotions that flitted across her face. He could tell, not only by words, that this

place meant a lot to her, and that it very well might be her only escape from her structured life.

He pushed open the gate and walked forward. “Your depiction makes me eager to explore.” He shut the enclosure when she was through. “Where do you suggest I start first?”

She smiled at him. “Follow me.”



EXCITEMENT COURSED through Dove’s veins as she escorted Lord Markel around the entire castle. From the towers to the courtyard, saving her favorite for last.

They walked along a half-crumbled wall where the outlines of windows might have once shone with grandeur. “This is the Great Hall,” she announced with awe. She reached out and ran her hand along the exposed stone. “Isn’t it magnificent?”

“Indeed. It’s all very remarkable.”

Dove glanced up at the husky timbre to his voice, but he turned his head before she could decide if he might be speaking of more than the keep.

Suddenly, butterflies began to swarm inside her stomach, because she realized how remote this place was—and how alone they were. She closed her eyes. She had been entirely too impulsive to leave the village with the viscount and neglect her father. Even though he was recovering, he was still weak. It had been wrong of her to depart, but the temptation to visit the castle had been too strong to resist.

And she would be lying to herself and God if she said Lord Markel hadn't also been an added incentive for this journey.

She was just about to tell him that they should be returning to the village when a single snowflake crossed before her line of vision. She paused and soon after, another one fell. And another. And another. Until the air was filled with giant flakes falling from the sky.

She laughed, her earlier woes forgotten as she held on to her bonnet with one hand and tilted her face upward and promptly stuck out her tongue. The snow landed softly on her nose and eyelashes but eluded her mouth.

After a moment, she gave up and looked over at the viscount who was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and a hooded look in his eyes. The snow was coating his bare head, after he'd removed his hat, and his greatcoat, as the flakes made him almost sparkle. She could almost imagine that he wasn't real, but a fantasy she had brought to life in the midst of a December snowfall.

“You are enchanting, Miss Meriwether.”

Shivers that had nothing to do with the chill in the air, but everything to do with the sensual curve of his mouth, danced up and down her spine.

Dove didn't know what possessed her, but she slowly walked toward him. She wasn't certain what she really intended, except the magic of this place had managed to weave some sort of spell around her. Lord Markel remained where he was until she stopped right before him. He lifted a brow in a

silent query, but Dove wasn't as reticent as she'd thought she would be.

She rose up on her tiptoes and kissed him brazenly on the lips.

At first, she thought that he might not respond, but it wasn't long before his arms wrapped around her as he crushed her against his chest. Her breath instantly left her, making her head spin, but it was worth it, as he deepened the kiss. Fire shot through her limbs, warming her from the inside out. No doubt any snow that fell on them now would instantly sizzle from the heat.

She wound her arms around his neck and was rewarded with a low growl in his throat. She thrilled at the sound, because it was almost... *possessive*, and oh, how she yearned to be possessed by him.

He altered their positions until her back was up against the stone wall. She gasped and his tongue swooped into her mouth, teasing, taunting, *mating* with hers. Her breathing became shallow and her legs moved restlessly beneath her skirts. He moved away from her mouth and trailed a scorching path along her jawline to her neck, pausing to suckle there.

"My lord..." she breathed, hardly able to believe that it was her voice she heard.

He replied to her plea with another devastating kiss that made her legs tremble. Dove knew that she should break out of this haze before she made another grave error, but she promised herself just one more kiss, just one more caress, and she would tell him to stop. She hadn't lost control yet, she just

wanted to enjoy these staggering sensations a little bit longer, before she was forced to return to her staid life where passion was forbidden.

At the first touch of his hand sliding along the fullness of her breast, Dove leaned her head back against the stone and closed her eyes.

“Do you like that, my sweet Dove?” His voice rumbled through her.

She loved the sound of her name crossing his lips. “Yes.”

He pressed against her until they were flush, breast to chest and thigh to thigh. The hard length of his manhood pressed against her midsection. “You drive me crazy with desire.”

Dove couldn't answer, she was drowning in the moment.

Abruptly, the viscount moved away from her, and as the cold interceded, she overheard the sound of approaching voices.

That was when everything came crashing down around her. Reality intruded harshly. She had wanted her interlude with Lord Markel to be a dream, a fantasy that she wouldn't have to feel shame for, but it had been all too real, and if he hadn't broken away from her in time, they might have been caught in a compromising position from which her reputation would never have recovered.

And she wouldn't have been the only one to suffer because of her misdeeds.

Her father would likely have borne the brunt of the consequences.

Tears of frustration stung her eyes, and she headed blindly for the gate, eager to ride away. For a place that had become something of a private sanctuary for her, she wasn't sure she could ever return.

And she had no one to blame but herself.

CHAPTER SIX

Cain had allowed the silence to be their guide on the way back to Meriden, because he wasn't sure what to say. It wasn't as if he had regretted that unexpected tryst with Dove, but he could tell that she did. She likely felt as though she'd done something unforgiveable, had partaken of some unimaginable sin, when they had only shared a mutual passion as God had intended from the very beginning.

But picturing her personal torment pained him the most.

They parted ways at the inn with little more than a murmured farewell while Dove kept her eyes averted.

The next day, when Cain trudged through the newly fallen snow to call upon the Meriwether household, the vicar greeted him once more. He looked more improved than the day before, but Cain could tell that he still wasn't entirely steady. However, he invited him into the parlor for a chat. Dove was nowhere around, and Cain suddenly didn't have the courage to ask after her.

When the vicar mentioned their outing the day before, Cain went on alert, wondering if he was going to demand that he walk his daughter down the aisle for his torrid behavior.

But he did nothing of the sort. In truth, he spoke with a very gentle demeanor. “You must call me Edmund, my lord.”

Cain inclined his head. “As you prefer.”

“I do. I find it is easier on my congregation to feel comfortable with me if they are to confess their sins.”

Again, Cain agreed. “Understandable. I appreciate you giving me the same courtesy.”

“Of course.” Edmund smiled gently, his slightly wrinkled face creasing around very blue eyes that were very reminiscent of his daughter. Cain glanced away, as his chest suddenly ached with the desire to see her, to ensure that she was all right. “Dove told me of your journey yesterday, although I daresay there was a particular sparkle in her eyes as she did so. While the castle ruins have long been a favorite place for her to go, I noticed a difference in her with you as her companion.”

Cain resisted the urge to shift in his seat. “I’m sure I had nothing to do with it.” He grasped on to the first excuse he could think of. “She was quite fascinated by the snow, if I recall.”

“Ah, yes.” Edmund’s expression took on a faraway look. “Her mother was always fond of it as well. Personally, I don’t much care for the cold. As I’ve gotten older, these bones of mine have begun to ache and protest.”

Cain snorted lightly. “Some would say that is a good sign, as it means you aren’t yet dead.”

The vicar shook his head. “I am not afraid of what lays beyond this life, because I know it will be filled with eternal glory.”

Cain released a heavy sigh and sat forward, clasping his hands between his knees. “I wish I could be as confident as you about that.”

Edmund mirrored his pose. “It’s never too late, my son, and I know just where to begin.” He paused. “Tell me, are you familiar with the nativity story?”

Cain resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “I am not unfamiliar with what is taught in the church. I’ve just... veered off course over the years from its teachings.”

“Then what better way to restore your faith than by going back to the beginning?” He lifted a bushy, gray brow. “If you are interested in saving your soul, as you claim, I am offering you a chance to prove yourself. Every year, the church hosts a nativity play. Generally, Dove plays the part of Mary, but the gentleman who plays Joseph was recently wed. While he is growing used to his new role as a husband and potential father, I was looking for someone to fill his role. I think you would be a perfect fit.”

This time Cain did shift in his seat. “Are you sure it’s wise to tempt the Lord by giving the part of His son’s earthly father to a man named Cain?”

The vicar chuckled. “You are not a murderer, my lord, and if you are seeking to gain His favor, then you will not be turned away. On that you can be assured.”

Cain frowned as he stared at his clasped hands. If he declined the offer, then he should merely forgo this entire quest and ride back to London and just do his duty to his title and be done with the rest. But, if he were to accept the challenge presented to him, he would be in Dove's presence every day, and yet, unable to do anything more than speak a few words to her. It would certainly test his resolve if he was serious about returning to the Lord's "flock," as he claimed.

It wasn't until he pictured Dove's face that his decision was made for him.

He got to his feet and bowed. "I would be honored to play the part of Joseph."



DOVE SAW the viscount come out the front door of the cottage on her way back from the infirmary, and quickly ducked behind a nearby hedge row before he could see her. She held her breath where she crouched down in the snow and waited for his steady gait to pass by.

Only when she was assured that he was gone did she slowly rise. She felt foolish for hiding from a man who likely hadn't thought any more about their scandalous interlude at Kenilworth Castle, while it had seldom left her mind. She'd had a difficult time concentrating on anything else, her mind wandering back to that exquisite moment when their lips had met...

She clenched her fists at her sides and headed toward the house. She had to cease this incessant woolgathering about the viscount. He was likely on his way to the inn to collect his things and return to London at this very moment. He was only enough of a gentleman to bid her father farewell and gain the redemption he'd been seeking before continuing on his way. She was merely a passing fancy to be discarded when it suited his needs.

Dove walked inside and stomped the worst of the snow from her boots before she took them off and set them by the door. She was removing her bonnet and pelisse to hang them on a nearby peg when her father walked out to greet her. "Hello, daughter. You just missed Lord Markel, but perhaps you saw him on your way home?"

"No, I didn't. What a shame," she murmured. She walked toward the kitchen, hoping that her lie was easily concealed as she grabbed an apron and tied it around her waist to begin working on the evening meal. Much more of this subterfuge and she might have to ask for absolution herself. First, she consorted with a man who wasn't even a proper suitor, and now the lies were rolling easily off of her tongue.

She withheld a sigh and gathered the items she would need for bread. As she rummaged around and placed everything on the counter, her father, who had followed behind, spoke up. "I invited Lord Markel to stay for our annual play."

Dove hesitated, but then she shrugged. "I'm sure he's too busy to bother with such a trivial village performance when he has access to Drury Lane."

“Grander is not always better,” her father pointed out. “Pleasing things can come from modest achievements.”

