

*Indecently
Daring*

EMMA V. JEECH

THE DARING DAUGHTERS BOOK SIXTEEN



Indecently Daring

The Daring Daughters Book 16

By Emma V. Leech

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About Me!



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

The horror! (On both sides I suspect.)

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

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

KEEP READING TO DISCOVER MY OTHER BOOKS!

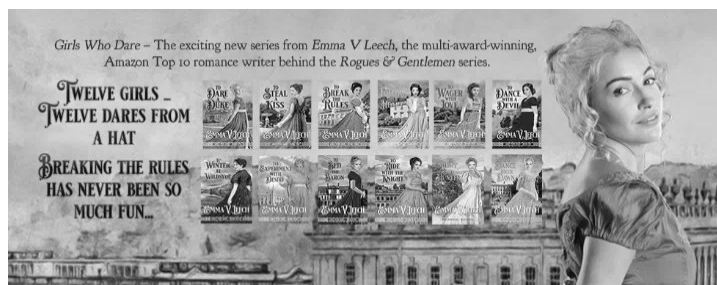
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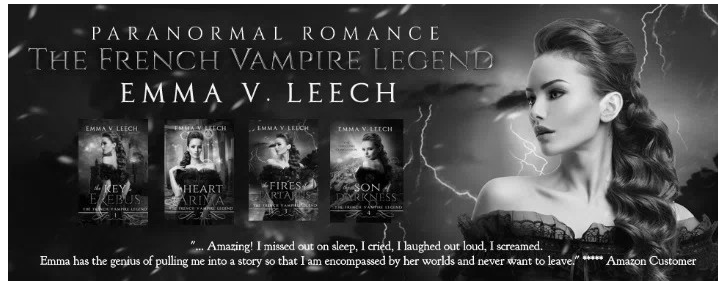
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A huge thank you to all of Emma's Book Club members! You guys are the best!

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

emmavleech@orange.fr

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

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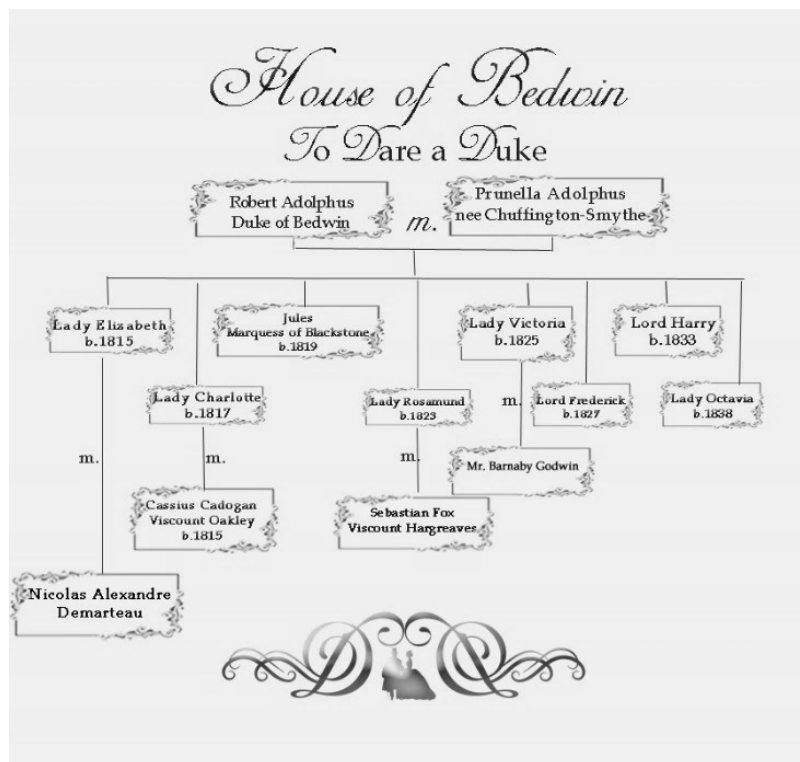
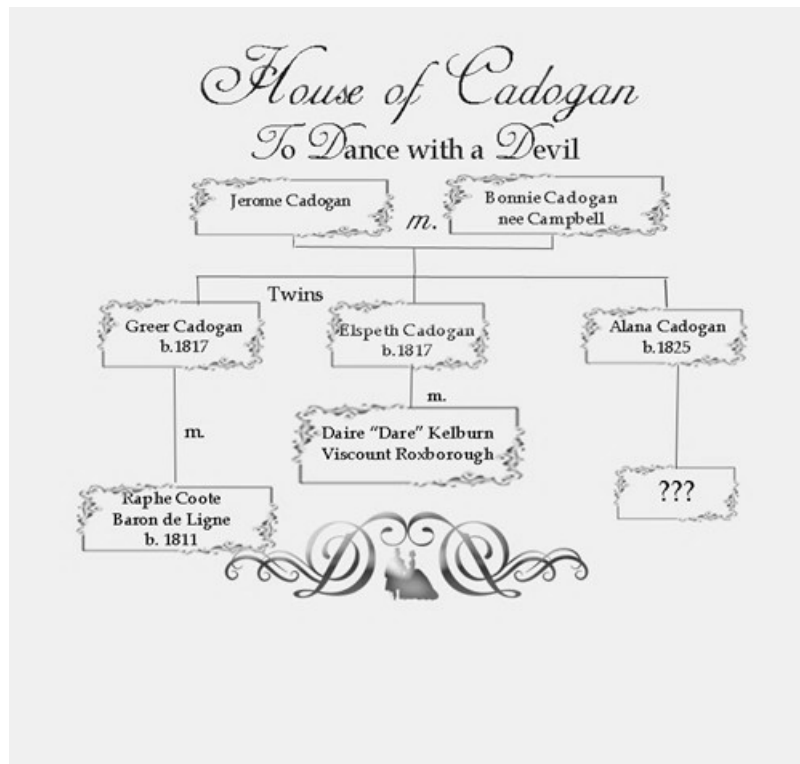
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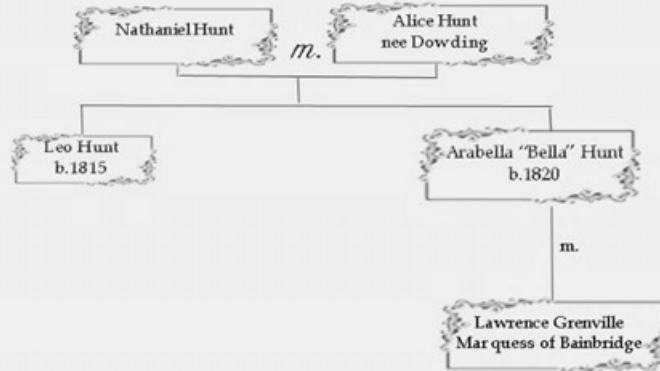
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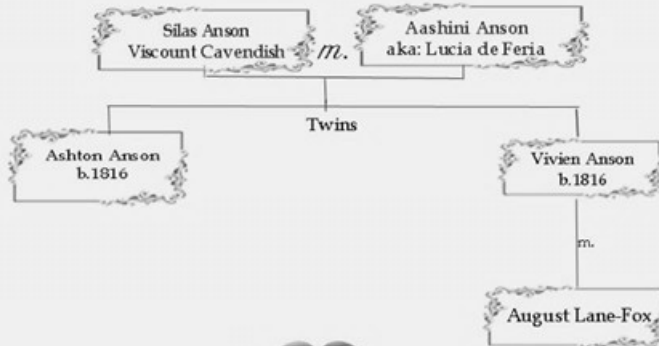
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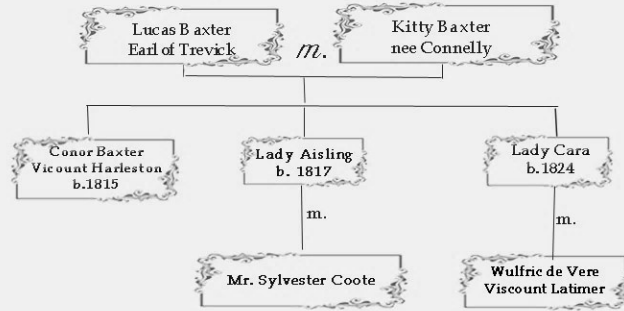


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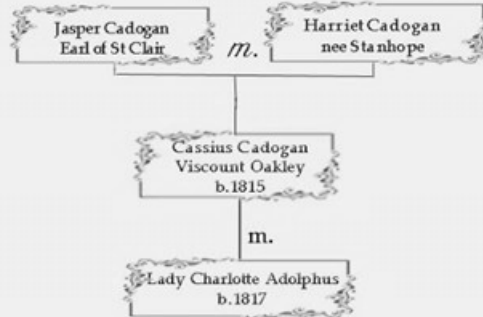
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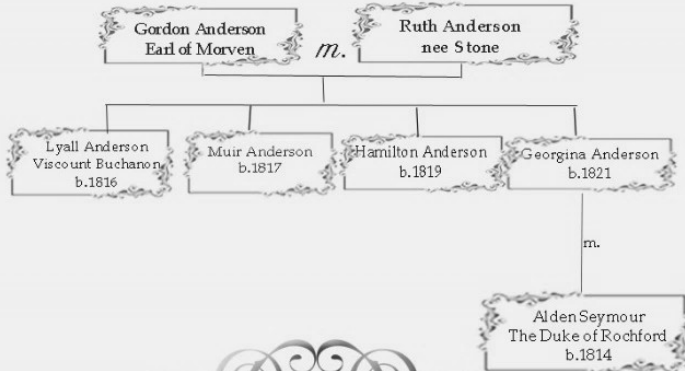


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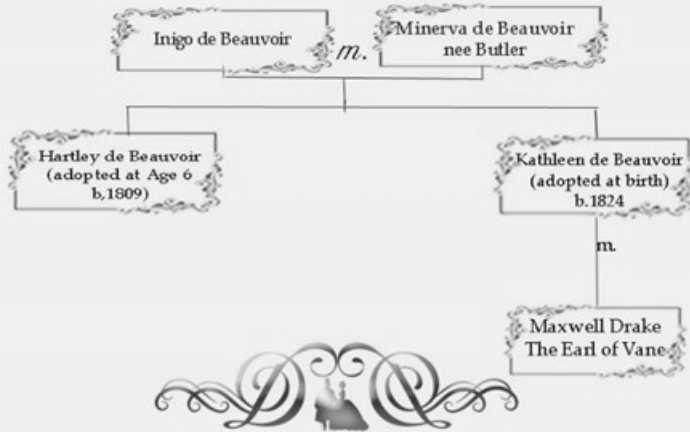
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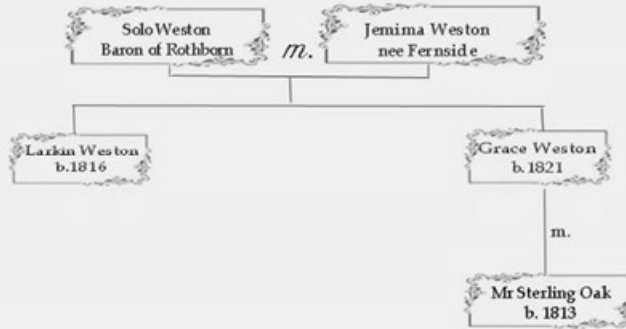


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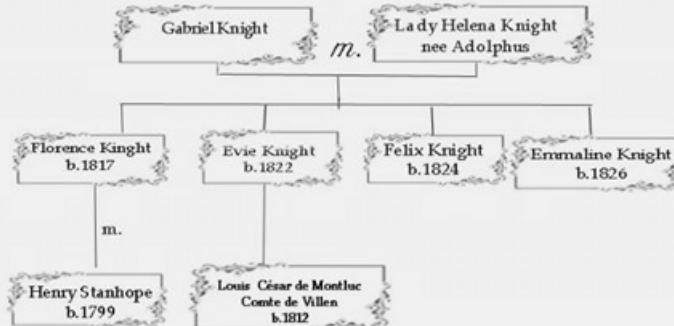
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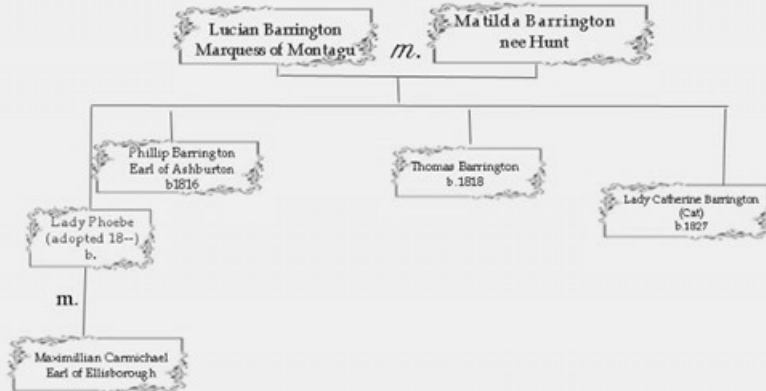


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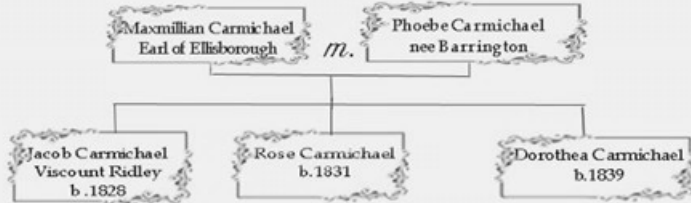
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Chapter 1



Dearest Harry,

Have you finally come to your senses and realised a clergyman's life is wasted upon such a fine specimen of manhood? I pray nightly for such an occurrence, though I know it is a hopeless endeavour. You ever were stubborn as a mule. I only hope you do it for your own reasons and not to please your Papa, the pompous old twit that he is. Still, even he must be proud of the steps you have taken to become the man you are. I am, should you be in any doubt. Only I do worry for you, Harry, my boy. I fear you have become too serious, that you have forgotten that life is for living and ought to be brim full of joy. You spend a deal too much time with the sick and the dying and I believe it is depressing your spirits. The last time I saw you, the change in you shocked me. Where was the mischievous, laughing boy I knew and loved so dearly? So, it is entirely for your own good that I am coming to stay.

Now, fear not. I have no intention of putting up at that draughty old vicarage and catching pneumonia. No, I shall call upon Lady St Clair. She's a sweet creature. Dorcas is a distant relative of the earl by marriage, so he won't hesitate to invite her,

and everyone knows we come as a matched set these days.

So, gird your loins, dearest nephew. I will arrive in three days.

—Excerpt of a letter to the Reverend Harry Martin, from his Great Aunt, Mrs Cora Dankworth.

2nd January 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

“More tea, Vicar?”

“No, thank you, Lady St Clair.” Harry shook his head, setting down his cup and saucer and trying not to stare too longingly at the delicious fruit cake on the table. He’d had three large slices already and was well on his way to gluttony. He really must replace his housekeeper before hunger reduced him to cleaning every tea tray within his parish.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, take another slice,” the lady said with a snort, cutting a ridiculously large slice and handing it to him. “I could hear your stomach grumbling when you came in. Have you still not found a housekeeper?”

Harry accepted the plate with a rueful expression. “No. I keep meaning to, but the problem seems insurmountable.”

“Nonsense,” Lady St Clair said in her usual brisk manner. “It just needs a little attention and thought. You are running hither and yon like a headless chicken, precisely because you do not have a suitable housekeeper to help you. The correct choice will see off people inclined to waste your precious time on flirtation and nonsense, make you regular meals so you do not arrive with the look of a starving hound, *and* keep your robes in order.”

Harry winced and tugged self-consciously at his fraying cuff. He had the greatest admiration and respect for Lady St Clair. She was a bundle of energy with a mind he found frankly rather intimidating, but her forthright manner, whilst refreshing, could be a little brutal.

“I have tried,” he ventured, wishing he did not feel quite so thoroughly like a scolded boy. “But it’s complicated.”

Lady St Clair returned a dry expression. “No, Reverend, it is not. The problem is abundantly clear. All the best applicants for the job have daughters of a marriageable age.”

“Er....” Harry said awkwardly, and then let out a sigh of relief. If the lady understood the problem, perhaps she could advise him on how to proceed without offending the female half of his parish. “In a nutshell.”

With a thoughtful nod, the countess sipped her tea before setting the empty cup down. She pushed her spectacles up her nose and turned the full force of her attention upon him. “Leave it with me. I shall compile a list and engage someone suitable for you.”

“My lady, you are too kind, but I ought not to impose upon your time, and—”

“Piffle. You are clearly running yourself ragged, and that is no good for anyone. Where shall we be if you have a nervous collapse?”

“I don’t think things are really that—”

“In the suds, that’s where we shall be, and I shall be tasked with finding a new vicar, I don’t doubt. Oh-ho, not likely.”

“My lady, I can assure you, I am in perfect health. Just because—”

The lady carried on, disregarding his protestations with an impatient wave of her hand. “It won’t do. I shall help you find a housekeeper, and then you will be fed and watered at regular intervals and my mind shall be easy. If I do not, you’ll end up with someone who is unequal to keeping the marriage-minded mamas and some of the less modest young women of the parish out of your hair. I could not bear to see you forced to marry to some frivolous chit who fell in love with only that pretty face of yours, and has no notion of the man beneath it.”

“Yes, my lady,” Harry said, feeling suddenly quite serene and not the least offended by her words. Why women acted so oddly around him was a mystery he’d never understood, but why things had become worse since he’d entered the church was quite beyond him.

Did they believe just because he was a man of God, he was perfect? For that was so far from the truth, it was laughable. If they saw the real man, knew all the things he had done in his life, all the mistakes and... but he would not dwell on that. After all, Lady St Clair had set her mind to the task of getting him a housekeeper. Now no power on earth would keep her from her objective, which meant he was saved.

Harry felt a weight lift from his shoulders and sent thanks to his heavenly father for arranging things so nicely. He might actually be able to sleep peacefully at night. He might even be able to get up in the morning without having to peer out of the windows and check for young women lurking in his garden, bearing freshly baked loaves, cakes, biscuits, or whatever they had turned their fair hands to on his behalf. Little did they know that, since his housekeeper had left to take care of her ailing sister and a daunting number of nieces and nephews, it was the contents of those covered baskets that tempted Henry the most.

Lady St Clair smiled with satisfaction. "Well, I'm glad that's settled. So, onto the next matter. We need ideas for a charity event to raise funds for your school. You give generously of your time but, really, we shall need a full-time teacher if it is going to work. There aren't enough hours in the day for you to keep up this rather gruelling timetable."

"I enjoy teaching the boys," Harry protested. It was only a few hours in the mornings, and only three days a week, though he wished he could do more.

Lady St Clair nodded. "I know that, and they adore you, but we need money to ensure the school is doing what it ought, and you don't drive yourself to exhaustion. Not only that, but there's so much the lads need. I was delighted all the boys got new boots before the winter this year, but the little devils grow like weeds, and they shall need replacing before we know it. Also, I very much agree with your idea of giving the boys a hot meal. I know the Board of Guardians balked at the notion, but that's only because they're terrified they'll be expected to put their hands in their pockets."

"It will be expensive, I suppose," Harry said anxiously.

The lady rolled her eyes. “Nonsense. St Clair will make a weekly contribution of whatever is in season from the home farm, naturally, but we shall need a cook and a place for her to do so. I’m not finding you the perfect housekeeper only to have her leave a day later when she realises her kitchen is invaded every morning to prepare the school dinners. So we must create a kitchen and storeroom.”

“There are the stables,” Harry said, ignoring the stab of disappointment in the vicinity of his heart.

The countess gave him a sharp look. “No, that won’t do. You really ought to have a horse, you know. St Clair would lend you one until you have the time to arrange your own. I’m sure I’ve offered you the pick of the stables three times now. But anyway, I shall come and visit tomorrow, and we shall put our heads together.”

“Very good, my lady,” Harry said, hoping she would drop the subject now.

“Why don’t you have a horse?” Intelligent brown eyes, enlarged by the thickness of her spectacles, bore into him. “From what I hear, you were an exceptional horseman. And didn’t you have some magnificent animal that everyone was so impressed by? A black stallion, wasn’t it? What was his name now? Prince, no that wasn’t it. Ah, yes... *Pirate*. That was it, I think? I remember St Clair waxing lyrical about the animal. Finest horse he ever saw, apparently.”

Harry flinched inwardly as the name of his old friend made his chest ache with regret. He swallowed hard and nodded, telling himself not to be so foolish, not to keep dwelling in the past, for no good could come of it.

“And yet a man with such a reputation for horsemanship, who owned such an animal, goes everywhere on foot? What has happened? Is the living not sufficient to—”

“Oh, yes, my lady,” Harry said quickly, appalled that she or the earl could think him the least bit dissatisfied with his lot when they had been so astonishingly generous. Far more than he deserved or was worthy of, though he intended to be worthy, no matter how long it took. “It is more than ample.”

“Then is it a form of martyrdom?”

Lady St Clair’s keen eyes narrowed, and Harry felt his neck grow hot. Before he could stammer out a reply, a knock came at the door. Harry let out a sigh of relief and sent another thank you heavenwards.

A butler appeared and carried a silver salver to the countess. She took the letter laid upon it, opened it deftly with a pretty mother-of-pearl knife, then scanned the letter and smiled.

“Marvellous!” she said, setting the letter down and dismissing the butler with her thanks. “Well, it seems we shall have more help with our fundraising efforts. I don’t think I mentioned before, but my niece, Miss Alana Cadogan, and her friend Lady Catherine Barrington, are arriving this afternoon. They’ll be staying until we go to town for the season, and that letter informs me we have more guests who I am certain will be eager to help, but you know that already, I suppose?”

She looked expectantly at Harry. He stared back, at a loss.

“Your aunt,” Lady St Clair said, frowning at him. “Mrs Dankworth.”

“Er....” Harry replied with an impending sense of doom.

“Well, she said she had written to tell you she was coming?”

“Coming?” he repeated in horror. “*Here?*”

Harry’s heart plummeted as the countess nodded. And the morning had been going so well.

“Yes, with Lady Beauchamp.”

Somehow, Harry refrained from groaning and putting his head in his hands and instead affixed a polite smile to his face. “I see. I must have missed the letter.”

“Because you need a housekeeper,” the countess said, throwing up her hands. “Well, in any case, they are due to arrive tomorrow. They’re staying here, naturally. So with them and the young ladies, we shall be in fine form to take on the world. Alana has energy enough for three people. A pity her

mama could not come, but then Bonnie Cadogan and Cora and Dorcas together might be a little too much. We want to take on the world, not blow it up.”

The lady gave an amused snort of laughter and then caught the horrified look on Harry’s face.

“Oh, really, Harry,” she said, lapsing into informality as she did with him sometimes because she remembered him as a friend of her son, Cassius, the two of them running wild about Holbrook like grubby little savages. She tried very hard to treat him respectfully, as was due to his position, but now and then she lapsed and scolded him like she would her own son, even though they were both grown men. “I admit my brother-in-law’s branch of the Cadogan family can be a little overwhelming, but they’re certainly no worse than Cora and Dorcas, and you handle them well enough. I promise you my niece is a delightful young lady.”

“Handle them?” he repeated, appalled. “You don’t *handle* my aunt and Lady Beauchamp, you just run for cover and hope the devastation isn’t too far-reaching.”

“And you a Christian, Harry,” she said reproachfully. “They’re full of fun and merry as grigs.”

“They’re wicked old women who love to cause mischief,” he retorted, which was a bit strong but, really, they were frightful creatures who never failed to cause a ruckus wherever they went.

“Well, that too,” she admitted, her eyes twinkling merrily. “But dreadfully entertaining.”

“Dreadfully,” he echoed darkly, and wondered just how awful it would be.

Chapter 2



Dearest Fred,

Life at Heart's Folly is rather wonderful. Sometimes I wake up in the morning, in a great big bed surrounded by lace edged pillows and with a fire blazing in the hearth and think I must be dreaming. The day I met Papa was the luckiest day of my life and I am so grateful to him. I wish I were better behaved, for he deserves the perfect daughter who never says things she ought not or acts imprudently. Sadly, he's stuck with me. I do try, Fred, truly, but then I open my mouth and... well, you know.

Sometimes I think you will lose patience with me and decide I am not worth the bother. There are so many other young ladies eager for your time who would not try you so sorely. Yet, I do miss your company and wish you were still here. I hope you are doing well at school and getting top marks, but of course I know you are.

Papa has hired a tutor for me, for as his daughter, it is no longer appropriate that I attend Eliza's school. I rather miss it, for the girls were a lot of fun, but I must become a young lady now and make him and dear Evie proud. Happily, I still get to learn all the lessons I attended at school,

including maths and science, though I think it rather scandalises the tutor to be teaching such subjects to a mere girl. However, I intend to confound him by showing him I'm just as good as any boy.

When shall I see you again?

—Excerpt of a letter to the Right Hon'ble Frederick Adolphus (Younger son of Their Graces, Robert and Prunella Adolphus, The Duke and Duchess of Bedwin) from Miss Agatha de Montluc (adopted daughter of Louis and Evie de Montluc, Comte et Comtesse de Villen).

3rd January 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

Harry approached the vast building that was Holbrook House with a prickling sensation skittering down his spine. He told himself not to be so ungrateful, nor so unkind as to wish his aunt elsewhere. She was a kind-hearted soul and generous to a fault. As a boy, he'd adored her and believed her the only person in the world who understood him or cared for his well-being, but things had changed. Cora Dankworth's particular brand of chaos was not something he could welcome into his well-ordered world with equanimity any longer. His living here as parish vicar still felt precarious but, until his housekeeper had left so precipitously, things had been going well. For the first time he could remember, he'd had taken control of his life. He had found meaning and purpose in a life that had been too random and tumultuous for too long. But of late he'd been feeling somewhat restless and on edge, as if the safe, peaceful little world he had built for himself rested on sand, rather than the solid foundation he had wanted so much to believe in. And now here was his madcap relative, plunging headlong into his nicely ordered life without so much as a by your leave and those uncertain footings were shuddering with apprehension.

Forcing down his misgivings, Harry affixed a smile to his face and greeted the countess, who had just preceded the butler out of the front doors. Harry turned at the sound of hooves and

wheels upon gravel, to see a splendid carriage and six matched bays trotting smartly down the long approach to the house.

“Perfect timing, Reverend,” Lady St Clair said approvingly as he bowed to her. “Oh, and do you remember my niece, Miss Cadogan? I suppose it’s been rather a while, and I must introduce you to her friend, Lady Catherine.”

Harry turned and almost took a step backwards in shock, which would have pitched him back down the stairs. Instead, he forced himself not to react, which made his greeting rather mechanical, and froze the already stiff smile upon his face. Really, though, one did not expect to be thrust into the presence of Aphrodite *and* Artemis at the same time. A fellow needed a bit of warning for that kind of thing, but Lady St Clair only hurried through the introductions, keen to greet her approaching guests.

“Lady Catherine, allow me to present the Reverend Harry Martin. Reverend, Lady Catherine Barrington, and my niece, Miss Alana Cadogan.”

“A pleasure, ladies,” Harry managed, though uncomfortably aware that it did not sound as if much pleasure was involved. Lady Catherine, or Aphrodite, as he had mentally labelled her, returned a warm smile, apparently unperturbed by his reaction. Looking as she did, no doubt she was used to men acting oddly around her. Artemis, however, had a challenging glint in her eyes that suggested she thought him rude and rather pompous. He only had a vague memory of Alana Cadogan, though he remembered well enough that she always conspired to be elsewhere when she ought to be in church. Sighing inwardly, Harry turned towards the carriage, which had rolled to a stop before the house, and now he saw the impressive golden crest emblazoned on the door.

Oh, no. And there he’d been thinking it couldn’t get any worse.

The door was flung open a moment before the footman reached it and a large and all too familiar man leapt down, turning to glare back into the carriage, shaking his fist at someone inside.

“Never again, you devil! I’m never travelling with you ever again. Not if my life depends upon it, you malodorous creature. You’ve the heart of a villain, you blackguard, but you’re nothing but a pigeon with pretensions!”

Emerging from the carriage—now a rather anxious looking footman had set down the steps—Lady Beauchamp rolled her eyes at her nephew. “Bainbridge, really, must you make such a scene? It’s only a parrot, dear.”

“It’s the devil’s spawn is what it is!” Bainbridge raged with feeling, before remembering himself and turning to see the assembled company watching him with consternation. Tugging down his waistcoat, he let out a slow breath before bowing to the ladies. “Forgive me, Countess, ladies, but Lady St Clair, whatever possessed you to allow them to bring that wretched bird? I swear it would try the patience of a saint, and I ain’t no saint.”

“I was under the impression the creature would pine if left behind,” the lady said, lips twitching with amusement.

“Pine,” Bainbridge scoffed, looking disgusted. “It would just use the time to make plans for how best to upset my peace of mind, that’s all.”

Harry looked on, amused despite himself, as his aunt stepped out of the carriage and a footman gingerly followed her, carrying an enormous cage with a large, brightly coloured parrot inside.

“*Sodom and Gomorrah,*” the parrot announced cheerfully, whistling and bobbing up and down on its perch whilst looking about with interest. “*Wicked, wicked Bainbridge! Murder, murder!*”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you. I wish you joy of it,” Bainbridge said to Lady St Clair balefully, before his gaze fell upon Harry, his expression brightening. “As I live and breathe. That you under all that black cloth, Harry?”

“For my sins,” Harry replied with a wry smile, finding himself pleased to see Bainbridge after so long, despite the fellow always having caused chaos whenever he was around.

Bainbridge took the stairs two at a time and grasped Harry's hand, shaking it enthusiastically. "Well, well. Look at you, all holy and err, vicary. I heard you'd taken holy whatchacallems, but I hardly believed it, yet here you are. The *Reverend* Harry Martin." Bainbridge shook his head, staring at Harry with obvious fascination, as if he'd revealed himself to have a green skin and a tail. "*Why*, Harry?" he asked then, his tone so bewildered Harry could only laugh.

"It's good to see you too, Bainbridge," he said, before turning to greet his relation. "Aunt Cora, you are looking well."

"What tosh! I look like the Gorgon's grandmother, especially after that dreadful journey, and I don't doubt I'm just as welcome, eh, boy?"

His aunt shot him a knowing look, though her lips quirked with amusement.

"Nonsense. I'm delighted to see you, you dreadful creature," Harry said, finding he meant it, for now at least. Cora brought memories of a happy childhood, of mischief and sweets and stolen cake, and a great deal of laughter. Until now, he'd not realised he'd forbidden himself to remember such things. A bittersweet sense of regret accompanied the memories.

"*Dreadful, dreadful, wicked boy!*" squawked the parrot.

"Get that blasted bird indoors and out of my sight!" Bainbridge barked at the nearest footman, who practically ran up the stairs, cage in hand. "Thank God I'm not staying here, no offence, Countess—oh, or you, Martin. Blasphemy, and all that. Forgive me, I forgot myself, but you know I'm a philistine by now, I reckon."

"Well, then," Lady St Clair said, her voice trembling with suppressed laughter. "I'm certain you're all desperate for a cup of tea, so do come inside and we'll get you all settled."

Casting a bright smile upon the assembled company, she ushered everyone indoors.



“Well,” Cat said to Alana, watching the new arrivals as Aunt Harriet ushered them all indoors and out of the cold. “Now I understand what all the fuss was about.”

“Hmm?” Alana turned to look at her friend. “What fuss?”

Cat rolled her eyes and slipped her arm through Alana’s. “About the Reverend Martin, dear.”

“What about him?”

With a snort of frustration, Cat shook her head, her ice-blonde curls bouncing. “That he’s divine, you unnatural creature! My, those broad shoulders, and that thick dark hair. What on earth is wrong with you? Surely you noticed him?”

“I noticed he looked at me like I’d crawled out of cheese,” Alana remarked tartly.

“Oh, you must disregard that.” Cat waved this away. “A vicar is still a man, and men often act oddly when meeting pretty girls. Papa says I must deploy my smile with caution. He swears he saw a fellow walk headlong into a lamppost once, simply because I smiled at him and the poor devil promptly lost his bearings.”

She shook her head, apparently still finding this incomprehensible, but Alana knew that, if Cat’s father had told her, she would take it as gospel.

“Lost his wits, more like,” Alana muttered. “And I can well believe *you* have that effect on men, Cat, but he was glaring at me.”

“Well, and the combined effect of both of us together must have temporarily dazzled him.” Cat snickered. “Come along. We shall give him another chance, and see if he rallies.”

Alana allowed Cat to drag her indoors.



Alana was not to have a chance to see what she made of Reverend Martin that day, however. It appeared that, immediately after being introduced to them, he’d seen his aunt comfortably settled, then made his excuses and rushed off,

presumably to tend to his flock. Not that Alana could find fault with that. She was all admiration for those kind-hearted souls who gave their time to aiding and comforting others. Though the possibility that he had fled to avoid her company nagged at her, Alana scolded herself for being conceited enough to think her presence bothered him one way or another and disregarded it. No, he would have gone off doing good works, no doubt.

Today, he had come to Holbrook again at her aunt's invitation to discuss a fund-raising event for the local school. Alana eyed the man with curiosity as he listened to Lady Beauchamp illustrate some minor mishap that the lady seemed vastly disturbed by, and with every outward appearance of attention and sympathy. He must have a tremendous amount of patience.

Alana had never quite gained the knack for offering comfort. Though she was happy to be busy, to *do* things, the idea of holding the hand of someone in distress and offering reassurance always made her want to run for the hills. It wasn't that she was squeamish; Alana was a practical girl with a strong stomach. If you wanted help to lance a boil or to birth a calf, she'd do whatever was required. If you wanted her to hike up a mountain without a murmur of complaint, or wade barefoot through mud to rescue an unfortunate kitten, she'd do it. She *had* done all those things. But weeping and sickness made her panicky, and she hadn't the slightest idea of polite chitchat.

Her eldest sister, one of the twins and the most intelligent of the Cadogan brood, despaired of her. Elspeth was truly an elegant lady of the *ton*, and everything that Alana was not. The other twin, Greer, was far closer in character, but even she had settled down since she'd married, and now lived a peaceful life with her husband. Greer simply said Alana had best marry a farmer and have done with it, because she'd no notion of how to go on in society. Alana had believed for some years that she *was* going to marry a farmer, and had prepared for the role, only to discover... well, that she'd made a proper mess of things. How unusual.

She gave a heavy sigh and then stiffened as she realised she had been lost in her own thoughts instead of paying attention to the meeting. Reverend Martin was frowning at her in apparent disapproval. Alana sat up straighter, determined to concentrate on the proceedings.

“Have another biscuit, Harry,” Mrs Dankworth said, offering the tray to the reverend.

He took one. That had to be his fifth, Alana noted with amusement.

“Well, so we have decided a ball won’t do, then,” Lady Beauchamp said with a regretful sigh. “A pity.”

“Well, only because there is already a ball for Valentine’s night planned before we go up to town,” Lady St Clair pointed out. “To have another within a few weeks of it might try even my organisational powers, not to mention my patience.”

“Yes, quite right, of course. I’m being greedy as usual,” Lady Beecham said wistfully. “Only I do love a ball. All those handsome young men in their finery, such a pretty sight.”

“Marvellous,” Mrs Dankworth agreed with alacrity. “Though it was better in our day. The fashions are so dull for men now. When we were girls, they wore these tight little pantaloons, and—”

“So if not a ball, what shall we do?” the vicar interrupted hurriedly, moving the conversation on and earning himself a reproachful glare from his aunt.

“How about an auction?” Alana suggested, handing the plate of sugar biscuits she’d been given to Cat after she’d chosen one for herself. “People can get quite competitive about giving the best prize, and then even more so when bidding, each of them trying to look more generous than their neighbours.”

“Oh, a marvellous idea,” Mrs Dankworth said, her eyes lighting up. “I’m certain we could find something to donate, couldn’t we, Dorcas?”

“I should think so,” Lady Beauchamp agreed.

“That sounds interesting, though it would take some organising.” Aunt Harriet frowned a little, considering. “You know what people are for promising the earth, but when it comes to the point, they’re dreadfully hard to pin down.”

“Well, we could help with that,” Cat volunteered. “Alana and I are very good at persuading people. Aren’t we, Lana?”

“Erm, I suppose so,” Alana said, eyeing the vicar, who was studying them with increasing concern.

“I’ll just bet you are, Lady Catherine. My, the trouble I could have caused with a face like that,” Mrs Dankworth said with a wondering sigh.

“You caused your fair share and more, Cora, dear,” Lady Beauchamp murmured.

“True, but I did give it my all.” The old lady winked at them, and Alana and Cat laughed, delighted by her.

“I’m uncertain it’s appropriate,” the reverend said, his dark eyes filled with concern.

“What’s not appropriate?” Mrs Dankworth demanded.

“For two unmarried ladies to be visiting the neighbourhood to gather donations. Isn’t it a little... I mean...?” The vicar hesitated, turning towards Lady St Clair for help. “Is it quite the thing?”

Despite knowing she ought not, Alana rolled her eyes, naturally at the precise moment the vicar glanced back at her. He stiffened, obviously offended, and Alana winced inwardly. Well, whatever it was he didn’t like about her, she had just made it far worse. She made a mental note to give him a wide berth in the future, but it was just more proof that she was quite unfit to enter society. Perhaps this was a mistake. Perhaps she ought to go back to Monmouthshire.

Alana had enjoyed living with her sister Greer and her husband, rather to her surprise. Once upon a time, the idea of not living in London would have appalled her, but she had found life in the country offered her far more freedom than she’d ever had before, and she had revelled in it. The discovery that she was not afraid of hard work, had a knack for

handling animals, and loved the challenge of a working farm had entirely changed her perspective of who she was and what she wanted. But that had been much to do with Ollie.

Pushing those memories to the back of her mind, Alana forced her attention back to the question of the auction. The vicar, despite looking like every girl's dream of a knight errant, was obviously a stick-in-the-mud, the kind who thought the world would crash down about their ears if propriety was not observed. Ignoring his obvious disapproval, Alana turned back to her aunt.

“—perfectly respectable,” the countess said. “It only needs a proper chaperone to accompany them. Perhaps Mrs Dankworth—”

The vicar choked on his tea, setting his teacup down with a crash.

Lady St Clair sprang to her feet and pounded him on the back as the vicar gasped, wheezing and coughing.

“That will teach you,” Mrs Dankworth remarked with a smirk, as Reverend Martin glared at her, his dark eyes watering as he fought to catch his breath.

“A glass of water, perhaps?” Lady St Clair offered, but Reverend Martin shook his head again, getting to his feet.

“Best be off,” he managed hoarsely. “Appointments.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Lady St Clair said. “Let me see you out.”

They watched the countess escort the vicar out of the room.

“Poor Reverend Martin,” Cat said sympathetically, once the door had closed behind them.

Rather to Alana's surprise, Mrs Dankworth snorted. “I could choke him myself,” she muttered. “The foolish boy.”

Lady Beauchamp reached over and patted Mrs Dankworth's hand. “Now, now, Cora. He's young yet, and he's trying so hard to make something of himself.”

“Yes, but he’s doing it all wrong, the dolt!”

Alana and Cat shared a glance and Mrs Dankworth sighed. “Forgive me, girls. It just makes me wild to see him wasting his life.”

“Wasting his life?” Alana repeated cautiously. “You don’t approve of his religious calling, Mrs Dankworth?”

The lady shrugged, apparently indifferent. “Oh, no, that’s fine. If that is what makes him happy, then I’m all for it... and do call me Cora, dear. Mrs Dankworth is such a dreary name. Mr Dankworth was a dear soul, but I always wished he’d *sounded* a little more dashing.”

She gave another wistful sigh and shook her head.

Alana bit her lip, rather delighted by the old woman. She was short and a little on the stout side, unlike Lady Beauchamp, who leaned towards the statuesque. Cora’s curls were a soft white with an apricot tint, suggesting she had once had auburn hair. Her eyes, like her nephew’s, were brown, though the Reverend Martin’s were an unusual spicy colour that put Alana in mind of cinnamon, and Cora’s were a darker shade.

“If it is not his being a vicar, then?” Cat asked, daring to ask the question Alana had not been bold enough to voice aloud. “What is it that makes you think he is wasting his life?”

“Because he’s forgotten *how* to live it,” Cora said in frustration. “He’s so afraid that—”

She snapped her mouth shut as Lady Beauchamp cleared her throat suggestively.

“I think perhaps your nephew’s affairs ought not be discussed quite so freely, Cora, dear,” the lady said gently.

Cora flushed. “How dreadful of me. Oh, what am I thinking? Girls, please disregard me. My nephew is a fine young man, the finest, in fact, and I adore him. I only worry about his happiness and that makes me cross and... and indiscreet, apparently.” The lady gave a bark of laughter. “Not that I’ve ever been any different, but poor Harry would be

mortified if he knew I'd spoken of him so. Oh, but he's changed too much, Dorcas! You must see it too?"

"Of course, I do, but don't fret so. The Harry we knew is still there, we must just remind him, that's all."

Alana and Cat exchanged a bewildered glance. Alana wondered what on earth his aunt meant, what the Reverend Martin had once been like that was so different to how he was now, and how his Aunt Cora proposed to remind him of that fact.

Chapter 3



My Lord Marquess,

By some stroke of misfortune, your last letter to me only came to my attention this morning, though it is dated the 22 December. It seems it was discovered down the back of a sideboard in the hallway, where it has languished all this time. I hope you have not thought too ill of me for not having replied until now, for I would have done so at once, if I had known.

Since reading it this morning, I am all anxiety, for your words disturbed me greatly. I tell myself that you must be in earnest when you say you are at your wit's end, for I do not believe the estimable Humboldt would allow you to say such things to me if they were not true. He is obviously in your confidence, and of a mind to agree that there is something to fear.

To answer the question you posed and with all haste, for I wish to return this belated reply to you at once—yes. Yes, you may trust me, Wrexham. I swear it.

—Excerpt of a letter to Miss Emmeline Knight (daughter of Lady Helena and Mr Gabriel Knight) from The Most Hon'ble Leander Steyning, The Marquess of Wrexham.

6th January 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

“Do you miss him?” Alana turned to look at Cat as they walked through the frozen gardens around Holbrook.

“Yes,” she said simply, not needing Cat to say Ollie’s name to know of whom she spoke.

They stared down at the lake, admiring the way the sun glinted on the water like diamonds. The sky above was blue, and Alana blew out a breath that clouded about her face in a great white plume.

“But you did the right thing?” Cat pressed, and Alana could feel the weight of her gaze.

“Yes,” she said again, and with the knowledge came a sense of peace.

Ollie would be fine, he would be happy again, and so would she. They both knew it, though Ollie had taken longer to admit she was right, but that did not mean her heart did not ache for the dream she had lost.

Oliver had fallen head over ears in love with her back when they were both fifteen. The romance of it had swept her up too, the notion of being childhood sweethearts, and living a future together that they meticulously planned year by year. They spoke endlessly about the home they would create, the farm they would have, how it would work between them. They had been so certain, so convinced of everything to come, until Alana had realised with a blinding and unwelcome flash of clarity—they were not in love.

“You really didn’t love him?”

Alana laughed softly. “Yes, I did. Of course I did. We loved each other, but not in the way Elspeth loves Dare, or how Greer loves Raphe. We were just children when it began so we didn’t see, didn’t notice the difference. If we hadn’t so many examples of what a real love match looks like, we might have carried blithely on, might have married, and perhaps we would have been content... or perhaps we would have both lived to regret it.”

She shrugged, the bittersweet sense of loss stirring in her chest as it always did when she spoke of Ollie.

“It wouldn’t have been enough.”

“No.”

Cat nodded, her expression grave. “So, you must face the marriage mart after all.”

Alana groaned and threw up her hands. “Yes! And entirely unprepared. Cat, can I tell you a secret?”

Cat squeezed her arm reassuringly. “I should be offended if you didn’t.”

“I’m scared to death.”

Cat gave a little laugh and leaned into her, resting her head on Alana’s shoulder. “Oh, you silly goose. We all are.”

Alana frowned, turning to regard Cat with surprise. She found it hard to believe Cat was afraid of anything. Her friend looked up and snorted.

“Of course I am! Good heavens, Alana, I have such plans, but I do not know for certain if I am choosing the right path, if I will get what I want in the end, or make a great muck of it all. But what else is there to do but try?”

Alana nodded, somewhat comforted to know even Cat, with her beauty and all her advantages, was feeling out of her depth as this pivotal moment in their lives loomed before them. Mama had guessed at the depths of Alana’s anxiety and had taken pity, suggesting she spend some time with her Aunt Harriet and Uncle Jasper. Aunt Harriet loved to entertain and often gave lavish parties. She had become a powerful figure in society, and though most people would soon leave the country for the London season, there was still a little time left for Harriet to help Alana find her feet in a safer environment before she was thrust into the cutthroat world of London society. Maybe she could even teach her some manners before the *ton* inevitably labelled her a hoyden. But then the Cadogan girls had always borne that title, courtesy of their irreverent mother, who still caused a stir wherever she went, even now.

“I don’t want to go to London, Cat. I know it’s foolish, but I can’t bear it. I so wish I were more like Mama,” Alana said with a sigh. “She simply loves life, and people, and she

doesn't give a tinker's cuss what those people think of her. She says other people's opinions are none of our business and we ought not regard them."

"She's very wise, your mama," said Cat with a grin.

Alana laughed, nodding. "As she is the happiest person I know, I can only agree, for surely it is wisest to be happy, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. So, let's do that, Lana. Let's be happy."

Alana's lips quirked into a smile, and she held out her hand to Cat. "I will if you will."

"A deal," Cat replied decisively, and they shook upon it.



"Good morning, my lady," Harry said with a smile, opening the door to the village hall to let in Lady St Clair. "You're early."

"The early bird catches the worm, Reverend," the countess said with a bright smile.

Harry laughed, charmed as always by the lady's boundless energy. "Well, I have set up the tables and chairs. Just how many worms are you expecting?"

"I'm uncertain. A dozen, perhaps, but the appeal of a charity auction appears to be working upon the community. It was a good idea of Alana's. She's a bright girl."

"I'm certain she is," Harry replied politely, though he did not enjoy the girl's presence. He did not feel easy when she was nearby and had avoided speaking to her directly ever since she'd arrived. Inevitably in such a tight-knit community their paths crossed often, but she seemed aware of his discomfort and kept her distance too. Harry knew he was being ridiculous, but her strangely piercing eyes disturbed him. They were not the startling turquoise of her uncle's, the earl, but she had inherited something of that blue tinted sea-green hue, and a way of looking at one as though she knew all your secrets. It was an uncomfortable sensation and one he was keen to avoid.

As if he had summoned her with the thought, Harry turned at that moment to see Miss Cadogan and Lady Catherine enter the hall. By rights, he ought to have been dazzled by Lady Catherine, who was surely Aphrodite in the flesh, the most stunning creature he had ever seen, but it was Artemis that drew his attention, and kept it. A shaft of sunlight pierced the early morning gloom of the hall and suddenly there she was, the goddess of the hunt, of the wilderness and the great outdoors, standing in a puddle of golden sunlight. The hall seemed suddenly all wrong, too small to contain her lively spirit, and he sensed her impatience with the dark, musty interior, her desire to be outside under the blue sky. She was dressed all in green and she turned then, those too-bright eyes meeting his. Harry's breath caught, and he forced himself to look away, to drag his attention from her and back to the work he was supposed to do here today. He did not have the time or the energy for such nonsense. He had committed himself to serve God, to serve his community to the best of his ability, and he did not need distractions of *that* nature to tempt him from his purpose. He had a job to do, and do it he would.

Once everyone was gathered, Lady St Clair greeted the assembled company. As well as the countess and her four guests, there was the countess' sister-in-law, Mrs Florence Stanhope; Mrs Grace Oak; Mr and Mrs Bishop who ran The Lamb, the pub in the village; Mrs Stevens from the general store; the elderly Dr Haysom; Miss Dudley, a kindly spinster who looked at Harry as if she stood in the presence of a divine being; and, inevitably, Miss Hatchet. Harry forced his mind away from the uncharitable thoughts that stirred there at the sight of the aptly named woman. Miss Hatchet was a mean-spirited gossip and troublemaker, and the only person who tolerated her company was Miss Dudley. Everyone found this entirely incomprehensible, for Miss Dudley was a sweet-natured if fussy creature who never had a bad word for anyone.

“Thank you all for coming,” Harry said, greeting them all with a smile. “As I believe you know, Lady St Clair has kindly offered to host a charity auction to raise funds for the boys' school. This would enable us to employ a full-time teacher, to

bolster my sorry efforts, and so we might create a canteen that provides hot meals and employ a cook to work in it. A most worthy albeit ambitious undertaking, I know, but with the support of such an enthusiastic committee, I feel confident we can achieve our aim. I understand you have already made a contribution, Mrs Bishop?"

"Aye, that's right," Mrs Bishop said proudly. "Four vouchers for a roast dinner at the Lamb, and a full dinner mind, with dessert and cheese. Wine, too, so it's a decent sum to give away."

"Indeed, it is most generous. You are an example to us all," Harry said warmly, for he knew Mrs Bishop still viewed him with deep suspicion, offended that in the nearly five years he'd been in this parish, he'd never set foot in her comfortable inn, despite the reputation it had for good ale and excellent food. "I'm certain it will attract an enthusiastic response."

"Bloomin' well ought to," Mr Bishop muttered glumly.

Harry ignored this and turned his attention to Miss Dudley, who had given a nervous little cough.

"I'm knitting scarves and mittens," she offered with a shy smile, lifting her knitting needles, which had been clicking away incessantly as they spoke.

"An excellent effort, Miss Dudley, thank you," Harry said, clearing his throat as she flushed pink with pleasure.

"I have some rather magnificent cauliflowers," Dr Haysom offered. "I would be happy to donate some to the cause, and my wife has offered a fruit cake. She makes a marvellous fruitcake," he added, looking a little wistful.

"I always find it rather dry," Miss Hatchet murmured to Miss Dudley, who shot a panicked glance towards Harry.

"That's excellent, Dr Haysom," Harry replied enthusiastically, relieved that Haysom had become rather deaf of late, and feigning ignorance of Miss Hatchet's words. "Mrs Oak? I believe you have a donation too?"

Mrs Oak nodded, and Harry smiled. She was a lovely woman, delicate and gently spoken and Harry very much liked

her husband, Sterling, who was a decent, hardworking fellow.

“A spring lamb, and a cask of ale.”

“You’d best put a warning on that ale,” Mrs Stanhope said with a laugh. “It’s dangerous stuff. I still remember Lord Bainbridge face down in your lavender bush after having sampled it.”

Mrs Oak grinned mischievously. “Sterling says it kicks like a mule.”

Harry turned as he felt eyes upon him to discover Miss Cadogan watching him curiously. It was only then that he realised he was scowling and hastily rearranged his face. No doubt the young woman thought him a dreadful killjoy. The thought irritated him more than it ought, and he forced his attention back to the meeting.

By the time everyone had made their donations, including some very fine wood carvings by Lady St Clair’s husband, and a beautifully bound set of Dickens novels from the lady herself, they had a very respectable start to the auction. Lady Catherine and Miss Cadogan were to be escorted by Dr Haysom to all the wealthiest houses in the parish in order to wheedle out as generous a donation to the proceedings as they could, and Mrs Stanhope had offered her services to paint signs that would be placed around the village to inform people of the upcoming event. Miss Cadogan had also suggested a tombola might be a good idea, so that even those who could not afford to bid at the auction could have a chance of winning something, which Harry had to admit was an excellent notion. They were just about to wrap things up for the morning when there was a knock on the door, which opened to reveal three young women.

“Oh, we’re so sorry. We didn’t know there was a meeting going on.”

“Miss Steadman, what can we do for you?” Harry asked, fighting to keep the impatience from his voice.

The girl was only sixteen, and had taken to ambushing Harry at every opportunity, lying in wait for him, and even

coming to his home unescorted. Despite remonstrating with her mother, the visits continued. Today, it seemed she had gathered reinforcements.

“I brought you some jam tarts,” she said, taking his question as an invitation to enter the hall. “I made them myself,” she added, looking up at him from under her lashes.

Harry experienced a rush of frustration. He had no desire to hurt the poor girl’s feelings, but he had no desire to encourage her efforts either, which could only end in disaster for them both.

“Well, that’s very good of you. I’m not one for sweets, I’m afraid, but I don’t doubt the committee here will appreciate your efforts.”

“Oh,” Miss Steadman replied, obviously dismayed to see her efforts squandered on the rest of the company. “Oh, well, of course.”

Harry squashed down the niggle of guilt at giving away the gift she’d brought him and set about tidying the hall as everyone else gathered around Miss Steadman and her friends and took a jam tart.

“Isn’t lying a sin?”

Harry looked up from the stack of notes he’d compiled to see Miss Cadogan watching him curiously. She took a bite from the tart she held and chewed thoughtfully.

Strawberry, Harry noticed with regret. His favourite.

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow,” he said, his gaze dropping to the young woman’s mouth as her tongue darted out to chase an errant crumb. Something hot and sharp spiked in his blood and he forced his gaze back to his notes.

“You told that young woman you don’t like sweets, but at my aunt’s house, you ate a half dozen sugar biscuits with obvious enjoyment.”

Harry bristled, irritated that she’d noticed such a thing and not a little mortified. “I beg your pardon, I shall be less indulgent the next time I visit.”

Miss Cadogan shook her head. “I don’t care if you eat the entire plate, I just wondered why you’d lie about it. The poor girl looked crushed. I thought vicars were supposed to be kindly?”

“And I’m not kindly?” he said, glaring at her. How outrageous! In the space of a minute she’d accused him of lying, gluttony, and of being unkind.

The girl shrugged, apparently unperturbed by his tone. “I’ve no idea. I don’t know you at all, but you lied about not liking sweet things in order to be unkind. It seemed odd to me. I just wondered why, not that you need tell me. I know it’s none of my business, but I’m notoriously curious. I’m told it will be my undoing one day, which I don’t doubt is entirely true.”

Harry stared at her, so startled by her candour he hardly knew how to reply. Miss Cadogan waited for a moment, and when he did not answer, turned away.

“If you must have it, Miss Cadogan,” Harry said, unable to keep the impatience from his voice. “Miss Steadman has me in her sights as a romantic prospect. I don’t have the least desire to encourage her and so, if I seemed rather harsh, that is the reason. It is for her own good, and mine. She is a mere child, an innocent creature who has no notion of what she is doing, and I do not wish for anyone to speak ill of her.”

Miss Cadogan’s expression cleared. “Oh, I see. Well, yes, of course I can understand your difficulty. I don’t doubt there are plenty of those eager to spread mischievous gossip about the unmarried vicar. Miss Hatchet would be as happy as a pig in—”

“Miss Cadogan!” Harry said in shock.

“—a puddle,” she finished, eyes wide, and far too innocent. The wretch. She had been baiting him. Her lips twitched. “I beg your pardon, vicar. I ought not to tease you. I quite understand. No doubt you are plagued on all sides by young women setting their caps at you. It must be very trying.”

Though her words were sincere, there was laughter dancing in her eyes and Harry frowned, thoroughly unsettled and uncertain if she was still mocking him.

“Lana, do come along,” Cat said, gesturing to her to hurry. “Dr Haysom is going to walk to the manor with us. I am determined to get three hams from Mr Davies at the very least. Your aunt says he’s a dreadful nip cheese, so we must employ our most dazzling smiles and bamboozle the old curmudgeon.”

“All in a good cause, vicar,” Miss Cadogan said to him, though her lips quivered with amusement as she took in his sceptical expression.

Harry watched them go, and despite knowing they were quite right, Mr Davies *was* stingy and could very well afford to donate four hams without blinking, he could not help but pity the man.

Chapter 4



Dear Miss Milly,

I am beyond relieved to receive your reply. Whilst I would never think ill of you for keeping such a ramshackle fellow as I at a distance, I confess your lack of communication dashed my hopes. You cannot know how reassuring it is to find that my estimation of your character was entirely accurate. You possess an abundance of courage and generosity that I am going to stretch to its limits, my dear, and yes, you may consider this a warning. I must speak to you candidly and alone. Can you allow it?

I hear you are to leave Heart's Folly soon. So I shall waste no more time and call on you tomorrow. We shall then see just how courageous you truly are. I will not blame you in the slightest for not being at home when I arrive, but I pray you will hear me out.

I swear I mean you no harm, and that my intentions, while selfish, are entirely honourable.

—Excerpt of a letter to Miss Emmeline Knight (daughter of Lady Helena and Mr Gabriel Knight) from The Most Hon'ble Leander Steyning, The Marquess of Wrexham.

6th January 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

“Four hams, two bottles of port and six jars of preserves!” Cat said triumphantly to Aunt Harriet as the footman carried in their spoils.

“All from Mr Davies?” her aunt said in astonishment. “I don’t believe it.”

Alana laughed and gestured to Cat with a flourish. “May I present your secret weapon, Aunt. No one can resist her, I swear. Not only was Mr Davies putty in her hands, but even Mrs Davies liked her. It was she who donated the jam, and it’s her best blackberry jam. Apparently, it’s famous in these parts.”

“It is,” Aunt Harriet agreed, looking quite stunned.

“We also visited two other houses and stopped off at the bakers, so we have two lace hankies, six balls of wool, an Encyclopaedia Britannica, and the baker has promised to make two selection boxes of cakes and biscuits,” Alana said triumphantly.

“Well, I am impressed, girls. Truly. And, if you can get such a generous donation from Mr Davies, we shall be inundated.”

“I am at your disposal,” Cat said cheerfully, tugging at her bonnet ribbons and casting it to one side.

“She should work for the government,” Alana said, regarding her friend with fascination. “She’d make the most marvellous spy. I’ve never seen such a talent for wheedling information out of people. It was quite Machiavellian.”

“What kind of information?” Aunt Harriet demanded, leading them into her cosy parlour.

“Oh, the useful kind,” Cat said with a grin. “Like the fact Mrs Parker has a surplus of green satin sitting in her storeroom and she’s just taken delivery of two dozen kid gloves, that Mr and Mrs Clark could certainly spare a goose or two, and Mr Saunders had a mysterious delivery two nights ago that chinked and had French writing over the crates.”

“In other words, you can add a bolt of green satin, at least three pairs of kids gloves, two geese and three bottles of cognac to your list for the auction,” Alana said, shaking her head with undisguised admiration as she took a seat by the fire.

The day had remained bright and sunny, but it was bitterly cold, and her toes were numb, despite the sturdy boots she favoured. Cat’s feet must be like blocks of ice. Alana gazed at the dainty toes peeking out from beneath Cat’s fashionable gown. She’d not complained of the cold, not even once.

Alana’s stomach gave an audible growl, and she clutched at it. “Sorry. I’m famished.”

“How can you be famished?” Cat demanded. “I saw what you ate for breakfast. Sausages and bacon and eggs, and three slices of toast and jam!”

Alana shrugged. “I don’t know, but I’m hungry.”

Aunt Harriet laughed, smiling at her indulgently. “I’ll see if luncheon is ready.”

Once she was gone, Alana stretched luxuriously, like a cat, relishing the heat of the fire as it warmed her frozen toes.

“What were you talking to Reverend Martin about earlier?” Cat asked, curiosity in her eyes.

Alana shrugged. “Nothing much. I just wondered why he’d been so unkind to the young woman with the jam tarts.”

Cat frowned. “Well, he didn’t want to encourage her attentions, obviously.”

“Oh,” Alana said, brought up short. “*Was* it obvious?”

“Er, yes.” Cat replied, staring at her as if she were a half-wit. “Good Lord, Lana, you have been out of society far too long if you couldn’t see that.”

Alana bit her lip, feeling suddenly rather guilty.

“What on earth did you say to him?” Cat demanded.

“Nothing!” she protested, her cheeks growing warm. “Only... well, I might have accused him of lying.”

“Lana!” Cat’s eyes grew wide. “You accused the vicar of lying?”

“And I might have suggested he was unkind,” she added, her cold toes curling with mortification.

Cat put her hand up to cover her mouth and Alana was uncertain if it was shock or amusement she was hiding. Her friend gathered herself sufficiently to reply.

“Good heavens, Alana. I’m supposed to be the outrageous one, you do remember that? You know, for a moment there I thought perhaps you’d caught his eye, but now I see he was furious with you. The poor man,” she added with a choked sound that sounded suspiciously like suppressed mirth.

Alana huffed and folded her arms. “Caught his eye, indeed. He’s done nothing but cast disapproving looks in my direction since the moment we met. Though I suppose I must admit, I’ve done nothing much he *could* approve of. Oh, drat it. Now I shall have to apologise to him, and I loathe apologising. There’s nothing worse than being in the wrong!”

“Cheer up, you silly goose. I can assure you apologising when you know you’re in the right is infinitely worse.”

A gong sounded somewhere in the house, and Cat leapt to her feet, tugging Alana with her. “Come along. You know you get morose when you’re hungry. Let’s have lunch and then apologising to the gorgeous vicar will seem vastly less distressing.”

“It had better,” Alana said gloomily, and allowed Cat to tow her out of the room.



6th January 1845, Heart’s Folly, Sussex.

Emmeline paced up and down the parlour. Her heart thudded behind her ribs, an excitable and uneven series of beats that she could not believe were good for her health.

“Do stop being such a nitwit,” she muttered as she paced, but no amount of scolding would soothe her jittery nerves.

Somehow, everything had worked out perfectly. Louis and Evie had gone for the day and Mama had gone with them, believing Emmeline's fib about having a headache, though she would have a headache soon enough if she kept this nonsense up. Her father had left the day before with Felix to attend a meeting in town, and Emmeline and Mama were due to follow at the end of the week. Today was also the day many of the servants, including Emmeline's maid, took a half day, and the house was practically deserted. A cold luncheon had been left out for her in the dining room, should she desire it, but Wrexham still hadn't arrived. There was no way on earth she could sit still long enough to eat a bite when she was in such a state of agitation. No matter how she looked at it, the fact was she had lied and arranged circumstances so that a gentleman with a reputation as a libertine, and one about whom there were whispers of madness, could call upon her, *alone*.

That did not seem to be an entirely sensible thing to do.

"Entirely sensible," she said incredulously. "It's deranged is what it is, and now you're talking to yourself. Congratulations on losing your reason."

Shaking her head at the sad state of her morals and her sanity, Emmeline flounced into the nearest chair and put her head in her hands. Wrexham had sworn his intentions were honourable, if selfish, and she believed he meant her no harm, foolish as that might be. As for the gossip about his state of mind, he seemed perfectly sane to her. Besides which, anyone seeing her in such a tizzy might well think *she* was mad and start a ridiculous rumour. The thought was not entirely reassuring.

The sound of wheels upon gravel had her leaping to her feet. She raced to the window and peered around the curtains to see Wrexham's elegant carriage stop at the front door. Hurrying out, Emmeline made it down the front steps just in time to see Wrexham step down from his carriage with the aid of a footman.

Emmeline's breath caught as she took in the sight of him and so disordered her brain that she almost tripped and fell down the steps. Saving herself at the last moment, she slowed

her steps, so she did not embarrass herself by landing in a heap at his feet. Though her thoughts had been far too preoccupied with him of late, she had convinced herself that he was not half so handsome as she remembered, and it was just her overactive imagination gilding the lily.

It wasn't her imagination.

Sunlight glinted off thick hair the colour of old gold. The marquess held an ebony walking stick in one hand, long, strong fingers curled about the silver handle, and his tall, imposing figure gave one a sense of the commanding personality behind his eyes. Impeccably dressed as always, that he was blind made not a whit of difference to the impression of a powerful man in the prime of his life. Doing her best to gather her scattered wits, Emmeline curtsied, despite him not being able to see it, for the footmen could and she was damned if he'd get anything less than the respect he was due.

"My lord, it is good to see you looking so well. You have recovered from your illness, I hope?"

"Miss Milly," Wrexham said, his expression becoming alert as she spoke. His words were warm and approving and made odd little shivers run up and down Emmeline's spine. "I am quite recovered, I thank you, and how good it is to hear that lovely voice again. I am so pleased you are here. I feared you might not be at home."

"I would not do that, Wrexham," she said crossly, annoyed he should think her such a feeble creature.

"I'm glad, though I should not have thought ill of you for doing so," he replied, a wry smile tugging at his mouth.

Emmeline stared at his lips for too long, remembering the fleeting touch of his mouth against her cheek, and then blushed furiously. Ridiculous girl, she scolded herself, for he could hardly see her staring or blushing, but it didn't seem to matter.

"Well, *I* would have," she retorted sharply, thoroughly discomposed now. "Would you take my arm, Lord Wrexham?"

There are eighteen steps to the front door.”

“I had forgotten how very fierce you are, Miss Milly, and I will take your arm with pleasure.”

“Miss Knight!” she corrected him impatiently, though in truth she had come to like his nickname for her, and his teasing. Lord, but she was in a bad way, she thought with a sigh.

“I beg your pardon, *Miss Knight*,” he said gravely, though she felt certain he was laughing at her, and was then quiet for a moment as they navigated the steps.

“We’ll go to the parlour,” she said as they walked. “It’s a lovely room that catches the morning sun and there’s a fire blazing, too. It’s delightfully cosy. Shall I order some tea?”

“Not on my account, but please do if you would like to.”

“Oh, no, I’m all agog to discover what it is you want to discuss with me,” she said, wishing she had not sounded quite so eager. Emmeline glanced up at him, wondering if she could gather any clues from his expression but his face was impassive, giving nothing away.

“Here we are. If you would like to take this chair.” Emmeline waited as Wrexham put his hand on the chair back and oriented himself. Once he was settled, she sat in the chair opposite him. Suddenly she wished she had ordered tea, for it would have given her something to do other than gawk at the stunning man before her like the verriest ninny.

Wrexham tugged off his fine leather gloves and laid them in his lap, his walking stick resting on the side of the chair. Then he remained silent for a long moment, his face turned towards the fire, and Emmeline could not help but study him. In stillness, one would never know he was blind. His eyes were undamaged and did not move restlessly back and forth as she had seen once on another person so afflicted. They were also beautiful, the darkest blue she had ever seen, almost indigo, and thickly lashed, a darker gold than his hair. Emmeline shifted restlessly, nervous, and wondering what on earth he wished to say.

He turned towards her, his expression sharp, as though he had heard her moving and knew she was anxious.

“Forgive me. This is most improper of me, and I am not putting you at ease, am I? Only I hardly know where to begin. I do not wish for you to think me... well, no doubt you will think me a lunatic, but there is no help for it. I have no other options left. We are alone?”

“Y-Yes,” she stammered, wondering what on earth he was talking about, and just how far she was risking her reputation for this man, for not all the servants were absent and this visit was bound to be remarked upon.

“I believe my stepbrother is trying to kill me, and I think my father is helping him.”

Emmeline gasped, horrified. She had known something was terribly wrong that day she'd found him alone in the snow, but this.... “Wrexham! Oh, my word. Whatever has happened? Have you been hurt? Is it safe for you to go home?”

Wrexham gave a choked laugh, his expression one of such relief and yet such pain, that Emmeline did not know what to think. So she didn't. She got up and knelt on the floor before him, taking his hand in hers, and only then noticing all the little cuts and injuries on his fingers. She looked up, seeing a faint bruise on his temple that she had not remarked before. His fingers curled about hers, his grip warm and sure, and Emmeline's heart gave a peculiar lurch behind her ribs.

“Miss Milly, you are the first person I have told who has believed me without questioning my sanity or asking if perhaps I was mistaken, if I was *quite sure* I hadn't just let my imagination get the better of me.”

“I do not believe you are a man given to histrionics, Wrexham,” she said, aware she sounded annoyed and agitated, but now she was terrified for him.

“Thank you,” he said, squeezing her fingers tighter for a moment, his voice not entirely steady. “Even if you do not

wish to help me with my mad scheme, I thank you for that, for believing me, with all my heart.”

“W-What mad scheme, my lord?” Emmeline asked nervously, uncertain if she was more scandalised by the idea his brother was trying to murder him, or that she was alone with him, holding his hand. Her gaze remained riveted upon their linked fingers until he spoke again.

“Ah, as for that, sweet Milly. I wonder just how courageous you really are?”



Alana walked briskly, tilting her face to enjoy the morning sun. It was beautifully bright again, if freezing. The ground was rock-hard beneath her boots as she strode out with Cat at her side. There had been another hard frost, and everything sparkled white in the glittering sunlight. Ordinarily, she would have very much enjoyed her walk, for being out of doors on such a fine day—and with such lovely countryside to enjoy—was Alana’s idea of time well spent. However, her journey had a purpose, and one she was not looking forward to in the least.