She paused in her task and had the grace to appear chastised. “Of course, Papa. I’m sorry.”

Silence filled the room for a time as she mixed the ingredients together. It wasn’t until she put it on the stove to rise did her father reply, “I’m the one who is sorry that you don’t have your mother around to talk to about certain things.”

Dove’s heart melted. She walked over and took her father’s hands in her own. Not for the first time, she noted how different they were starting to look, more aged and frail. She didn’t want to think of what her life would be like when he was no longer in it every day. “You are not to blame for Mama’s death. You told me yourself that the Lord decided it was her time. While I do miss her, I don’t regret that you are the one I go to for help. I love you.”

“And I you. The Lord certainly blessed me when he gifted me with you as my daughter.” He patted her hand. “Shall I help you with the evening meal?”

“Absolutely not.” She stood up straighter and pointed toward the door. “I expect you to rest if you intend to oversee the production of the play tomorrow night. I daresay I don’t know who else would narrate the scenes we portray if it wasn’t for you.”

He laughed and held up his hands in surrender. “I will abide by your wishes, as I certainly don’t want to endure your wrath if it is anything like your mother’s was.”

When he was gone, Dove allowed her shoulders to slump. She laid her hands on top of the kitchen counter and took several steadying breaths. It was true that she had never regretted that she still had her father, though there were times she did miss her mother's feminine advice. But since she hadn't wanted to hurt his feelings, she allowed those emotions to remain buried deep inside and held tight under lock and key.

Exhaling, she recalled her task and got back to work.



DOVE TOLD herself she had been expecting the viscount's absence when he didn't call the next morning, but there had still been that slight hope that his intentions in becoming a better man had rung true. Now she realized that she'd just made another mistake.

She sighed. Perhaps she should just join a nunnery, because she seemed to lose her composure when a handsome man paid notice to her and made her feel like a desirable *woman*, and not just a vicar's daughter.

It might be something to consider, but first, she had to get into her role as the mother of the Messiah.

As she walked with her father down to the church, the sun shone on them, turning the landscape covered with a blanket of white into a ground of sparkling stars. They entered the sanctuary, and she glanced at the wooden benches in neat rows, just awaiting the moment when they were filled once more. The stained glass beyond the altar that depicted Mary

with the Christ child, splintered the expanse with a prism of color.

But it wasn't the Holy sight she'd gazed on so many times that captured her breath this time. It was Lord Markel's towering height. Even amongst a modest assemblage, he stood out from the rest. Immediately, her lips began to tingle, along with other places on her body, remembering that day at the castle ruins when he had kissed her and she had responded with such reckless abandon.

She had imagined he'd taken his leave of Meriden, but apparently, she'd been wrong. Now the question that begged to be answered was: why had he remained?

"I'm glad to see everyone is here for the first rehearsal," her father announced. "I trust you all received your parts from Dove?"

As a few nods and murmurs of assent passed throughout, the viscount was the only one who didn't move. Immediately, shivers of apprehension began to crawl up her spine.

"As you are all aware, Andrew Cummings was wed a few weeks ago, and rather than intrude on his recent marital state, I have found us a new Joseph to partner Dove in the role of Mary." He lifted a hand and indicated Lord Markel, and then put his hands together in applause, which was joined by the rest of the congregation—except for Dove, who was quite unable to move with the announcement. "I trust that you will treat him as kindly as if he was one of our own members as he is hoping to draw closer to God during his time here."

As the group began to walk forward and offer their well wishes to the viscount, Dove turned to her father with a grim expression. Now that Lord Markel's position had been confirmed by the vicar, she said, "Are you sure it's wise to offer him such an important role in the play? You and I both know that he will likely leave before it is performed. Christmas Eve is yet a fortnight away."

Her father offered her a gentle smile in return. "Have faith, daughter." He patted her shoulder and walked away, likely to speak with the rest of the group.

She would do the same once she'd had a moment to compose herself. How could she manage to pretend to be such a spiritual woman like Mary, devoted to God, when it wasn't Joseph she saw in Lord Markel, but rather the tempting serpent?

"Miss Meriwether."

She startled at the sound of that deep voice, yet she didn't know why she should be surprised that he might approach her. Just because she was still unnerved by their last encounter didn't mean that he was. Even so, she had trouble meeting his gaze directly. But then, that could be because of his smooth appearance, the perfectly tailored clothes, or more likely, the hypnotic way he had of looking at her in a way that made her think he could read her every thought. "Lord Markel," she murmured.

There was a pause. "I hope you aren't upset that I offered my assistance in the play."

“Not at all,” she returned coolly. “As long as you follow through on your promises.”

He lifted a brow. “You don’t believe that I will.”

It wasn’t phrased as a question, but an accusation. Either way, she didn’t deny it. “To be blunt, my lord, no I don’t think that you will stay the entire two weeks. I believe that the lure of the city and your torrid lifestyle will begin to beckon you, and you will give your fond regards as you leave. In truth, I thought you were already gone.”

His gaze was unwavering. “While I don’t generally appreciate my honor being impugned, I suppose I haven’t really given you any reason to trust my word. But I vow that I will not disappoint your father in this regard.” He paused. “Or you.” Then he sighed heavily. “In fact, I should apologize for —”

She held up a hand. “Please, spare me your regrets. Our... unfortunate encounter has already left my thoughts, as it should your conscience.”

Again, there was that unnerving stare. “Very well.”

“Good.” She nodded her head curtly. “If you will give me a moment, I shall find a script for you and we can begin rehearsing.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

When they came to a pause in his lines, Cain did his best not to let his attention stray to Miss Meriwether, but that proved difficult to do. Wearing a simple muslin dress, her blonde hair pulled back into a plain knot, it wasn't as though she was different from any number of women he'd met before, but there was... something compelling about her. He wasn't sure if it was her innocence or her intelligence, or a combination of so many other characteristics that he found appealing, but it was enough that he hadn't been able to leave Meriden as yet. When her father had given him the perfect excuse to linger a bit longer, he hadn't been able to refuse.

Yet she was unimpressed, believing him to be just another scoundrel hoping for some fun. Normally, she wouldn't have been wrong, but something was shifting inside him.

He was fascinated by her, and not just in a sexual way, although he certainly found her attractive.

The manner in which she spoke her part as Mary, as if she had been the one born to the role, was just one of the aspects of her personality that captured him. Every word she said was enunciated clearly and with purpose, and he was quite sure

most of the actresses on Drury Lane would find it impossible to compare to her talent. But then, she wasn't in this play as a way to impress anyone. She was simply doing her duty as the vicar's daughter. While most women dreamed of marriage and a family, Dove was one of the few who yearned to please God as much as her father.

For someone like Cain, who had shunned both, her gentle nature and forgiving manner went far to make him rethink his entire existence. While it was obvious she wasn't pleased about his appearance there that day, he intended to prove to her that even a ne'er-do-well could change and be a better man, because she made him *want* to be someone she could be proud of.

“Lord Markel. It's your line.”

He snapped to attention at her harried whisper. “Oh, yes. Pardon me,” he muttered, and then said his part clearly.

At the end of the rehearsal, as everyone began to go their separate ways, the vicar walked over to him. “Lord Markel, I would like to invite you to our cottage for dinner, if you aren't otherwise occupied.”

Cain slid his glance to Dove, but she wasn't looking at him. Instead, she seemed rather interested in studying the lines they had just gone over. “I should be glad to accept your invitation, Mr. Meriwether.”

“Capital,” the older man grinned. “Dove just baked some bread, and I daresay you will not find any better made in the city.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Cain returned sincerely.

The vicar turned to Dove. “My dear, if you don’t mind escorting the viscount home, I have a few things to finish up here. I will join you for supper shortly.”

Cain was quite sure he didn’t misinterpret the way Dove suddenly pursed her lips in disapproval. “Of course, Papa.” She glanced at Cain and then headed for the door, apparently expecting him to follow her.

Once they were outside, she didn’t pause, but continued walking.

Cain frowned, as this wouldn’t do. “Have I done something to offend you, Miss Meriwether?”

She paused and glanced at him. “No. Why do you think so?”

“It’s just that you seem a bit... ” How could he put it delicately where it wouldn’t upset her further? “Distant. You weren’t like that before.”

She stiffened. “Before what?”

“Before today,” he clarified, knowing better than to bring up anything else.

“Oh.” She relaxed slightly and a small smile even graced her lips. “I am sorry for that, my lord. I suppose I’m just a bit overwhelmed at the moment. The play is always quite an undertaking with preparations, but the villagers look forward to it every year and we can’t disappoint them.”

“I would be glad to help ease the burden,” he offered with a friendly bow.

She studied him for a moment and then inclined her head. “I appreciate that, and I will consider it.”

They continued walking, kicking up the powdery snow with their boots as they went, but this time, she held back and kept an even pace with him. He was relieved that she had relented toward him, however slightly. “So what is on the menu for this evening?” he inquired.

“Beef stew,” she returned.

“Mmm. It sounds delicious, and perfect for such a cool evening.”

“Indeed. Papa and I eat a lot of soup during the winter months. The warmth you consume goes far to take away some of the chill in the air.”

He rubbed a finger along his jaw. “I imagine that could be interpreted in a faithful manner as well.”

She lifted a shoulder. “Perhaps, although I’ve never considered it that way before.”

“I imagine not. You are just eager to eat whereas I have time to think philosophically.”

Her lips twitched, as if she was trying to hold back a smile. “I can’t imagine you wouldn’t be. As a viscount, I’m sure you were taught by the best governesses and tutors that money could buy.”

He couldn't tell if she was merely making a statement or if there might be a bit of resentment there. Either way, he said, "You would be correct. My father ensured that I had the best education in order to properly follow in his footsteps. But what he, nor anyone else in society ever considered, was that I didn't care to become a peer."

She tilted her head to the side. "What else would you have done?"

"I'm not entirely sure what I might have chosen, but I would have earned a proper wage, rather than sitting at a desk and allowing others to do it for me. I find it entirely more appealing by taking on a trade. My pride would certainly celebrate by doing something worthwhile."

"And you don't believe by taking a seat in Parliament and allowing your voice to be heard for a good cause isn't the same?" He appeared to actually consider her words as she continued, "For all of the benefits you've been given in this life, there is a lot you can do to make a difference if only you would fully open your eyes and see what is right in front of you."