The church came into view. Alana sighed as Cat shot a grin in her direction.

“Well, you’d best get it over with,” Cat said, laughter behind the words.

Alana scowled and pushed open the gate, walking down the uneven flagstone path to the church doors. The huge door creaked a little as they entered, and Alana blinked at the dim interior as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. An older lady hurried down the aisle towards them, emerging from the gloom.

“Is that you, Miss Cadogan? Oh, and Lady Catherine, too. Good day to you!”

Alana smiled as Miss Dudley’s sweetly faded face came into view.

“Good morning, Miss Dudley, how do you do?”

“Oh, I am quite well, thank you for asking dear. And you ravishing creatures, are you well?”

“Hale as a horse,” Alana replied with a grin as Cat rolled her eyes, before gesturing to the armful of greenery that Miss Dudley held. “Flower displays for the altar?”

“Oh, yes, not that there are any flowers to be had at this time of year, sadly, but I’m doing my best with foliage, and I found some lovely holly with berries on, though they put up something of a fight,” she added sadly, lifting her hand to show her white woollen glove had a hole ripped in the thumb and the wool stained with blood.

“Goodness, you have been in the wars. Shall I clean it for you?” Alana offered, frowning.

“No, no, dear. I’m not the least bit squeamish about my own blood, it’s only... other people’s,” she said, swallowing hard and looking a little green.

“All the same, it needs seeing to at once, Miss Dudley,” Cat said, looking rather stern, which was usually most out of character. “You know a tiny cut can be a dangerous thing if it gets infected. One of Papa’s gardeners, a great strapping fellow, almost died because he let a silly little wound fester rather than get it treated. So, I would really be happier if we saw to it now.”

Miss Dudley paled, obviously caught upon the dilemma of being tended by the daughter of a marquess and wondering how on earth to say no to Cat. Alana well understood the problem.

“Oh, w-well, if you insist, my lady....”

“I do insist,” Cat said firmly. “My darling Pippin would never forgive me if I ignored such a thing, and you fell ill.”

“Very well,” Miss Dudley said, carried along by the force that was Lady Catherine Barrington. “B-But... isn’t she a *witch*?” she whispered the last words, as if she feared being struck down for uttering them in the house of God.

“I was looking for Revered Martin,” Alana said hastily, before Cat could reply, as the look in her friend’s eyes was a

little daunting. She was exceedingly protective of Pippin, whom she viewed in the light of a beloved grandmother.

“Well, of course he’s teaching now, dear, but if you walk over to the vicarage, you’ll find him easily enough.”

Alana turned back to Cat, who had taken Miss Dudley’s arm and was marching her back down the aisle towards the vestry. “Is there a sink? Soap and water at least?” she demanded.

“Oh, yes, the vicar is most particular about... it’s all very....” Miss Dudley said helplessly.

“Come find me when you’ve finished here, Cat,” Alana called after her friend, receiving a very business-like nod in return.

Well, once Cat focused on something, she was rather an unstoppable force. Certainly a feather-brained creature like Miss Dudley had no chance of resisting her. Smiling with amusement, Alana headed back out of the church and in the direction of the vicarage.

Rather to her surprise, it was the sound of laughter that drew Alana towards the elegant, whitewashed building that was the vicarage for the Church of St Nicolas. It was a large house, built in the classic, square symmetrical style of the last century, with large sash windows and a portico over the front door. Alana knocked, and waited, and waited, but no answer was forthcoming. Remembering that her aunt had said something about the vicar needing a housekeeper, she set off in the direction of the laughter.



With hindsight, Harry wasn’t certain that *Ivanhoe* had been the most intelligent choice of reading matter for his boys. He’d known the derring-do of the hero would find favour, but he had not banked on quite the amount of sword fights and overexcited re-enacting of the battles as they had provided him with.

Still, it had encouraged Jeb with his reading, to the extent the boy would beg to read another chapter even after the

school day had ended. This from a child who had watched the clock incessantly until a few short weeks ago. It had encouraged him in his theatrical endeavours too, it seemed, for the boy was holding the rest of the class in awe as he stood on his desk, reciting from memory. Jeb was perhaps eight years old, but was skinny and slight, so he looked younger. His sandy blond hair was thick and curling and badly needed cutting, for the other lads teased him over his lovely locks. Harry made a mental note to persuade the boy to let him do it. Perhaps it wouldn't be pretty, but it might avoid Jake Phillips ending up with another black eye when Jeb lost his temper again.

Harry's lips twitched at the boy's over dramatic retelling, which was nonetheless word perfect and most enthusiastic. His smile dimmed, however, as the door opened, and an unwelcome but lovely vision appeared.

"Silence, maiden; thy tongue outruns thy discretion!" Jeb pronounced fiercely, at which Miss Cadogan bristled.

"I beg your pardon! I haven't said a word yet."

The entire class stared, dumbstruck, and for a horrible moment Harry thought she was serious, but then she gave a snort of laughter.

"Oh, your faces," she crowed, delighted. "And what a marvellous rendition. How clever of your teacher to choose such an interesting book to study."

The boys roared with laughter, which evidently pleased Miss Cadogan. She looked dreadfully smug and got that laughing look in her eyes that made the back of Harry's neck prickle with anxiety and made him think thoughts a vicar had no business entertaining.

"Boys! Is that how gentlemen behave in the presence of a lady?" he demanded severely.

"If the lady's as pretty as this 'un, and they've a lick of sense, aye," one young devil muttered under his breath. Harry scowled and suspected Peter Willis, who was something of a wag, and would do anything to get a laugh.

“You will stand up smartly in the presence of a lady and keep your mouths shut,” Harry said firmly. “Now, Miss Cadogan, what can we do for you?”

“Oh, er... actually, I wanted to speak with you, but I see now I’m rather *de trop*,” she said sheepishly.

“’Ere, isn’t that French?” demanded Jeb, who was full of surprises today.

“That’s right,” Miss Cadogan said, smiling at the boy. “It means *too much*.”

Jeb looked the lady frankly up and down. “You don’t look too much to me, miss, if you don’t mind me sayin’.”

“Jeb!” Harry said severely. “You do *not* make personal observations about a lady’s figure.”

Jeb gave him a sceptical look. “Beg pardon, Rev, but Greg Clark told the barmaid at the Lamb somethin’ of the sort, and it worked out well enough for him, and what with you being a vicar, I reckon he might have more experience of that kind of thing. No offence.”

Before Harry could even begin to decide how to respond to that little gem, a soft sniggering sound caught his attention, and he looked up to see Miss Cadogan fighting a fit of the giggles. Harry did his best to tamp down his irritation but, really, she was a blessed nuisance. Not content with disturbing his lesson and inciting the boys, now she was laughing at him.

“Was there something you wanted?” Harry growled.

“Y-Yes, I told you so,” the lady said unsteadily. “But I see I’ve called at a bad time. I’ll come back again anoth—”

“Oh, no you won’t,” Harry said firmly, stalking towards her. The idea she might come back and repeat this experience was far too disturbing. “If you’ve something to say, I’ll have it now, I thank you. Boys, you will read the next chapter in silence whilst I am gone. In *silence*. Mark my words or you’ll spend the entire morning on conjugating Latin verbs tomorrow.”

There was a collective groan, but the boys obediently settled down with their books.

“I’m sorry for barging in on you,” the irritating baggage said the moment he had closed the door behind them.

Harry said nothing, walking on towards the front door in the hope he could have dealt with whatever it was she wanted by the time he got there.

“I tried the front door but there was no answer, so I came around and heard that terrific rendition from *Ivanhoe*—he really was splendid, wasn’t he? — and I simply couldn’t resist finding out what was happening. Irresistibly nosey, as I warned you,” she said ruefully, the words accompanied by a charmingly sheepish smile which only irritated him more. What business had she poking her nose into his school and being charming?

“And did you come on the off chance of seeing a theatrical production, or was there another reason?” Harry asked, immediately guilty for sounding so snappish and impatient.

He was supposed to set an example of kindness and patience, and usually he did a reasonable job of it. He took a breath, intending to apologise, but it was too late. The lady’s eyes flashed.

“There was another reason, yes, but I’m beginning to regret the impulse to come at all. Apologising is not one of my favourite pastimes, but apologising to pompous vicars ranks very low on the list of things I wish to waste my time on.”

She folded her arms, those disturbing sea blue-green eyes glinting with a look that dared him to make things worse.

Sadly, there was a devil in Harry, a devil that would rather die than walk away from a dare. He had spent much of his life fighting that particular devil, and for the past five years he’d thought himself successful. Yet that look in her eyes called to the wicked bit of his soul that he had tried so very hard to tame, and made the blasted thing rattle its chains for the first

time since he'd been ordained. And really... pompous? *Him?* Now that was too much.

“Miss Cadogan, I am not the least bit pompous, but when ramshackle females insist on turning up at my house unescorted, it puts me in a difficult position. Bearing in mind I explained this particular difficulty to you only yesterday, your behaviour rather confounds me. Not to mention the fact I ought to be teaching, and you have disturbed a lesson which had been going very nicely until you turned up and got the boys all overexcited.”

Her beautiful face flushed, which ought to have looked unattractive, he was certain. It wasn't. Drat the woman.

“I am not unescorted!” she retorted. “I was with Lady Catherine.”

“Ah, a marvellous escort, another unmarried female. And where is the lady at present?” Harry made a show of looking about him for the missing young woman, even opening the front door and looking about outside, which was undoubtedly childish but satisfying.

“She's at the church, tending to Miss Dudley.”

“Tending to her?” Harry said in alarm. “Why, what's wrong, is she unwell?”

“No,” Miss Cadogan said with a sigh. “She stabbed her finger on a holly bush. Not fatal, I think, but Cat takes such things seriously and insisted it was properly cleaned and bandaged.”

“Quite right, too. A sensible young woman,” Harry said, having seen firsthand how a minor wound could cause a fatal fever in a matter of days.

“Unlike me, I suppose,” Miss Cadogan said, a challenging glint in her eyes.

Harry decided silence was the better part of valour. Miss Cadogan did not agree, judging by the glittering look she bestowed upon him. Without another word, she turned on her heel and left through the open doorway.

“Wait!” Harry said, seized with indignation that she would come here, cause havoc, and then go without telling him why she’d come in the first place. Had she mentioned an apology? He’d been too annoyed to pay much mind. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Never mind,” she said, not turning to look at him. It rather sounded as if she was gritting her teeth.

Harry hurried after her. “Well, you’ve come all this way, you may as well.”

“No. I don’t think so.”

Definitely gritted teeth, he decided.

“Don’t be ridiculous, what did you want with me?”

She swung about then, causing Harry to grind to a halt before he ploughed into her.

“I didn’t want anything with you, Reverend Martin. I only wanted to apologise for being rude to you yesterday, but right at this moment, I’m not sorry at all!”

With that, she stuck her nose in the air, and stalked off.

Chapter 5



Dearest Torie,

Thank you so much for your letter. How happy you sound, and how wonderful your description of your new home. I cannot wait to come and visit you and Barnaby. Do give him my best wishes.

As delighted as I am for your marital bliss, I wish you were here. I am sitting upon the horns of a dilemma, and I do not know what to do. I know what I wish to do, what my heart tells me to do, but we both know my heart is a fickle creature, and two weeks from now I might realise I've made the most awful mistake. Yet if I do not act, I am afraid of what might happen, just how deep my regret would be if anything—But I cannot write more, and I ought not to worry you so, only I must say something to someone. I could tell Evie of course, but since she's become pregnant, she's the most dreadful worrier and weeps at the slightest upset. I cannot disturb her peace of mind and fear she will tell mama.

Never mind. I shall figure this out and decide for myself what to do. I have a brain in my head and it is about time I used it for a purpose. Perhaps there is another solution I have not seen yet. I just need to put my mind to it.

—Excerpt of a letter to Lady Victoria Godwin (daughter of Robert and Prunella Adolphus, The Duke and Duchess of Bedwin) from Miss Emmeline Knight (daughter of Lady Helena and Mr Gabriel Knight)

12th January 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

With the exception of coolly polite greetings in passing, Alana avoided the vicar successfully until Sunday, when there was no other choice but to attend church.

“Do stop dragging your feet,” Cat chided as they walked along the lane. It was gloriously bright again, though still freezing. The lingering cold snap had frozen all the lakes and ponds in the area, and the idea of sitting in a draughty church listening to the Reverend Martin sermonise was not putting Alana in the best of spirits, despite the sunshine. “Come along, we can feast our eyes on your gorgeous vicar and we won’t notice the fact our toes are numb.”

“He’s not *my* vicar,” Alana protested in alarm.

“Perhaps not, but you didn’t deny he’s gorgeous,” Cat teased her.

Alana huffed, but was too honest to contradict her. The vicar *was* gorgeous, which was a terrible waste of a fine-looking man if he insisted on being so blasted difficult. Grudgingly, Alana considered why her aunt thought so highly of him if he was as difficult as he seemed and was forced to allow the possibility it might not have been entirely his fault.

Perhaps she *had* provoked him, at least to begin with. If she’d not been so quick to judge him, this animosity might never have arisen. Cat was right; Alana had been out of society for too long and had forgotten her manners. Her life at Marcross Manor had been rather idyllic but, with hindsight, she ought to have returned home instead of lingering for so long, or returning so often. If she had, she might have realised that Ollie was only a friend, and she might not have forgotten how to interact with anyone who wasn’t close family, or of the four-legged or feathered variety. Mama had suggested as

much, had told her it was time to come out and experience society, but Alana had ignored her, and Mama was far too lenient to insist. Alana rather wished she had now, but that was unfair. She'd made her bed, and now she must tidy the sheets.

“Do stop looking so glum,” Cat said impatiently as they followed her aunt and uncle up the path to the church. “I’m reasonably certain you won’t burst into flames the moment you step inside these hallowed walls.”

Alana gave a forced laugh. “Haha. Oh, stop it, you’re hysterical,” she grumbled, though her lips were twitching too hard to make it entirely believable.

Cat snorted and the two of them were sniggering by the time they entered the church, which naturally meant Reverend Martin was there to see it. Cat sobered at once, somehow adopting an angelic expression in the blink of an eye. Alana, by contrast, felt her face freeze in what she suspected was an unattractive smirk, and could only hurry to take her place next to her aunt. Seeing as they were sat in the front pew, it did not afford her an escape for long, and Alana decided it was prudent to examine her toes for the duration of the service.

There was no opportunity to doze off, however, as the reverend launched into a rousing sermon about the dangers of gambling and drinking. He was remarkably passionate on the subject. Unsurprisingly, she supposed, as there had been a rowdy incident in the village Friday night which everyone had been gossiping about all day yesterday. Apparently, the postmistress had been celebrating the birth of her first grandson and had got roaring drunk with Jane Smith, the blacksmith’s wife. Their neighbours on both sides had complained about the noise and a fight had ensued between the women, which quickly escalated once the men got involved. There had been considerable property damage—as the blacksmith was an enormous fellow with an excitable nature—not to mention several sore heads.

Finally, the ordeal was over, which was just as well as the entire congregation had red noses, their breath blowing clouds in the dim interior of the church. Alana was frozen to the marrow and could not wait to get back to Holbrook so she

might defrost in front of a good fire. Of course, there was one final hurdle as everyone had to share a few words with the vicar on their way out. There was no way her aunt and uncle could avoid doing so, even if they'd wished to, and they seemed to like the reverend very much. Her aunt seemed almost fond of him. Alana knew this ought to be proof enough she had no business taking the fellow in dislike, but something stubborn niggled inside her at the thought of letting him off for his rudeness.

“An excellent sermon,” her uncle said with an amused glint in his eyes. “I’m sure it fell on fertile ground, going on the rather battered and left over appearance of some of your flock this morning.”

Alana kept her head down, hovering behind her uncle whilst the two men chatted. Glancing around, she could not help but feel amused by the sight of the women in the congregation sending wistful looks in their direction. Her uncle, the Earl of St Clair, was universally agreed to be the most handsome man in these parts, or had been before the Comte de Villen and the vicar turned up.

“Strange, isn’t it? St Clair looks so angelically handsome, he makes the vicar look rather wicked by comparison,” Cat mused under her breath, regarding the two men with a critical eye.

Alana smiled at the observation. “Yes, that’s true.”

“Perhaps it’s just their colouring, the light and the dark? What do you think?” Cat added, pondering this.

“No,” Alana replied, studying the vicar a little closer before turning back to Cat. “It’s more than that. Something in his eyes. I bet he was a right little devil when he was a boy. A shame he’s grown into such a dull fellow. His aunt said as much, too, didn’t she? ‘He’s forgotten how to live,’ she said. Forgotten how to crack his face into a smile, I’d say. I’ll just bet he’s a poacher turned gamekeeper. He’s far too intent on making everyone behave themselves and avoid anything resembling fun. Honestly, I know there was a bit of a scene, but was such a scolding upon the perils of drink really

necessary? I mean, Holbrook village is hardly the Seven Dials, is it?"

Too late, Alana saw Cat's eyes widen with warning, and Alana winced inwardly as she knew without a shadow of a doubt that he'd heard what she said. Drat and botheration.

"Lady St Clair asked me to escort you ladies home, as I'm dining with you this afternoon. If I might have the honour."

His voice was cool, scrupulously polite, and Alana vacillated momentarily between running away and brazening it out. Well, she was her mother's daughter, after all.

"How kind of you, Reverend," she said, smiling brightly as she turned to face him.

To give him his due, he showed no sign of discomposure or displeasure, and offered her his arm. Alana looked around to see Dr Haysom was escorting Cat, who sent her a sympathetic expression, mouthing *sorry* in her direction.

Alana sighed. She was doomed to put her foot in it with Reverend Martin, it seemed. They were about to leave when Jane Smith, she of the drunken fight, came up and begged a word with the vicar. Alana let him go with relief. She toyed with the idea of walking on with Cat and the doctor, but that seemed rather churlish, and so she stood waiting for him, stamping her feet to get some feeling back into them. A bitter, icy wind had blown up.

On the far side of the graveyard came the sound of children's laughter. Alana moved towards it, leaning upon the stone wall around the churchyard, seeing shapes moving through the trees. There was a pond down there, no doubt frozen and... yes, the children were messing about, skidding up and down on it. Alana felt a stab of alarm. She had swum in that pond one summer, and it was far deeper than it looked. Though the weather had been cold for some time, the ice might not be as thick as it appeared out in the middle.

Alana called out to the children, but they were too intent on their game to heed her. Too worried to walk all the way around to the gate, Alana hiked up her skirts and climbed over

the wall. Sliding on the icy grass, she made her way down the slope and into the trees.

“Get off there!” she called as she went. “Hey, you daft creatures! Get off, it’s not safe!”

An ominous crack echoed through the trees.

“*Get off!* The ice is—”

A scream rent the air before she could finish the sentence.

Alana ran, bunching up her skirts in one hand as she flew towards the frozen pond.

“Jeb! Jeb!” screamed two boys, who looked too terrified to know what to do, whether to move or to stay still.

“Get down, get low, hands and knees!” Alana shouted at them, trying to keep calm though her lungs were bursting with terror, for there was a black hole in the ice and no sign of the little boy who’d been standing there. Gingerly, the boys got on their hands and knees. “Get off the ice and fetch help,” she said, fighting to sound calm and authoritative when she wanted to gibber and weep with panic. She wanted someone else here now, but no one was, and she couldn’t ignore the boy in the freezing water.

Carefully, she did as the boys were doing, but crawled onto the ice on the opposite side of the hole in the middle. Getting onto her belly to spread her weight, Alana sucked in a breath as the shock of ice and freezing water seeped through her clothes as she inched out onto the pond. Moving as fast as she dared, Alana dragged herself over the ice until she was at the edge of the hole. Just as she looked into the horrifyingly black water, a hand emerged, followed by another, thrashing madly. She reached out, firming her grip around the sickeningly cold, slippery flesh and holding on with all her might. The other hand reached out, grasping at her arm, pulling so hard she cried out with fear that she too might be pulled in. Digging her toes into the ice, she firmed her position, praying the ice would hold her weight as tugged the boy up. Jeb emerged, gasping and choking, eyes wide with terror.

“I’ve got you, I’ve got you!” Alana cried, though she was not entirely certain she had. “Hold on.”

Jeb could do little more than that, too shocked and cold to make his limbs work. Behind her, Alana heard a deep voice shouting, but she could not make out the words. All her focus was upon the boy, who was not quite so little as she had supposed. How such a scrawny fellow could be so heavy she did not know, but pulling him free of the water took all of her strength. Finally he was out, flat on his back on the ice, but she knew the battle wasn’t over yet. The cold would kill him if he didn’t get warm soon. Trying hard not to move too much, she tugged off her cloak and wrapped it around him. Only then did she look up, feeling a surge of relief upon seeing Reverend Martin skidding to a halt at the edge of the pond. He looked desperate, but there was no way on earth the ice would hold his weight and she knew he dared not move forward.

“Well done, Miss Cadogan. Well done,” he said hoarsely, such approval in his voice Alana might have blushed if she wasn’t so perishing cold. “Come now, Jeb. I know you’re tired, but you must crawl to me now. Miss Cadogan can’t help you, the ice is cracking. If you don’t want another dunking, you had best come now.”

His voice was calm, his demeanour likewise, but Alana saw the tension in his shoulders. He lay down across the edge of the pond, keeping the bulk of his weight on the bank but leaning his long arms out to reach for Jeb as the boy made his painful progress towards him.

Alana did not dare move until the boy was safe, stiff with anxiety as she listened to the ominous snapping and odd cracking noises the ice made beneath her. Finally, Jeb was close enough for the reverend to take hold of his hand and, with one swift tug, the boy was lifted to safety. Jeb wrapped his arms about the reverend’s neck, sobbing piteously.

“It’s all right, my boy,” Reverend Martin soothed, holding him tight, his voice not entirely steady. “It’s all right, Jeb. You’re safe. You’re safe now. I’ve got you.”

For a moment the sight of them struck Alana with a sharp pain in her chest, like being shot with a dart. The obvious affection the man held for the child was enough to melt the stoniest of hearts, and Alana was far from hard-hearted. She thought perhaps the reverend was praying as he closed his eyes, holding the boy's head against his shoulder. It was such a tender scene she looked away before she was caught blubbering, which would not do at all. More to the point, she was so cold she could no longer feel her hands, and her teeth were chattering. She needed to get off the blasted ice. Cautiously, she began sliding her way back to the bank. As she glanced up, she noticed the reverend had wrapped Jeb in her cloak and his thick black coat and had laid down once more, reaching for her. Alana opened her mouth to tell him she was perfectly fine and to get the boy into the warm at once, when there was an awful sound, like breaking glass, and before the words could leave her mouth, she plunged into the icy darkness.

Chapter 6



Dearest Hester,

It is just as I feared. My nephew is the finest looking unmarried man for miles in any direction, and he's turned himself into the dullest fellow I ever had the misfortune to know. Of course, I understand how it happened, but honestly, Hester, what a foolish creature he is. No doubt he is punishing himself, though for what I do not understand. As if there is aught for him to chastise himself for. So many young men make far worse mistakes, and he has paid dearly and worked so hard. Oh, I do not know whether to shake him or hug him. Neither, I suppose, for he would not allow such liberties, so distant and starchy he is now. How I miss my roaring boy, but I shall get him back, you see if I don't. I might even enlist some help, for there is a lovely creature here I cannot help but believe is just what the silly man needs to bring him back into the world.

By the way, if I did not say so, I thoroughly enjoyed your nuptials, even if his grace looked unbearably smug. I'll let him off, just this once, as he had good reason to be.

—Excerpt of a letter to Her Grace, Hester Grenville, the Duchess of Axton from her friend, Mrs Cora Dankworth.

12th January 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

Harry's breath snagged in his throat as the ice gave way.

"No!" he cried, reaching for Alana as she plunged through the ice.

Her fingertips grazed his, and he saw her beautiful eyes wide with terror before she disappeared beneath the water. Without thinking, he leapt forward, crashing through the ice in his haste to reach her, knowing the weight of her skirts and petticoats would take her to the bottom in seconds.

Please God, please God, give me the strength, help me, please.

The words echoed through his brain as he dived into the black water, the temperature so frigid the shock of it was painful. Reaching out blindly, his heart skipped as he grasped hold of a hand. Harry pulled, with all his might, startled by the dead weight of the sodden clothes dragging them both down. His muscles and lungs burned with the effort and the searing cold as he swam hard back to the surface, hauling the girl with him.

They broke the surface, gasping and shivering. Harry swam until he could touch the floor, and then stood, pulling Miss Cadogan into his arms and carrying her out of the water. There were people on the bank now, though Harry could not hear what they were saying, too dazed to do anything but carry her sodden weight to safety. He glanced down, finding those blue-green eyes fixed upon him, her gaze for once devoid of laughter and mischief.

"Th-Thank you," she said through chattering teeth.

Harry nodded, suddenly exhausted, as someone threw a blanket about his shoulders. Another pair of hands went to take Alana from him, but he shook his head, reluctant for reasons he did not wish to examine to relinquish his hold on her. Instead, he carried her the short distance to Saxenhurst Hall, though it felt like miles and miles, every step making his exhausted muscles scream. Thankfully, Henry Stanhope and

his wife made quick work of providing warm beds and roaring fires.

Little more than half an hour later, Harry was sitting by the fire in Henry Stanhope's study.

Henry had lent him some clothes, which were soft and cosy, if a little tight across the shoulder and a touch too short in the trousers. Harry ought to be warm now, but there was a chill set deep in his heart every time he replayed the scene in his mind's eye.

"Here we are," Florence Stanhope said, following a procession of maids into the room.

They laid a tea tray out before him, laden with thick ham and pickle sandwiches, and cakes and biscuits. Harry's stomach gave an appreciative growl. Mrs Stanhope's husband followed her in, and flashed Harry an approving smile.

"Well, you've had quite an exciting day so far."

Harry snorted. "A bit more excitement than I ever want again, I assure you, but are they both well? Jeb and Miss Cadogan?"

"Perfectly fine," Mrs Stanhope said soothingly, settling down to pour the tea as the maids filed out again. "Both of them are tucked up in bed with a hot bowl of soup, which is where you ought to be, I might add. Do at least eat something, please."

Harry helped himself to sandwiches. He'd never been able to stand being fussed over; the idea of being tucked up in bed and waited on when he was perfectly well made him restless and irritable. "You are very kind, Mrs Stanhope, but there is no need. A hot cup of tea and a slice of that delicious looking cake and I shall be right as ninepence."

"Oh, surely we can do better than tea," her husband said with a frown. "I've a very fine cognac. Just the thing to warm the cockles of your heart."

"No." Henry shook his head. "No, thank you," he amended, realising that had sounded rather sharp and

ungrateful. He took a large bite of his sandwich, chewing determinedly.

Stanhope looked surprised by his refusal, but shrugged. “Very well. Tea it is, then.”

Relieved, Harry accepted a cup, then finished three sandwiches, three biscuits, and two slices of cake without the slightest twinge of remorse. He had surely earned them today.

He looked up at a knock on the door, and the butler appeared.

“I beg your pardon, Reverend Martin, but Master Jeb is anxious to see you.”

“Is he all right? Is he sick?” he demanded, surging to his feet.

The butler’s eyes widened. “No, indeed! Oh, no. In fine form, I should say. A fine little lad he is, and already a favourite of our housekeeper. No, it is only the boy wishes to speak with you.”

Harry let out a breath of relief. “I’ll go up at once. If you would excuse me,” he added to Mr and Mrs Stanhope as he hurried from the room.

He found Jeb sitting up in an enormous bed, surrounded by lace-edged pillows and covered in so many quilts and blankets he looked a bit like a disembodied head.

“Well, you’ve fallen on your feet, lad,” Harry said, striving to sound amused and to fight back the urge to hug the boy until his ribs cracked.

Honestly, he was getting sentimental in his old age. He knew he ought not to have a favourite among the boys, either, but Jeb was a cheeky little tyke and reminded Harry very much of himself at the same age.

Jeb returned a sheepish smile. “I never saw such a big bed in all me life,” he confided, sounding rather awestruck. “Is the lady all right? She’s not... not sick or—”

“I’m told she’s perfectly fine,” Harry said, perching on the edge of the mattress.

“You ain’t seen her?” Jeb asked anxiously.

Harry shook his head. “I *haven’t* seen her,” he corrected with a smile. “That would not be appropriate, seeing as she is tucked up in a warm bed like you are, but Mr and Mrs Stanhope assure me she’s fine, so there’s no need to fret.”

“She saved my life,” Jeb said, his lip trembling a little. “I was ever so... ever so... fri... frightened.”

The boy gave a hiccoughing sob and threw himself at Harry.

“Ah, there, there, Jeb. You’re a brave lad. A lucky escape you had, right enough, but I think the big fellow has plans for you yet.”

“The big f-fellow?” Jeb asked, sniffing and wiping his nose on his sleeve.

Harry handed him his own handkerchief. “God,” he explained gravely.

“You reckon he didn’t drowned me for a reason?” Jeb’s eyes had grown very wide.

Harry smiled, pushing the boy’s thick hair back from his forehead. “I think you’ve a good deal of living to do, Jeb. The world has a great deal to show you yet, and there are many adventures to have. So be a good lad and get some rest now, and don’t worry anymore. You’re safe, and everything is fine.”

“I... I don’t suppose me ma...?”

Harry felt his heart ache at the hopeful look in the boy’s eyes. It was only Jeb and his ma, who earned her living sporadically, sometimes as a barmaid, before she disappeared to who knew where when the whim took her. No one seemed to know who Jeb’s father had been, but Jeb had certainly never laid eyes on him. Sadly for the boy, his ma was unreliable and had a tendency to disappear for weeks, or even months, if a fellow offered to keep her. Poor Jeb had been running wild and causing mischief wherever he could until Harry had taken him in hand and into his school.

“I don’t expect she’s heard yet,” Harry said, praying that were true, though the woman didn’t seem to have much resembling a maternal instinct. He’d tried to speak to her, to offer her help where he could, in finding her regular work, and in gently showing her how much Jeb needed her in his life. But she thought Harry an interfering busybody who wanted to stop her from having any fun in life. As her life had little resembling fun in it outside of drinking and a series of widely and publicly criticised love affairs with unsuitable men, Harry could see how she’d think it.

“Or p’rhaps she’s too busy with a new beau,” Jeb said, his expression taut. “I ain’t seen her for a week or more.”

“I’m sorry, Jeb,” Harry said, wretched that he could not do more, could not make his mother love her son and take responsibility for him, to make her see the wonderful boy she was ignoring, for she was missing out on so much. By the time she realised her mistake, supposing she ever did, it would be too late.

Jeb shrugged. “I don’t care. I don’t need her, do I? Not with all this,” he flashed a grin, gesturing to the luxurious room and the fine bed, the fire in the grate.

Harry smiled as he was supposed to do, though his heart felt heavy as lead. He wished Jeb didn’t need her, but a boy needed a mother, needed *someone*. The idea of Jeb going back to the grim little home his mother kept for them all alone made his stomach twist.

“You’ll come and stay with me at the vicarage, once you’ve had a good night’s sleep.”

The words were out before he could think about them, but Harry realised he wouldn’t take them back.

The boy needed someone, and Harry was by himself, rattling about in the huge vicarage that had felt increasingly tomblike without his housekeeper. It would be good to have some company, and he’d sleep better knowing Jeb was safe and warm, that he’d eaten a good meal.

“I don’t need no charity!” Jeb bristled, pride squaring his scrawny shoulders, his narrow chin going up.

“Who said anything about charity, you ungrateful tyke?” Harry shot back, cursing himself for not having considered the boy’s pride. “I need help about the place, and it gets rather lonesome spending every night all by myself.”

“What sort of help?” Jeb asked suspiciously.

Harry racked his brain. “Well, er... collecting kindling for the fires and making sure they keep burning, cleaning my boots, making sure I don’t miss appointments. That sort of thing,” he said vaguely, hoping he’d not said anything too dire that would put the lad off.

“You need a wife, is what you need,” Jeb said frankly, folding his arms.

“Balderdash. A bachelor existence suits me very well,” Harry said firmly. “I need a housekeeper, that I’ll grant you, but Lady St Clair is finding me someone who’ll start any day now and, when she does, we’ll have to break her in gently and not scare her away. No toads indoors, do you hear me?”

“I s’pose,” Jeb replied grudgingly. “Still reckon you oughta marry. That Miss Cadogan is right pretty. She looks a fun sort too, not stuck up like some ladies.”

She looked like a deal of trouble, Harry thought, but he kept it to himself.

“No wife,” he said firmly, ruffling the boy’s hair. “Now, get some rest. I’ll be back for you in the morning.”

“Thank you, Rev,” Jeb said, yawning enthusiastically.

“You’re welcome, Jeb.”

Harry closed the door quietly behind him, making his way back down the corridor. His mind was occupied with the problem that was Jeb and what to do with him when a door cracked open.

“Reverend Martin?”

Harry stopped in his tracks and turned to the door to see Miss Cadogan peering through the narrow gap. She was in her nightgown, and her blonde hair tumbled about her shoulders in a mass of unruly curls. Aware of how inappropriate it was to see her in such *dishabille*, Harry dropped his gaze to the floor, which didn't help when he noticed her bare feet against the polished wood. They were astonishingly dainty when viewed in the proximity of his own large black boots.

"Miss Cadogan!" he protested as an all too familiar excitable sensation thrummed through him. He stamped on it with irritation. "This is most—"

"Inappropriate, yes, I know," she said impatiently. "And I beg your pardon, but were you with the little boy? Is he well?"

Harry's frown softened at her obvious concern for the child, and he dared a glance back at her, struck by the worry in her lovely eyes. "He is, thanks to you, Miss Cadogan. You saved his life."

She grew very pink at his words, opening the door wider. "I was scared to death," she admitted, a catch in her voice. She looked very young, and very vulnerable, standing in the open doorway and something in his heart shifted, an oddly protective feeling growing inside him, no doubt a result of having hauled her out of the water.

"And yet you saved him. At considerable risk to your own safety, too. I can never thank you enough for that," Harry said, meaning it, and trying hard not to notice how lovely she was, not to think about how soft her skin looked, how adorable she was all in virginal white, the lace ruffles at her throat and wrists making her look ridiculously angelic.

"And you saved me, Reverend Martin." Her voice quavered.

"It was my pleasure," he replied gently.

Miss Cadogan gave a little laugh, her lips trembling. She clamped them together, pressing her fingers against them, obviously holding onto her composure by a thread, and Harry knew a moment's panic.

Oh, no. Don't cry. Don't cry, he begged her silently.

She swallowed hard, sniffing.

“You’ve had a most upsetting experience, Miss Cadogan,” he tried, using his most authoritative and vicarish tone in the hope she might heed him and keep her unruly emotions at bay. Fat chance, he thought grimly. “You need your rest, and standing about in your nightclothes with bare feet is not going to....”

A big fat tear rolled down her face. *Damnation.*

“Miss Cadogan, *please*, go back to bed,” he said desperately.

She burst into tears.

Harry dithered as she sobbed. He tried his best to fight the instinct to offer comfort, for that way lay danger and madness, and who knew where it would end? No, he ought to fetch Mrs Stanhope. She could offer comfort better than he could. Far better. Far more appropriate.

“It was s-so c-cold and dark,” she said, hugging her arms about herself which pulled the cotton nightgown tight across her voluptuous breasts.

Harry closed his eyes, willing himself to unsee the shadow of her nipples, the tight little buds peaked against the fine fabric. Heat simmered beneath his skin. *Damn you, Martin, the girl is overwrought, stop being so thoroughly inappropriate.* Torn, he glanced back at her as sobs that racked her slender body. She wasn’t pretty when she cried, he observed wildly, unsettled to discover it did not lessen her appeal.

“I th-thought I was going to d-die. I’m frightened to close my eyes in case I d-dream about it.”

His heart broke a little at her obvious terror.

“You won’t,” Harry said firmly, reaching for her and pulling her against him before he could think better of it.

He held her tight for a moment, horrified by how the feel of her arms going about him made his heart sing, made him want to hold tighter still and not let go. He fought to steady his

breathing, to not notice the way her warm, soft curves felt pressed against him.

“I w-won’t?” she repeated, staring up at him.

Harry shook his head. “I forbid you to have bad dreams, Miss Cadogan,” he said sternly. “You have done a wonderful thing today and you deserve to sleep like a baby, so I am telling you now, there will be no bad dreams. I forbid them, and I forbid you to have them.”

He was talking gibberish, obviously, but her expression cleared at his words, her lips quirking up a little.

“You forbid them?”

“I do.” With a supreme effort of will, Harry forced himself to let her go and took a step back. Desperately, he avoided looking directly at her and tugged at his borrowed waistcoat, feeling ridiculous. “Now, back to bed. This is most inappropriate.”

And now he sounded like a pompous arse.

“I’m so sorry I was so rude to you,” Miss Cadogan said, regarding him with frank curiosity.

Harry waved this away, eager to end this inadvisable conversation, and put the dreadful creature out of his mind. The terrifying suspicion that might be an impossible task nagged at him, making him increasingly impatient. “No matter. I provoked you.”

“You did,” she said with a grin.

Harry opened his mouth to tell her she ought not agree with him if she was apologising, but he swallowed his words before he was foolish enough to speak them.

“Apology accepted,” he said. “Now, go to bed before you undo all Mrs Stanhope’s good work and catch pneumonia.”

“I’m never ill,” she said, studying him far too intently.

Harry made the mistake of meeting those blue-green eyes, and stared at her, captivated. He saw once more lovely Artemis, her hair all undone, tempting him, beckoning him to

join her on the wild hunt. Desire uncoiled deep in his belly, stirring thoughts he'd not allowed himself to have for a very long time.

“Miss Cadogan, *please* go back to bed now, before I put you there myself!” Harry begged as his sanity unravelled a notch. He had not felt this excitable thrum of anticipation, of *wanting*, in years, had not allowed it, for he knew what kind of behaviour it led to.

“Now who's being inappropriate?” she said, her eyes wide with surprise and laughter.

“I didn't mean—” Harry snapped his mouth closed.

He had to get out of here, away from her, from the scent of vanilla and roses that drifted from her unbound hair, from her soft warm skin. Without another word, he turned on his heel and fled.

Chapter 7



My Lord Marquess,

Come out from whatever rock they buried you under, or ought that to read – mound of petticoats? We request the pleasure of your company for a gathering of the Sons of Hades. No excuses. No exceptions. Failure to appear will be cause for immediate expulsion. You've been warned, scapegrace.

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

13th January 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

“Really, I wish you would stop fussing. I’m quite well,” Alana insisted for the fifth time in as many minutes.

She had arrived back at Holbrook House earlier that morning to a hero’s welcome that had been at once touching and excessively embarrassing. Even the staff had turned out to congratulate her, but she just wished everyone would go back to normal, or as normal as life got in present company. After all, Reverend Martin was every bit as heroic as she was.

“*Who’s a clever girl then?*” Macintosh squawked, and then whistled cheerfully, bobbing up and down on his wooden perch.

Alana stared at the parrot in surprise, for that was the least offensive thing she'd ever heard him say.

"Clever, clever, pretty girl! Tits!"

Ah, well, that made more sense. Alana smiled as she noticed her aunt considering the bird with fascination.

"Why is he so appallingly vulgar?" she asked Lady Beauchamp.

"He belonged to Bainbridge's mama. She and his pa, the Duke of Axton, loathed each other. She had been raised a lady, however, and ladies are *never* vulgar, so she taught Mac here to say all the foul things she could not bring herself to say to her husband's face. After she died, I took Mac on, and Axton delights in teaching him new obscenities, the wicked man."

"Not only Axton, you fibber," Mrs Dankworth cut in with a bark of laughter.

Lady Beauchamp sent her friend a reproving look, but didn't deny it. "I'm so glad Mac is mine, though. He's the most devoted creature, and very affectionate. We quite adore him," she crooned, stroking the bird's head with a finger. Mac closed his eyes and made soft clicking noises to show his approval.

"Love, love, lovely bit o' stuff," he said contentedly.

"And the trouble he causes is quite entertaining," Mrs Dankworth added with a delighted grin.

"How dreadful you are," Cat said with approval. "I shall be just as naughty as you when I am old. It looks to be great fun."

"Oh, it is, child," Lady Beauchamp agreed with a smile. "Only, the trick is to live life to the full first and have no regrets."

"Is it possible to live a life free of regrets?" Alana asked doubtfully.

"It is," Mrs Dankworth replied with a firm nod. "Not easy, perhaps, but it *is* possible. One must own up to one's mistakes and take delight in the successes, and then move on to what

comes next. Never dwell on the past, Lana, dear. It changes nothing and helps no one, just leaves you stuck in the same place.”

“That sounds like something Pippin would say,” Cat said with a smile. “Oh, and speaking of that dear creature, I must post my letters. She’ll be cross with me if I don’t give her all the latest gossip.”

“Temple will have one of the footmen take it for you,” Aunt Harriet suggested, but Cat shook her head.

“No, I need some fresh air and to stretch my legs. I walk a great deal at Dern, and I’m not used to sitting about so much. Besides, it’s such a beautiful, sunny day.”

“It’s freezing out there!” Mrs Dankworth said in horror, staring at the bright blue sky beyond the windows as though there were a tempest raging.

“A bit of cold won’t hurt me,” Cat said with a laugh.

“Well, wrap up warm, dear,” Aunt Harriet said sternly as Cat left the room.

A moment later, Temple, the butler, appeared with a new arrival.

“Reverend Martin, my lady,” he said, announcing their guest.

“Come in, Reverend,” Aunt said, beaming as Harry came in and bowed to the assembled company.

“Ladies. I hope I’m not disturbing you?”

“Not in the least. Come and sit down next to your old auntie, Harry,” Mrs Dankworth said, patting the seat next to her. “Brave, brave boy,” she added, taking his hand and patting it with an expression of affectionate pride.

Alana bit back a smile as the vicar frowned awkwardly, looking as if he’d changed his mind and wanted to run from the room.

“Oh, well, that was—”

“You’d best not say *nothing*,” Alana warned him severely. “For it was something to me, I can tell you.”

“To us all,” her aunt said, one hand pressed against her heart. “My goodness, when I heard what had happened, but thank the lord all of you are safe. Poor little Jeb. Is he well enough to call upon, do you think? I’ve made up a basket with books, and some toy soldiers I found. They must have belonged to Cassius. Jasper has added a lovely wooden horse he made too, and Cook has put in some treats he’s bound to enjoy.”

“He is quite well, I thank you and I’m certain you will find an appreciative audience for such a generous gift. In fact, I am going to collect him on my way home. I’ve asked him to stay with me at the vicarage, at least for the time being until his mother returns, and you are most welcome whenever you wish to visit.”

“Oh, Harry,” Lady St Clair said, smiling fondly at him. “How lovely you are. I’ve been so worried about what would happen to him. I’d heard his mother has disappeared again.”

Harry nodded. “I’m afraid so, and I couldn’t bear the thought of him going back to that cold, empty room all alone.”

Alana watched the exchange with interest, and suddenly understood why her aunt was so very fond of the vicar. He was genuinely kind and caring. Taking in the boy was not an act of charity because it was part of his job. Harry wanted him, needed to know he was safe and well.

Harry? When had he become Harry? *Reverend Martin*, she corrected herself. The sound of feathers ruffling drew her attention, and she was relieved to think of something else as the parrot tilted its head slyly, clearly of the opinion it had not received enough attention. Alana watched, entertained, as the bird fluffed itself up and opened its beak.

“*Murder!*” it shrieked, and at such a pitch Mrs Dankworth juggled her teacup and saucer, which was thankfully empty but still left the lady with a lapful of tea leaves. “*Infamy! Sodom and Gomorrah! Sod em, sod em!*”

Alana could not help but glance at the vicar, expecting to see him scowling with disapproval and was surprised to see his shoulders shaking silently while he fought not to laugh.

“Oh, you dreadful bird!” her aunt said, spluttering with indignation at having been given such a fright.

“Macintosh, you fiend!” Mrs Dankworth protested, holding out her skirts as Lady Beauchamp did her best to brush off the tea leaves with a hanky.

“He did that on purpose,” the reverend observed with delight. “What a clever fellow he is, if rather unruly.”

Macintosh regarded the vicar with interest, marching up and down his perch. Alana held her breath, suspecting he was building up to his *pièce de résistance*. He did not disappoint her,

“*Cock! Ooooh, what a big one!*”



Cat strode out, glad to be out of doors even if it was *brass monkeys*, as her old friend Jack would say about the icy temperature. She reached the village in good time, pink-cheeked and breathing fast after her invigorating walk, but at least she had kept the cold at bay. After she had posted her letters, she visited the bakery and bought a small bag of marzipan fruits to eat on the way home. Dallying a little, she looked in the shop windows, toying with the idea of buying a length of glorious violet ribbon on display in the haberdasher’s. It put her in mind of a certain fellow’s unusual eyes, but perhaps she ought to keep thoughts of him to a minimum, at least for now. Papa had been so furious with her. She had never seen him truly cross before, not like that, but she had frightened him half to death as he considered what might have happened.

That he was also indebted to Lord Kilbane infuriated him to such a pitch he’d not been able to speak to her at all when she’d got home, which was the worst feeling in the world. Even now, remembering it made her feel sick. She had been rash, she knew, but she also knew Kilbane was not the man her

father thought he was. It was her belief that no one knew the Marquess of Kilbane, because he would not allow it. She truly believed the persona he presented to the world was only a façade, something to keep everyone at a distance, but acting upon that belief was a very large gamble and Cat was not yet certain if she were brave enough to stake everything upon her instincts. It was one thing to believe it, but quite another to lay her entire future on the line to prove it.

Yet, he had come to her rescue and, despite the scathing way he had spoken to her, he'd been kind enough. He had ensured she was unhurt and had been discreet in getting her home, taking pains to make certain no one saw her. He'd not needed to do that.

Cat popped a marzipan fruit into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully, regarding the ribbon, and remembering what it had felt like to be alone in that carriage with him. His presence had been electrifying, making her skin prickle with anticipation, her heart race, and every nerve in her body sing with awareness. She had never felt more alive than she had during those too brief moments.

Lost in her thoughts, she turned away from the window without looking where she was going, and crashed into someone walking past her. Cat stumbled back, twisting her ankle and letting out a most unladylike curse as pain lanced through it.

"I ought to have known you'd curse like a sailor," replied a mocking and wonderfully familiar deep voice.

Heart leaping to her throat, Cat looked up, stunned into silence as she stared into violet eyes, the remarkable colour so much more startling in reality.

"Drat you, child, must you always be so eager to throw yourself in harm's way? Don't you have a nursemaid to keep you out of trouble?"

Well, that was enough to help her find her tongue. A nursemaid indeed. The nerve!

“I’ll be eighteen in three weeks! I do not need a nursemaid,” she snapped. “*Ouch!*”

Cat yelped as she tried to put weight on her ankle and pain shot through it.

Kilbane let out a pained sound of irritation. “Damn you! What is your father thinking, letting you out in the world without an army of attendants to chaperone you? He should keep you under lock and key where you can’t bother the rest of the population,” he grouched, glaring at her.

Cat leant against the wall, keeping the weight off her ankle. “The rest of the population don’t look terribly bothered,” she retorted. “You’re the only one making a fuss. Methinks the gentleman protests too much.”

Kilbane pulled a face, which to her dismay looked genuinely disgusted at the idea. “The rest of the population are too dim-witted to realise the danger they’re in. *I am not.*”

“What are you doing here, anyway?” she demanded. “It’s not like I’m following you about, you know. I’m staying at Holbrook House.”

“Good for you, and my business is my own, brat. I urge you to keep your nose out of it.”

“I’m not a sneak,” Cat said, indignant that he should think that of her.

“How delightfully reassuring,” he said dryly, his lips thinning into an unpleasant smirk.

Cat bristled, but said nothing.

“Well, if you’ve quite finished making a nuisance of yourself, I’ll be on my way. Good day to you, Lady Catherine.” Kilbane made a show of doffing his hat to her and strode past.

Muttering with irritation, Cat tried to walk again, and smothered a cry of pain as her ankle protested. “Devil take you,” she grumbled, wondering how on earth she would get home.

“I could not agree more,” came an angry voice from close behind her. “And the sooner the better! Never in my life was I so plagued by a spoiled brat of a child.”

Cat turned to find Kilbane glaring at her, his eyes flashing with annoyance. He had not abandoned her after all.

“Oh, you came back,” she said, smiling at him.

Kilbane did not smile. He looked furious. “I don’t suppose you have a carriage waiting? That someone is coming to fetch you?”

“I walked. By myself,” she admitted sheepishly.

A nerve in his cheek leapt. “Of course you did. By God, I shall have something to say to your father about this.”

“Oh, please don’t,” Cat begged, horrified. Her father would never forgive her. “Papa was so angry with me about the last time. I’ve been in disgrace for so long, and I only walked to the village. I wasn’t doing anything I ought not do. I had no idea you were here. I swear I did not mean to plague you.”

Kilbane looked as if he was grinding his teeth with frustration. “Stay here,” he growled, and strode off again.

Where he thought she would go in this state, she couldn’t imagine.

With a sigh, Cat leant back against the wall, waiting for Kilbane to return. Despite his genuine annoyance with her, a smile curved over her mouth. Lord, but he was handsome. All that thick black hair, and those eyes.... She sighed happily, content to wait for him to return. A few minutes later she saw him cross the village green, leading an enormous black horse, the two of them perfectly matched in colouring. Cat caught her breath as she watched him stride towards her. Such broad shoulders he had, and those long, lean legs, his trousers clinging to strong thighs.

He’s mine, she thought dizzily. He doesn’t know it yet, but he will. One day. He will.

“You’d best pray nobody sees us together,” he said, glowering at her. “I don’t give a rat’s arse if you’re ruined, but I do care if your father comes after me wanting blood. Dying for one’s wickedness is one thing, dying when one hasn’t had the pleasure of sinning for it is quite another.”

Cat held her tongue, certain that did not require an answer.

Kilbane manoeuvred the splendid horse beside her and then bent to cup his hands to give her a boost.

Cat sent him a reproachful look. “Aren’t you going to lift me on? I’m not heavy.”

“Not on your life,” Kilbane growled. “Get up, or stay here. I really don’t care.”

Cat shrugged and tucked her bag of marzipan into her reticule, letting it hang from her wrist, then grasped hold of the saddle to keep her weight off her injured ankle. Kilbane shoved her up with the uninjured side, refusing to help any further. It took an ungainly amount of wriggling and heaving, but Cat finally got herself seated, though not terribly comfortably as it wasn’t a side-saddle. She did not dare cause even more of a scene by riding astride, however. No doubt Kilbane would leave her to her fate if she tried it, she thought with a grin.

“Don’t smirk. It’s unattractive,” he said, walking to the horse’s head and taking the reins. Cat bit her lip to stop herself from laughing as he got the horse walking out.

“It’s a beautiful day. Do you come to this part of the world often, my lord?”

“Don’t speak to me. This is not a social call. We are not friends. We are not even acquaintances. I will deposit you at the gates to Holbrook House, where someone will spot you soon enough and no one will see us together. You say that you turned your ankle on that spot, and with luck, no one will contradict you. Your father need not know.”

“Thank you, my lord,” she said with feeling, for she did not doubt Kilbane would have relished the opportunity to tease her father with this incident, but he was restraining himself.

He turned and shot a murderous glare in her direction.

“I beg your pardon. I shan’t thank you either,” she said gravely, though the urge to laugh was nigh on irresistible.

Cat bit her lip hard. He really was too delicious. It was a pity he refused to talk to her, but she didn’t care. Instead, she admired the way he moved, sighed over his powerful shoulders and the way the fine fabric of his coat highlighted them. His hair was a little long for fashion: thick, dark curls brushed his collar, and made her itch to reach out and touch them. Instead, she stroked the horse’s inky black coat.

“He’s quite magnificent,” she said at last, unable to resist that much. “What’s he called?”

Kilbane looked back, his expression one of pure frustration, and Cat had to fight to smother a bubble of laughter.

“Pirate,” he snapped.

“Pirate,” Cat crooned, stroking the beast’s smooth neck. “What a handsome fellow you are. Have you had him long?”

“A while. Don’t talk to me.”

Cat sighed, trying to keep quiet, but it did not come naturally. Inevitably, she failed.

“Wasn’t Euphonia, the Talking Machine, an amazing sight? Did you enjoy your visit as much as I did? I wonder that it was not more popular, but Professor Faber was rather an unpleasant prospect, I suppose. He was not terribly clean, and the smell was terrible, and his hair badly needed cutting. I don’t think it had seen a comb any time in the past decade. Besides that, the machine itself is uncanny, bearing the face of a human woman and with that awful voice. I confess, I was rather afraid of it,” she admitted frankly. “Which you likely think foolish of me, and I cannot truly account for, only, it was delightfully disturbing.”

“It was,” Kilbane replied without turning, surprising her that he’d answered at all. “It put me in mind of Frankenstein. I wanted to weep for it.”

“For the monster, or the talking machine?” she asked, astonished, and gratified by his confiding this to her.

He shrugged, those strong shoulders moving easily beneath the snug cut of his coat. “Both, I suppose. Things created by man with little care or understanding for what they are doing, for the effect they have on their creations or those that look upon them.”

“Oh,” Cat said, struck by his words. They seemed heavy with sincerity, with something that felt like pain. She wondered if they revealed something about the man before her, and turned them over in her mind before tucking them away to consider when she was alone and could replay this entire episode and dissect every moment.

“I wonder what happened to Euphonia?” she asked wistfully, imagining visiting it with Kilbane so they might discuss it at length.

“I said don’t talk to me, brat,” he growled, and Cat sighed.

Chapter 8



My Lord,

It was so lovely to see you again after so long. I did not expect that you would ever visit again, and I cannot tell you how happy you made me. I get terribly lonely, you see, and though the cottage is wonderful and comfortable, and I am eternally grateful for it, I miss having company and going to parties, but one cannot have everything. Sadly, my neighbours are all far too respectable to call upon me. Scandal is catching, you see. I suppose I cannot blame them, but it makes for a lonely existence. The only person who takes the trouble is the lovely vicar. Such a handsome fellow he is, too. Quite delicious, and it's so much fun to make him blush.

—Excerpt of a letter to The Most Hon'ble Ciarán St Just, The Marquess of Kilbane from Mrs Louisa Clifford.

14th January 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

“Well, this is a turnabout,” Alana said with a laugh, looking at Cat, who was sitting with her ankle bandaged and resting on a footstool.

Cat pulled a face. “I cannot abide being incapacitated,” she grumbled. “I warn you now, I’m a vile patient. I hate sitting still.”

“You think this comes as a surprise to us?” Alana said, putting her hands on her hips. “You only did this yesterday afternoon and you’re already getting on my nerves.”

She laughed at the indignant look Cat sent her.

“Well, that’s unkind.”

“You may be a vile patient, but I’m vile *to* patients,” Alana replied airily. “Can’t stand them. No forbearance whatsoever and nothing approaching a bedside manner. You’ve been warned.”

Cat laughed, shaking her head. “What a delightful pair we are.”

“You’re just lucky Uncle Jasper rode past when he did or you might still be there,” Alana replied, pausing when she saw an odd look cross Cat’s face. “What?”

“Nothing,” Cat said hastily, looking guilty as sin.

“Oh, Cat. What have you done now?” Alana demanded, sitting down carefully on the footstool so as not to jostle Cat’s injured ankle.

“I didn’t do anything!” Cat protested, blushing. “At least, not on purpose.”

Alana groaned and put her head in her hands. “Out with it.”

Cat folded her arms, scowling. “No, I’m not telling you now. You’ve been beastly to me.”

“Oh, spill the beans, you little brat,” Alana said, laughing now. “You’ll turn my hair grey, I swear it.”

“That’s what he called me,” Cat said with a heavy sigh. “He thinks I’m a child.”

“He who?” Alana demanded, genuinely alarmed now.

She had heard about Cat’s adventures whilst visiting the Talking Machine with horror, and her friend’s fascination with the Marquess of Kilbane filled her with anxiety. Cat was nothing if not single-minded. If she decided to do something,

she'd do it, no matter what, and if she'd set her sights on the marquess... Alana shivered.

"Cat?" she pressed.

Cat pursed her lips and shrugged.

"Oh, no, Cat. I don't believe it. Here? Lord Kilbane was *here*?"

"Well, it's not like I knew," Cat exclaimed. "You both look at me like I planned it! I had no idea. I was minding my own business, and turned around, and there he was. I walked straight into him. It's how I twisted my ankle."

"At the gates to Holbrook?" Alana said, perplexed by what on earth the man could have been doing there.

"No, silly! In the village. He put me on his horse and brought me that far, or I'd have been stranded."

Alana stared at her. "You bumped into Kilbane in the village?"

"Quite literally," Cat agreed, grinning.

"And he put you on his horse and brought you home."

"Yes."

"Well, you needn't look so pleased about it, you outrageous creature! What if your father finds out?" Alana demanded in horror.

"It's not like I had a choice," Cat pointed out reasonably. "It was fate. There's no other answer for it. Besides, I don't think anyone noticed us, it was so cold yesterday hardly anyone was about."

"But Kilbane will love rubbing your father's nose in this little adventure, Cat!" Alana said, disbelieving she could have overlooked that fact, but Cat shook her head.

"No, he won't. He said he wouldn't."

"And you *believed* him? Are you insane?"

"Yes, I believed him," Cat glared at her. "He said he wouldn't, and he won't."

Alana snorted. “Then you’ve a deal more confidence in him than the rest of the world.”

Cat’s jaw set, her expression reminding Alana that beneath the beautiful face was a formidable will of iron.

“I know,” she said darkly.

“Oh, I wish you would not persist in this crusade on his behalf, love. He doesn’t want you to. He’s clearly happy in his debauchery, or he wouldn’t revel in it so. Leave him be.”

“But he isn’t!” Cat cried, and so passionately that Alana jumped a little. “He isn’t the least bit happy. He’s alone and sad, and rather broken, I think. Everyone believes he’s the devil and he doesn’t know how to make them stop, so he does his best to make it true.”

“What nonsense,” Alana said, truly anxious now, for Cat spoke with such certainty, as though she had spent a great deal of time considering the fellow. “He’s a grown man, Cat, not a boy.”

“Only a young man. He can’t be more than five and twenty,” Cat countered. “And he’s been vilified since he was a boy because of his father and brother. What chance did he have to be anything but what he is, I ask you?”

“And what if you’re right?” Alana asked, keeping her tone gentle when she wanted to shake some sense into her reckless friend. “How will you prove it without getting yourself into a situation that will ruin you? And what if you’re wrong, Cat? What then?”

Cat sat back with a huff, her silver eyes glinting in a fashion that made the hair on the back of Alana’s neck stand on end.

“I don’t know,” she muttered crossly. “But I shall think of something.”



20th January 1845, The Vicarage, Sussex.

“What excellent work,” Harry said with approval, picking up his newly shined boots. Jeb shifted from foot to foot, trying to hide his smile of satisfaction, but growing pink about his ears with pleasure at the praise. “I can see my face in them. You’d make a fine valet, Jeb.”

“What’s a valet?”

“A wealthy man, like Lord St Clair, would have a valet to see to his shoes and boots, and clothes. He keeps everything neat and clean and makes sure his master is beautifully turned out every day. Though there are lots of other things you could do, you know. You’ve a fine brain in that head of yours. If you applied yourself, you could be a teacher one day. Is there anything you’d like to do? What would be your dream?”

Jeb frowned, considering this. “Dunno. I ain’t never thought about it.”

“I don’t know, I *have* never thought about it,” Harry corrected.

“I have never thought about it,” Jeb said with a scowl, but he was always careful to repeat everything as well as he could.

Harry suspected he did not mind the idea of improving himself.

“Here you are then.” Harry slid a plate of bacon, eggs, and fried bread in front of the boy and sat down himself, slinging the tea towel over his shoulder. “You earned it.”

“Cor,” Jeb said, his stomach giving an audible growl.

Harry laughed and poured them both some tea, adding sugar and milk. He did not know where the skinny little fellow put it all, but he ate like a horse. Harry was glad to see him tucking into a good meal and getting a proper night’s rest in a cosy bed. The hollow look had gone from the lad’s face over the past days at the vicarage, and his cheeks were pink in the kitchen’s warmth. He was dressed for the weather, too, as Harry had bought him new clothes and boots. It had embarrassed Jeb when Harry had noticed he’d gone back to wearing the ill-fitting clogs he’d had before Lady St Clair had gifted each of the boys a sturdy pair of leather boots. Harry

hadn't asked where the boots had gone; he could guess. No doubt his mother had sold them.

Harry was trying his hardest not to judge her for that. There were certainly plenty of others in the village ready to do it for him. If she'd been a man, he knew the judgement would have been far less harsh, and that was wrong, if inevitable. Mrs Maby was *no better than she ought to be*, according to most people. But their obvious disgust only made her increasingly wild, and that he could certainly understand, but he'd not had a child relying on him, at least.

He reminded himself it was not his place to judge others, for he was hardly in a position to throw stones. Perhaps he might have done something so awful if he had been in her position. Poverty and desperation wore at a person's soul, and not everyone was strong enough to withstand the challenges life heaped upon them. He'd been blessed to never experience that first hand, but he'd still enough sins to atone for. He'd not kept to the path even when he'd had all the wealth and security a person could need. Everyone was fallible, everyone could fall from grace, given the wrong set of circumstances. He was doing his best to be a good man, to set an example, to show kindness and understanding, and to be someone his parishioners could rely on and turn to. It wasn't always easy and, more often than not, he was beset by feelings of frustration and anger that he could not do more. It made him wild with an impotent fury that he couldn't change things, that he wasn't better, was not enough.

He was never quite good enough. Harry forced the unsettling sensation of unworthiness away. He was doing his best, and he would do better. This time, temptation would not lead him astray. This time, he would prevail and show his parishioners what kind of man he was, and that they could rely on him.

Once Jeb had cleaned his plate by swiping a thick slice of bread and butter over every inch of it, Harry washed the dishes as Jeb dried them.

"Right. Ready for school, then?" Harry asked, already hearing the sounds of laughter out in the garden as the rest of

his boys assembled for the morning's lessons.

"Yep," Jeb said, carefully hanging the tea towel up to dry in front of the fire.

Harry felt a swell of affection and fellow feeling for the lad, who was trying so hard to be as good as he could be. He ruffled Jeb's hair. "You're a good boy, Jeb. Your ma should be very proud of you."

Jeb glanced up at Harry and away again, his narrow shoulders lifting awkwardly. "Don't know about that."

"Why do you say so?" Harry asked, though he knew the answer.

"She's always cross with me. I spoil things for her, make life harder when she has to worry about me and pay for me, and she don't like it. Then she goes away."

Harry nodded and laid a hand on Jeb's shoulder. "I know, lad. Your ma's not a very happy lady, that's the problem, and so she's always looking for happiness, trying her hardest to find it. She's looking so hard for it she can't see it anymore. Can't see that it's right here, in front of her. You must forgive her for not seeing you, Jeb. She's trying her best, but she's lost. We all get a bit lost sometimes."

"Even you?" Jeb asked sceptically.

Harry gave a short laugh and crouched down, re-buttoning the buttons on Jeb's thick wool waistcoat as they were done up wrong. "Especially me, Jeb. I got lost too, but I found my way back, and now I've found you, too. So, we'll look after each other, won't we?"

Jeb swallowed hard and swiped a hand over his eyes, but gave a sharp little nod. "Reckon."

"That's a good fellow. Now come along, the other boys are waiting, and all those Latin verbs won't conjugate themselves."

Jeb gave a heartfelt groan. Harry laughed and ushered him out the door.



20th January 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

“Well, I think we’ve done splendidly well,” Cat said, as she ticked the last item off the list.

Alana looked around at the stacks of boxes filled with everything they had collected for the charity auction and could only agree. They had just done an inventory and the generosity of the parish—with a little persuasion from the force of nature that was Lady Cat Barrington—was lovely to behold.

She turned back to Cat, who was sitting in splendour in the kitchen storeroom on a well-padded armchair, with her injured ankle propped up on a velvet-covered footstool and a cashmere shawl about her shoulders to keep the chill away. Every so often, a besotted footman would poke his head around the corner to ensure there was nothing the lady wanted. It was most amusing.

“It’s a wonderful haul,” Alana agreed happily. “Aunt will be so pleased. Her auction will be a tremendous success.”

“What shall we put up as a prize for the tombola?” Cat asked, perusing the list with a little frown that wrinkled her nose. “We want everyone to buy tickets so it must be something that everyone wants.”

“How about that goose? It’s the fattest I’ve ever seen and, no matter who wins it, I’m certain they’d be pleased. After all, the books would be my idea of a splendid gift, but not everyone would appreciate them, and I’m uncertain lace hankies would be much use to Mr Bishop.”

“He could give them to his wife,” Cat suggested.

Alana shrugged. “I suppose so, but I can’t see Mrs Bishop being much impressed with lace handkerchiefs either, though perhaps I’m wrong. Everyone likes a bit of luxury, but then everyone likes roast goose too.”

Cat laughed and nodded. “Well, that’s true enough. The goose it is. So, the date is set for this weekend. What else is there to do?”

“We need to finish the cards with the numbers on to give out to the bidders. The posters are already up, and Aunt has arranged for everything to be taken to the village hall Friday night. Saturday morning, we’ll set up the chairs and arrange all the donations, so they look impressive, and the auction starts at two. So, just a bit of work drawing up the numbered sheets for us, and we’re done.”

“Well done us, then,” Cat said with a grin. “It’s going to be a tremendous success. I hope everyone enjoys it.”

“I’m sure they will, especially if they win that goose,” Alana said with a laugh. “Well, I shall find one of your minions to carry you back upstairs and head over to the vicarage.”

“They’re not my minions,” Cat said with a disgusted expression.

“Well, they act like it,” Alana retorted.

“The poor fools. They think I’m as sweet as I look, which is far and wide of the mark. If they knew my propensity for getting into trouble and causing chaos, they’d run a mile,” Cat said frankly.

Alana shook her head, wondering how Cat could believe such a thing. She might not have seen much of the world, but she suspected men would put up with a great deal for a woman who looked like Cat. “If you say so.”

“Why are you going to the vicarage?” Cat asked, suddenly more interested in Alana, her silver gaze fixing upon her.

“Aunt asked me to fetch the key in case the vicar isn’t there when they deliver the boxes for the auction. She says he’s always out and about on calls in the afternoon and often he doesn’t get home until late.”

“The poor man works too hard,” Cat said, studying Alana with interest.

Alana shrugged, uncomfortable with her friend’s scrutiny. “I suppose.”

“Well, give your vicar my best regards. I’m very much in charity with him for having rescued you so heroically.”

“He’s not *my* vicar!” Alana protested.

“He forbade you to have nightmares,” Cat pointed out, one blonde eyebrow raising, as if this explained everything.

“Oh, I so wish I hadn’t told you that,” Alana grumbled. “He was just being kind.”

“Mm-hm. I bet he cuddles all his parishioners in their nightgowns.” Cat’s tone was dry as dust, her eyes glittering with laughter.

“That... That was just... it didn’t... *Oh!*” Alana said in disgust. “It would serve you right if I told your minions you’d said you were not to be disturbed and left you down here all day.”

“They wouldn’t leave me alone all day even if you did,” Cat replied with a sigh that sounded rather heartfelt. “But by all means try it. I don’t mind a bit of peace and quiet.”

“Abominable girl,” Alana grumbled as she stalked from the room. “I’ll see you later.”

“That you will,” Cat called after her merrily.

Chapter 9



My Lord,

Forgive me for writing again so soon, only after you had gone I was feeling nostalgic and opened up my keepsakes box. I came across something that you ought to have. I had quite forgotten I had it, but it is rightfully yours. I hesitate to impose upon your time again, but I believe it would be best if you came to collect it.

—Excerpt of a letter to The Most Hon'ble Ciarán St Just, The Marquess of Kilbane from Mrs Louisa Clifford.

20th January 1845, The Vicarage, Sussex.