Cain couldn't stop himself. As they paused before the front door of her cottage, he reached out and brushed a stray strand of her hair away from her face. "You may be sure that I see *you*, Miss Meriwether."



DOVE SHIVERED, although it had nothing to do with the temperature in the air. She looked into Lord Markel's eyes and saw the tempest in them. Green and brown swirls danced before her, and she realized it would be so easy to get dragged back down into that appealing gaze.

She glanced away and walked hastily through the front door before she did something she would later regret. After she removed her boots and outer wear in the entryway, Dove headed for the kitchen to begin preparing the meal, where she removed an apron from a nearby peg and tied it around her waist.

As she began to gather the ingredients she needed, Cain appeared in the doorway then walked over and sat on a stool near the counter. He said nothing for a time, merely watched her work, but then he said, "Is there anything I can do?" he asked.

Dove opened her mouth, about to refuse his offer to help but paused and decided against that course. "If you'd like to peel some potatoes and cut them up into smaller chunks, that would be wonderful." She gestured to a bowl on the counter and the vegetables nearby. "You'll have to wash them first, but —"

She fell silent as he moved about the kitchen as if he'd always spent his time there. He poured some water out of the nearby bucket into the bowl and washed the skins of the potatoes. After that, he grabbed a paring knife and moved to the other side of the counter and began to make shallow slices in each potato, peeling away the skin with expert precision. He

dropped the peeled potatoes into a pot of water then tossed the refuse in the rubbish bin near the end of the worktable.

Dove lifted a curious brow, impressed in spite of herself. “Have you done this before?”

He glanced up with a snort as he continued his task. “Don’t look so surprised. More than once, when I was supposed to be taking a nap with my brother and sister, I would go down to the kitchens and pester our cook, Mrs. Alfreds, for some sweetmeats. She generally indulged me, but not without forcing me to earn it first.” He shrugged. “I peeled potatoes, carrots, beets, anything that she needed help with.” He glanced up and offered her a coy grin. “I can probably even attempt to do some canning, but only in dire circumstances.”

Dove laughed. She could just imagine a stubborn young man bedeviling the servants. “You sound like you’ve always been a bit rebellious, my lord.”

“Indeed.” He sighed dramatically. “I admit I was a handful when I was a child, but I was tame then compared to after I was sent away to school. That’s when I became quite unruly.”

Dove saw his mouth turn down at the corners, as if he wasn’t proud of the fact. “What caused it?”

He seemed to ponder her words for a moment. “I can’t say. Wishing to be like my fellow peers, I suppose? Why do any of us act in a certain manner?”

She considered her answer carefully. “My father would say that it is our demons that propel us to behave irrationally.”

“You mean the ones from hell?” he teased.

“No,” she returned solemnly. “Our inner battles that we have yet to overcome.”

Cain paused for a moment, his focus intent on the potato in his hand all of a sudden. “Your father is quite the philosopher himself,” he murmured. “But I can’t say that he’s wrong.” He glanced up and caught her gaze. “It’s true that I haven’t lived a life that my parents would approve of thus far, and perhaps it’s the way I was always expected to appear and comport myself that I felt it necessary to lash out so ruthlessly. I wasn’t rebelling against anything more than a lifestyle I had never wanted, nor asked for.” His focus warmed slightly. “But I’m starting to see that I’ve been given a gift that I have squandered for far too long.”

Warmth flowed into Dove’s cheeks, because she knew he was recalling their earlier conversation.

He returned to the item in his hand and continued to manipulate the potato’s skin. “I never told you why I ended up in Meriden, did I?”

This time, it was her turn to snort softly. “Other than seeking redemption? No, you did not.”

He gave a mock wince. “I did sound foolish when we first met.”

She didn’t deny it.

“I do apologize for that.” He sighed heavily. “I suppose I was just a bit... unnerved at the time. I had recently attended the funeral of my closest friend, a man as devoted to carnal pursuits as I was, and it made me... wake up and realize that

the body being lowered into the ground and covered with dirt could have easily been me.”

He sounded so forlorn and... *lost* in that moment that Dove reached out her hand and placed it over the one holding the potato. He instantly stilled and set both the vegetable and the knife to the side, clasping her hand in the warmth of his.

Suddenly, the air thickened and sucked the breath from her lungs. Dove’s focus dropped to his mouth and she licked her lips in anticipation of his kiss. In turn, his eyes darkened to a mixture of mossy green and mahogany. With his free hand, he reached across the counter and cupped her cheek in his palm. She couldn’t resist the temptation he offered and closed her eyes momentarily as she relaxed her head in his embrace. “My lovely, Dove...”

The kiss was both slightly unexpected yet, at the same time, entirely *wanted*. In truth, she hadn’t ever wanted anything more. It was wrong, it was wicked, but... perhaps she had a small bit of rebellion coursing through her veins too. She had never allowed herself this sort of abandon—not even when her young, naïve heart had been shattered by another scoundrel.

Could it be that she was like Eve and drawn to the forbidden fruit? The viscount was far from just being an apple, but he could make it so that she was an outcast all the same.

Even though she cautioned herself time and again about Lord Markel, when his mouth was moving against hers, and the blood was rushing through her veins, she found it difficult to resist him. The desire was more potent than the most

intoxicating elixir, and she was starting to fall hard under his spell.

As the kiss deepened, Dove leaned as far over the counter as possible, trying to move closer to his warmth. He met her halfway, but still, it wasn't enough. She wanted to be pressed fully against him, to feel his strong length flush against her.

"Cain..." She hadn't meant to address him so informally, or speak his name aloud at all, but it wasn't in vain, as he made a deep growl in his throat as he pulled away from her.

He held her face in both of his hands, his eyes shining with a passion so undeniable that it made her gasp. "My name sounds so damned good falling from those beautiful lips. Say it again," he commanded.

She swallowed. "Cain." It was a whisper, but his gaze darkened even more. He released her only long enough to move around the counter and draw her back within the circle of his arms. He backed her up against the counter where there was no escape. This time when he kissed her, it was just as ruthless as he'd claimed he'd been in his youth.

Shivers of delight danced throughout her body. and she told herself that she would end it soon. Just a few more moments to enjoy this blessed torment.

But that was before his hand slid across her breast. His palm rubbed over her aching nipple, and she tore her mouth from his with the intent to put an end to it all. Words failed her as his other hand teased the other mound. She moaned, and he rewarded her response by leaving a trail of scorching kisses along the length of her collarbone and the edge of her bodice.

“I want to devour you, to savor every inch of you until you’re no longer moaning my name, you’re *screaming* it.”

Dove was instantly hot and cold at the same time. “Show me.”

He abruptly stilled, and while she was bold enough to find out what he might have done next, the door opened and the interruption was enough for her to come back to her senses. Blinking, as if she’d truly been hypnotized by the viscount, she moved away from him and immediately busied herself at the opposite end of the kitchen.

“You’ve put the viscount to work? Really, Dove, he is our guest.”

“It wasn’t Dove, Mr. Meriwether. I offered my assistance.” There was a brief pause, but she was too much of a coward to turn around and face him just yet. Her hands were still trembling from the fire that had yet to abate in her veins. “But as much as I would love to keep my promise of staying for dinner, I forgot that I promised Mrs. Decker I would help her this evening at the inn. She found out I have a particular skill for repairs, and I’ve become something of her personal handyman that she likes to rent out to the villagers.”

Her father laughed. “That does sound like Mable. She is always willing to spread the talents of others to those in need. While I daresay I’m disappointed, I shall endeavor to tear you away from her before you return to London.”

“Of course.” Another hesitation. “Good day, Miss Meriwether.”

She made a show of wiping her hands on a strip of linen, although she said over her shoulder, “Lord Markel.”

Dove waited anxiously for the sound of the door to open and close before she finally turned back around. Her father was still there, and she gave him her brightest smile. “Supper will be ready shortly, Papa.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dove couldn't sleep that night. Instead, she tossed and turned in her bed until the sheets were a tangled mess about her legs. Finally, she gave up and threw her robe on and headed down to the parlor with a candle in her grasp to light the way.

She glanced at the clock on her bedroom mantel and saw that it was nearly two in the morning. As she padded on bare feet down the hall, she could hear her father's snores coming from his closed chamber door. If only she had been so lucky in pushing aside the memory of Cain and his wicked kisses. She must be very evil, indeed, to continue harboring such depraved thoughts about the viscount. It was just like when the last scoundrel had ridden through the village—except it was so much worse now.

While she had barely escaped with her virginity still intact, the only thing she'd managed to salvage from that brief, torrid affair, she knew that if Cain were to lure her away alone, those fiery kisses wouldn't end until she was completely ruined and beyond redemption for herself.

She set her candle on a nearby table and searched the few titles that were on the shelves, hoping that she could lull herself to sleep with one of her father's books, most of which were dedicated to the written Word of God. While some of the stories she read in the Bible were quite interesting, the books that people wrote around their own interpretations were not as captivating.

She chose Sermons to Young Women, one of her least favorite titles in her father's collection, mainly because she thought it was nonsense. Ladies should be meek and nothing more than a glorified watering pot of beauty? Utter ridiculousness.

However, she practically knew every word by heart, as her father had approved of James Fordyce's depiction of how a proper lady should act, and since Dove didn't have her mother there to teach her about being a woman, it fell to the good Reverend.

Of course, Dove didn't fault her father, as he was doing what he'd thought was best. And for the most part, she considered herself to be the model of propriety. She was respected in her father's congregation and adored by the villagers, many of whom had complimented her on her genteel upbringing.

What they all *didn't* know was the side of Dove that she desperately tried to suppress, the shameful, carnal nature that had first been awakened when *that man* had ventured through their village. She still remembered the sight of his sandy blond hair shining in the sun and that devil-may-care smile that hid

the serpent beneath, for surely he was Satan himself, intent on devouring an innocent young woman for sport.

Thankfully, they had been discovered in the stables by Mrs. Decker before things had gone any farther, and while the innkeeper hadn't told her father of the incident for Dove's reputation's sake, it was the disappointment in the older woman's gaze that had been the most difficult to bear.

Just like then, Dove was sliding down a treacherous cliff.

But this time, there might not be anyone there to save her.