Harry sighed as he heard yet another knock at the door. Inspiration was sorely lacking for this week's sermon, and the constant interruptions were not helping a bit. He glanced up at the clock and sighed. It was time he was about his business, in any case. He must see Betsy White and find out how she and her new babe were going on. The poor woman already had seven children underfoot, and if her lump of a husband was being of any use whatsoever, Harry would eat his hat. He must remember to take the box he'd made up for her, too. He'd bought some basic items and filled it with flour and sugar, a large slab of bacon, a fresh loaf and a few jars from his own store cupboard. He remembered having done the same thing for Jeb's mum, and had tried hard to forget the abusive she had served him in return. Mrs Maby had thrown a pot of jam at him, narrowly missing his head, all the time railing against God and do-gooders and people who ought to mind their own

bloody business. So, he'd tried his best to do as she asked, but a neglected child was not something he could turn a blind eye to.

Harry carried the heavy parcel with him to the front door, trying not to regret the last jar of strawberry jam from his larder. Betsy needed it more than he did. After he'd visited Betsy, he'd go to Mr Figges, who still swore he was breathing his last, but he'd been saying that every day for the past ten months, by Harry's count. Harry thought the old fellow seemed remarkably sprightly for his advanced years, but one never knew. He'd not forgive himself if the man died and he'd not bothered to come by, so he visited most days. Sometimes Harry read from the Bible, but more often than not from a novel, or from the paper he took with him and always *accidentally* left behind so the old man could enjoy it in peace.

In the hallway, Harry set down the box and opened the door, making a mental note to ask Lady St Clair if he'd have a new housekeeper soon. It would make life much easier. His heart sank to his boots as he looked upon a pair of limpid blue eyes that gazed up at him adoringly.

"Miss Steadman," he said, trying his hardest not to sound impatient with the girl. "I was just about to go out. What can I do for you?"

"Oh, Reverend Martin," she said with a sigh, gazing at her shoes and then looking back up at him through her lashes. Harry wondered if she practised that in the looking glass and then scolded himself for being uncharitable. "I must speak to you in private."

"Certainly not," Harry said briskly. "That would not be at all appropriate."

"B-But I must," the girl said, wringing her hands together. "I simply must!"

Her voice rose an octave, and her eyes glittered dangerously. Harry experienced a stab of alarm. Good Lord, perhaps the girl really needed to talk to him. "Well, if you wish to speak to me, you can come back with your mother or, better still, perhaps you ought to speak to her instead of me."

“Oh, I couldn’t do that!” she exclaimed, putting a hand to her heart with a fluttery motion that he was almost certain she *had* practised. “Mama would never understand.”

Oh, drat the girl. Harry reminded himself severely that this was his job, the girl was one of his flock and as deserving of his attention as anyone else.

“In that case, you may walk with me. I’m going to see Mrs White and I see no harm in you accompanying me as far as the bridge, as it’s on your way home. If you would wait, I’ll fetch my coat and hat.”

Harry hurriedly shrugged into his coat, put on his hat, and gathered up the box for Mrs White.

“Now then, Miss Steadman, what can I do for you?” Harry asked, once they had closed the gate to the vicarage.

“Well, it’s rather... delicate,” Miss Steadman said, blushing and looking away from him.

That did not bode well.

“Are you certain you couldn’t speak to your mother about it?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Quite certain,” Miss Steadman replied, a mutinous set to her chin.

Harry sighed. “Well, then. I am at your disposal. Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“Yes,” the girl said, giving him a desperate glance and then looking away again.

Oh, the poor child, Harry thought, instantly castigating himself for not having taken her seriously. How many times must he learn the lesson about putting others before himself?

“Miss Steadman, please. You may confide in me. I shall do anything in my power to help you, but you must tell me what the problem is. Would I be correct in supposing that there is a boy at the heart of this situation?”

“Oh, no, not a boy,” she said with a faint air of disgust. “A man.”

Harry felt anger lance through him at the idea some man had taken advantage of this innocent girl who had no defence against such a wicked seducer.

“I see,” he said, striving to sound calm and doing his best to keep his feelings at bay so she would tell him the rest. “And what happened, Miss Steadman?”

“I-I fell in love,” she said, gazing up at him with those big blue eyes.

The thought struck Harry that her eyes were not nearly so lovely as Miss Cadogan’s. Miss Steadman’s eyes were a very pale blue, whereas Miss Cadogan’s were that oddly piercing colour that seemed to change with the light, reminding him sometimes of the Mediterranean Sea, and at others of somewhere cold and storm-tossed. That was generally when she was in a snit with him, though. Harry returned his attention to the girl before him, horrified that he’d been distracted at all, let alone by that troublesome minx.

“I see,” he said again, inwardly rolling his eyes as he repeated himself. “And does this fellow return your... er... regard?”

“I don’t know,” she said sadly. “But I hope so, for I know we are meant to be together, if only he would realise it. We’re quite perfectly matched, you see.”

“I see... I mean... Who is this fellow?” Harry asked, deciding he’d best get to the heart of the matter. If no harm had been done, perhaps Harry could persuade him to do the honourable thing and sod off. Though if she’d been compromised... Harry jolted as Miss Steadman grasped hold of his lapels.

“Why, don’t play coy, Harry, you know it’s you,” she said, before standing on tiptoes and pressing her mouth to his. Harry, encumbered as he was with the box, froze with shock.

“Miss Steadman, do put the vicar down. He does not appreciate your unsolicited advances.”

The voice was cool and firm and had Miss Steadman stumbling away from Harry with an expression of

mortification.

“Miss Cadogan,” Harry said, relieved beyond measure that it was her and she’d grasped the situation. “I am so pleased to see you.”

“I’ll just bet you are,” she muttered, folding her arms before turning back to Miss Steadman. “How would you like it if some boy of only fourteen came up and kissed you, without a by-your-leave?” Miss Cadogan demanded of the girl.

“It’s not at all the same thing,” the girl said indignantly, her cheeks flushing scarlet.

“Of course it is. Reverend Martin is a grown man. To him, you’re a little girl and you’ve just embarrassed the poor fellow by behaving very badly. I believe you owe him an apology.”

Rather to Harry’s surprise, Miss Steadman folded her arms and glared at Miss Cadogan, her expression mutinous. “You’re just jealous.”

Miss Cadogan rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. That old chestnut. I am nothing of the sort. Now do stop acting like a complete nitwit. Apologise and go home before you get yourself into trouble. You can’t just go about the countryside kissing vicars without consequences, you know.”

Miss Steadman’s scowl deepened. “You just want him for yourself. I know, I can see the look in your eyes. You’re not that much older than me, either. Only four or five years. That’s nothing. You’re after him, aren’t you? I bet you only fell in that pond on purpose, so he’d have to drag you out again.”

“Miss Steadman!” Harry said, feeling this had gone on quite long enough. “That will do. Miss Cadogan rescued Jeb at considerable risk to herself, and I will not tolerate this silliness. Now do as the lady bid you and go home to your mother.”

Miss Steadman turned her arctic glare upon Harry with an expression of such fury he was quite taken aback. Without another word, she turned on her heel and stalked away.

Miss Cadogan gave a low whistle. “Oh, now you’ve done it.”

“Done what?” he demanded irritably, though why he was irritated with her he didn’t know, bearing in mind she’d saved him from an awfully delicate predicament.

“Love and hate, two sides of the same coin, you know.”

“I think hate might be considerably safer for my peace of mind and my reputation,” Harry retorted.

They walked on, crossed the bridge and turned left, happily in the opposite direction to the one Miss Steadman had taken.

She shrugged, walking easily beside him despite his long strides, and turned to regard him with interest. The sun glinted upon her blonde hair, turning it to gold. Harry looked away.

“How on earth did you get yourself in such a pickle, in any case?”

“Doing my job,” he said, wishing he didn’t sound so irritable, but really, Miss Steadman was bad enough for his nerves. Miss Cadogan was like a spark in a room full of gunpowder. Harry sighed, reminding himself he was a gentleman, and a man of the cloth, and that he owed the lady a debt. “I beg your pardon, Miss Cadogan. I’m afraid I’m a little out of sorts. I did not mean to sound so sharp.”

“That’s quite all right,” she said, amusement lurking in those troublesome eyes. “It’s little wonder you’re a bit cranky in the circumstances. First Miss Steadman, then that trying creature who makes you so unreasonably cross.”

Harry sighed. “You don’t make me cross, Miss Cadogan.”

“Yes, I do,” she said, grinning at him. “You may as well admit it. You don’t like me.”

“I never said anything of the sort!” he exclaimed, rather shocked she should say so.

She snorted, an unladylike sound he ought to disapprove of, but it only made him want to smile. What a dreadful girl she was. “You didn’t need to. That disapproving look is never far from your eyes. You think me too bold, too outspoken. Too much trouble.”

Harry sighed. “And you think me a dull dog,” he said dryly.

Her laughter made him turn to stare at her, an odd sensation tickling down his spine at the merry sound.

“I don’t, truly. I do *know* I’m a trying creature. I’ve been told often enough, I assure you, though I don’t mean to be. Mama says we both have an excess of animal spirits, whatever that means. I’m very like her, you see, and she was a terrible troublemaker before she married Papa. No, what am I saying? She’s *still* a terrible troublemaker. So, don’t blame yourself,” she said, patting his arm reassuringly. “It’s me, not you.”

The words *animal spirits* slid under Harry’s skin and burned there, making him increasingly tetchy as it conjured tantalising images and thoughts he had no business having.

“Oh dear. I’ve done it again, haven’t I?” she said, regarding him quizzically. “Well, never mind. If you would only give me the key to the village hall, I shall get out of your hair. My aunt wishes to deliver all the donations for the auction Friday night, but she does not wish to bother you if you’re busy.”

“I’m afraid I left the key at the vicarage,” he said apologetically.

“Oh, bother. In that case, I’ll simply have to come back tomorrow.”

“No!” Harry said hastily, and then cleared his throat in light of the smirk she turned upon him. “I’m not avoiding you, Miss Cadogan. I only mean to save you a journey.”

“Mm-hmm,” she replied, obviously unconvinced as well she might be.

“Jeb will be back at the vicarage by now. He knows where the key is.”

“Excellent. I’ll visit with Jeb for a bit and collect the key at the same time. Farewell, Reverend Martin. Until we meet again.”

The wicked female winked at him and then turned with a flurry of petticoats, chuckling to herself as she walked away.

Harry watched her go, frowning and feeling thoroughly distracted.



“Miss Cadogan!” Jeb said, beaming as he opened the door to the vicarage.

“Good afternoon, tyke. How are you settling in?”

“Fine and dandy.” The lad grinned, a cheeky expression she approved of. “But His Nibs ain’t here. Gone off do-gooding, like he does,” he added with a mystified expression.

“I know,” Alana said, fighting a smile. “I met him on my way here. I’ve come for the key to the hall. He said you’d fetch it for me and that I might visit with you whilst I was here. Shall I make some tea?”

“I can make tea,” Jeb shot back at once, looking affronted. “I know how.”

“Even better. I shall put my feet up and let you do all the work.”

“Best come in then, hadn’t you?” Jeb said, opening the door wide and ushering her inside.

Jeb put the kettle onto boil and went off to fetch the key. Alana looked about the kitchen, which was clean and tidy. She wondered how the two of them were managing together. The scent of bacon lingered in the air, so she assumed they weren’t starving.

“There you are. Mind you give it back to him, though,” Jeb said sternly.

She smiled. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Alana enjoyed a pleasant half hour with Jeb, who she found an entertaining companion. He even presented her with a plate of biscuits to go with the tea. They were a little soft, not that Jeb seemed to notice. Alana hoped her aunt would find a housekeeper for them soon.

“What a gentleman you are, Jeb,” she said approvingly as he opened the door for her. “I have very much enjoyed our visit. Might I come again to see you?”

“Anytime you like,” he said, looking mightily pleased with himself.

“’Ere! What you doin’ with my boy?”

Alana turned at the sound of the strident voice, dismayed to see an angry woman with hard expression hurrying towards them. A glance back to Jeb, whose face was set, his expression frozen, told her all she needed to know.

“You must be Jeb’s mother. How nice to meet you,” she said politely, offering the woman her hand as she stalked up the path to the front door. “He’s a credit to you. Such a gentleman.”

His mother looked Alana up and down, giving her a measuring glance before turning to her son. “What’s all this, then?”

Jeb said nothing, his jaw rigid, but Alana could see the tension singing through his narrow frame. Regret filled her chest as she considered the lovely half hour they’d just spent.

“A right nice welcome home, that was. Comin’ back to find the house all shut up, no fire lit, no grub neither. What you playin’ at? Why you still here? There ain’t no school at this hour, and don’t tell me there is. Bad enough that preachy cove forced me to send you. He tryin’ to steal you off me now, is he? T’ain’t right. *T’ain’t natural*,” she added with a revolted sniff.

Alana could not have that, indignation rising inside of her.

“Mrs...?” she began coldly, ensuring to use the exact tone that Cat would have done in the circumstances that could wither most people with ease.

Jeb’s mother was made of sterner stuff, however. “Mrs Maby. What’s it to you?”

“Nothing at all, Mrs Maby, only I shall not have a good man slandered. Your son had a traumatic experience and

almost drowned and yet you did not come running to his bedside. You only appear now, when the reverend has taken it open himself to invite the child into his home to ensure he is warm and fed. You owe the man a debt of gratitude, not disgusting insinuations.”

“Oh, don’t it talk nice, Jeb?” Mrs Maby said, regarding Alana with a sneer. “Well, he’s my boy. Mine! And ain’t no fancy piece of the vicar’s going to take him off me neither. Come on Jeb, we’re—”

Mrs Maby’s expression morphed into one of fury as the door slammed in her face. She sent Alana a glare that could have stripped the paint from the wood before hammering on the door with her fist.

“Open up, you little bastard. You open up this door and get out here now!”

“I don’t believe he wishes to go with you, Mrs Maby,” Alana said, feeling a swell of animosity towards the woman, the like of which she’d never experienced in her life before.

“No. Course he don’t. Had his head turned, ain’t he? You all turned him against me, against his own flesh and blood. You, all la-di-dah, and that vicar.” She scoffed. “He don’t look like no vicar I ever saw. Ain’t natural, I tell you, a man that looks like that preachin’ and maundering on about God. He’s a wrong ’un, that man. Mark my words.”

With that, Mrs Maby spat on the ground and, with one last glower at Alana, strode back down the path, slamming the garden gate behind her.

Alana let out an uneven breath, only now realising how hard her heart was hammering behind her ribs. Much as she wanted to believe that was the last they would see of Mrs Maby, she was not the least bit convinced. She knocked on the door, calling out to Jeb.

“It’s Miss Cadogan, Jeb. She’s gone now. It’s all right.”

Slowly, the door cracked open, and Jeb appeared, his eyes bloodshot and red. Alana’s heart broke, and she had to swallow down a burst of anger.

“It’s all right, love,” she said gently, and then stumbled back as Jeb flew at her, wrapping his arms about her waist and sobbing.

“Don’t let her take me, Miss. Please. I don’t want to go back. I’ll be good for the vicar. Swear I will. Won’t be no bother.”

“Ah, Jeb. Of course you won’t. There, there, now. Don’t upset yourself. Come along, let’s go back inside and I’ll wait with you until Reverend Martin gets home. How’s that?”

Jeb stared up at her, his cheeks tear-stained and his nose runny. He wasn’t a terribly attractive sight at that moment, but Alana bent and kissed his forehead all the same.

“You’ll stay?” he repeated, as if he couldn’t quite trust her words.

“Until the vicar gets home. Yes. I promise.”

Jeb let out a sigh, the tension draining from him as he leant into Alana like all the stuffing had been kicked out of him. “Come along, my brave lad. I think it’s my turn to make tea, and how about some cake?”

“We ain’t got any cake,” he said listlessly.

“Have you got eggs?”

He nodded.

“And flour and butter and sugar?”

He nodded again, a hopeful glint in his eyes.

“Then we shall certainly have cake,” Alana said firmly, and guided him back indoors.

Chapter 10



Mr Martin,

I acknowledge receipt of your last payment which we received on the tenth of this month. Your outstanding account is now settled in full. Thank you for your business.

—Excerpt of a letter to the Reverend Harry Martin from Hunters Gentlemen's Club.

20th January 1845, The Vicarage, Sussex.

Harry smothered a yawn as he walked up the path to the vicarage. He hoped poor Jeb had found himself some supper and gone to bed. A housekeeper really was imperative, now Jeb was living with him. Harry often returned home late when events overtook him. Like tonight, when it became clear that Mr Figges had been quite correct in what he'd said. The old man had died peacefully, with Harry holding his hand as he slipped away. *Thank you*, he murmured as he reached the front door, speaking to a God he had discovered late in life and considered a friendly being, a forgiving and loving father, not the fire and brimstone vengeful creation some would have their flock believe in.

Harry was grateful, though, that God had guided him to forget to leave the paper, and to return to Mr Figges again on his way home from visiting old Mother Babbage so he could give it to him. Harry had known as soon as he'd entered the bedroom, and so had Mr Figges, his smile quietly rueful. Thank God that he had returned, that the old man had known someone was with him as he went into a peaceful sleep, never

to wake up. Harry would never have forgiven himself if he'd died all alone.

Harry opened the front door, hanging up his coat and hat and then pausing, sniffing the air. His stomach growled at the delicious scent. Had the housekeeper arrived? The wonderful thought propelled his feet towards the kitchen despite his weariness, only to have him freeze upon the threshold at the extraordinary sight before him.

Miss Cadogan was in his house, in his kitchen, asleep in a chair before the range cooker. Her golden hair was a disorder of curls and she had tucked herself up in the warm blanket Harry kept here for the nights when he became restless, couldn't sleep, and sat up staring into the darkness. On the kitchen table was a delicious looking sponge cake, golden and sparkling with sugar in the lamplight. One large slice was already missing. Jeb's work, hopefully, and there was something else, something that smelled wonderfully like some manner of stew was keeping warm on the range. What on earth was going on?

At a loss, Harry cleared his throat.

Miss Cadogan stirred in her sleep, her eyelashes flickering as she woke. She blinked rather owlishly as she focused on Harry. She smiled, a soft, hazy smile that put Harry in mind of lazy mornings in bed with a lover. It was secret and intimate and full of dreams, and for a moment his chest ached with longing. Then she came fully awake with a start and a little squeal of exclamation.

"*Oh!*" she said, swivelling around to the windows to see the curtains hadn't been drawn and it was dark out. "What time is it?"

"Close to midnight," Harry said, still too befuddled at finding her here, let alone at such a scandalous hour of the night, to react with as much horror as he ought.

"Oh, my goodness! Drat and botheration. I must have fallen asleep."

Harry nodded. Well, that much was obvious. "You did."

“Good heavens, now I’m for it,” she said, sounding rather desperate. “I’m so sorry, Reverend. Miss Steadman’s assumption was not correct, I swear it. I am *not* angling to be a vicar’s wife. This is not a trap. What a horrifying idea, for both of us!” she said with a slightly hysterical laugh.

Harry rubbed a hand over his face, too exhausted to figure out why he didn’t feel especially horrified. He’d been up since five and it had been a long and soul-wearying day. “Then why are you here, Miss Cadogan?”

She got to her feet and set about folding the blanket, then smoothing down her rumpled skirts. The actions were jerky and distracted. “Because of Jeb.”

Harry frowned, galvanised with concern. “Jeb? Why? Is he well? What’s happened? Is he sick?”

“He’s quite well, don’t worry.” Miss Cadogan smiled at him and reached out, laying a reassuring hand on his arm.

Harry stared down at it as every nerve ending in his body fired to life. She was standing too close, and she smelled of vanilla and buttery, sugary sweet things that made his mouth water. Suddenly, he was wide awake. He took a step back, and she dropped her hand, blushing.

“His mother came around,” she said briskly. “Thankfully I was here, but there was rather an unpleasant scene. She accused us both of conspiring to turn Jeb against her, and of stealing her boy. Jeb was extremely upset and frightened, too. He wants to stay here, with you, very badly. He stayed in the house and slammed the door on his mother. She was none too pleased, I might tell you. I’m afraid you’ve not seen the last of her.”

Harry sighed, weariness descending once again alongside the weight of regret that poor Jeb had been so distraught.

“And so you stayed with him?” he guessed, knowing that she would have done so, because she was inherently kind, and brave. She was brave enough to rescue Jeb from drowning, and to stand up to a woman who was not good to him because she felt she must, because it was the right thing to do.

“Yes. He was so sad and lost and... I just couldn’t leave him alone. So, I showed him how to make a cake, and then I thought as I’d been brazen enough to raid your larder and use an unconscionable quantity of butter and sugar, I may as well compound my villainy and make supper too.”

Harry’s stomach gave a well-timed and very audible growl. “If that’s villainy, I’m changing sides and going to the devil,” he said with a tired smile.

“Why vicar, you do have a sense of humour,” she said with mock amazement.

Harry snorted. “Occasionally, though, how either of us can find humour in this situation is beyond me. You realise if anyone discovers you here—”

“Yes, it had occurred to me,” she replied, rolling her eyes at him. “And if you don’t want me for a wife, you’d better get me home unseen.”

The words shocked Harry, striking at him like a clapper hitting a bell and making it ring out. The word *wife* thrilled through him as he saw her there, in his kitchen, smelling of the cake she’d made and dishevelled from sleeping in the chair by the fire, waiting for him to come home. It was such a domestic scene, one that tugged at something inside of him.

“I’d best get you back to Holbrook,” he said, forcing the image into some dark corner of his mind before his imagination could run away with it. His imagination was a wicked thing and had led him into far too many dangerous situations to be trusted ever again.

Miss Cadogan gave him an assessing look, her blonde brows drawing together. “Yes, you had, but I think you’d best sit down and eat something first. You look ready to drop. Did something happen?”

He waved this off, not wanting to argue. “It’s fine, Miss Cadogan, I can wait until—”

“I disagree,” she said firmly, taking his arm and guiding him around the table, where she pulled out a chair for him.

“Sit.”

It was an order, not a suggestion. Harry almost balked, but then his legs gave out and he sat heavily. In something of a daze, he watched as Miss Cadogan went to the stove and ladled out a generous bowlful of something that sent perfumed steam curling into the air as she carried it to him.

Harry stared blissfully down into a bowl of beef stew. It was thick, rich, and smelled of herbs. There were large chunks of potato and carrot, as well as onion, and little bits of bacon too.

“Well, eat up,” she chided, pressing a spoon into his hand. “Or are you that tired I need to feed you?”

Harry gave a soft huff of laughter and helped himself to a heaped spoonful. Flavour exploded on his tongue, and he gave a happy sigh of pleasure. Satisfied he could feed himself after all, Miss Cadogan went to the counter and uncovered the loaf of bread Harry had bought that morning, which now seemed like a lifetime ago. She cut off two thick slices before slathering them with butter and setting them on a plate. She returned to him, setting them beside the bowl of stew. Harry ate in silence, and Miss Cadogan sat with him, apparently content not to chatter and to let him eat in peace. He was grateful for that, needing time to gather his thoughts after the events of the day.

Once he had eaten the bowlful, Miss Cadogan got up and put another ladleful of stew in and gave the bowl back to him. Harry didn't bother to protest. It had been sometime since he'd been looked after, and it was rather wonderful. His old housekeeper had been perfectly efficient, but not the nurturing sort. Her cooking had kept body and soul together, but had not been exactly inspiring. Harry felt so moved by the hearty stew he suspected he could write an entire sermon about it. He was lucky enough to be invited to eat with some of the wealthier parishioners on occasion, but to come home to such a delicious meal was something he could not remember enjoying for a very long time.

Once he'd finished, Miss Cadogan took the bowl away and cut him an enormous slice of cake, and made a fresh pot

of tea. She placed the tea and the cake in front of him and sat down again, regarding him with sympathy.

“Tell me,” she said.

And, rather to his surprise, Harry did. He told her about Betsy White, who had answered the door looking worn to a thread. Her husband was snoring on the kitchen floor, having had a skinful last night. The children clustered about her, the smallest clinging to her skirts, ragged and all skin and bone, and the stench in the house had made Harry want to retch, but he had stayed and taken the baby whilst Betsy saw to the little ones. He'd got the older children to practise their letters with a bit of charcoal from the fire, drawing on the big hearthstone. He had chopped wood and given the children their breakfast while Betsy took a nap before she fell down from exhaustion, and all the while her lout of a husband snored. Harry had listened while she talked about her fears for the future, for the children, for another mouth to feed, and he'd promised to find work for the oldest child, who was only ten but needed to earn his keep. Harry had wanted to get the boy into school, but with his father drinking away what little coin they had.... Fury had been a living thing inside him as he'd stared down at the sleeping man. Betsy must have sensed it, for she'd come to stand beside him.

He ain't a bad man, Vicar. He's just sad, is all. Life crushes the spirit from him, and it gets all sour in his guts, he don't know what else to do but drink it away.

Harry still wondered at the love, forgiveness, and fortitude he'd seen in the woman's eyes. She was far stronger than her husband, far stronger than Harry had ever been. Disgust had curled in his stomach, and he'd felt a surge of revulsion so fierce he'd had to get out of the house that minute. Harry had pressed a handful of coin into her palm and ordered her to hide it from Mr White, and left Betsy to her lot, feeling wretched and angry with everyone, himself most of all. Then he'd visited Mr Figges, who had restored his good humour for the man was wise and wry in the way of a fellow who'd not had much in the way of schooling but had seen every foolish and

wonderful thing life had to give, and had remained good-hearted.

Mr Figges had taken one look at Harry and told him to sit down and spill the beans before giving him some pertinent advice.

Reckon you don't need to fix the world, Vicar, just give them an ear to unburden themselves, and a bit of advice so folk can fix it themselves if they want to. Else you're on a hard road full of disappointment. Can't live other people's lives for em, can you now?

Harry had thanked Mr Figges for his wisdom and felt much restored as he'd gone about the rest of his day. That had consisted of visiting Mother Babbage, who swore she was one-hundred-and-two, and Harry wasn't about to argue. She was a wicked old woman who had been loose with her favours in her youth, had a dozen living children, and swore like a navvy. Harry rather adored her. Then Mr Johnson, who'd lost his arm in an accident last summer and was struggling to find work, then young Master Brant, who was recovering from a nasty bout of the measles. Then over to the church at Golden Cross, which was a good four-mile walk, to meet Mr and Mrs Clayton and arrange the christening of their new daughter, and then Mr Smith and Miss Fanshaw, who'd asked him to read the banns for them. Then back to Mr Figges, and to spend the hours of darkness watching a man who had been a good friend to Harry slip away peacefully, leaving him bereft and unaccountably lonely.

Harry talked and talked, and Miss Cadogan listened, occasionally asking a question, or offering an opinion—with which Harry was pleased to discover he agreed—but mostly she listened, and Harry felt the relief of being heard. Mr Figges had been quite right, of course. Sometimes giving someone an ear to unburden themselves was the greatest gift you could offer.

“I'm sorry,” he said, humbled by her goodness, by her generosity in everything she had done today, and the risk she was taking in still being here.

“Whatever for?” she asked in surprise.

“For maundering on so.”

She snorted, shaking her head. “That’s what Mrs Maby said, you know. She said it wasn’t natural for such a handsome fellow to be preaching and ‘maundering on about God,’ but you don’t do that, do you? I admit, I thought you were a pompous, preachy sort, but I was wrong. You just try to help people as best you can, and I think that’s admirable. You’re rather a good fellow, Reverend Martin.”

He laughed. at the genuine surprise in her eyes. “Thank you, Miss Cadogan, and as we’re being complimentary, I must observe that you are rather a good-hearted, kind and lovely sort of girl.”

The words were wrong, or at least, they were entirely correct, but he’d said them wrong, somehow conveying something far more intimate than he had intended. The atmosphere shifted, and Harry was suddenly aware of everything, of the glow of the dying fire and the tick of the grandfather clock in the hallway, of an owl calling far off in the darkness, of his heart beating, and the taste of vanilla that lingered on his tongue. His gaze settled on the little hollow at the base of her throat, the place where he’d feel her pulse beneath his lips if he kissed her.

“I ought to be going,” Miss Cadogan said, the sound of the chair legs scraping on the flagstone floor breaking the spell. “I dread to think what time it is.”

Harry leapt to his feet too, horrified by the road his thoughts had been travelling down, by the temptation that had slid beneath his skin and wormed its way into his brain, making him think of things he had no business desiring.

“Of course. I ought never to have kept you for so long. You ought to have stopped me instead of listening to that litany of complaint, and—”

“It was nothing of the sort,” she said, sending him an impatient glare as she fetched her coat. Harry took it from her and helped her into it, irritated by the sweet, warm scent that

rose from her, stirring his senses into restless agitation as he settled the coat in place. "You'd had a long and difficult day and you needed to talk about it. It's only natural when people have been filling your ears about their problems from morning till night. You ought to get married, you know, then you'd have someone to discuss it all with."

"I have no intention of getting married anytime soon," he said, regretting his tone immediately as she bristled.

"Well, there's no need to take a pet. I've already told you I'm not considering the post, so you needn't get all prickly. Can you seriously see me married to a vicar?"

There was such a mocking glint in her eyes that Harry's temper flickered to life.

"No, I suppose an earl is more in your line, or is it a duke you're after? Your sisters got a viscount and a baron between them, didn't they?"

She went very still, staring at him in shock, and Harry wanted to cut out his tongue.

"Miss Cadogan," he began, his voice hoarse with mortification and regret, but she was already moving towards the front door. She snatched up her bonnet and cloak and hurried outside.

"Bloody hell," Harry said, snatching up his own coat and going after her.

She was walking fast, down the narrow lane that led back toward Holbrook House. It was a longer route but did not pass via the village, so no one would see her. Thankfully, there was a little moonlight, so it was not pitch dark, though it was icy cold. Harry's breath clouded on the air as he caught up with her.

"Miss Cadogan, I beg you to forgive me. That was a terrible thing to say. I don't know what came over me, I didn't even mean it, I swear I didn't."

She glanced at him but did not slow down. "Fine, I forgive you. Now go home. You've had a long day and I'm perfectly capable of walking to Holbrook alone."

“I’m not leaving you to walk home in the dark by yourself,” he said, outraged by the suggestion. “Besides which, you’re still angry with me.”

“I am not angry,” she said, sounding bloody furious if he was any judge.

“I’m so sorry,” he said again, figuring the repetition couldn’t hurt.

“I said I’m not angry,” she repeated, but as the words were growled more than spoken, it was a less than reassuring statement.

“I remain unconvinced.”

She glared at him.

“Not that I blame you!” he said hurriedly. “I think... I think I was a little offended.”

Harry stumbled to a halt as she stopped in her tracks.

“How on earth did *I* offend *you*?”

“Can you seriously see me married to a vicar?” he repeated, mimicking her and giving a toss of imaginary blonde locks.

Miss Cadogan gaped at him. “I never said it like that!”

“Yes, you did, as if you were far too good for the role,” he countered, irritated all over again, although he was supposed to be apologising.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, her voice remarkably cold before she strode off again.

Harry kept pace with her. “Oh, come on. You can admit it. I know how these things work. I’m a third son, remember? Everyone wants the heir, and even the spare has some value, but a third son? Oh, no. They’re dispensable, and as for a lowly vicar, I should think not. A woman with your looks and connections could marry anyone she wants. You could have comfort and security and a life of ease. That’s the goal, isn’t it?”

“No!” She turned towards him, shoving him hard. Harry stumbled back on the uneven ground, shocked by the strength behind the action. “No, that’s not the goal, you ignorant, opinionated *man*. The goal was to marry my best friend. I spent years preparing to be a farmer’s wife, to be useful and knowledgeable and capable, to create a place where we would be happy together, a business we would run together, side by side, and we’d be safe and happy and it w-would be w-wonderful, but it all went wrong.”

To Harry’s horror, her lip trembled, and tears streamed down her lovely face.

“Oh, I hate you!” she exclaimed, swiping angrily at her wet cheeks. “Now look what you’ve done.”

She turned away, clearly intending to walk off in a temper once more, but Harry caught hold of her arm.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, his voice soft this time, dismayed at how he’d hurt this generous woman who had been so kind to him. “Truly. I’m an unfeeling brute, and I’m so terribly sorry. I feel wretched, if it’s any consolation. I wish things had worked out for you.”

Harry was uncomfortably aware the last part felt like a lie.

She shook her head, not looking at him. “Well, that, at least, is not your fault,” she said with a huff of amusement, which was the saddest sound he’d ever heard.

“Who was he?” he asked, tamping down a rush of inappropriate feelings that were too disturbing to contemplate right now.

She shrugged. “My sister’s husband’s little brother. The baron’s brother,” she added, sending him a sideways glance.

Harry ignored the dig, he deserved it after all. “What happened?”

“We thought we loved each other, and we did, but we were just children. We didn’t know, didn’t understand what love was, but we were engaged, and for almost five years I thought that was it, that he was the one, and we made so many plans and... and I feel such a fool.”

“No,” Harry said, shaking his head. “Never that, Miss Cadogan.”

“You think me a fool,” she accused him.

“What?” He stared at her, wondering how on earth she’d come to that conclusion. “I don’t.”

“You think me a bottle-headed ninny,” she said with something like satisfaction as she saw the look on his face, which he suspected was utterly appalled.

He shook his head, staring at her, staring into the face of lovely Artemis, turned all silver in the moonlight, a wild creature who existed only in dreams. A low mist moved over the landscape, shifting about them and adding to the ethereal sensation of unreality. Tears still sparkled in her eyes, glittering, beckoning him like sunlight upon a warm sea, and Harry was caught in the dream too.

“I think... I think you’re extraordinary,” he said, knowing the words ought never be spoken aloud, not by him, but they wouldn’t remain buried. Not when Artemis was gazing up at him, when the moon had hypnotised him and the frost-filled landscape reminded him he was flesh and blood. He wanted so badly for another to hold to him and remind him he was alive. “I think you’ll never be entirely tame. You’re wild and unfathomable and unpredictable, and a man could spend a lifetime with you and never know what was coming next.”

Her mouth opened in a little ‘o’ of surprise and Harry reached for her, pulled her into his arms and kissed the trail of tears away, brushing his lips over skin like satin. He stared down at her, finding her staring at him with astonishment and he acted upon instinct, seeking the lush warmth of her mouth. She gasped as he kissed her, and he wrapped his arms about her until she was flush against him, her softness melding against his harder frame. He kissed her deeper and harder and she held on, following his lead, matching his passion with her own. Elation soared through him, desire a rude awakening after such a monk-like existence for so long, so very, *very* long. He was young and alive, and he wanted, he *wanted*, *oh*, *yes*, *yes*, so much.

The eerie sound of a fox screaming in the undergrowth beside them had them both jolting with alarm. Harry broke the kiss, startled, his heart hammering as his senses—those not ruled by his libido—woke from the dream. He stared down at Miss Cadogan, horrified by what he'd just done, the liberties he'd just taken. "Don't," she warned him, holding up a hand, an accusing finger pointing at his face. "Don't you dare."

"I'm sorry," he said helplessly. "I should not have taken advantage. It was a mistake."

She made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a growl of fury, pushed out of his embrace and kicked him in the shin. Hard. Harry yelped as her boot made contact.

"I said *don't*, you thick-headed *arse!*"

Harry blinked at her, never having heard a lady of Miss Cadogan's ilk speak in such a way, and certainly not to a vicar. Though he had never so thoroughly deserved it.

"Don't what? I don't understand. I took the most appalling liberty, but you looked so beautiful and sad and... and—"

"Not another word!" she hissed at him, her eyes flashing with anger. "Not. Another. Word."

They stared at each other whilst Harry's panicked brain tried to decide the best course of action in the circumstances. Silence, he decided. Silence, in this case, was definitely golden.

"This...." She gestured back and forth between them. "This never happened. You walked me home to Holbrook, and I said goodnight, and that was the end of the evening. There were no arguments, no tears, and certainly no *kissing!*"

Harry nodded, willing and able to follow this instruction to the letter. "Agreed. No arguments, tears or kissing. None."

"None," she said, with a firm nod.

She walked on and Harry walked a pace behind her, feeling it was prudent to keep his distance. His blood was still up, and he felt peculiar... most unsettled. It was probably his own fault, but he wanted to blame her for it. She was just

too... she was just so... *argh. Don't think of it. Don't think of her*, he counselled himself. Fat chance.

They got to a small wrought-iron gate that opened onto the extensive gardens behind Holbrook. This was the path the family took when going to church on Sundays and would lead her back to the house.

"I'll be quite safe from here, thank you," she said, her voice cool. "Goodnight, Reverend Martin."

"Goodnight, Miss Cadogan."

With a regal nod, he was dismissed, and Harry watched as she walked away into the garden, disappearing into the swirling mist like a goddess returning to her own mystical world and leaving mere mortals behind.

Chapter 11



Dearest Mama,

Whatever do you mean? I'm not hiding anything. No, of course I've not met anyone I fancy. Yes, I will tell you if I do. The auction is this weekend and I believe it will be a tremendous success. Aunt Harriet is very pleased. I shall buy a ticket for the tombola on your behalf.

Cat is driving me to distraction. That girl is never still, and since she twisted her ankle, she's confined to the house and it's making her insane. I've caught her hopping about on one foot, twice now, the wretch. She'd escape to the village like that, given half a chance. Her new entertainment is to make me a candidate for Bedlam because she is so horribly bored. She's read every book I have given her and insists on discussing them at length and in depth until I want to scream. I've persuaded Aunt to let me take the little dog cart out this afternoon. Then, at least, I can take her for a ride out in the fresh air and I might refrain from doing murder. I am quite out of charity with everyone.

—Excerpt of a letter from Miss Alana Cadogan to her mother, Mrs Bonnie Cadogan.

22nd January 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

“What?” Alana demanded, her tone impatient. She could feel Cat’s gaze upon her as the pony trotted down the tree-lined avenue that led from the house to the village.

“I was just wondering what the trouble was. You’ve been in the most peculiar mood ever since that night you didn’t come home. Are you ever going to tell me what really happened?”

“Nothing happened,” Alana said automatically, for nothing had happened. They had agreed. No argument. No tears. No kissing. “Jeb was upset, and the vicar was nowhere to be found, so I waited for him to come home and fell asleep. When he finally turned up, he walked me home, and that was that.”

“And that was that,” Cat repeated.

“Yes,” Alana agreed. “Aunt believed me so I don’t see why you shouldn’t.”

“Because you’re leaving something out.”

“I am not.”

“So nothing happened?”

“Nothing happened.”

“And that was that?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Stop repeating everything I say, you’re as bad as the blasted parrot,” Alana griped.

“So, is that why you’re in a bad mood?”

“Well, to begin with, I’m not in a bad mood, but having your every word repeated isn’t soothing, you know.”

“No, no. I meant, are you in a bad mood *because* nothing happened? Is that balked lust making you unreasonable?”

“What? *No!*” The words exploded out of her with rather more force than was necessary.

“I see,” Cat replied, and in such a way that Alana was sorely tempted to throttle her.

“*What* do you see?”

Cat returned a sweet smile and fixed her gaze ahead of her. “Oh, nothing,” she said airily.

“Cat,” Alana gritted out. “I *will* murder you.”

Cat snorted and leaned into Alana. “Silly widgeon, do you know what I think?”

“No,” Alana said with a heavy sigh. “But I’m certain you’re going to enlighten me.”

“I think it’s time.”

“Time?”

“Yes, time.”

“Time for what?”

“For the hat, obviously.”

“What hat... oh! *The* hat.”

Cat nodded. “I will if you will.”

“I thought you were going to wait?” Alana said, frowning at her. “You said you’d decided to wait until the summer.”

“Yes, but no one believed me. I’m far too impatient, and this blasted ankle has given me too long to think and.... Oh, I’m tired of just endlessly waiting, waiting to grow up, to come out, to get engaged, to get married. I want to live now, not at some distant point in the future.”

“But you’re only seventeen, Cat. Do you think it’s wise?”

The girl snorted. “When was I ever wise, may I ask? Ridiculous creature. Besides, I’m only seventeen for three more weeks, and just because I have my dare, it doesn’t mean I must do it at once. I can still wait a bit, but at least it will give me something to think about, to focus on and plan for. I want something to dream about. The season is fast approaching, and I know exactly how it will go and... well,

I'm the most spoilt girl in all of creation, but it's looking to be rather tedious."

Alana nodded sympathetically. She knew exactly how it would go, too. Unlike her, Lady Catherine Barrington knew exactly how to behave in society when the need arose, and she would cause a sensation. Men would fall in love with her, battle for her attention, likely fight duels, write dubious poems, and throw pebbles at her window in the dead of night. She would never know a moment's peace or have a sensible conversation because they'd all be so dazzled by her beauty they'd not bother noticing the fact she was quirky and funny, and clever and bold, and rather wicked when the mood took her.

"All right, then," Alana said, laughing as Cat's expression changed in an instant from gloomy introspection to one of exuberant delight. Even Alana felt a little winded by the sight of that joyous smile. The poor fellows didn't stand a chance.

"Oh, huzzah! Thank you, dearest, dearest, Lana. You are the very best of friends."

Alana snorted and gave her attention to the reins as she navigated out of the driveway and onto the road into the village. "Don't pour the butter boat over me, you horrid girl. I only know I shan't have a quiet moment until I agree."

"Am I so very dreadful?" she asked, affecting a pout.

"Yes."

Cat returned a devilish grin. "Oh, good."

Alana drove them to the village and Cat waited in the cart, holding the reins while Alana popped into the bakery. She came out again holding a small, wrapped package tied with string.

"What did you get?" Cat asked, taking the parcel, and sniffing it with interest.

"Two currant buns. They're still warm," Alana said, grinning at her. "I'll drive over to that little clearing we passed along the wooded track, and with a bit of luck, we can stuff our faces with no one seeing."

Cat laughed. “An excellent plan, I’m famished. Onwards,” she commanded, flinging out an arm like a general commanding troops.

“Barmy,” Alana muttered, shaking her head.

She found the little clearing where they could eat their buns without disapproving glances and settled the pony while Cat unwrapped the paper. Both girls tugged off their gloves, so they didn’t get spoiled. She handed the first bun to Alana and then bit into her own with a sigh of contentment.

“Bliss,” she said happily.

Alana smiled, turning her bun back and forth in her hands and studying it as she remembered Reverend Martin last night and the pleased sigh he’d let out when he’d tasted the stew she had made. He had closed his eyes, savouring every bite, and Alana had studied him covertly. She had known he was a handsome man, obviously, but seeing him at the kitchen table, in need of a shave and with his hair a mess, weariness written in every line of his posture... somehow he’d become even more beautiful. It felt like a privilege to see him that way, as if he had given her a glimpse of something secret and precious. She had never seen him anything but immaculate before then. Not that she believed he was vain, or that he primped for hours before a looking glass, only that he tried so hard to be good at everything. He tried so hard to be good.

He had failed last night. She had seen the horror in his eyes the second after he’d kissed her, the precise moment when he’d realised what a dreadful mistake he’d made. It had cut her to the quick, snuffing out the tiny spark of hope that had lit the instant his lips had met hers, because that kiss... Oh, that kiss had shaken her to her core. She could still feel the memory of it, a fizzing sensation in her blood, tension in her bones and the most peculiar fluttery sensation in the pit of her stomach. For one brief, dazzling moment her soul had sung out, and she had known she had been right to break her engagement with Ollie because *that* kiss, that had been what was missing. That kiss had changed her, rearranged her in ways she did not yet understand, and yet he had looked at her

with horror and she had known at once what he was going to say.

She'd tried to stop him, tried to avoid hearing the words so she could at least walk away with a warm feeling, knowing it would never happen again but that it had been dazzling. But no. He'd had to open his big mouth and apologise, and tell her it was a mistake, and the moment had been ruined. Yet she could not stop thinking about it, could not stop the peculiar fizzing and fluttering and the anticipation of seeing him again and... oh, this was *dreadful!*

Alana scowled, suddenly furious with Reverend bloody Martin and wishing he were there so she could kick him again. Harder this time. The brute.

“Did it offend you?”

“Huh?” Alana's head snapped up, and she turned to see Cat giving her an odd look.

“The currant bun. Did it offend you? Offer you insult? For you've been giving it the evil eye for the past five minutes and I'm quite at a loss, unless it made some gross breach of etiquette.”

Alana rolled her eyes and took a large bite out of the bun, chewing so she wouldn't have to answer.

“I will get the truth from you,” Cat replied crossly. “I just know you're hiding something and it's terribly unfair, because I told you everything that happened with Kilbane.”

Alana took another bite.

Cat scowled at her. “You're mean.”

They sat in silence while Alana chewed her way through the bun, feeling the wretched thing lodge in her chest. She was too overwrought to digest anything, and too aware of her careening emotions to confide in Cat, at least for now. If she told her now, Alana was horribly afraid she would cry, and either Cat would think the vicar had assaulted her and taken liberties, or it would seem as if it had been something significant and her heart was breaking with unrequited love, and then Cat would want to discuss it endlessly and... and she

could not cope with that. Once she had mentally filed that night in a box labelled *things that might have been wonderful but were spoiled by an idiot male* she might be calm enough to confide in her friend.

“Oh, Lana, look who it is.”

Alana took a moment to turn her head, lost as she was in a tangle of emotional excess, but the sight that greeted her was not one to help matters.

“It’s your vicar,” Cat hissed in an undertone, as if Alana might somehow have missed the large man dressed all in clerical black striding down the lane.

“He’s not *my* vicar!”

If she’d believed him to be a vain man, she might have thought he’d gone into the church simply because black suited him so very well. Lord, but he was handsome, though he looked far more devilish than angelic, like Lucifer made flesh and blood. For a moment she had the uncharitable thought that Mrs Maby might be onto something, for why on earth would a man who looked like that choose such a life? Alana scolded herself severely for thinking such wicked things and had herself tolerably under control by the time he came level with them.

“Lady Catherine, Miss Cadogan, good afternoon to you. Is aught amiss?” he asked, clearly wondering why they’d stopped in the little clearing beside the lane.

“Nothing at all, Reverend,” Alana said serenely. “We only stopped to eat some currant buns. Shocking, I know, eating in public, but there you are. We are very badly behaved.”

“Hardly in public,” Reverend Martin said with a wry smile. “You’d have got away with it, had I not come along.”

“Ah, well, you can’t help being always in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Alana replied with a too sweet smile.

Reverend Martin’s eyes flashed. “I did not realise I was *always* in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

“Well, you wouldn’t, would you? Or else you’d surely contrive to be in the right place at the right time.”

Reverend Martin opened his mouth to reply, but then let out a breath and returned a polite smile. “I will certainly endeavour to do so in the future. For now, I shall let you get back to your currant buns in peace.”

“Oh, they’re gone now,” Cat replied before the vicar could make his escape. Alana glared at her. “They were delicious, though. Still warm. I can recommend them if you’re hungry. You look like the sort of fellow who’s always hungry.”

He shot a suspicious glance at Alana before returning his attention to Cat.

“Thank you for the recommendation. I’ll bear it in mind.”

He turned away and Alana jolted as Cat hissed in her ear.

“Oh, my goodness! He *kissed* you! You horrid girl, why didn’t you tell me?”

Alana stared at her, open-mouthed. “How on earth...?”

“Oh, it’s obvious!” Cat threw up her hands in frustration. “You could cut the tension between the two of you with a knife.”

“What nonsense,” Alana replied, cheeks blazing, her appalled discomfort at the turn the conversation had taken nicely illustrated when she looked up to see the Marquess of Kilbane before them and felt only relief.

It was only a momentary disturbance to the status quo. Good grief, whatever was he doing here?

Alana stared at the man with the irreverent thought that, next to Kilbane, Reverend Martin looked positively saintly. Before them sat the Prince of Darkness on a massive black horse, and his glittering eyes were levelled upon Cat with suspicion.

“You,” he said darkly. “Wherever I turn, there you are, like the newest, shiniest of bad pennies. I am beginning to think you are following me, Lady Catherine.”

“I’d like to know how, when I’m incapacitated, thanks to you,” Cat shot back, shocking Alana to her bones as she hiked up her skirt to show her bandaged ankle. “I can’t go anywhere without assistance.”

If Cat had been hoping for a reaction, she was to be disappointed. Kilbane did not so much as glance at the exposed leg, his disapproving gaze fixed on Cat’s face.

“Go away,” he said.

“That’s a little difficult, as you are blocking the path,” Cat returned. “Anyone would think you didn’t want me to go.”

Kilbane looked revolted by this suggestion and backed his horse up at once, giving a sweeping bow. “Please, do feel free to go away.”

Before Alana could remark that this was an excellent suggestion and get them out of there, Reverend Martin reappeared.

“What’s going on...?”

His words died as he stared at Kilbane, the colour draining in from his face in dramatic fashion.

“Well, well. Harry Martin,” Kilbane replied, something glittering in those strange violet eyes. “How do you do?”

Kilbane’s horse whickered, tossing his head and stamping.

“My lord,” Harry said, his voice somewhat unsteady as he gave a sharp nod of recognition. “I am quite well.”

Kilbane looked him over with a critical eye. “You’re alive, which is something of a surprise, I’m bound to say.”

The vicar said nothing in response, but tension sang through him. The peculiar moment stretched out until he cleared his throat, finding his voice again. “How... How is he?”

At first, Alana didn’t understand to whom he referred, but then realised he was gesturing to Kilbane’s horse.

The marquess reached down and patted the horse’s neck. “In excellent health, as you see.”

The horse walked to the vicar. Kilbane allowed it, and Alana watched as Reverend Martin stroked the great beast's head. The horse closed his eyes and made a soft huffing sound.

"Pirate," Reverend Martin whispered, pressing his forehead against the horse's and closed his eyes. "It's good to see you, old fellow."

"A man of the cloth," Kilbane said, shaking his head in dismay. "I never would have believed it. Out of the frying pan and... neatly avoiding the fire? A dirty trick to play on old Beelzebub."

Reverend Martin shot the marquess an unreadable look and straightened reluctantly, giving the horse's soft muzzle one last caress. He turned to Alana.

"I will escort you home, ladies."

"You will not!" Alana shot back.

"Oh, I think I will." He gave her a warning glare that suggested she not fight him on this and took hold of the pony's bridle. "Walk on," he said, making a soft clicking sound.

"Goodbye, my lord," Cat said to Kilbane as they passed him. "Until next time."

Kilbane ignored her, instead turning to Reverend Martin with a wry smile.

"Well done."

He touched a black-gloved finger to his hat before carrying on his way.

"What did he mean by that?" Alana asked.

"No idea," Reverend Martin replied blandly. "Kilbane says a lot of things for his own amusement."

"That didn't seem very amusing."

"He often isn't."

Alana scowled. "It sounded sincere to me."

"He is sincere a lot of the time, you know," Cat added. "Only people expect the worst of him, so they think he's being

sarcastic or trying to cause trouble, when if they'd only listen to his words and not his tone, they'd realise he's just telling the truth."

Reverend Martin's gaze sharpened upon Cat. "You seem to know a deal about him, Lady Catherine."

Cat shrugged. "I know him a little, but I'm also more observant than most. For instance, Pirate was your horse, and Kilbane seemed surprised to see you. In fact, he seemed surprised that you were even *alive*. He congratulated you on the fact, actually."

"*Cat!*" Alana said, suddenly aware that Reverend Martin might have good reason for not wanting such information to be common knowledge.

She suspected Cat realised it too in that moment, for she turned rather pink, adding hurriedly, "Not that it's any of my affair. Just an illustration, you understand, and I'm no gossip. I shan't say anything about anything."

"Stay away from Kilbane, my lady," Reverend Martin said, his tone urgent. "Whilst there is much truth in your observations, association with him will do you no good."

"Surely a vicar should invite any opportunity to save a lost soul and applaud anyone who attempts it themselves. Didn't the good Samaritan have something to say about it?" Cat demanded, her silver eyes flashing sparks that threatened trouble.

"Perhaps," he said, sympathy in his eyes now. "But were you intending to martyr yourself for him? Because a man like that could destroy you without trying, without even meaning to. The only person who can save Kilbane is Kilbane, and he gave up on that idea a long time ago."

"You know him," Alana said, drawing his attention back to her. An odd, squirming sensation bloomed deep in her belly as his warm gaze settled upon her.

"I knew his older brother a little," he said, and turned his attention back to the road.

Alana and Cat exchanged a glance. They had both heard the rumours about the older brother. He made Kilbane look like an innocent babe by comparison.

“What was he like?” Cat asked with some trepidation.

Reverend Martin did not look back at them as he answered. “The closest thing to evil I have ever encountered.”



Despite her protests, Reverend Martin insisted on escorting them the entire way back to Holbrook House, which had Alana seething with annoyance by the time they got there. They dropped Cat at the front of the house first, where several obliging footmen haggled over the opportunity to carry her back inside.

“I think I can safely take it from here, just as I could have managed the rest of the journey,” Alana said, glowering at the vicar as he hopped up and sat beside her on the cart.

“I never doubted it, I just worried your friend might persuade you into doing something rash if I wasn’t there.”

“In the first place, I am not that biddable,” Alana replied, growing testier as the vicar’s lips twitched.

“No. I suppose that is accurate enough.”

She huffed. “And in the second, it’s none of your business.”

He waited, glancing back at her quizzically.

“What?” she demanded.

“Ah, you’ve stopped. I was just waiting for the third and fourth.”

“Oh, go to the devil,” she snapped, guiding the pony to a halt in the cobbled yard of the stables.

He sent her a look she could not decipher. “I’ve been already, Miss Cadogan, and I do not recommend the experience. I beg you will forgive me if I do my best to stay closer to God this time.”

There was something in his eyes that told her this was a genuine apology, and she let out a breath, finding it impossible to stay cross with him.

“Why was Kilbane so surprised to discover you were still alive, Reverend Martin?”

There was a significant pause.

“Good afternoon to you, Miss Cadogan,” he said, jumping down from the cart and striding away.

Oh, drat the man.

With frustration, Alana had to wait for a groom to come and take the pony from her, and when she eventually hurried out of the yard, the vicar was nowhere in sight. He'd have taken the path through the garden, she guessed, back to the vicarage. She knew... *knew* she ought to just let him go. After what had happened between them, she ought to keep her distance. It was clear he had no interest in marrying, and she'd be a fool to allow herself to grow closer to him when there was no future in it, but the temptation to discover more about the increasingly mysterious Reverend Martin was too tantalising to let go. She hurried around to the garden.

Chapter 12



Dear Miss Milly,

I beg you will forgive me for this. I know I said I would give you time, but time appears to be in increasingly short supply. I will not think ill of you if you refuse to aid me with my outrageous scheme. Indeed, I shall think you a sensible young woman with a healthy respect for her own peace of mind. Yet I must ask you, must insist upon an answer now, please. I cannot delay any longer. I fear if I cannot be discreetly done away with, they mean to lock me up in an asylum and throw away the key, and if you cannot help, then I must flee.

It sickens me that this is what I'm reduced to, running away or hiding behind your skirts, but for now, I do not appear to have options.

How you must despise me for my weakness. Yet, I find terror outweighs pride when faced with the prospect of an insane asylum.

What will it be, sweet Emmeline? Yea or nay?

—Excerpt of a letter to Miss Emmeline Knight (daughter of Lady Helena and Mr Gabriel Knight) from The Most Hon'ble Leander Steyning, The Marquess of Wrexham.

22nd January 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

Harry didn't need to turn to know she was following him, every sense, every nerve ending lit up with anticipation at the prospect. He walked faster, telling himself it was beyond his dignity to break into a run but sorely tempted all the same. The church came into sight, and he kept his gaze upon it, though the temptation to turn around and look at her ate at his self-control.

Almost there. Almost there. Behave yourself, you bastard, he warned his less noble instincts. *It's not like before. You're a man of God now. You've put it all behind you. There will be no slip-ups. No falling into temptation. If you give into one, then the others will follow. You know how it works. You know this. You know this.*

The internal lecture continued as he walked faster, hoping she might not catch up with him, hampered as she was with petticoats and etiquette. Except this was Miss Cadogan, who didn't seem to give a snap of her fingers for either petticoats or etiquette. As he heard rustling close behind, Harry made the mistake of glancing back, only to see her running towards him, skirts hiked up to allow her to move freely. He groaned at the vision of shapely ankles and calves, and the indecent glimpse of her lacy garter would be seared into his brain for all time. His temper snapped.

“Miss Cadogan, surely your mother taught you not to make such a display of yourself! It is not seemly for a young lady to act with such abandon!”

And oh, bloody hell, now he sounded like a righteous prig and exactly the kind of fellow his younger self would have despised and mocked at every opportunity. Quite rightly, too, he thought ruefully.

She drew to a halt beside him, breathing hard, which did the most distracting things to her bosom. Pressing an elegant, gloved hand to her heart, she returned a scathing look which was only marginally spoiled by the fact she was still gasping for breath.

“My mother...” she panted, “...taught me not to pay any mind to narrow-minded, self-righteous pedants.”

Well, that told him.

“Narrow-minded,” he muttered with wonder as he opened the lych-gate. He shook his head sadly. “Pedant. Good grief.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” he said with a sigh. “It’s just rather shocking to hear such words flung in my direction.”

“Why?” she demanded, keeping pace as he walked up the uneven path to the church.

Harry paused with his hand on the heavy oak door and stared at her. Perhaps this was the way, the best way, to ensure she stayed away from him. “You want to know why?”

“Yes.”

He considered this as he pushed the doors open, feeling the peace of the cold, dim interior welcoming him inside as it always did. The sense of wellbeing, of homecoming, gave him courage.

“And you want to know why Kilbane was surprised I wasn’t feeding the worms?”

She followed him into the church, wrinkling her nose at his rather colourful description but she nodded. “Yes, though I know I ought not pry, but... Reverend Martin, are you quite well?”

He walked down the aisle towards the altar, finding he needed to touch it, to ground himself in this holy place and remember who he was now. Upon reaching it, he placed his hands upon it, smoothing out the velvet cloth that covered it. He let out a soft huff of laughter.

“You’re worried about me?”

She scowled at his amusement and folded her arms. “Against my better judgement, I assure you.”

“You ought to listen to your better judgement, Miss Cadogan.”

“You say that like I don’t know it,” she grumbled.

He laughed, a wave of fondness making him wish things were different. Yet, try as he might to put his past behind him, it was all around him, all the time. Temptation jumped out at him at unexpected moments, making him sweat and his breath come short and every time he had to battle against it. He could never let down his guard, never pretend it hadn’t happened, and believe that he was in every way the decent, honourable vicar he purported to be. He had to resist temptation, all kinds of temptation, for giving into one would lead then to another and another, and Miss Cadogan was a temptation beyond anything he’d encountered for some time.

Only, she was worse, because she promised salvation. She tantalised him with her wholesome goodness, that vanilla-scented sweetness that he hungered for, but she wasn’t for him. She’d made that plain enough.

He stared up at the three narrow stained-glass windows before him, a triple lancet depicting the Resurrection, the Crucifixion and the Ascension. “Well, then, Miss Cadogan, if I put my darkest secrets in your keeping, will you guard them for me?”

He turned to face her. She looked taken aback, but then her expression grew serious, and she nodded. Harry believed her, knew in that moment that she would take his secrets to her grave. He trusted her, he realised, and so he told her.

“This,” he said, gesturing to his clerical robes, “is the new Harry Martin, for the old one was badly flawed. So flawed, he very nearly destroyed himself, and made a thorough job of destroying any friendship or kinship he ever had. The old Harry Martin was a desperate fellow, a surveyor of the highway, a vice admiral of the narrow seas.”

She looked so perplexed he wanted to hug her for her innocence, and then remembered why that was out of the question, so he grew serious.

“I was a drunkard, Miss Cadogan, and I would have sold my soul for another drink. I certainly sold my boots and the coat off my back. I lost everything, including my self-respect,

and it has taken me a good many years to get them back again. As of a few days ago, and for the first time in five years, I am out of debt. Astonishing, really, how much money a fellow can piss up a wall. I beg your pardon, that was crude. But at first it was all jolly good fun... as most young men with coin in their pocket believe as they gain a little town bronze. I gambled, and I whored, and I was generally a jolly good companion. A regular roaring boy, and then I discovered I was not like my friends any longer, and gambling and drinking had become necessities, not pleasurable vices," he said, disgust lacing the words.

"You lost your horse to Kilbane," she guessed, and Harry avoided her eyes, not wanting to see her revulsion, nor her pity.

"I did. I was out of my head with drink, and I gambled away my dearest friend, and he *was* my dearest friend, Miss Cadogan. It was a betrayal of the worst sort, for he trusted me to keep him safe as he'd kept me safe on so many occasions. I never forgave myself for that, but Kilbane is a fine horseman. Pirate is in expert hands there, at least. I'd not trust Kilbane within a mile of you or Lady Catherine, but he prefers horses to people, from what I've seen. He's certainly kinder to them."

He dared a glance at her, to see her studying him with a contemplative expression, not with the aversion he had expected. Well, it would come soon enough, once she'd had time to consider his words.

"Strange, isn't it, that I'm always confessing to you? I'm certain it ought to be the other way about," he said with a laugh that sounded a little desperate. "Strange, too, that my parents always intended me for the church, and I did everything in my power to put off the inevitable. I wanted nothing to do with it. I'd wanted the Navy and adventure, but my brother got that option. Anyway, I was speaking of dear old Pirate. I miss him quite terribly, you know, and that awful morning.... God forgive me, but once I sobered up enough to realise what I'd done, I—"

He closed his mouth as his voice quavered, the misery of that day slamming back into him with such force it stole his

breath.

“You needn’t tell me anymore, Reverend Martin,” she said softly. “I ought never to have pried, but... but I’m glad you told me, all the same. I shan’t ever speak of it to another soul, I give you my word.”

“No.” He shook his head. “No, you’d best hear it all. Just so we’re clear. You see, when I realised what I’d done, I knew I’d lost my soul. I was going to the devil, and so I figured I’d get on with it and get it over with. So, I just drank. Nothing else. I don’t really remember the rest. Then one day, by some miracle, I woke up to discover I wasn’t dead, though I was in the gutter—quite literally—and an old man was standing over me. He was a vicar,” he said, remembering his mentor with a rush of affection.

“Ah.” Miss Cadogan smiled at him, and suddenly his vile history dissipated, drifting from his mind like so much smoke, chased away by the force of that smile, by the jolt of sheer happiness that surged through him. “And so you were saved.”

Harry nodded, still dazed. “I was saved.”

“I’d like very much to shake that man’s hand.”

“He’d like you,” Harry said, grinning. “The old reprobate.”

“I thought you said he was a vicar?”

“He is. The very best sort of vicar: one who knows we are all flawed, all messy and imperfect, and that God loves us, anyway. He is what I hope to be one day.”

“I think perhaps you already are, Harry.”

He stilled at the use of his given name, yet beneath his exterior everything inside him was a riot of activity. His heart picked up and anticipation thrilled in his blood, his nerve endings all on alert as she reached up and touched his cheek, laying her palm there like a benediction.

“You are a very good man, Harry Martin.”

“Don’t,” he rasped as desire ripped through him, shredding good intentions and straining against the fraying

restraints holding his control in place. Her touch was gentle, her palm warm and soft, and yet it burned against his flesh, branding him, marking him as hers, all hers, and he wanted her. He shook his head, finding it suddenly hard to breathe, let alone speak. “Don’t,” he managed again, the word barely more than a growl, but he could not tear his gaze from her mouth, from her plush, soft lips, sweet as vanilla, tempting him to taste her again.

She dropped her hand, a blush scalding her cheeks as mortification lit her eyes.

“I... I beg your pardon,” she said, looking so appalled that he couldn’t stand it, could not let her think that he hadn’t wanted her touch.

He craved it, and he knew a thing or two about craving.

“No, wait,” he said, reaching for her, catching hold of her wrist as she turned away.

A mistake. *Idiot*. He ought never to have touched her, for now his fingers curved about her wrist, around the warm inch of skin between her glove and her sleeve. Her pulse fluttered beneath his fingertips, too fast, like holding a panicked bird in his palm. His thumb smoothed over the tender flesh of its own accord and her breath hitched, her eyes growing dark and fathomless as she stared up at him.

Stop this. Stop it now.

He heard the voice, heard the words, but he couldn’t make himself move away. It was taking every last bit of his self-control not to pull her against him, not to plunder that delicious mouth and put his hands on her as he so badly wanted to do. This... This was a triumph of restraint, this was willpower working at full tilt, but to ask him to loosen his grip, to move away... *impossible*. She must do that. Surely, some notion of self-preservation and good sense would kick in at any moment and save him, save them both and that would—

She kissed him.

The movement was so swift and decisive it took his brain a moment to catch up, but then his face was cradled between

her hands and her sweet, sinful mouth was pressed against his.

He was going to hell. Except... if he was, they were detouring through heaven, because it was so... so... perfect.

She knew what she was doing. The thought was at once startling and unsurprising. She had been engaged, after all, for some years if he'd understood correctly. A sudden wave of jealousy lanced through him as he considered the man who had taught her to kiss so exquisitely and then she trailed her tongue over his bottom lip, and he didn't give a damn anymore. He put his hands on her hips, pulling her against him, his breath leaving him all in a rush as she pressed closer. His cock stood to proud attention, impossible for her to mistake, and yet she pressed closer still.

Harry groaned, turning them both around until her back pressed against the altar. She wrapped her arms about his neck, allowing him to kiss her as he wished, as hard and wicked as he desired, and....

The devil take it!

He stumbled back with a gasp, moving away from her as he realised what he'd done. Her eyes grew wide too as she came back to her senses.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her fingers touching her lips with wonder.

The sight shot straight to his groin, and Harry closed his eyes on a groan.

"Oh, dear," she said. "Harry, we... we were very bad."

"Very bad," he rasped, nodding, raking a hand through his hair.

"In *church!*" she whispered, sounding utterly mortified.

"Yes."

"Against the *altar!*" Her voice grew higher with every word.

"Yes," he said again, wishing his heart would stop crashing about, for it was making it exceedingly hard to

breathe, let alone think rationally.

“Oh, dear.”

Harry dared a glance at her to see her staring at him nervously. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright, and she looked.... His heart lurched in his chest.

“Ought we to apologise?” she asked, wringing her hands together, so earnest and sincere that Harry longed to hold her to him, but that would only get him in deeper.

“I certainly ought to, but you are not to blame, Miss Cadogan. You’re too tender-hearted, that’s the trouble, but we know the difficulty now, and... and we must endeavour not to spend any time alone together.”

“Tender-hearted?” she said in confusion.

“I think it prudent we keep away from each other from now on. It’s for the best.”

She still looked puzzled. “But there’s the auction.”

“Yes, well, obviously we need to get through that, but you’ll be going up to town soon enough, I imagine. For the season?”

“Yes,” she said uncertainly.

“Well, then. There you are. We only need to stay away from each other until then and... and the problem will go away.”

“The problem will go away,” she repeated, looking rather hurt, which he hated, but it was for the best. If he was alone with her again, things... things could get out of hand.

He must not be given another opportunity to take such appalling liberties. What if she came to the vicarage, for example? Providing Jeb wasn’t home, that would be perfect. They could go to his room and... *No! What the hell are you thinking?* This was temptation at work. This was what happened when he wasn’t vigilant. It was so easy to get seduced into taking a little taste, just a tiny drop, and before you knew it, you were downing your second bottle, spinning out of control.

“It’s for the best,” he said again, as much to convince himself as her.

It didn’t feel like the best; it felt wrenching and depressing and entirely wrong, but he did not dare deviate from the path he’d worked so hard to remain upon. It was hardly the first time temptation had come calling, but he had always fought it and known it was for the best. Why, then, was there this awful sensation of doubt and anxiety at sending her away?

“I see,” she replied, and she stood very straight, her shoulders rigid, hands in tight little fists. “Well, in that case, I had better be going.”

Harry nodded, not trusting himself to speak in case he changed his mind, in case the wrong words exploded out of him, for they were crowding in his chest, and he didn’t quite know what to do about it.

“Goodbye then, Harry, I mean... Reverend Martin.”

Harry winced at the correction, once again the feeling of something very wrong sweeping over him. He watched her go, heard the heavy oak door of the church close behind her and still could not make himself move. Eventually, he forced himself to put one foot in front of the other and made his way back to the vicarage.

“Afternoon, rev,” Jeb piped up as he entered the kitchen. “I done all me chores. Want some tea? I can make a pot.”

Harry frowned, struggling to focus on the words. “What? Oh, well done, Jeb, you’re a good lad.”

“Shall I make a pot, then?” Jeb asked, his expression quizzical, before adding, “You going to take your coat off, or are you not stopping?”

Harry tried to remember what he’d come into the kitchen for. An anxious, panicky sensation thrummed beneath his skin and he needed to calm it. He wanted a drink. *No*. No, he definitely didn’t. He must get a grip. “What, Jeb?”