It was a sobering thought and one she took to heart as she opened the volume and began to read.



SHOW ME...

Cain knew it wouldn't be any use to take himself in hand this night. It might offer his burning lust a temporary relief, but the moment he was in Dove's presence, his cock would flare back to pulsing life.

Instead, he'd chosen to shake off his insomnia by having a drink in the inn's taproom. While there weren't many occupants in the middle of the night, he was surprised to see Mrs. Decker was still awake. When he remarked on the fact, she merely smiled as she finished wiping down another table.

“When you own a business, my lord, the work never ceases.”

“But when do you rest?” he asked.

“Oh, I find the time to catch a nap now and then when it’s not overly busy, but the best time to clean is when everything is empty.” She shrugged. “I suppose it’s also a time when I can allow myself to think without interruption.”

Cain nodded, because he couldn’t disagree with that reasoning.

“I wonder why *you’re* up at this hour though,” she noted curiously. “But then, I guess you’re not yet used to country hours. I’ve heard some people stay up in London until the wee hours of the morning.”

“Sometimes even until the sun is fully risen,” Cain corrected. “But no. The change in my current circumstances isn’t the reason for my unrest. Let’s just say it’s... complicated.”

He offered her a sideways grin and she nodded her head. “Ah, I know that look.” She crossed her arms. “You have lady troubles.”

He winced. “Am I so transparent? If so, I must be losing my touch.”

She laughed. “Not at all. At my age, my lord, with various travelers coming in and out of that front door, you start to recognize a thing or two.” She pointed a finger at him. “And I know that uncertain expression you’re wearing now.”

“In that case,” he murmured. “Would you have any advice for this helpless viscount?”

Mrs. Decker crossed her arms in apparent thought and then relented with a sigh. Pulling out a chair, she sat down across

from him and regarded him steadily. “If my suspicions are true, that you have taken a fancy to our Dove, then I would caution you.”

He didn’t miss the way she said *our*, as if Dove actually belonged to the villagers. “My intentions toward the lady may not be entirely platonic, but I am not completely without scruples or a conscience.”

She glanced at the table, as if choosing her words carefully. “Not all men are like you, Lord Markel. Dove has been injured once before, by a man not unlike yourself. He was the epitome of a proper gentleman, but I knew it was only for show. But as much as I tried to caution her against allowing her heart to become engaged, she was headstrong in her devotion. I caught them in the stables just before—” She stopped and straightened, as if remembering that she was talking to an “outsider” in their midst. “I didn’t tell her father because I knew she would suffer enough from a broken heart and I didn’t want to damage her reputation. All of us make mistakes that we wish we could forget, and I have cared about that girl since she was in pinafores.” Her focus never wavered from his face. “You should know that I will do whatever it takes to ensure she isn’t faced with that decision again. At eighteen, the affair nearly destroyed her. I can’t watch her suffer again when I can prevent it.”

Cain slowly unclenched his fists. He’d tightened them when Mrs. Decker had mentioned the scoundrel who had used Dove so carelessly. Now, he inclined his head. “I understand completely, and I do not blame you for your concern. I can see that you consider yourself as her female role model since her

mother is no longer alive, and I commend you for it.” He frowned down at his nearly empty mug of ale. “I wish I could ease your concerns, but my mind is conflicted when it comes to Miss Meriwether. I won’t deny that I feel something for her, but I can’t yet put it into words. I’ve lived a disgraceful life for so long that I can’t say I’m even capable of strong emotions.”

She got up from the chair and said, “Until you figure that out, my lord, my suggestion is to keep your distance and try to remember that you were brought up to be better than the last man who promised her the world and broke her heart.”

Cain’s frown deepened as Mrs. Decker took her leave. Staring into the mug in front of him, he lifted it to his lips and drained the last of the contents. But nothing would dull the conversation he’d just had.



DOVE WAS WAITING in the church the next morning to practice for the play with script in hand. Not everyone had arrived yet, including Lord Markel, but she told herself it no longer mattered. She might feel flutters in her stomach when he was near, but she was here to celebrate the church and do the Lord’s work, not to allow herself to explore some torrid fascination.

Perhaps she had learned something from Fordyce’s Sermons after all. Henceforth, she would endeavor to be the model of feminine propriety and ignore those damning, inner longings.

The front door of the church opened and with the sun at his back, Cai—Lord Markel strode in, his tall, lean silhouette conveying grace and confidence. When the familiar urges began thumping against her ribs, Dove looked down at her script and began to recite her lines as Mary.

The last of the remaining playactors entered after Lord Markel and their excitement caught her attention, so she glanced up once more. She pretended an indifference as the viscount took his place beside her on the stage and offered her a brief, but polite nod.

“I’m telling you, I’ve never seen anything like it!”

Dove was curious as one of the village boys, Tommy, who was about fourteen, argued with another lad of a similar age.

The second boy, Freddie, pointed toward the viscount. “You can’t say that what he did was a *miracle*.”

“If you don’t believe so,” Tommy snapped, “then perhaps you should talk to the vicar, because your faith doesn’t appear to be as strong as you might think.”

“Here, now, what’s all the fuss about?” Mr. Meriwether walked forward. He had been in the back of the church working on his sermon for that Sunday, but when he heard the commotion, he’d come to investigate.

Tommy was the first to speak. “*Freddie*,” he jabbed a thumb in his friend’s direction as if anyone wasn’t sure who he was referring to, “doesn’t believe in miracles.”

“I didn’t say that!” the other boy cried. “I only said that what Lord Markel accomplished wasn’t enough to *qualify* as

one.”

The vicar held up his hands when it appeared that the argument would continue. “Let’s settle our tempers and speak of the matter in a more rational tone.”

Again, Tommy was the one who stepped forward with the explanation. “We were passing by the smithy on our way to the church when Mr. Carruthers, the butcher, collapsed outside. Lord Markel saw him and ran to help. When he grabbed the fireplace bellows, I couldn’t imagine what he was about when he put it against Mr. Carruthers’ lips. He pumped it a few times and the butcher’s eyes opened as if he’d been revived from the *dead!*” He glared at Freddie and then asked the vicar, “Wouldn’t you qualify that as a miracle? It was just like Lazarus from the Bible!”

Freddie rolled his eyes. “He was dead for four *days*,” he corrected. “And I didn’t say what the viscount did wasn’t impressive.”

Lord Markel stepped forward. “I’m afraid that I’m going to have to agree with Freddie on this one, Tommy. What I did was science, not a miracle. At least, not unless God would have allowed it.”

Tommy deflated like a hot-air balloon. “But, you brought him back to *life!*”

“I’m afraid not,” Lord Markel explained. “If you would have noticed his face, it was covered with soot, so I knew he had collapsed from a lack of air in his lungs, rather than an apoplexy.” He got down from the stage and faced them on a more even level, although he still towered over them by

several inches. “I merely recalled something I’d learned at university. It is referred to as the Bellows Method and was first used by a Swiss physician by the name of Paracelsus. It is a way to push air into the lungs if someone is suffocating, such as an excessive amount of smoke inhalation. A local surgeon by the name of William Tossach in Scotland also claims that you can use air from your own lungs with mouth-to-mouth contact. This has also been proven as effective for victims of drowning and is recommended by the *Academie des Sciences* in Paris.”

No one moved or spoke after his pronouncement, although Tommy and Freddie’s eyes were as wide as saucers. Dove would be lying if she said she wasn’t impressed as well. It appeared that Lord Markel was indeed, an educated gentleman.

“Is that enough to satisfy both of you lads so that we might start practice?” Dove’s father asked.

They nodded in unison and snapped out of their trance to get into their position as the local shepherds.

The viscount rejoined Dove and when he glanced at her, she offered him a small smile. “Impressive, my lord.”

He shrugged, as if embarrassed. “I had something of a fascination with medicine, so I paid attention when it suited me.”

“To the relief of Mr. Carruthers, I’m sure,” she noted in a dry tone.

His eyes warmed slightly. “I merely wanted to offer my assistance.”

“And that you have,” Dove returned. “To the whole village. Everywhere I go I hear your praises being sung.”

His gaze was steady. “Do you find fault with that?” he asked softly.

“Not at all,” she said evenly. “As long as it is deserved, and it seems as though it is.”

CHAPTER NINE

*A*fter the play practice, the vicar asked Cain if he would like to join them for luncheon and he agreed. He saw Dove stiffen out of the corner of his eye, but rather than escort her home before the vicar, he volunteered to stay and return with her father.

This obviously surprised Dove, but there was a slight sense of relief in her blue gaze too. After the rest of the occupants of the church had taken their leave as well, Mr. Meriwether looked at Cain rather curiously. “I didn’t realize I had been mistaken when I noted your regard for my daughter.”

Cain’s mouth kicked up in the corner. “You are not wrong. I just don’t wish to harm her reputation by making your congregation believe there is something untoward going on between us. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that if I were to spend too much time alone in her company, people would get the wrong impression.”

“A very astute observation, my lord.” The vicar smiled. “And I appreciate that you are taking a care for Dove’s honor. I knew you were a man of worth.”

Cain narrowed his gaze. “I have the feeling this was some sort of test.”

The vicar looked up at the ceiling. “The Lord is always testing us, my lord. It’s when we act upon our human nature that it plays an important role in our character. We must learn to draw from our faith and not our temptations when they are set before us.”

He immediately saw Dove’s lovely face. “But what if we can’t?” Cain asked softly.

“The lure of sin is like no other. It tries to engage us every day, but most often when we choose to walk the path of righteousness. That is when we must truly be steadfast.” He strode over and put a hand on Cain’s shoulder. “Believe not only in God, my lord, but also yourself.”

With a gentle pat, he headed toward the entrance of the church, and Cain followed.

The walk to the Meriwether house was accomplished in silence. Cain was lost to his own thoughts while the vicar was likely contemplating what other philosophical things to say. In truth, he’d given Cain a lot to ponder, the least of which was the shame he continued to feel when he looked back over his life from the past few years. Ever since he’d left Oxford, he had cut a swath through London’s gaming hells and brothels, most generally with James at his side to share in the devilry. Now, he couldn’t help but feel as if he owed his mother and father more than just an apology, but a thorough atonement for his transgressions. It was no longer enough that he simply perform his duty and settle down to fill his nursery. He needed

to find some way to be a role model for others. Surely he could find a way to help others the way Dove had at the local infirmary. Perhaps a true orphanage?

It might take some consideration, but he was determined to find a proper course of action. While he wasn't naïve enough to believe that what he chose would ensure him a ticket past the pearly gates of heaven, just considering the prospect made his chest fill with warmth. Could it be pride?

By the time he'd reached the cottage, he walked inside with a smile on his face. It only grew when he smelled the air. Something tantalizing was brewing, but it wasn't just whatever Dove was cooking. It was deeper than that.

For the first time in a long while, Cain's smile expanded. It was as if he'd walked in a door—and found his way home.



THE INSTANT LORD Markel walked into the kitchens with her father, she could tell that something was... different about him. While he was still entirely too handsome for her peace of mind, it was his expression that had altered. There was generally some sort of spark in his eyes that promised wicked delights, but today, in that moment, he looked like he was... at peace.

“It smells delightful, daughter. What have you prepared for us?”

“Mutton and cabbage with bread and honey cake.”

“My favorite,” her father gushed. “Have you already set the kettle on the stove?”

She nodded. “Yes. The tea is steeping now.”

Cain stepped forward. “Allow me to take a tray into the dining room.”

“Oh, no, my lord. My manners won’t allow that.” Her father waved a hand. “Please, do sit and keep Dove company and I will attend to the tea.”

When he walked out the door, Dove wasn’t sure what to say to break the silence that had suddenly descended over the kitchens.

“Might I be of some assistance?”

Dove instantly brought to mind the day before when he had pinned her up against the counter and kissed her soundly. Her cheeks warmed of their own volition. “I can manage, thank you.” She didn’t intend for her words to sound so clipped, but her nerves were taut and it made her more frustrated than usual.

“I’m sorry, Dove. For yesterday. For the day at the castle.”

This got her attention. She finally faced him fully, and while she wasn’t sure what she might see in his gaze, she hadn’t been prepared for sorrow. His eyes were a soft mixture of swirling green and brown, both of which told of his regret. She would have almost rather accepted his pity, but the latter meant that he was remorseful for ever kissing her. That was a particularly bitter pill to swallow, for her waking hours were filled with the desire to be in his arms again.

But, of course, he would feel guilty for allowing some village girl to imagine that he might actually feel something for her. He didn't want to leave her with a broken heart and could she really fault him for that? At least he was being honest, if not brutally so.

"It's fine, my lord. All is forgiven."

He regarded her steadily. "Is it?"

"Of course. I had nearly forgotten about it, so please don't punish yourself when it has hardly crossed my mind."

She wasn't sure if he was injured by her false assurance, or perhaps his pride was bruised, but she didn't wait to see because she turned her focus back to the stove. After she had put the finishing touches on the meal, she finally faced the viscount and found that he looked no different than before. Then again, he said nothing as he walked over and took the platter of meat from her grasp.

It wasn't until he was at the door to the dining room that he said, "I never meant to hurt you, Dove. I know you've been hurt before, and I just wanted you to know that all the endearments I've told you were true. You really are the most amazing lady I've ever met, and you have gotten under my skin more than any other woman ever has. I realize now that I wasn't just passing through Meriden that day. I was led here. To you."

Dove clasped the edge of the counter after he disappeared. It wasn't his shocking pronouncement that unnerved her, because something told her that, more than ever before, he was telling the truth.

What bothered her was that he mentioned something about her being hurt before. The question that rushed through her mind was—how did he *know*?



THE MEAL WAS one of the finest that Cain had ever consumed, either because Dove was a remarkable cook or he found little fault about her at all. However, Dove herself mainly picked at her food and consumed only a few bites before she pushed it away, virtually untouched.

The vicar, on the other hand, had no such reservations as he leaned back in his chair with a satisfied sigh and an empty plate. “Your skills in the kitchen never fail to amaze me, Dove. You shall make a fine wife and mother someday.”

A rosy pink hue flushed Dove’s cheeks, and she worked hard to avoid Cain’s gaze. “You know there is no one who could ever replace you, Papa.” She got to her feet and began to clear the dishes.

Instead of asking if he could help, Cain began to offer his services without a word, gathering up what he could. Besides, it was the perfect excuse to talk to Dove in private. He felt the need to do so, as he realized he’d spoken boldly earlier and he wanted to ensure that he hadn’t frightened her away before he could make his suit.

The solution had come to him the moment he’d walked in the front door of their cottage. If any lady could keep him on the straight and narrow path, and satisfy his mother’s

expectations, as well as that of society, it was Dove. He would gladly take her as his wife if she would but agree to accept his hand, because he also couldn't imagine seeing anyone else comparing to her kind nature and goodness of heart. While most women would be excited to become a viscountess, Cain knew that Dove wouldn't be so easily swayed by his title. She would expect something more sincere and genuine. He might not be worthy to be her husband as of yet, but he intended to continue to try. If nothing else, he vowed he could make her happy in the bedchamber, and the rest would surely fall into place.

Dove was pouring steaming water from a bucket on the stove into a basin when he entered with the dishes he'd gathered. "Shall I use the linen to dry—"

"I'm sure you and my father have things to discuss," she interrupted curtly, as she set the bucket down. "As I said before, I can manage."

Cain hesitated. He had expected her to be confused, perhaps slightly discomfited by his earlier confession, but she appeared decidedly... *angry* from the stiff set of her shoulders. And unfortunately, he had no idea what he'd done to cause it. He cleared his throat. "Miss Meriwether." He hoped that by addressing her formally, that some of her upset would cease. "I was hoping that we might have a chance to talk—"

She threw a rag into the basin and spun on him. Her blue eyes were flashing fire and her face was flushed to the edge of her blonde hair. "How did you know I've been hurt before? Have you been gossiping about me behind my back?"

He blinked. “What?” When her eyes turned even more furious, he held up his hands. “No... I... You don’t understand. I was at the inn and...” He sighed. He had never stumbled over his own tongue before, but apparently, there was a first time for everything, because he couldn’t seem to string two coherent words together. He clenched his jaw. “I might have heard about your previous misfortune with another gentleman, but I did *not* set out to inquire about you, nor to cause you injury. On that, you have my word.”

She crossed her arms and tossed her head with a brittle laugh. “Mable, of course. It appears that you have charmed everyone in town with your London charisma, my lord. As if your word, or any other *gentleman*’s should sway my opinion. One encounter with a man like you was enough to suffice for the rest of my days.” She pinched the bridge of her nose and exhaled heavily. “I wish I had never known what a peer even was, or that I had ever met you or James Danfield. For an earl, I would have thought he might have had a conscience, but I suppose it doesn’t extend to the aristocracy.”

This time it was Cain who stilled. A strange buzz of warning began to start in his ears. “What did you say his name was?” he asked woodenly.

She narrowed her gaze. “I suppose you’re familiar with the Earl of Minelawn.” She snorted. “Not that it should surprise me. You are cut from the same cloth, are you not?”

Cain couldn’t move, and he certainly couldn’t look Dove in the eyes. James had been his cohort in carnal activities and the man whose funeral he had attended just days ago. Surely

fate hadn't been so cruel as to play such a twisted hand, to offer him a woman capable of turning him into a man his family could be proud of, a man *he* could be proud of, and end his suit before it could even begin, merely because she would never allow herself to trust another scoundrel like the earl. But he refused to lie to her any longer.

“I had known James for years, since we were in school together. He was my closest confidante.”

Her gaze hardened. “I suppose he was also in on this little game of who could woo the vicar's daughter.”

“Actually, no.” Cain swallowed hard. “He's dead.”

Her face paled, but he couldn't focus on her distress right now when he was overwhelmed with his own.

This whole endeavor had been nothing but a fool's errand. While he had been searching for redemption, this was enough to prove that he wasn't worthy of forgiveness. He had committed so many sins that this was his reward—to be cursed until the end of his days as a known libertine. He would never be able to truly love because the one woman he desired to give him a second chance at life had already been abused by someone who was just like him.

His past flashed in front of his eyes, reminding him in detail how he'd treated women like Dove, and it sickened him. He felt unclean, and certainly not fit to even brush the hem of her gown let alone offer someone so pure and innocent the opportunity to dirty herself with a lifetime of former debauchery.

“Excuse me.” Cain turned on his heel and left the kitchens. He could barely see straight. His vision wavered as he headed for the front door, and even though he could hear the vicar call his name, he kept going. He could no longer infect this house with his filth.

The door slammed on his departure.

CHAPTER TEN

That night, Dove cried herself to sleep. She prayed that her father couldn't hear her from his room down the hall, for the sobs that were coming out of her chest were deep and painful, as if her very heart was breaking in two.

She could no longer deny the fact that she had fallen in love with Lord Markel.

Before, when the Earl of Minelawn had paid court to her, she'd imagined that her emotions had been engaged. She had been despondent for weeks, but it was nothing compared to the anguish she was feeling now. If Cain left Meriden, she might not ever recover from such a devastating blow.

After her frustration had abated, she realized that she hadn't been as upset with the viscount so much as with her own foolishness. She had allowed herself to care for someone who could never be hers. She admitted now that Lord Markel was trying to be a better man, whereas his friend James had thrived without thought to the consequences of others. Just because Mable had let something slip about Dove's past didn't mean that he had intended to use his position as a peer to take advantage of her. She'd had enough time to look back over

their brief time together, and he had never made any untoward advances without her permission.

If the harsh words she'd said to him weren't enough to cut deeply, the look of harsh regret in his gaze still tore her to shreds.

If he had remained at the village today, which she doubted would be the case, she intended to apologize for her outburst. Otherwise, she would choose her words carefully and send a letter to him in London. However, such communication couldn't account for human emotions, as he couldn't see the sincerity on her face when he read a simple sheet of paper.

Carefully hiding her emotions with a bright smile for her father, Dove donned her pelisse as they made their way to the church for play practice. She had considered telling her father that they would have to find another Joseph but decided to wait until the viscount didn't appear. She feared they would also have to find another Mary, for she wasn't sure she could continue playing a part that reminded her so much of Cain.

As the congregation slowly began to file into the church, Dove remained silent as she pretended a sudden interest in her lines. She had already memorized them long ago, because after adopting the role of Mary every year, it wasn't much different than the Christmas prior. But then, not much changed when it came to the Nativity Story.