“Your coat, you taking it off? And do you want tea? You all right, Harry? I mean, Reverend.”

“Harry,” he corrected, for it was important. “Call me Harry.”

“Right you are, Harry. You want tea, then?”

His chest suddenly tight, Harry shook his head. “No, Jeb I’m... I’m going out.”

“Now? Do you have to? You don’t look good, and it’ll be dark afore long. Where you off to, anyhow?”

“To see an old friend. Help yourself to supper. There’s soup and some good bread. Cheese, too. You eat, and don’t wait up. All right, Jeb?”

“If you say so, Harry, but are you sure you’re all right? Perhaps you’re sick. You look a bit sweaty and pasty.”

Harry forced a smile and nodded. “I’m fine, Jeb, or at least, I will be. I’ll see you later.”

Chapter 13



Yes.

—Excerpt of a letter from Miss Emmeline Knight (daughter of Lady Helena and Mr Gabriel Knight) to The Most Hon'ble Leander Steyning, The Marquess of Wrexham.

Still the evening of the 22nd of January 1845, Lewes, Sussex.

By the time Harry arrived at his destination, it was well after six. It was an inconvenient time to be calling, but he was too desperate for niceties, and he hoped he'd be forgiven for the lateness of the hour.

He could hear irritated muttering behind the door as the housekeeper bustled towards it, and then the clink of keys and slide of the bolt.

“Yes?” she demanded, peering out into the dark at him.

“Mrs Potter, I beg you will forgive me—”

“Harry? That you, lad? Well, I'm blowed. Come in, come in. Hurry now, don't let all the good warm air out.”

She ushered him inside and the door closed, a curtain drawn swiftly across to keep out the draughts.

“Well, this is a nice surprise. The reverend will be that pleased to see you. We were only talking about you yesterday, too, wondering how you were going on.”

“Speak of the devil,” Harry said wryly, following her up the gloomy corridor and towards something that he dared to

hope smelled gloriously like Mrs Potter's famous steak-and-kidney pie.

"Pffft. Devil, my eye," she muttered, opening the kitchen door. "Look who it is, Mr Bidewell, the good Lord heard your prayers for our favourite young fellow, and here he be."

"Harry! Harry, my boy!"

Harry smiled, feeling a sense of relief and homecoming in the warmth of his greeting, the like of which he'd never known elsewhere. Here was belonging, a place where he was valued for himself alone, not his association with a grand family, for his name, for his connections or his money... not that he'd had any of those since his fall from grace.

"Good evening, Mr Bidewell," Harry said, hurrying to greet the old man before he could cross the room, for his rheumatism pained him of an evening. He embraced the old man, who thumped him on the back with enthusiasm.

"Michael, you stubborn fellow. How many times? We're as good as family, so none of this Mr Bidewell nonsense."

"Ah, well, then it is good to see you, Michael. You look well. Sprightly, in fact," Harry said, which was true enough.

He was a sparse fellow, with sparkling eyes and a way of tipping his head sideways when he was thinking that always put Harry in mind of blackbirds listening for worms. His hair was white and fluffy as thistledown, giving him a rather startled aspect which led some people to think he was forgetful and vague. He wasn't. The old man was sharp as a tack and the wisest person Harry had ever known. Harry owed him his life, and that was the plain truth.

"Sit down, sit down, my boy, and let me look at you."

Those intelligent dark eyes gave Harry a considering look, his expression becoming one of concern. "Harry will dine with me, Mrs Potter," he said, without consulting Harry.

Mrs Potter beamed and hurried off, closing the door behind her.

Harry shifted awkwardly. "I don't want to impose...."

“Nonsense,” Michael waved this off with a gnarled, arthritic hand. “You need to get something off your chest if I’m not mistaken, and Mrs Potter’s steak and kidney is nourishment for the body and the soul. It will do you good.”

For a moment, Harry remembered Alana Cadogan setting a bowl of delicious stew down in front of him and his heart gave an uneven thud in his chest.

“Well then, what’s amiss?”

Harry sat staring at the fire for a long moment and Michael simply waited. He never rushed anyone, content to wait until you were ready to speak.

“I’m not... I don’t...” Harry sighed. “I’m afraid.”

“We’re all afraid of something at some time. What is it that frightens you, Harry?”

“Failing,” Harry said, putting his head in his hands. “I’ve paid off my last debt, Michael, and that... that felt so good. I did it by myself. I took control of my life, like you said, and it was all coming right. It felt like I was finally putting the past behind me.”

“Felt? Past tense?”

Michael’s keen eyes bored into him, and Harry swallowed, raking a hand through his hair.

“Temptation keeps putting itself in my way. I’ve tried to avoid it, but... I’m afraid I’m not strong enough. I don’t know what to do. I’m terrified if I fail, then I’ll fall. It will all come crashing down around me and I’ll—”

“What nonsense.”

“It isn’t nonsense!” Harry retorted, a little stung. “You’ve always given me more credit than I’m due. You don’t understand how hard I must fight it, all the time, how often I’m close to giving in.”

He let out a breath and sat back in his chair, mortified at having sounded so angry, for such an emotional outburst.

“Have you had a drink these five years? Placed a bet?”

“No! You know I haven’t,” Harry said, scowling.

Michael shrugged. “Then it is nonsense. You’re winning, and you’re winning because you’re strong and courageous. You’ll keep winning because of that, too.”

Harry shook his head. “I failed. Today, I failed.”

Michael sat up straighter, his bony hands clutching at the arms of the chair. “I thought you said you’d not had a drink, or laid a bet?”

“I haven’t! That’s not the problem.”

“Then what is?”

“A pig-headed, aggravating, beautiful, wonderful girl is the problem! She’s driving me to distraction. She’s everywhere I go, everywhere I look, and today... today... I.... In the *church*, Michael! Against the bloody altar!”

Harry put his head in his hands, tugging at his hair and avoiding Michael’s gaze, too mortified to meet the old man’s eyes. There was a tense silence... and then Michael roared with laughter.

Harry sat up, glaring at the old man with reproach. “It’s not funny!”

“Oh, you sit where I am, lad. It’s funny. Truly.”

“Did you hear what I said? I made... advances to her. In the *church*!”

“Yes, yes. Against the altar!” Michael whooped, wiping his eyes. “Ah, what it is to be young.”

“I don’t think you’re taking this seriously,” Harry grumbled, folding his arms. “I mean, where will it end?”

“Oh, come now lad, surely I don’t need to explain that to you too? Don’t you know about the birds and the bees? Do I need to have a little talk with you?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “And here I was thinking I could come and bare my soul and get some advice. I’m dying here, Michael. She’s temptation made flesh, and I’m.... What do I do?”

“Well, if it were me, I’d marry her.”

Harry shook his head. “No.”

“No? Whyever not? You want her. I’m assuming she wants you. Is she an intelligent girl, the kind who will challenge you and keep you guessing?”

Harry gave a rueful laugh. “Oh, yes. She’s that all right. I’ve been given the sharp side of her tongue a time or two already. Quite an experience, it was.”

“Then why not marry her?”

Harry threw up his hands. “You know why! I’m not a fit prospect for a husband, I’m barely a functioning human being. What if I fail, what if I make a wrong step and it all goes to hell? It’s one thing to drive myself into the gutter, it’s another to take a wife with me, perhaps children too.”

The vision of Betsy White swam behind his eyes, her lout of a husband snoring on the floor, having drunk away every penny they owned.

“Harry, Harry,” Michael said, sympathy shining in his eyes. “Did it never occur to you that you’d be a lot less likely to fail with a good woman in your life? If you had someone who relied upon you as you rely upon her, wouldn’t it make it easier to turn your back on temptation?”

Harry frowned. He’d never considered it that way. He had been so certain he had ruined himself and would ruin anyone else who came to care for him. Would it be easier to be a good man, to remain steady and sober, if he had someone who would not stand for any nonsense? He’d made it this far all alone, but how different it might be with a woman who was bold and brave and kind, and.... He sucked in a breath as the idea filled his chest, hope blooming to life. Even if he was wrong, and he failed, Alana Cadogan was no Betsy White. She’d not stand for him behaving in such a way. She’d likely murder him before she let him drag them all down. She would certainly throw him out, but she was also strong enough to tell him when he was being a fool, and to help him be the man he aspired to be.

Michael gave him a fond smile and shook his head. “Harry, you drank to fill the emptiness inside you, lad. You had no place you felt you belonged, no purpose, but that is no longer the case. You’ve done it, you’ve redeemed yourself. So let yourself live. Life is a blessing, and you should find pleasure in earthly joys. You’re only a man, remember, not a saint. There’s no requirement for divinity, I assure you. You’ve lost enough of your life, don’t condemn yourself to being a lonely old man. Have a wife, have a family. You’ll be a better man for it. I know I was. There’s not a day goes by I don’t miss my darling Mary. She was a joy to me, and losing her was the hardest thing I ever endured. I look forward to the day I see her again, but until then there is still joy to be found. Mrs Potter’s steak-and-kidney pie, for example. Now that is a blessing I am willing to give thanks for. So stop looking so glum. Let us fill our bellies until we can’t move, then you’ll see everything a deal clearer.”

Harry gave a huff of laughter and smiled. “Thank you, Michael. I knew coming to see you was the right thing to do.”

“Of course it was. I am a very wise man,” the old reprobate said. “But if you’re going to marry the girl, get on with it, will you? I’m not getting any younger, and I intend to perform the ceremony myself.”

“Do you indeed! I never said anything about proposing,” Harry countered, feeling his spirits lighten enough to banter with the old man. “That was your suggestion. I never agreed to it.”

Michael returned a wicked grin. “Well, it’s about time you used the altar for its proper purpose, my boy. Don’t you think?”



25th January 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

“Oh, Lana, but you must come. After all the hard work you put in,” Cat pleaded, but Alana only shook her head.

She put the book she’d been pretending to read aside and looked up at Cat.

“No. I have a headache. I don’t want to go. It’s all set up and ready. I checked this morning that everything was as it should be, so you don’t need me.”

“Need you?” Cat said in disgust. “We *want* you to come, you ridiculous girl. It won’t be half so much fun without you.”

“Well, it will be even less fun with me,” she said frankly.

Cat gave a frustrated little growl and sat down in the chair opposite her. “I could strangle that blasted vicar,” she said furiously.

“Get in line,” Alana said with a sigh.

“What business has he got kissing you and making you fall in love with him if he’s going to treat you like a leper the next minute?”

“I’m not in love with him,” Alana snapped, glowering. She was beginning to wish she’d not confided in Cat at all. “Right at this moment, I’m not certain I even like him very much.”

“Well, good. You ought not to like him after he’s treated you so shabbily. I’m very tempted to give him a piece of my mind.”

“Don’t you dare!” Alana exclaimed, horrified, and knowing full well that Cat would. She was far too bold and too willing to defend her friends. She was loyal to a fault and could not bear to see anyone she cared for unhappy. “Truly, Cat, I don’t want you to. He’s right. It’s for the best. I want to be wanted and valued and cherished. With Oliver, I was valued, but not wanted. Not... Not how Harry wants me. But Harry doesn’t want a wife, so there’s no cherishing and valuing to be had there. Don’t you see? I want it all. No half measures. I’ll have it all, like Mama and Papa, or I’d rather not bother. I’ll be a wicked old woman like Cora and Dorcas. They seem to have had a lot of fun out of life.”

“A lot of husbands, too,” Cat remarked, and then gave a sigh. “But you’re right, of course. You deserve it all, and we shall find you the perfect man who will give you everything you want. And then Reverend Martin will be sick with

jealousy and realise what a terrible mistake he made, and die of a broken heart,” she added with satisfaction.

“Cat!” Alana stared at her, shocked. “That’s an awful thing to say.”

Cat shrugged, unrepentant. “Well, kissing you so romantically and passionately and then saying you must stay away from each other was awful, too. He deserves a broken heart. Though perhaps I ought not to wish him to die of it,” she admitted grudgingly.

“Indeed, you ought not,” Alana agreed.

“Fine. Then he must love you from afar and regret his idiocy for the rest of his days. How’s that?”

Alana shook her head, unable to scold the girl when she was so earnest in her steadfast determination that Alana ought to be happy. “I suppose it’s a little better.”

“Better than he deserves after making you miserable,” Cat retorted. “Well, I wish you’d come, but I shan’t say another word. I’m saving you a seat in case you change your mind, though. Oh, do change your mind, dearest.”

They both turned at a knock at the door.

“Lady St Clair wants to know if you are ready, Lady Catherine,” called a maid servant.

“Yes, coming,” Cat replied. “Well, I must dash. I hope to see you.”

“Perhaps,” Alana said. She felt bad for letting her friend down. “Maybe in a little while.”

“Oh, hurrah,” Cat said, beaming. “I’m so glad. Then I shall see you later. But not too much later.”

And with that, she hurried from the room.



It took Alana a good hour to persuade herself into going to the auction. She really did not want to see Harry again. It was simply too humiliating. As far as he was concerned, she was a

problem that needed to go away so he could go back to his life. It was hardly flattering. If that had been the only part of the problem, it might have been bearable, but it was worse than that.

Somewhere between watching him devour the stew she had made, and that sinful kiss against the altar, Alana was very afraid that Cat might be right. Perhaps she wasn't *in love* with the wretched man yet, but she was falling, hard and fast and inevitably, and she didn't know how to make it stop. She supposed it was her own fault. Hadn't she wanted to know what it felt like to fall in love, to feel desperate for a man's touch, for his kisses, his company? Well, she was desperate, and the blasted fellow wanted her to go away. It was too depressing.

Forcing herself to tidy up and fetch her coat and gloves, she took the long route to the church hall, through the village. A delaying tactic, certainly, but she needed to bolster her courage to face Harry without blushing. She was almost through the village, and approaching the Lamb, when she noticed a groom walking a magnificent black horse up and down. Pirate. Her heart ached when she remembered how Harry had spoken of his beloved horse. How she wished she could get Pirate back for him. Kilbane did not strike her as a man likely to do anything from the goodness of his heart, assuming he had a heart at all. From what she had heard, there was little resembling goodness in him, no matter what Cat thought. The girl was deluded, sadly, but it was impossible to reason with her. Once Cat had made up her mind to defend and protect someone, that was it. She was their champion, whether they wanted her or not. Alana had to admit she was relieved by Kilbane's obvious indifference to her friend. He clearly viewed Cat as an annoying child and wanted nothing to do with her, which was the best they could hope for. What on earth was he doing back here, though?

Deciding it was none of her affair what the man was up to, Alana walked on, and was close to the vicarage when she heard a volley of furious shouting.

“Lemme go! Lemme go! I won’t go, I don’t want to... Gerroff!”

“Jeb?” Alana called, stopping in her tracks just in time to see a huge, burly fellow striding off, with Jeb slung over his shoulder like an old carpet. Jeb was pounding at the man’s back, to little effect. His mother scurried behind, holding her skirts as she ran to keep up.

“Mrs Maby!” Alana shouted. “Mrs Maby, what is the meaning of this?”

“None of your business is what it is. He’s my boy, and I’m takin’ him back.”

“Oh, no.” Alana dithered for a moment, uncertain of the best course of action. She wanted to rush after the big brute and demand he put Jeb down, but that was unlikely to yield results. Well, there was nothing for it. She ran towards the village hall.

Chapter 14



Dearest Pip,

Thank you for your last letter. It is wonderful to hear how you are getting on at Goshen Court. It sounds like you've had trials a plenty to overcome and we are so proud of you for taking them on and persevering. You will make a marvellous success of it. I know you will. Perhaps you will invite us to visit you one day soon, so we might see all you have achieved.

My darling boy, won't you tell me what the trouble is? I did not like to corner you at Christmas and demand answers, though I was sorely tempted. But you were with us for such a short time, and I did not want to risk an argument when I was so happy to see you. Your father counsels me to be patient. He tells me to give you space and time and that when you are ready, you will come to us, but he is the most patient man in the world, and I am not in the least patient. You know that I am not patient, Pip, and I worry so.

Please, won't you tell me what has happened that has you hiding away in that vast mausoleum of a place all alone? I know your father chastised you for squandering your talents and your time on frivolous pastimes, but we did not intend

for you to become a monk. Will you not return for the season? Do you not wish to marry and have children? What is it I am not seeing? I worry for you.

—Excerpt of a letter from The Most Hon'ble Matilda Barrington, Marchioness of Montagu, to her eldest son, The Right Hon'ble Philip Barrington, The Earl of Ashburton.

25th January 1845, Holbrook Village Hall, Sussex.

Harry scanned the hall, pleased by the turnout. The place was bursting at the seams, with every chair taken and people standing in the aisles and at the back. The bidding had become quite heated at times, though Lady St Clair, who was playing auctioneer, was cool and collected and had a way of skewering you with a glance that made anyone getting overexcited feel the need to sit down and be quiet immediately. Yet among all those here, he could see no sign of Alana.

Right in the front was Lady Catherine, and beside her was an empty seat, which several young gentlemen had tried their best to occupy, only to be sent away with short shrift. Well, she must be expecting her friend, then. The two women had been inseparable since they'd arrived at Holbrook, after all. Harry tried to catch the girl's eye, hoping he might ask where the lady was. A moment later, he did indeed gain Lady Catherine's attention, only to be on the receiving end of a volcanic look that Lady St Clair could not have bettered.

Ah. So Alana had told her what had happened. Marvellous. Not only did that mean his beloved was furious with him, and rightly so, but it meant that her friend wanted to do him bodily harm, too. His chances of being accepted as a potential suitor were looking slim. Again, he did not feel able to defend his behaviour. He'd acted shabbily and caused hurt, and... and perhaps this was proof that he'd been right, and Michael was wrong. Perhaps Harry was not ready for such a relationship. He was unprepared to have another human being depending on him. Maybe he would be ready one day, but just not yet. In a year, perhaps, or two. But in a year or two,

someone else would have seen how astonishing Alana was and married her. Someone who wasn't him.

Damn it.

He might not be ready. He might be flawed and idiotic and a bloody bad bargain, but if she was willing to take a chance on him, he must risk it. This might be his only chance for happiness, for a life he'd thought lost to him. An idiot he might be, but not idiot enough to let a woman like that get away. Not any longer. He'd simply have to make it up to her, to beg for forgiveness. He'd done a fair bit of begging for forgiveness since he'd sobered up, and it wasn't as if humiliating himself was an unfamiliar experience. If she wanted him on his knees, well, he'd had plenty of practice, and he could be patient. He could court her properly and show her how hard he would try to be everything he ought, everything she needed.

Harry slipped quietly out of the hall that was growing stuffy and close. He went outside, seeking fresh air and an opportunity to clear his head. His new housekeeper had begun work that morning, a Mrs Hogget. She was a cheerful soul, short and stout with a no-nonsense, friendly manner that would be perfect for dealing with his parishioners, and him. He suspected she was likely to become over-familiar enough to scold him, but would remain deferential enough to see that he could always work without interruption. Lady St Clair had found him the perfect solution to his household troubles. Even Jeb, after an hour or so of suspicious eyeballing, had warmed to Mrs Hogget, especially after she presented him with a plate laden with two hot buttered scones topped with jam. Her own jam. She'd brought it with her.

Harry sighed and sat down on the wall in front of the hall. If only he could make things up with Alana, this would be an exceptionally good day. He was just pondering how hard he was prepared to grovel when he heard someone calling him.

His head came up as he recognised both the voice and the sound of panic.

“Harry! Harry, oh, please come at once. *Please!*”

“Alana?” He scrambled to his feet. “Alana, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“Not now, Harry,” she said furiously, gesturing madly at him. “Just come!”

She turned and ran off again and Harry ran after her, catching her up. She was pink-cheeked from exertion and yet pale with worry.

“It’s Jeb,” she gasped as they ran. “His mother has some big lout with her, and they’ve carried him off.”

“What?” Harry said in alarm. “Where?”

“At the pub, a few minutes ago,” she gasped.

Harry muttered an oath. “Stay here. I’ll see to this.”

He ran flat out, leaving Alana behind and hoping she’d stay put. What he planned to do when he caught up with Jeb, he didn’t know. Mrs Maby was his mother, and the law was on her side. He had no rights to the boy. He didn’t doubt that, if he insisted or made a fuss, Mrs Maby would insinuate he just wanted free labour, or worse, had wicked intentions towards the boy. So far, his reputation had remained remarkably intact. Although certain people, Lady St Clair being one of them, were aware of his rather colourful past, most of his parishioners were not. Whilst he’d made a spectacle of himself, being a third son, the scandal rags had shown little interest in him. To them, he was of no importance or note, which was of course half the reason he’d made the spectacle in the first place, but now was not the time for such introspection. If Mrs Maby made a great fuss, his past would be bound to get dragged out into the light, but Harry could not let her just take the boy off against his will and do nothing.

He arrived at the Lamb to see Mrs Maby regarding a palmful of coin, but there was no sign of Jeb, or the big lout Alana had described.

“Where is he?” Harry demanded, his heart contracting with worry at the self-satisfied look Mrs Maby returned.

“Gone to London.” She smirked. “Gone to make his fortune.”

“To make his fortune? What the devil do you mean? Stop speaking in riddles. What have you done with him?”

“Got him out o’ your clutches, for one, eh?” she said, looking him up and down in disgust. “What you be wanting with my boy, anyway? Free labour, someone to shine your boots for free, or summat else?”

“Nothing of the sort, I promise you. Only to give him a roof over his head and someone who gave a damn about him,” Harry retorted, though he knew he ought not.

He ought to remain calm, to not pass judgement. That was his role here, but what had she done with Jeb? His stomach twisted but he took a breath, reminding himself that Mrs Maby was as in need of him as Jeb.

“Mrs Maby, I had no intention of keeping Jeb from you. Far from it. He needs you, and I only wish to help. He’s a good lad, and I’d like to make things better for him, for both of you, if you’d let me.”

“Bleedin’ do-gooder,” Mrs Maby said with disgust.

“Martin, are you looking for a boy?”

Harry looked up, startled to be addressed by the Marquess of Kilbane, who had just walked out of the pub. “Yes, did you see him?”

“I did, perhaps ten minutes ago. Some big ugly brute bundled him into a coach headed for London.”

Harry swung to look at Mrs Maby, who shrugged. “Told ye, didn’t I? He’s gone to London.”

“Why? Where did you get that money?”

“It’s my guess she sold him,” Kilbane, regarding Mrs Maby as though she were something he’d stepped in. “Isn’t that right, my dove? How much did you get? Enough to keep you in gin for a week or two, mayhap?”

“Damnation, I need to go,” Harry said desperately, raking a hand through his hair, tempted to pull it by the roots as anger and frustration gnawed at him. If only he hadn’t lost Pirate, if

only he'd not been such a bloody waste of a man he might have helped, he might have done something.

Alana arrived, one hand pressed to her heart. "Where...." she gasped. "Where is he?"

"His mother sold him to that devil and now he's been hauled off to London, and there's damn all I can do about it!" Harry exploded, wondering if he could beg a horse from Lady St Clair. She would surely help, but by the time he got back to Holbrook....

Kilbane tsked. "Oh, for the love of God. Take the bloody horse. I suspect the big brute is a sweep and this charming creature has sold him as a climbing boy. If you don't catch him before they get to town, you'll never find him again. Go on," he added, making a shooing motion towards Harry.

"Thank you," he said fervently as he ran to Pirate, tightening the girth and mounting him easily.

Kilbane glowered and tossed a purse at him. Harry caught it in one hand, the weight of it suggesting a goodly amount of coin was inside.

"You'll need this. I suspect you'll have to buy the child back."

"God bless you," Harry said, not about to argue with the man.

Kilbane returned a look of complete outrage. "Go to the devil," he said in disgust, and stalked back into the pub.



Alana watched Harry ride off, her heart still hammering. She had never loathed the constraints of dozens of petticoats and the blasted corset she was laced into more than now. Her head was spinning as she fought for breath, and she could do nothing but watch as Harry rode off to save poor Jeb. Furious with herself, her ridiculous outfit and, more than anything with Jeb's mother, she turned on Mrs Maby.

"How could you? How could you do such a vile, wicked thing?"

Mrs Maby folded her arms, a mutinous expression on her face. She looked Alana up and down with contempt. "Oh, it's all right for you, Miss La-di-Da. You ain't got a bleedin' clue what my life is like."

"No," Alana admitted readily. "I don't. I'm exceedingly fortunate and I know it. I cannot imagine how hard your life has been, but I still find it impossible to believe that you, his mother, had so little feeling for your own flesh and blood that you would sell him! He's a person, Mrs Maby, he has feelings too. Imagine how afraid he is now. Did you even stop to consider what his life would be? Do you know how many little boys die in those chimneys?"

Something resembling guilt flickered in the woman's eyes for a moment, but it was swiftly replaced by another expression, this one glittering and hard. "That's life, ain't it, duck? My pa didn't care much who he sold me to, charming bloke he was, and I had to look out for meself. Jeb's a big boy now. He'll figure it out."

Mrs Maby walked off without a backwards glance, leaving Alana seething and impotent to do anything at all.

"Lana?"

Alana turned to see Cat hurrying towards her.

"Oh, Cat, that dreadful woman!" she exclaimed.

Cat ran to her, holding out her hands. "What is it? What's happened? Why is Harry riding Pirate?"

"She sold him!"

"Pirate?" Cat asked in confusion.

"No! Mrs Maby sold Jeb to a chimney sweep. He's on his way to London as we speak," she said, her voice quavering.

"Oh, love!" Cat exclaimed, her beautiful face twisted with utter horror. "What can we do?"

"Harry's gone after them," Alana said, her heart easing somewhat as she said the words.

Harry would make it right. He'd not stop until he had Jeb safe. Yet he was only one man and that fellow had been huge and rough looking. Her heart recommenced its agitated rhythm.

"He took Pirate?" Cat asked.

"Kilbane told him to and gave him coin to buy the horrid man off," Alana said, gnawing at her lip. "I think we ought to go too, Cat. What if the brute is violent? Harry's a vicar, a man of God. He won't know how to fight. What if he needs help?"

"Certainly, we ought to go too," Cat said stoutly. "Where is Lord Kilbane?"

"Inside." Alana gestured to the pub.

"Come along, then," Cat said, marching towards the front door.

"Cat! We can't go in there," Alana said, her eyes wide.

Cat put up her chin. "Do you want to help Harry or not?"

Alana regarded her friend for a moment, then followed her inside.



Ciarán St Just, The Marquess of Kilbane, was in an excessively bad mood. If it wasn't bad enough, he'd had to waste his time *again*, trekking back and forth to this horrifyingly respectable place, now he'd been forced into doing a good deed. Another one! *And* the bloody vicar had blessed him for it! It was enough to give him a migraine. He scowled down into the glass of brandy he was nursing and wondered if getting howling drunk and scandalising the neighbourhood would make him feel better. Probably not, which was an even more lowering thought. God, but he was bored. He could not remember the last time anything even slightly interesting happened.

There had been that business with the witch, of course. That had been mildly diverting, but short-lived. He sighed. Worst of all, now he couldn't even get out of this hellish pit of morality because the bloody vicar had his goddamned horse. It

was beyond belief that the scandal sheets' favourite hell-born babe couldn't go home because he'd lent a man of the cloth his horse to rescue some grubby little oik. If the papers got hold of this, his reputation would be shredded.

"My lord?"

Ciarán groaned and closed his eyes. Just when he'd thought things could not get any worse. "No. No, just ignore it and it will go away."

"I certainly will not."

Irritation simmering, he slanted a glittering look at the ridiculous blonde termagant who seemed determined to plague his existence. "*It* should," he gritted out. "If it knows what's good for it."

"Oh, honestly. I refuse to continue this ridiculous conversation. I am Lady Catherine Barrington, not an *it*, and I refuse to be referred to as such. Besides which, you know very well I won't go away, so you may as well get it over with."

"I suppose you have a point," he said, giving into the inevitable. "Speak your piece and then go away."

"I do wish you would stop telling me to go away," she said, folding her arms. God, she was young. Had he ever been that young? He tried to remember being her age, but he seemed to have missed a bit. He remembered being a child, a helpless child who had not yet learned to fight back, and then he remembered being as he was now. The years in between seemed to have passed him by. Not so for Lady Catherine. Her skin was flawless, her eyes bright, she looked as shiny as a new penny and in comparison he felt... grubby.

"And I wish you would stop giving me cause to tell you to go away," he said crisply. "Alas, we both appear to be doomed to disappointment."

"We need your help."

Ciarán gave a bark of laughter. "Not on your life. You have all your limbs this time. Walk home, Lady Catherine. I don't have a horse to transport you even if I wished to, which I very much do not."

“Oh, yes, and that was very good of you, to give Pirate back to Reverend Martin.”

“I did not give him back. I lent him. Entirely different,” he snapped.

“It was still very good of you,” she said, her eyes shining.

Ciarán recoiled. Good God, the child was nauseating. Why would she not go away?

“Cat, come along. He won’t help us.”

He glanced to the side of Lady Catherine to see Miss Cadogan. Ah, the sensible one. At last. She tugged at her friend’s arm, trying to get her to budge, but Lady Catherine had a mutinous look in her eyes that boded ill.

“No, Alana. His lordship is going to help us.”

Ciarán scowled. “He most certainly is not.”

“He is if he wants to have a moment’s peace this evening,” she said sweetly, but with an edge to the words he did not miss. The diabolical girl would certainly think of some way to torment him further.

“What is it you want exactly?” he exploded, with the dreadful certainty it was the only way to get rid of her.

“To help Reverend Martin, obviously,” Lady Catherine said, sounding a little exasperated.

Ciarán barely refrained from gnashing his teeth. Any respectable girl with a brain in her head would be terrified by the prospect of speaking to him alone, but not Lady Catherine, and then she had the temerity to get exasperated. *With him!* It was the outside of enough.

“Did you not see the size of that big brute who took Jeb?” she carried on. “If he won’t let the vicar pay him off—and thank you for giving him the money, that was exceedingly kind of you—but, if the man won’t take it, he might get violent.”

Ciarán downed his drink and poured another. “It was not kind. I just wanted him to go away. If I thought it would work

on you, I would give you a bag of coin as well.”

The girl sighed, giving him a pitying look. “I know, I’m excessively annoying, coming and bothering you when you were having a quiet drink, and you’re all upset already, worrying in case anyone saw you doing something nice. But, really, it can’t be helped. We must go after the poor vicar. It wouldn’t be right to abandon him. You do see?”

He glared at her, wondering at the last time he’d been so bloody angry. Surging to his feet, he stared down at her in fury. She didn’t budge, didn’t even flinch, didn’t take so much as a tiny step back. She had her father’s ice in her veins, that was for damned sure.

“Get her away from me.”

Though he was staring at Lady Catherine, her friend knew very well he was addressing her.

“Cat. Come away now, before he murders you. I told you it was useless.”

Something flickered in the girl’s eyes, but Ciarán refused to see it, refused to look at her a moment longer. Instead, he turned on his heel and went back to his table. He downed his drink and poured another without giving them so much as a glance. The next time he looked up, they were gone.

Chapter 15



Dearest Mama,

Your letter made me feel more ashamed than I can properly convey in writing, and I have much to be ashamed for. Please forgive me for being such a wretched son when you have both been the very best of parents. I will do better, I swear it. I will make you proud of me, only I beg you, give me a little more time.

To set your mind somewhat at ease, I am in excellent health, and other than the fact I know I am making you worry, I am in good spirits. I feel, at last, that I know who I am. Warts and all.

It's hard to grow up in the shadow of such a man as father. This is not a whinging, woe is me remark, please understand that. I have had the most wonderful childhood, and a life filled with more love and happiness than anyone has a right to. But I have always been terrified of falling short of his example. I suppose I still am. He is everything a man ought to be, a kind parent, a devoted husband, the epitome of a proper English gentleman. He is loved by those who know him, admired by those who don't, and feared by those who would do him harm. I have spent my entire life wanting to emulate him and knowing I

could never be him, never be everything he is, but finally I understand something he tried to tell me so many times. I do not need to be him. He tried to make me listen, but I would not. I hear him now. I hear and understand what he tried to teach me. Better late than never, I suppose, but I realise now, I can only be myself, as imperfect as that may be. I hope he will not be too terribly disappointed all the same.

There is so much work to do at Goshen Court, sometimes I fear the place will fall down before I get to it, but I am making progress, good progress. I think by summer's end, the place might be somewhere I should be proud to show you.

If you would be so very kind and patient as to give me that time, I shall very much look forward to revealing all I have hidden from you.

—Excerpt of a letter to The Most Hon'ble Matilda Barrington, Marchioness of Montagu, from her son, The Right Hon'ble Philip Barrington, The Earl of Ashburton.

25th January 1845, The Lamb, Holbrook, Sussex.

Cat stared back at the pub, her beautiful face filled with confusion, her blonde brows knitted.

“Come along, love. If we go back to the hall, there's bound to be someone to help,” Alana pleaded, tugging at her arm.

Cat nodded, distracted still.

“I don't know what you expected from him. He doesn't give a damn about anyone but himself, that's plain enough.”

“It is *not!*” Cat exploded.

Alana stopped, rather shocked by the force of her anger.

“He lent your vicar his horse, didn’t he? And gave him money! If he didn’t give a damn, he wouldn’t have done that. He was just... just annoyed, with me, and... and he wanted to punish me by not helping, that’s all.”

“Perhaps,” Alana said, hoping agreeing would calm her down. “But what kind of man would act in such a way?”

“One who believes the world hates him and wants to hate them right back,” Cat snapped, a catch in her voice now.

“Oh, love. Please, don’t get yourself all worked up over him. He doesn’t care. Not for you, not for anyone. Perhaps you’re right, but he’s a long way past saving.”

“Is that what your vicar would say?” Cat retorted, her voice sharp.

Alana frowned. “He’s not my vicar, and no. I don’t suppose he would.”

She recalled then all Harry had revealed about his past. What might she have thought of him when he was in the gutter? Would she have troubled to see the man he might have been, or would she have left him there and walked on? But Harry was different, she reasoned. Harry had pulled himself out and straightened himself up and... he hadn’t done it alone. Someone *had* helped him.

“He’s got no one, Lana,” Cat said softly, echoing the thought as if Alana had spoken aloud.