She held her breath as more and more people entered, and while she prayed she would see that towering figure, he never appeared.

Tears began to sting her eyes, but she blinked them back. She would not allow the rest of her father's flock to see her pain. She would continue to harbor that in private.

Once everyone was there, except Lord Markel, her father glanced at the timepiece in his pocket. "Lord Markel is running late today. It's not like him."

Dove kept her thoughts to herself, but she swallowed hard over the lump in her throat. She stepped forward. It was time to make the announcement.

"Father—"

He turned to her just as the doors to the sanctuary opened.



CAIN HAD SAT on the edge of his bed at the inn, hands clasped, and stared at the floor for an unknown amount of time when he'd returned from the Meriwether cottage. His mind was a jumbled mess of self-recrimination and inner turmoil. Part of him wanted to just get on his horse and ride hell for leather to London and forget that he had even heard of a village called Meriden.

At the same time, he knew that would be impossible, because he *had* been here.

And met Dove Meriwether.

He snorted in disgust, because of all of the people that James would have had to injure before he'd departed this world, she was the one woman Cain could picture by his side

for the remainder of his days. Dove was everything that he wasn't—someone worthy of love.

Shoving a hand through his hair, he'd finally fallen into a restless slumber, waking the next morning with every intention of leaving. He had his valise packed with the few clothes he'd taken to Birmingham and which Mrs. Decker had kindly laundered, dried, and ironed for him while he'd been there. If she were a man, he had no doubt he would have hired her as his valet.

In fact, it was the despondency on the lady's face that had kept him from departing. When he'd gone downstairs and told her his plans, she had put a hand to her heart. "But, my lord, I was so looking forward to seeing you perform in the Christmas Eve play!"

Thus, Cain had shoved down his pride, along with the rest of his emotions, and reluctantly headed for the church.

He hadn't been prepared for the shock of pain that had flowed through him the moment he saw Dove, but neither did he miss the relief that was evident on her face. Of course, she was likely worried for her father's disappointment, and that of the rest of the patrons of the church. Given the way she'd dismissed him the night before, he was quite sure she didn't wish to look upon his face.

But, as Mable had so kindly reminded him, he had made a promise, and Cain would uphold his part of the bargain even if it killed him.

"I apologize for my tardiness," he announced, offering a general nod to his fellow actors.

The vicar offered him a warm smile. “No harm done, my lord. You’re here now. Shall we begin?”

Cain squared his shoulders and took his place near Dove, although he was careful to keep his gaze averted and a proper distance between them.

As the play practice commenced and there was a lull in Mary and Joseph’s lines, he could feel a presence moving closer to him. He kept his focus firmly on the sheet in his grasp, although it crinkled slightly with the added pressure.

“My lord,” Dove whispered. “If I might have a word with you after—”

His jaw clenched. “I think you said everything you needed to last evening, Miss Meriwether.”

He heard her sigh. “I was out of line. I was upset and—”

He faced her, his eyes clashing with hers. “Allow me to set your mind at ease. Once my duty to your father has concluded, I will leave Meriden, thus leaving any more unwelcome memories in the past where they belong.”

She paled slightly. “My lord, I didn’t mean...” She turned away and covered her mouth and he understood. She had never meant to hurt him.

“Set your mind at ease, Miss Meriwether.” He softened his voice slightly. “I harbor no ill will toward you or Meriden. This entire experience was what I needed to open my eyes. You spoke the truth last night, so don’t believe that you are at fault. I shall return to London and do my duty to my family and you will not have to see me again.”



DOVE CLENCHED her fists at her sides. This conversation was not going at all how she'd planned. She meant to tell him she hadn't intended to lash out like she had, but she couldn't force the words out.

And now she feared it was too late.

His words were so cool and clipped, so *final*, that she knew it would take a Christmas miracle for him to see that she didn't detest him, that he wasn't the scoundrel she had made him out to be. Because he was different now. The Cain Wyndham he had been when he'd rode into their village was not the same one on this stage with her now.

But how could she make him see that?

A sudden flush flowed through her body. Perhaps it wasn't enough if she just explained that he wasn't as terrible as he believed, but to *show* him that she wasn't without her own flaws. For years she had fought against the passion flowing through her veins, and while James had used her quite ill, she knew that it wasn't only his fault that she had almost trod the path of ruin. She had been easily led by his flowery words, but she wouldn't have succumbed if she hadn't *wanted* to do so.

Dove spoke up when it was her turn in the play, but her mind was whirling with how she might repair this unfortunate rift with Cain.

Once practice had concluded, the viscount didn't linger over long as he generally had before, but took his leave,

marching down the aisle of the church as if God himself had ordered him to go.

She wasn't surprised when her father walked over to her with a concerned frown. But then, she hadn't told him about the conversation she'd had with Cain in the kitchen, and the reason for his abrupt departure was that he had promised one of the villagers his assistance.

While her father had accepted her explanation without reservation then, as she had never lied to him before, he approached her now with an expression of distress. "Is something amiss with Lord Markel?"

"Not that I am aware, Papa," she returned cautiously. "But perhaps I could go to the inn later this afternoon and ask Mrs. Decker if she knows why he might be acting differently."

Her father smiled. "You are a treasure of a daughter, my dear, to care so much for others. I'm sure the viscount will be glad for your visit."

Dove forced a smile, because she was quite sure if her father knew the true reason she intended to seek out the viscount, he wouldn't be nearly as assured.

Dove slipped out of the church a short time later and held her bonnet close to her head. The wind had gotten up since that morning and the clouds overhead threatened more winter weather. She shivered in her pelisse, and hastily made her way to the Queen's Head.

She walked inside and didn't see the viscount among the few patrons who were sitting around the taproom. When she

spied Mable, she walked over to the bar.

“Dove!” Mrs. Decker offered her a warm, welcoming smile. “What brings you in today?”

She clasped her hands together in front of her. “Papa wanted me to check on the viscount to see if all was well. He was a bit reticent at the play today.”

Mable hesitated, and then she inclined her head. “I was just about to take a tea tray to him, but I suppose you can take it in my stead.”

Nerves caught at Dove’s stomach, but she pushed them aside and accepted the tray that Mable handed her.

Relief flowed through Dove, and although she knew she couldn’t tarry long, lest Mable should come check on her whereabouts, perhaps she would have enough time to accomplish what she intended.

However, providence was on her side, although she was quite sure it wasn’t divine, as several patrons walked through the front door of the inn. She overheard the coachman say that the mail had run into a problem on the main road, but they were able to limp into the village for repairs.

Dove smiled to herself, for this meant that Mable would be occupied longer than usual.

She made her way upstairs.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A soft knock at the door had Cain calling over his shoulder to admit the visitor, and then he continued working on the unfortunate knot he'd made of his cravat. He'd been so eager to rip it off the moment he returned, feeling as it was a band around his throat, choking off all of his air, that now he regretted his actions.

The door opened behind him and he heard the tea tray he'd been expecting from Mrs. Decker being placed carefully on a table. He also heard the door close, so he imagined the innkeeper had left, but when he heard gentle footsteps walking up behind him, he spun around. Curiosity quickly turned to surprise when he saw Dove standing just a few feet from him.

He couldn't seem to move as she closed the distance and reached for the pitiful strip of cloth he'd been fighting. "Allow me," she said huskily, and Cain's cock instantly stirred to life, although his brain admonished his member to cease and desist.

She easily removed the knot of his cravat and slowly slid it from around his neck to discard it to the side. Her eyes never left his as she reached for the buttons of his waistcoat. His

jacket had already been removed earlier. “Do you need help with this too?”

Cain said nothing. He did nothing. He was powerless to do anything more than watch as she slowly began to strip the clothes off his body. In light of all of the experienced women he’d lain with over the years, nothing had ever fired his blood like this village girl, whose fingers he yearned to have all over his body.

As she pushed the waistcoat off of his shoulders, she reached for the top closure of his shirt and lifted an inquiring brow. Again, Cain remained motionless, so she began to slide it from beneath the waistband of his trousers, and with a deep inhale, as if she was eager to see what lay beyond the cambric, she urged it up past his ribcage. Cain obediently lifted his arms and she slid it the rest of the way, until it became a forgotten pool of white at their feet.

He exhaled sharply at the first touch of her pale, slender hands on his burning skin. His head was spinning and it wasn’t just because he hadn’t lain with a woman since he’d learned of James’ death, but because Dove was driving him crazy with her gentle exploration. He wasn’t sure how long she intended to carry out this silent seduction, but it would have to stop soon, or he wouldn’t be able to say no.

Her palms were flat against his chest, and she ran them straight across his pectorals and he wondered if she liked the scattering of hair or if she might prefer a smooth chest. But the way her eyes flared in approval, he decided it was the latter.

Not until she continued further, past his abdominal muscles, following the trail that disappeared beneath the band of his trousers did he reach out his hands and capture her wrists. He did not hold her tight enough to hurt, just enough to cause her to reconsider her actions.

“What are you doing here, Dove?”

She looked up at him, those blue eyes flashing with desire. “I thought you might be able to discern that, my lord.”

He closed his eyes and sent up a prayer for control. If there was one thing he wished for God to grant him, it was this. “You need to go home.” He released her wrists and turned to walk over to the washstand. He considered dumping the entire pitcher of water over his head to cool off.

“Do you hate me so very much?”

He snorted and grasped the wood on the washstand until his knuckles turned white. “It seems to me it’s the other way around, if your words from last night were any indication.”

She sighed heavily. “I wanted to tell you I was sorry today, but you didn’t give me a chance—”

“And why should I?” He spun back around and glared at her. “You pegged me perfectly with your assessment. James and I cut a swath through London in our younger days that you can’t begin to comprehend. It wasn’t until a few weeks ago that he departed for his estate when I learned he was suffering from syphilis.”

She blanched, and he was glad for it. Maybe now she would see sense.

“I see you’re familiar with the affliction, and for good reason. It’s why you should steer clear of scoundrels and ne’er-do-wells like me. We’re all cut from the same cloth.”

She slowly shook her head. “You’re nothing like James. I knew from the first moment I saw him that he was a reprobate, yet it didn’t stop me from playing his dangerous game and getting burned. But you...” She dared to move closer. “Cain, you came here with the sole purpose of seeking redemption. Does that not make you a better person in spite of your past transgressions? If anything else, I’m the one who is in danger of suffocating in hell’s fire.”

He walked back to her and set his hands on her shoulders. “If there is one thing that’s ever been pure or virtuous in my entire, damned life, it’s *you*, Dove. You are the angel that I had been searching for to spare my soul.”

“But that’s just it.” Tears filled her gaze and it cut him to the quick. “I’m far from being an angel. I have my flaws.” She put a fist to her chest. “I’ve tried to fight against these... carnal urges inside of me, and yet, as much as I’ve prayed for them to go away, they remain. And they are strongest when you are near me.”

Cain dropped his head, and when he lifted it and looked back at her again, he was smiling. “My adoring, Dove. There is nothing wrong with these ‘carnal urges’ as you call them. We’re human, and they are a part of us. There is nothing shameful about passion or desire. It is perfectly natural.” He leaned his head against her forehead. “For years I abused that right, but ever since I met you, I’ve had no yearning for

anyone else. You, alone, make my pulse pound and my blood sing in my veins.”

She pulled away from him and untied the strings of her bonnet, allowing it to fall to the floor. Her pelisse soon followed. “I want you, Cain. I want *this*. Please, don’t deny me this one request.”

His nostrils flared, and he cupped her face in his hands once more. “As if I could deny you anything you wanted.”



THE KISS WASN’T GENTLE, but fiery and demanding.

Dove reveled in it.

Her mind kept screaming for more. She wanted to feel his hands on her naked skin. While James had done more than she had meant to allow, with Cain, she wanted it all.

Dove’s dress began to sag in the front, and she hadn’t realized that Cain had undone all the buttons down the back. She’d been too distracted by his mouth on hers, but she had to admit he was rather deft with his fingers.

Her undergarments swiftly followed until she was standing naked before him, other than her stockings and boots. She felt foolish and started to cover up her breasts, but he halted her movements. “No. Don’t.” He shook his head. “You have nothing to hide, Dove. You’re beautiful. Exquisite.”

Her breath caught as he abruptly caught her up in his arms and carried her over to the bed where he gently laid her down

on top of the coverlet. There was a modest fire burning in the room to take off the chill, but Dove didn't need anything save Cain's love to keep her warm.

She watched as he straightened and began to unlace her boots. She loved the look of hunger in his enchanting eyes, as if he wished to devour every inch of her.

She clutched the quilt on either side of her, as after her boots and stockings had been shed, he trailed a line of kisses from her ankle, past her calf, until he nipped at the inside of her thigh. She knew she ought to be embarrassed that he was so close to her femininity, but she was just enjoying the moment, because she didn't know if she would be granted anything more after a day like this.

She wasn't naïve enough to believe that he would make her an offer just because they had lain together. After his vow was completed to her father, she fully expected him to continue on his way, but perhaps he would remember this time with her in a fond memory. She knew she would once the pain had receded to a dull ache in her chest.

At the first swipe of his tongue at her cleft, she moaned out his name. He didn't tease her or allow the torment to linger but kept licking her with ruthless intent until her legs were trembling and something began to build inside of her. Suddenly, her entire body exploded with white light, as if she had just touched heaven itself.

Dove hardly recognized when Cain shed his trousers and covered her body with his. It was so hard and strong and

deliciously *male*, that she wrapped her arms around his broad back, her legs around his torso, fearing that he would leave.

She could feel the tip of his manhood nudging at her entrance, and she lifted her hips to invite him in, but he refrained.

“Dove.” When Cain paused, she looked at him to see his face in torment.

“What’s wrong?” she breathed.

He closed his eyes momentarily, and when he opened them, they were bright and almost, haunted. “Did James ever... did he...” He uttered a curse, and she knew it was difficult for him to ask her such an intimate question.

She loved him even more than before, just for having a care for her feelings.

“No. It never got that far,” she soothed. “I’m still a virgin.”

“I’m very glad to hear that.” Relief was evident on his face and he bent his head to suckle on first one breast, and then the other, until she was panting beneath him. When she was quite sure that she couldn’t take any more, he entered her with a single thrust while she was pleasantly distracted.

Dove gasped, not sure what to think of this foreign intrusion, but it didn’t take long for him to start to move, whereas a new sensation started to hum through her veins. When he increased his rhythm, she closed her eyes as the pleasure became too much. She shuddered around him with a low moan, while he cried out her name and spent himself inside of her.

Afterward, as their breathing returned to normal, she felt the edge of his thumb caressing her cheek. Her eyes fluttered open and she met his gaze, which was filled with caring and a tenderness she hadn't expected. Her heart yearned to hope, but her brain told her to think rationally. Just because they had shared this special moment, didn't mean that he was prepared to confess his undying love.

“Are you well, my love?”

Her heart skipped. *It's only an endearment. It doesn't mean anything more.* She smiled. “Wonderfully content, my lord.”

He chuckled and kissed the top of her forehead before he moved off of her. But he didn't leave her side. Instead, he propped up his head with a bent arm and looked at her in that heart stopping manner she adored. “Marry me.”

She stilled. “What?”

He rolled his eyes. “Are you that hard of hearing, Miss Meriwether?”

“No, I'm not. I just...” She got up and retrieved her dress, holding it up to her like a barrier. “I wasn't expecting that.”

He frowned but got up as well and donned his trousers. Setting his hands on his hips, he said, “Surely you don't believe that I'm such a worthless rake that I would use you in such a manner and then not do the honorable thing?”

She blinked, her mouth falling agape. “First of all, you didn't use me. I willingly came to your bed. And I don't want to be some sort of *duty* that you must perform.”

She turned her back on him and started dressing. She only made it as far as her stays and petticoat before he clapped his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. He still wasn't wearing a shirt, and the sight of his naked chest gave her pause. "If you don't agree, I'll go to your father and ask his permission."

Dove could feel the blood receding from her face. "No! You mustn't!"

His expression was hard, unyielding. "Then, as I see it, you ought to start planning a wedding, Miss Meriwether."



ALTHOUGH CAIN WASN'T PARTICULARLY THRILLED ABOUT Dove's reluctant acquiescence to his proposal, she ultimately agreed. Together, they left his rooms and walked downstairs.

Mrs. Decker looked somewhat harried as she attended to her customers, but the moment she glanced up and spied them, her expression faltered and she dropped everything to walk over. "Dove..." Her voice was little more than a whisper as she spied the younger woman. Dove's cheeks instantly colored with either embarrassment or shame, perhaps a bit of both, as she met the innkeeper's gaze. "Oh, my girl."

And that's when she looked at Cain and nearly skewered him with her accusing gaze, but before she could utter a word, he took Dove's hand in his own and proclaimed, "I thought you would like to be the first to hear of our impending engagement."

At first, Mable appeared at a loss for words, but then she clasped her hands together and embraced Dove, and then to his surprise, embraced him as well. “I offer my heartfelt congratulations. When can we expect the nuptials?”

He glanced at Dove and lifted a brow, but since she seemed somewhat unwilling to speak, he announced, “I believe a Christmas wedding would be ideal, but I would have to appeal to the archbishop for a special license.” He winked at her. “But I’m confident I can achieve success.”

This got Dove’s attention. Her blue eyes widened. “So soon?”

“Surely you don’t object, my dear,” he cajoled. “The sooner I can have you all to myself, the better.”

“Very well,” she returned coolly.

He didn’t like that reaction, but as they continued on their way, he allowed her the silence to compile her thoughts. However, when they walked outside and a light sheen of ice had already coated the countryside, he held her close to his side.

They made it to the cottage without incident, and when they entered, the vicar was just exiting the parlor, and he smiled in greeting.

Cain hesitated in the doorway.

The vicar’s smile broadened. “My lord. It’s good of you to escort Dove home in such inclement weather. I hope this means that things are well?”

“Indeed, they are, sir.” He glanced at Dove and said proudly, “Your daughter has agreed to my hand in marriage. We plan to be wed on Christmas Day.”

The vicar took a moment to get past the shock, but once he did, he laughed richly. “Why, that is fantastic news! I wish you every blessing on your upcoming union.”

“We would be equally honored if you would perform the ceremony,” Cain added.

Again, her father seemed at a loss, and then his gaze turned a bit misty. “Of course. It will be my pleasure.” He reached out and took Dove’s hands in his. “The Lord has seen fit to bring a wonderful man like Lord Markel into your life, my dear. I hope you are grateful for this blessing.”

“Of course, Papa. I couldn’t be happier.”

Only Cain must have noticed the lack of happiness in her words, but he vowed that a smile would soon return to her face.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Over the course of the next few days, once play practice was concluded, Cain made his way to the Meriwether house where he would spend the rest of the afternoon. Sometimes the vicar joined them, but for the most part, Cain was granted this time alone to court Dove.

She had started to relent in her stiff manner toward him, and he was able to tease a laugh out of her on more than one occasion. It was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard, and he couldn't wait until the time came when he could hear it every single day of his life.

They mostly talked about their childhood and neutral topics that had nothing to do with the future, and that suited him fine. He enjoyed picturing the shy girl that had blossomed into the lovely woman before him. He discovered that Dove was talented in several pursuits, including painting and music, and he intended to ensure that she had everything she wanted at her fingertips. He planned to spoil her as long as she could stand his generosity.

Cain truly felt as though he'd been redeemed, because his step was lighter and he seemed to be wearing a permanent

grin. He was happier now than he ever had been frequenting the gaming hells and brothels of his youth. But he supposed those wilder days made him appreciate these serene moments with Dove.

He did feel bad that he didn't have his grandmother's ring to offer her on their wedding day, but he intended to rectify that oversight the moment they arrived in London. While they hadn't yet discussed leaving Meriden yet, surely she would know that was what would need to happen. But he didn't want to push her too far just yet. They had time to discuss things after the ceremony had taken place.

Two days before Christmas Eve, Cain returned to the inn to settle in for the night and dream of Dove. She would be the best Christmas gift he had ever received, and he couldn't wait to unwrap all her wonderful delights.

However, Mable stopped him before he could retire. "This message just arrived for you, my lord."

"Thank you," he murmured and took the stairs to his room. He sat down in a chair near the fireplace and tore open the wax that bore his family's seal. The letter was in his mother's handwriting.

I have no idea where this letter may find you, but I pray it doesn't take long. I fear your brother, Paul, is treading a dangerous path of late. There are even rumors that he has joined an underground gang in London. Can you imagine the scandal that will cause the family? While the Wyndham name has suffered its fair share with your attempts to drag it through

the mire, this may be the final straw that bars our family from polite society for the rest of days.

If you have ever had a care for your sister and I, please come home and talk some sense into him. I am ready to wash my hands of him, but Paul has always listened to you. I have never asked much of you, as you well know, but I do entreat you to heed this matter.

YOUR LOVING mother

Cain crushed the letter in his fist and leaned back in his chair. Of course, this was not welcome news, but he wasn't surprised. Paul was three years younger than Cain and had made it a goal to follow in his elder brother's footsteps.

While he didn't want to leave, he realized that he had to act quickly, or all might be lost. He just hoped that Dove would understand the urgency and forgive him if he wasn't back to fulfil his promise to her.

To both of them.



DOVE PACED backstage the night of the play. Cain had yet to return from London from his family emergency, and she was starting to wonder if he actually would.

She shook her head, for the doubts that had plagued her ever since he had left refused to abate. She kept telling herself

that he would not abandon her when he had gone so far as to offer marriage.

And yet...

If he lied, the only person who would suffer would be her, in terms of her reputation. Her entire life in Meriden would be in shambles, and she couldn't blame anyone but herself. It was her rash decision that had landed her in this situation and if it came to pass where she was shunned for the rest of her days, she would hold her head high and let everyone know she wasn't ashamed. Truly, Cain wasn't the only one who had changed irrevocably. He had offered her the experience of a lifetime, passion that she had only dreamed of.

"It's time." She turned to see her father standing behind her, a particular grim expression on his face. "We have held the play long enough, but we can no longer expect the congregation to continue waiting in this manner. Mr. Carruthers is prepared to return to the role of Joseph in the viscount's absence."

Holding her head high, Dove nodded and stepped onto the stage to begin her performance.

Everything started out smoothly, more than it ever had. No one forgot their lines and their costumes were easily managed. Dove was able to maintain her persona as Mary, although inside her heart was aching with longing for Cain. She had prayed that he could make it back in time for the play, considering he had practiced so hard and many of the villagers were looking forward to him engaging the part of Joseph.

While Mr. Carruthers was a faithful man for the part, he lacked some of the conviction that Cain had shown.

As Mary and Joseph were on their way to Nazareth, the doors to the assemblage burst open. Everything came to a halt as all eyes turned to the entrance. Dove held her breath as Lord Markel strode purposefully down the aisle. His greatcoat was splattered with snow and his hair was quite disheveled. His clothes were rumpled and his expression was harried, but Dove thought he was the most handsome man she'd ever laid eyes on.

As the crowd began to whisper, he ignored them all, his focus wholly on the stage—more specifically, on Dove. He locked eyes with her and quoted the next line in the scene.

Dove's gaze shifted momentarily to Mr. Carruthers, who smiled and quietly exited the stage as the viscount climbed to the platform to take his place.

Dove's eyes filled with tears as she continued her part, as if there hadn't been any disruption. Cain continued to speak in a dramatic baritone, but there was something... different about him. His expression was like nothing she'd ever beheld.

It was as if he was truly a man reborn.

He grasped her hands and together they concluded the play, finishing as they welcomed the Messiah into the world, the true gift from God.

When the last line was spoken and they bowed to acknowledge the crowd with the rest of the actors, everyone in the sanctuary began to applaud enthusiastically. They didn't

seem to care that Joseph wasn't properly dressed, or that there had been a swap in the middle of the play.

It was Lord Markel himself who held up his hands in a plea for silence. When the merriment died down, he grasped Dove's hand and addressed her father's flock. "I'd like to thank you all for attending this evening and for allowing me the chance to partake in a part I'd long practiced, and which has become very close to my heart." He paused and turned to Dove. She held her breath when he continued, "I have not always been a good man, someone that my family could be proud of, but after the recent death of a fellow peer, I decided it was time to make some changes in my life. I came to Meriden purely by chance. Or so I believed at the time. Until I met a woman who would go further to pull me out of the mire that I had been trudging through for so long."

Keeping hold of her hand, he got down on one knee and looked up at her with stars in his eyes. He also withdrew something from his waistcoat pocket. Holding it up to her, she saw the brilliant light reflecting from the emerald ring. Tears fell unchecked down her face. "My darling, Dove. Tomorrow is the day we are to be united as man and wife. I'm sure you were starting to wonder if that would come to pass with my recent absence, but going to London for that short time allowed me to retrieve my grandmother's ring so that I might present it to you now. Expressing myself so boldly, in front of all of your friends and neighbors, and your father, I humbly ask once more to please be my wife. I love you and can't imagine a single day passing when I don't see your lovely face by my side."

“You love me?” Dove choked.

His smile grew. “Of course, I do, you darling girl. I think I have from the moment you first stepped foot outside this very chapel.”

Dove fell to her knees, and she didn’t care who was watching. She laid a hand on Cain’s cheek. The slight stubble scratched her palm, and she reveled in it. “I love you too, you impossible man.”

He laughed richly, his baritone carrying all throughout the chapel. “Then I shall take that as a confirmation.” He winked and slid the ring onto her finger.

And then he sealed their upcoming union with a kiss that caused the sanctuary to erupt in applause and cheers once again.

EPILOGUE

*L*ondon, England
New Year's Eve

DOVE clenched Cain's hand in a death grip. "Are you sure they will like me?" she whispered, although it was just the two of them walking up the steps to his townhouse.

He paused and kissed her softly on the lips. "They will adore you, because you are my wife if nothing else."

She glanced down at her attire, the fur lined cloak he had given her for a Christmas present, along with the deep red, velvet dress she was wearing beneath. "And they won't object to such a bold color?"

"No. They will think you are as beautiful as I do."

"Even though I'm a village girl with hardly any sort of blue blood—"

He chuckled and kissed her a bit more deeply, which he knew went far to distract her. "Even then," he murmured.

As if on cue, the door opened and an elderly man greeted them. “My lord. My lady.”

Cain saw Dove’s nose scrunch slightly, as she was still trying to get used to being known as a viscountess. But she would be the best that he had ever beheld, because London needed more caring people like her. He had no doubt that once his mother introduced her to other ladies interested in charities, Dove would easily find her niche in society and be celebrated for it.

“The family is in the parlor awaiting your arrival,” the butler noted once he had taken their outer wear.

Cain inclined his head, and then he escorted Dove along the black and white marble floor, which seemed to hold a particular fascination for her. But considering she had lived a modest life all of these years, he would be surprised if it wasn’t an adjustment. Either way, he intended to do what he could to ease the transition.

He knew she was upset because her father had been adamant about remaining in Meriden. He said his work there wasn’t finished, but Dove made him promise that when he was done tending to his flock, he would move to London with them. Mrs. Decker, of course, had promised to keep an eye on him.

The parlor was exactly the way it was the last time Cain had seen it. When he’d been in London he’d been on a mission and visiting and having tea hadn’t been on his list of things to do. First, he’d rescued his brother from trouble, and then he’d

gone to the townhouse for the sole purpose of securing the ring, which had been in his mother's possession.

But now, as he glanced around the pristine, white room with its silver and red floral décor to embrace the holiday season, Cain realized how much he'd missed it all—how much he'd missed his family. And how much he'd missed in general when he'd been out living his torrid lifestyle.

It was part of the speech he'd given to his brother, Paul, when he'd dragged him out by the scruff of his jacket from a seedy, gaming hell. While he'd been three sheets to the wind that day, Cain was pleasantly surprised to see that he was present and his eyes were clear, proving that he hadn't had a drop to drink in a few days.

He was the first to walk over and offer his congratulations. He embraced Cain with a hearty pat on the back. "Welcome home, brother. It's been far too long."

"Indeed, it has," Cain murmured. "I'm glad to see you looking so well."

Paul breathed a heavy sigh. "I have never been so grateful to have you drag me out of that place and see some sense." He smiled. "Thank you."

Cain inclined his head and turned to Dove to make the introductions.

Paul bowed low over her hand. "Welcome to the family." Although he had always been a man of few words and even fewer emotion, he smiled at Dove with approval.

Samantha, his sister, was the next to come forward. She was as lively as ever and gushed about her own impending betrothal, confident that her suitor would make an offer within the week. She also greeted Dove graciously.

But it was the last woman, Cain's mother, who he was most anxious to face. For a moment, she merely looked at him, and then she exhaled heavily, as if assuring herself of something. "I daresay I never thought this day would come." She shook her head. "Miracles never cease."

That was when she turned to Dove. Taking her hands in hers, she said gently, "You saved my boy from a fate worse than death and brought him back home. For that, I will never be able to truly repay you, but you can be sure I am indebted to you."

Dove shook her head. "That is where you are mistaken, my lady." She turned to Cain. "I don't deserve the credit. While the Lord might have had a hand in his salvation, Cain was the one who performed a Christmas miracle and saved himself."

AFTERWORD

I'd like to thank you for purchasing this book. I know you could have chosen any number of stories to read, but you picked this one and for that I am humbled and grateful! I hope that the romance captured your heart and added a smile to your day. If so, it would be awesome if you could share this book with your friends and family and post a review! Your feedback and support will help improve my writing and help me to continue growing as an author.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tabetha Waite began her writing journey at a young age. At nine years old, she was crafting stories of all kinds on an old Underwood typewriter. She started reading romance in high school and immediately fell in love with the genre. She gained her first publishing contract with Etopia Press and released her debut novel in July of 2016 - "Why the Earl is After the Girl," the first book in her Ways of Love historical romance series. Since then, she has become a hybrid author, published with both Soul Mate and Radish Fiction, upcoming works with Wolf Publishing and Dragonblade, as well as transitioning into Indie publishing. She has won several awards for her books.

She is a small town, Missouri girl who continues to make her home in the Midwest with her husband and two wonderful daughters. When she's not writing novels filled with adventure and heart, she is either reading, or searching the local antique mall or flea market for the latest interesting find. You can find her on most any social media site, and she encourages fans of her work to join her mailing list for updates.

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