“Then he should speak to Harry, confess his sins, ask God for help,” she said briskly, still not seeing how Cat could possibly do the wicked man any good. “I don’t know what the answer is for Kilbane, but it’s not for you to save him. He’s a grown man. He can save himself, and I promise you he won’t thank you if you try to do it for him. If you ruin yourself over him, you’re a fool.”

But Alana saw the stubborn look in her eyes and knew they were both idiots, both falling for men who didn’t want them.

“Come on, Cat. The more time we waste, the farther away they’re getting.”

Cat nodded, her expression pinched, and they walked on.

“My lady! Miss!”

They were barely out of the yard when the landlord, Mr Bishop, shouted after them.

“His lordship said you needed transport, and I was to provide it for you. Well, it ain’t much, but I put my Bessie up before the cart. She’s a good goer, and you can take her if you still need to?”

“Lord Kilbane arranged it?” Cat asked.

“Aye, paid me enough to buy the damned thing too, excuse my French,” he added with a sheepish smile.

Cat flashed a triumphant grin at Alana, who let out a huff of laughter. Well, even the devil had a good day now and then, it seemed.



Harry’s prayers were answered when the carriage stopped at the Maiden’s Head in Uckfield for the night. He had been forced to stop and check every blasted carriage he passed, not having a clue what the one Jeb had been taken in looked like. Throwing Pirate’s reins at the nearest groom, Harry leapt down and ran to investigate the latest suspect. The pub windows glowed in the darkness, the sound of chatter and the scent of dinner drifting out on the chill evening air. He hoped everyone was too busy eating and drinking to pay him any mind and hurried closer to the carriage.

It was an ancient, rotten thing that looked to be held together with string and muck. How it was still in one piece, he couldn’t fathom. With a glance about him to check no one was paying him any mind, he crept towards it and peered through the filthy window. It was impossible to see much in the gathering gloom, so Harry dared to crack open the door. A musty, stale smell billowed out, bad personal hygiene mixed with something oddly familiar. It hit him all at once, a memory from those black days when he was less particular about the company he kept. Opium.

Something shifted in the darkness, giving a soft groan.

“Jeb?” Harry whispered. “That you lad?”

There was no answer, so Harry crept inside. In the dim light, he could just make Jeb out, curled in a ball on the floor of the carriage. There was a livid bruise on his fair cheek and his new waistcoat was ripped, the buttons all gone. He’d put up one hell of a fight, the brave boy. Harry’s heart contracted. The bastard must have drugged him to keep him quiet.

“Come along, Jeb,” Harry said, though the child was so far out of it he doubted he registered anything. He shrugged off his coat, wrapped up the boy, and lifted him in his arms. Harry was carrying him back to Pirate when a loud and furious voice cut through the twilight.

“Ere, what d’you think you’re doing with my boy?”

“Taking him home where he belongs,” Harry said calmly.

“You can’t take my property. I bought and paid for him!” the man roared.

Harry was very aware of the size of the fellow coming up behind him and had little choice but to set Jeb down on the floor where Pirate had been tethered.

“Look after him, boy,” he murmured to the horse, stroking his silky nose before turning his attention to the brute bearing down on him.

“You cannot buy a child, sir,” he said, though he knew all too well that was a lie. “It is morally wrong. Have you no care for your immortal soul?”

“I have a care for my bleedin’ wallet,” the fellow retorted. “I paid good money for him.”

“Very well, then I shall reimburse you for the child and for your trouble.” Harry held up the heavy money purse, still a little stunned Kilbane had offered it. There must be five times what the man had handed over inside it, if not more. The man’s eyes lit with greed.

“Perhaps I’ll take the money and the boy,” he said with a nasty grin.

Harry sighed. He'd suspected it would be inevitable, but occasionally one liked to be proven wrong. "You're not taking the boy, but you are welcome to the money."

"Both," the fellow said, crossing his meaty arms across his enormous girth.

Eyeing him dubiously, Harry wondered how much of the fellow's bulk was fat, and how much muscle. He certainly outweighed Harry by a good three or four stone, likely more, but he was hardly at the peak of good health. His colour was florid, and his hurry from the pub to where Harry stood already had him breathing fast.

"I'm sorry. I cannot allow you to take the boy against his will."

"His will," the man said with a sneer of contempt. "He's just a child. He ain't got no will."

"Oh, he has, and I'm here to see it done," Harry said, his voice implacable.

"Right you are then, vicar. I ain't never clobbered a man of the cloth before, but I'm willing to give it a go."

Harry jumped back, narrowly missing a fist that would have broken his nose.

"Come along then, my lad, or are you afraid to spoil that pretty face?"

"One day, louts like you are going to come up with some more original repartee," Harry groused. He'd heard it all before.

"Repair what now?"

"Never mind," Harry said with a sigh.

He dodged another fist that could have dislocated his jaw, and returned a satisfying blow to the fellow's midsection. Sadly, this turned out to be a lot more solid than he would have liked. They exchanged a few more blows, during which the clientele of the Maiden noticed entertainment was in the offing and piled out to watch. No doubt seeing a man of the

cloth fighting a hulking great fellow twice his size was their idea of a good night out.

“Ten bob on the big fella!” someone called.

“My money’s on the reverend. Ain’t he handsome? Don’t spoil him, Jo!” shouted a female voice, followed by a lot of cackling and squawking of amusement.

Marvellous.

Jo, as that appeared to be his opponent’s name, hit out again, Harry dodged and tried an uppercut which missed; the fellow was quicker than he looked. Jo tried again, missed and this time Harry got him smack in the jaw, which was satisfying except for the fact it hurt like the devil and Jo only staggered a little. Annoyed now, Jo charged Harry like an enraged rhino, which would have been easy enough to avoid had some blighter in the crowd not tripped Harry up. He managed not to fall on his face, choosing to believe the foot in his path had been accidental, and then decided not to think about it further. He had more pressing matters to consider, such as the fact Jo was trying to squeeze the life out of him. Harry tugged at the thick arm in a stranglehold around his neck, but it didn’t budge. He gasped as it cut off his air, a dizzying sensation invading his mind. But Harry had not lived in the gutter without learning a thing or two about fighting dirty. Angling his body to the side, he let go of Jo’s arm and swung his fist back as hard as he could, hitting him in a very tender spot.

All the air came back into Harry’s lungs in a rush as Jo released him with a howl of pain. Harry stumbled away, gasping, but knowing better than to let down his guard. He turned and tackled Jo, sending the big man crashing hard to the ground. Jo let out a pained groan and Harry scrambled away, standing up, fists raised, waiting.

“You little bastard, you’ll pay for that,” Jo spat, a look of pure venom in his eyes.

Harry didn’t doubt it. Bracing himself, he waited for the next round.



“It’s getting awfully dark,” Cat said quietly.

Alana nodded, the fact not having escaped her. “I suppose we ought to have left word, told someone... something,” she added, glancing at Cat.

“Probably would have been sensible,” Cat replied ruefully. “Only, I’m not terribly sensible, so you really ought to have said something, Lana.”

Alana snorted. “I might have known it would be my fault.”

“No,” Cat said, shaking her head. “But, really, you know I’m going to get us into trouble, so you ought to make allowances.”

“I’m not certain I can blame you for this one,” Alana replied, squinting ahead of them. “We’ll have to stop soon. We can’t keep going in the dark.”

“We’ll be out all night,” Cat said, chewing her lip. “Lud, Papa is going to have my head. He’ll send me to a nunnery his time. I shouldn’t blame him, either.”

“Neither would I,” Alana retorted. “But I’ll say it was my fault, don’t worry. So long as I’m safe, Mama and Papa won’t fret overly much.”

“Lucky you,” Cat said with a sigh.

“I’m not the daughter of a marquess,” Alana remarked, not that the distinction needed making.

“I suppose Kilbane knows where we are,” Cat said, brightening a little.

Alana turned an incredulous glare upon her. “And you think that will help when your father finds out?”

Cat deflated visibly. “Lud,” she said again.

They carried on in silence, relieved when a high street came into view.

“We’ll have to stop at an inn. There’s no help for it,” Alana said.

“Assuming they’ll let us,” Cat pointed out. “Two young, unmarried females with no chaperone and no baggage? What will they think of us? Nothing good, I assure you.”

“Hopefully they’ll take one look at you and stop thinking entirely,” Alana muttered, but Cat wasn’t listening.

“What’s that? Look, all those people, Lana. What’s—oh, it’s a fight. Just look. A big fellow and—”

“*Oh!*” Alana shrieked and urged the pony into a canter. They pulled up in a flurry behind a wall of spectators and Alana leapt down. “Cat, look after the pony, and find Jeb!”

She did not wait to see what became of her friend, too intent on stopping a murder.

The man she had seen carrying Jeb off looked even bigger in the light of all the lamps the patrons of the inn had brought out to illuminate the fight. Stripped down to the waist, he appeared to be a solid wall of flesh, so huge and heavy she could not think there was a hope of Harry surviving the encounter.

Yet it appeared the fight had been ongoing for some time and Harry was... Alana swallowed. Harry was magnificent. He too had stripped to the waist, muscular body gilded in the lamplight and sheened with sweat. As she watched, dry-mouthed and breathless, Harry got in two swift blows, the second of which snapped the big man’s head back and made him stagger. The giant spat blood on the floor, gave Harry an evil look that made Alana’s blood turn to ice, and charged him.

Harry went down, with his opponent’s meaty hands tight about this throat, squeezing. Harry struggled, his hands tugging at the man’s wrists, body twisting to unseat the immense weight that must be crushing his chest, but nothing worked. The crowd had fallen quiet, uncertain now, a few of the braver soul suggesting he’d best stop now before a man of God expired before them, but no one intervened.

He was going to die. The big brute would kill him!

Alana looked frantically around her, searching for something, anything, she could use as a weapon. Her gaze

settled upon a stack of neatly cut firewood. Each piece was perhaps a yard long, the thinnest pieces on top of the stack. Alana didn't stop to think, just snatched up a cut branch—about as thick as her wrist, but good and strong—and hurried over to the bully strangling Harry to death. She raised the length of wood and hit him with all her might.

The impact juddered up her arm and shoulder, pain a sharp sensation that stole her breath but hardly registered in her mind, her attention all for Harry.

The man slumped immediately, a dead weight falling upon Harry, who groaned and shoved him to one side. He got to his hands and knees, choking and gasping for air. Harry looked up, glassy eyed and dazed as his attention settled on Alana, and on the length of wood still in her hands. He blinked.

“Alana?” he croaked in confusion.

“Oh, Harry!” She dropped the wood and flung herself at him, heedless of her skirts on the dirty cobbled yard. “I thought he was going to kill you.”

Harry's arms went around her, and he held her tight to him.

“You did that?” he asked, sounding rather stunned, his voice scratchy and faint.

Alana swallowed, somewhat distracted by the feel of slick male flesh and hard muscle beneath her hands. Then she remembered the way the man had collapsed, and terror spiked through her. She nodded, shivering, and dared not look behind her.

“Is h-he d-dead?” she stammered, the shock of what she'd done finally sinking in.

“He ain't dead, pet,” called one of the women who'd been watching the fight, and was now inspecting the felled man. “More's the pity. Mean old bugger, he is. 'Bout time someone clobbered him.”

“Aye,” said an elderly gentleman, peering down at Jo's recumbent frame. He poked at him with his walking stick. “Reckon 'e's coming around, though. I'd make myself scarce

if I were you, reverend, an' take the lad and your missus with you."

"Oh, but—" Alana began.

"I will, sir, thank you," Harry said before she could explain. "It's late and we've had quite enough excitement for one day. Come along, dear," he said, hauling himself to his feet and helping Alana with him.

She looked up at him uncertainly and he smiled, such a smile that her heart gave an odd little skip. "Very well, Harry."

Harry looked at her for a long moment, and she thought he would say something, but then his eyes went wide. "Oh, my word. Jeb! Come along."

He took her hand, towing them through the crowd, who had lost interest in Jo now and were making their way back inside, all except for a little knot of men who were crowded together.

Alana gave a huff of laughter as she saw Cat sitting in a chair someone had provided for her, with Jeb held tenderly in her lap. She was stroking his hair as men jostled each other around her, one offering a glass of something that looked like ale, another a damp cloth.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Cat said serenely, accepting the cloth to wipe Jeb's dirty face. "My poor brother has been dreadfully ill-used. If perhaps you might find some straw to make a bed in the back of that cart there, or it will be dreadfully uncomfortable... and perhaps a blanket?" she added with a sweet smile.

There was a sudden bustle as men pushed and shoved at each other, eager to be the one to do the angel's bidding and provide the straw and blankets she had demanded, and likely anything else they could get hold of that she might require.

"Reverend Martin," Cat said, sitting up straighter as they approached. Her eyes went wide as she saw him stripped bare to the waist and more than a little battered.

"How's Jeb?" Harry demanded, rushing to the boy, and kneeling beside Cat.

“He’s got a terrible headache and he’s still very groggy, but I think he’s well enough,” Cat said, smiling down at Jeb, who stared up at her with a glazed expression of adoration.

“You ain’t ’alf pretty, miss,” he slurred.

Harry let out a breath of laughter, which was as much relief as amusement if Alana was any judge. “Good lad. Let’s get you back to the vicarage. I expect Mrs Hogget will enjoy making a fuss of you.”

Jeb turned his unfocused gaze upon Harry, his eyes bulging with shock. “Vicar! You be naked!”

Harry looked down at himself then, and exclaimed with mortification. “I do beg your pardon, ladies. I quiet forgot myself. If you’ll excuse me....”

He ran off, no doubt in search of his clothes.

“Don’t apologise on our behalf,” Cat murmured, watching him go and then glancing at Alana with a smirk.

Alana was too tired to reprimand the wicked creature. Besides, she could hardly blame the girl for doing as she’d done herself.

Once they had arranged Jeb in the back of the cart on a thick bed of straw and wrapped in a blanket to sleep off the opium, Cat climbed in beside him.

“Don’t worry, I’ll look after him. Just get us home without any more excitement, please,” she said, smothering a yawn.

Harry nodded and tied Pirate to the back of the cart, giving the horse an affectionate pat before climbing up on the driver’s bench beside Alana. He took the reins and got the pony walking out, the soft clop of hooves on the road and the jingle of tack the only sounds now darkness had fallen. Someone had lent them—or more precisely Cat—a lamp to help light the way somewhat, and the pool of golden light just reached them, a little oasis in the night’s impenetrable black.

Alana dared a glance at Harry. His jaw was badly bruised, his face dirty and streaked with blood, and one eye was swelling shut. He looked entirely disreputable.

“Are you all right, Harry?” she asked.

He nodded, meeting her eyes for a moment before returning his attention to the road.

“You came after me. After *us*,” he amended quickly.

Alana smiled. “Of course I did.”

He shook his head and slanted a look at her. “You’re the bravest person I ever met, Alana Cadogan.”

Her heart swelled at the praise, even as the blush rose to her cheeks. “I couldn’t let him hurt you, Harry. I was so frightened. I... I thought he meant to kill you.”

“So did I,” Harry said ruefully. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

They carried on in silence for a while as Alana grew increasingly anxious. Would things go back to how they were now? Was she still a problem he wanted to get rid of? She supposed that must be the case, for he’d not said otherwise. There was no reason to believe the admiration shining in his eyes now was anything but gratitude for helping him. Uncertain, but needing to know where she stood, Alana cleared her throat.

“My aunt’s ball is on Valentine’s night. Will you be there, Harry?”

“I’ve been invited, yes,” Harry admitted. “Though I’m not sure I ought to go now. I’ll likely still not be a pretty sight.”

He gestured to his battered face and Alana winced with sympathy.

“Arnica and witch hazel. You have some?”

He nodded.

“Good. Well, anyway, after the ball, my aunt will close the house up. We’ll be going to town after that. The season, you know. I’ve got to catch myself that earl, haven’t I?” she said, rather too brightly. She felt Harry turn to look at her, but she couldn’t return his gaze, staring away from him into the darkness. “So, I’ll not be a thorn in your side any longer.”

There was silence for a long moment and Alana blinked hard as she relinquished any last hopes she'd held on to.

“That’s a pity.”

Something in her snapped.

“A pity!” she exclaimed, turning to glare at him. “A *pity*? Really, Harry? That’s all you’re going to say to me?”

She studied his face. The devil was grinning at her, which only made her angrier still.

“So that’s it? You’re just going to let me go?”

Harry returned his attention to the road. “I never said that.”

The words were quiet, thoughtful, and turned her heart inside out as hope bloomed inside her.

“Oh?” Alana swivelled in her seat, turning towards him, suddenly breathless. “So... you’re *not* going to let me go?”

Harry jerked his head to remind her they were not alone, and Alana gave a huff of frustration.

He laughed softly and leaned into her, whispering in her ear. “Never.”

Alana smiled, and the rest of the journey passed in something of a blur.

Chapter 16



Dear Max,

I hope this letter finds you well. How does the brat go on? Thriving, I hope. When he's old enough to be interesting, do bring him to meet me. I'm curious to see what this next generation of Drakes looks like. I wonder if he'll turn his father's hair white with his misdeeds?

I'm going to France. I'm uncertain why I'm telling you this as I don't suppose you care but I feel like I ought to tell someone I'm leaving the country just in case rumour gets round that I'm dead. Not so lucky as that, I'm afraid, old man. Though, you never know, perhaps I'll get in a duel with some excitable Frenchman. You know how passionate the Gallic race can be.

No doubt it will take me a few weeks to prepare and pack up my household, but I cannot endure England any longer. The weather is dreary, the people are dreary, everything is dreary. I'm tired Max, of everything and everyone. Do you know, I have done more good deeds in the past week than I have in my life before. If this keeps up, I am in danger of giving a damn. I refuse to do it. So I'm leaving to find pastures new, warmer climes, and something dreadfully wicked to do. I'll

*forward my direction once I'm settled on
the off chance you wish to write to me.*

Yrs, etc.

**—Excerpt of a letter to *The Right Hon'ble
Maxwell Drake, The Earl of Vane, from
The Most Hon'ble Ciarán St Just, The
Marquess of Kilbane.***

**The early hours of the 26th of January 1845, Holbrook
House, Sussex.**

It was four in the morning when they finally arrived at Holbrook House, though the grand building was not in darkness. As the pony trotted the last few yards up to the impressive entrance, the doors flung open, and Harry saw people silhouetted against the light that spilled out.

“Oh, now we're for it,” he murmured.

Alana stirred beside him. She'd fallen asleep with her head on his shoulder about an hour ago, but now sat bolt upright.

“Oh dear,” she said, anxiety lacing her voice. “Oh, my word.”

“What?” Harry frowned at her. Obviously, he knew they were going to be in trouble with her aunt and uncle, but that would surely not account for the panicked look on her face.

“Montagu,” she whispered.

Harry stared at her in alarm. “As in the *marquess* of?”

She nodded.

He swallowed. He was returning home in the early hours of the morning, with the Marquess of Montagu's daughter asleep in a straw-laden cart borrowed from the local pub. He'd never met the man himself, but he knew about him. Everybody knew about him. Anyone with any wits would cross an ocean rather than risk getting in Montagu's way. Everybody knew he adored his daughter more than anyone else on earth, saving his wife. The daughter Harry was bringing home in the early hours of the morning.

Bloody, bugging hell.

“He’s going to kill me, isn’t he?”

Alana swallowed. “N-No,” she said, but with enough uncertainty that every bruised muscle in his body sang with tension. “I don’t think he’ll kill you, Harry. As it wasn’t your fault, but I truly would not wish to be Cat at this moment.”

“Ought we to wake her?” Harry asked.

Alana shook her head. “No. She looks like an angel when she sleeps, even more than when she’s awake. Perhaps it will soften him up.”

They exchanged a glance as they drew level with the crowd. Montagu stood beside the Earl of St Clair, both men white-faced and grim.

“Catherine!” Montagu exclaimed, and the face that had been severe and intimidating just a moment ago turned to one of sheer terror as he saw his daughter laying in the cart. With hindsight, they ought to have woken her. Her father reached for her, and Cat jolted awake with a yelp.

“Papa?” she said blearily.

Montagu let out a breath and hauled her into his arms, hugging her tightly, his eyes closed.

“I’m s-sorry, Papa,” Cat said quietly.

Montagu released her, only to grip her shoulders, looking very much like he wished to shake her until her teeth rattled. “Cat, you wicked, wicked girl. You will be the death of me yet.”

“Oh, no, never say it!” Cat said and burst into tears.

Harry turned away to give them privacy and hauled his aching bones out of the cart with a muffled groan. Everything hurt, the bruises Jo had inflicted making themselves known with increasing vigour.

“Harry! Harry, my boy... oh, my dear, what happened?”

Harry watched, bemused, as his Aunt Cora hurried down the steps towards him. “Your poor face!” she cried, her soft

hands turning his head this way and that as she inspected the cuts and bruises.

Touched and a little overwhelmed, Harry hugged her. “There, there, Aunt. A bit bruised is all. I’ll mend.”

Cora let him go reluctantly, sniffing and blowing her nose on a handkerchief that her dreadful friend, Lady Beauchamp, pressed into her hand.

“Reverend Martin,” St Clair said, his tone calm but his gaze travelling over Alana as he spoke, ensuring she was in one piece. “I’m certain you have an admirable explanation for this.”

“Er...” Harry tried manfully to pull himself together, but his ears were still ringing from a particularly vicious blow Jo had landed and he was feeling rather out of sorts.

“Of course he does, Uncle,” Alana said briskly, jumping down from the cart and marching towards her family as though she hadn’t been dropping from exhaustion a second before. “It was a rescue mission. I’m so sorry I didn’t have time to leave a note or an explanation, Aunt, but every second counted. That awful woman who calls herself his mother sold Jeb to be a climbing boy.”

“Good heavens!” Aunt Harriet exclaimed in shock, hurrying to the cart now she realised Jeb was in it too.

“He’s been drugged,” Alana went on. “We think opium. I believe he’s fine, but he ought to see a doctor.”

“Oh, the poor little mite!”

The front steps became a flurry of activity as a footman was instructed to carry Jeb inside, and the housekeeper set to preparing a room and a bowl of broth, as well as tea for everyone. Instructions flew back and forth.

“I suppose we ought to have seen the other fellow,” the earl remarked, looking Harry over critically.

“Once Miss Cadogan got hold of him,” Harry agreed wryly. “I’m afraid I had little impact. She knocked him out cold.”

St Clair turned towards his niece and raised an elegant eyebrow. Alana shrugged.

“Just like her mother,” the earl said with a sigh.

Alana brightened at that. “Thank you, Uncle.”

Once Jeb had been given into the tender care of about a dozen housemaids, who fussed over and coddled the ‘poor brave boy’ as they bore him off to await the doctor, the others repaired to a warm parlour. A tea tray arrived in short order.

“You’ll all be wanting your beds, I don’t doubt,” Lady St Clair said as she prepared the tea. “I know I do, but you’ll never sleep if you go to bed at once. You must settle your nerves, so a cup of tea and something to eat first, and you may as well tell us what happened before we all die of curiosity.”

Montagu got up and moved towards a bureau that held an elegant tantalus. He picked up a glass.

“I’ll take a brandy if it’s all the same to you. I think I lost a decade over the past hours, and I need something stronger than tea,” he said, his eyes flitting towards his daughter.

Cat was fidgeting in front of the fire, too agitated to sit still.

“Pour me one too. I shall turn white, you see if I don’t,” St Clair said, raking a hand through his hair. “Thank heavens your parents weren’t here, Lana. Do you have any notion what manner of scene you caused tonight? Heaven alone knows how we’ll hush this up. I pray your powers of persuasion are everything they’re cracked up to be, Lucian, for the entire village is talking about the disappearance of Lady Catherine and my niece here, and with the two of them having been seen talking with Kilbane, though God only knows why he’s here at all—excuse me, Martin—and, well, you can just imagine the speculation.”

Montagu slanted another glance at his daughter, who blushed and avoided his silver gaze.

Harry did not blame her. There was something about the man that commanded attention, a force of personality that was

impossible to ignore. The idea of displeasing him was, quite frankly, horrifying.

Harry cleared his throat. “Actually, Kilbane was instrumental in helping us save Jeb,” he said, unwilling they should blame the man when he’d done the right thing for once in his life.

“That sounds unlikely. No doubt he found the entire thing amusing,” Montagu muttered acidly as he poured the drinks.

Movement caught Harry’s eye, and he glanced up to see Alana pinch Cat, hard, just as she opened her mouth to say something. Cat squeaked, saw the look on Alana’s face, and subsided.

Montagu returned with two crystal glasses, a generous measure of brandy glinting in each. Harry tore his eyes away, staring at his boots as longing rose inside him. His boots were badly scuffed and dirty. He must clean them when he got home, he thought, trying his best to concentrate on boot polish. Had he got any left, or had he used it? Oh, no, Jeb had used it last, had he not?

“Apologies, Reverend, I ought to have offered you too. You’ve had a trying evening, it seems. Would you care for a drink?”

Harry looked up. Montagu was standing before him, holding out a glass of brandy. It glinted warm amber in the lamplight. Harry swallowed hard.

“*No!* I mean... er... Might I have one?”

Montagu turned with astonishment to stare at Alana. “You want a brandy?” he asked sceptically. “I think you’d best ask your uncle. If you really want one?”

“No, actually. Not really,” Alana admitted, glancing at Harry with concern as he realised she’d done it to give him a chance to gather himself.

“Jasper will murder you if you don’t hand his drink over, Lucian,” Lady St Clair said brightly. She clearly understood, as Alana had, that they were putting temptation in his way.

“I don’t want a drink, thank you, my lord,” Harry said, his voice firm.

Montagu nodded and turned away, and Harry let out a breath of laughter. *Alana*. She smiled at him, such pride and encouragement in her eyes that he discovered he really didn’t want the brandy. He wanted her. He wanted to be alone with Alana and tell her what a bloody fool he’d been, and how much he regretted it. He wanted to kiss her so badly, the desire for it outweighed everything else. Even the pain that seemed to be in every part of his body faded in the light of wanting her.

Once Lady St Clair had provided everyone else with tea and plates generously loaded with sandwiches and cakes, everyone looked at Harry. Weariness swept over him at the idea of reciting the entire evening’s events.

“Go on then, Harry, dear. What happened?” Aunt Cora demanded.

“It started at the auction,” Alana said, saving him again.

He sighed with relief as she plunged into the story, telling it with such relish and drama that even Harry got caught up in it. He smiled, suddenly certain that she would make the perfect wife for him, assuming she had the slightest interest in taking on the role. He could see her dealing with obstreperous parishioners, keeping the peace, organising him, his life, everything. It was a wonderful idea... if she’d give him a chance. She *had* seemed rather furious with the idea he might let her go without a fight, though. His smile widened. Alana glanced at him, and must have seen something in his eyes, for she blushed scarlet.

“Well,” St Clair said as Alana came to the end of their little adventure. “You’ve had quite a night of it.”

“Yes, my lord,” Harry said, wishing it were over so he could go to bed before he dropped. The Axminster beneath his feet looked exceedingly appealing.

“Whilst I heartily applaud your efforts on behalf of the boy, Reverend Martin,” Montagu said gravely, “and I am relieved to know he is safe and unharmed, it does not take

away the difficulty we face. Between two unmarried young women jaunting about the countryside in the dead of night without a chaperone, Kilbane's name being bandied about, and your fight to liberate the boy, there is a scandal here which the villagers will have spread to the next three counties before luncheon tomorrow if we do not take it in hand at once."

"I'm so sorry, Papa," Lady Catherine said. It was the first time she'd spoken all evening.

Harry glanced at her. She was ruffled and her hair was askew, several bits of straw poking out of it at peculiar angles, yet if she walked into a ballroom looking as she did, Harry suspected she could still carry it off. She had the same force of character as her father, the same magnetic quality that meant every eye in the room was drawn to her, or would have been if Harry could have looked anywhere but at Alana.

"Ah, child, if I had a penny for every time I've heard you say that," Montagu said wearily. "One day, you'll go too far, and no amount of 'sorry, Papa's, will save you. I do not know yet if I can contrive it this time."

She nodded, penitent, and went to sit down beside Alana, her hands folded in her lap, head bowed. Montagu did not look as if he believed her. Harry didn't blame him. Alana reached over and took her friend's hand, silently lacing their fingers together. Lady Catherine glanced up as Alana gave a quick squeeze and Harry saw the smile that Alana sent her, warm and reassuring. An unspoken promise to always be there for her friend.

Something shifted in his chest. This woman... This woman had saved Jeb from drowning, had stood up to Mrs Maby, stood up to *him*. She had determined to save Jeb yet again, had come after them both, heedless of her own safety or reputation, had defended him to Montagu and St Clair, looked at him with pride and encouragement, despite knowing all the ways he'd failed in the past... she was, quite simply, extraordinary. He must marry her, he realised with a flash of insight. Michael had been right, not that Harry had doubted it. He needed to marry, yes, but more than that, he needed to marry Alana before someone else saw exactly how special and

wonderful and brave and extraordinary she was. He'd messed his life up quite thoroughly before now. He wasn't about to do it again.

"I can make things right," Harry said, before he could talk himself out of it. "If you'll let me, or, more to the point, if Alana will let me."

Everyone turned to stare at him.

Harry cleared his throat. He'd have liked to have believed he'd never been a less appealing prospect than in this moment, battered and grubby and worn to a thread. Sadly, that was far from true. The mess he appeared to be right now was a vast improvement, but Alana didn't seem to mind. So, he took a deep breath.

"If Miss Cadogan would do me the honour of becoming my wife, I think we are all well thought of enough in the area that any hint of scandal would be quickly forgiven and forgotten."

Silence reigned. It was the kind of silence that rang in your ears, and Harry wondered if he'd gone deaf, or if he only imagined he'd said that out loud. But then Alana sprang out of her seat like a jack-in-the-box, startling Aunt Cora so much that she upset her teacup and dropped the entire thing, saucer and all, back onto the tea tray with a crash.

"Oh, Cora, not again!" Lady Beauchamp cried, searching for her handkerchief.

But Harry didn't care about teacups, nor about the blasted parrot that had apparently been sleeping in a dark corner of the room and now erupted.

"Murder, murder, infamy! Bugger, bugger, bugger."

"Harry!" Alana said, staring down at him.

Harry got to his feet, only dimly aware that every part of him hurt.

"Harry, you don't have to do this. I know I'm not what you wanted. I'm too outspoken, too much trouble, a problem you need to go away—"

“You’re wonderful,” Harry said simply. “And if you go away, I shall only follow you. Don’t go away, Alana. Please. *Stay.*”

Alana’s eyes grew very round and very bright. Sea green, sea blue, he could never tell which, but they glittered today and took him somewhere warm and sunny.

She gave a hesitant laugh and then let out a breath. “All right, then.”

“All right, then?” Harry repeated, pulling a face.

“Yes, Harry,” she amended. “Yes, please.”

Harry took her hands in his and held on tight.

“You’ll let me court you, then? Give me a chance to show you I’m not such a bad-tempered prig as you thought?”

She grinned at him. “I know you’re not.”

“I’m a bad bargain though, love,” Harry whispered. “Poor as a church mouse. Your parents—”

“Want me to be happy,” Alana said, with such certainty he almost believed her. “And besides which, I’m an heiress.”

“You’re a... *Oh!* You’re...?”

“Yes. Horribly rich. It’s embarrassing really,” she said apologetically. “You’ll probably have to give it all away or something.”

Harry really needed to go to bed. He felt dizzier than ever.

Belatedly, they turned to see everyone was watching them.

“I thought she didn’t like him,” Lady St Clair said to her husband with a puzzled frown.

The earl gave his wife a fond look of exasperation. “I know, dear,” he said, his tone soothing, putting his arm about her shoulders.

“*Bugger, bugger, tits!*” Macintosh sang happily, appearing to believe this gathering was entirely for his benefit.

Montagu turned to frown at him.

“I do apologise, Montagu,” Lady Beauchamp said, not looking the least bit sorry. “He’s dreadfully naughty, I’m afraid, but quite a darling, and so affectionate.”

Montagu walked closer to the parrot, eyeing it sceptically. The parrot scurried across his perch, closer to the marquess, eyeing Montagu in return.

“*Tits,*” Mac said, as if testing the water.

Montagu raised an eyebrow.

“*Ooooh, what a big one!*”

Harry thought perhaps the marquess’ lips twitched, but it was impossible to tell.

“How spectacularly vulgar. Matilda will adore you,” he said with a sigh, turning back to the assembled company as Aunt Cora enveloped Harry in a fierce hug.

“Well done, Harry!” she said, grinning broadly. “I just knew she was the girl for you. Didn’t I say so, Dorcas? Oh, I think this is simply wonderful!”

“You would. She’s worth a fortune,” Lady Beauchamp whispered gleefully. Cora turned and hushed her with a warning glare.

“Will it do, Lucian?” St Clair asked, turning to Montagu.

“Alana, you wish to marry this man?” the marquess asked, his piercing gaze boring first into her, and then Harry.

“Yes, my lord. I do. Very much.”

“Then, assuming your parents agree to the match, it seems we may have a solution. It won’t entirely kill the rumours but, providing Catherine can behave herself for the next few months, the fuss should die down.” Montagu regarded Lady Catherine and shook his head. “Well, child, you’ve fallen on your feet again, it seems, but even a cat runs out of lives eventually.”

Cat nodded, swallowing. “Yes, Papa.”

Montagu regarded her steadily, frustration glinting in his cool, silver gaze. “If only I believed it would make a jot of

difference. I thank God your mother isn't here, and to think I thought to surprise you with a visit. I ought to know better."

St Clair got to his feet and patted Lucian on the back.
"There, there, old man. Boys are so much easier, aren't they?"

Montagu looked at him and let out a bark of laughter. "I'm too tired to answer that. Goodnight, everyone. I need to get some sleep, or I shall rival the parrot for obscene comments."

Chapter 17



My Lord Marquess,

I hope you are in good health and spirits. I am relieved to know plans have been made to your satisfaction. We will indeed be at home on Monday morning. I would suggest coming early, as close to ten as you are able, for most of Mama's callers will arrive after eleven. Else we will not have a moment's peace.

—Excerpt of a letter to *The Most Hon'ble Leander Steyning, The Marquess of Wrexham* from *Miss Emmeline Knight* (daughter of *Lady Helena* and *Mr Gabriel Knight*).

28th of January 1845, Peregrine House, Grosvenor Square, London.

“Are you looking forward to the Valentine's ball at Holbrook, Emmeline? Em, dear. Emmeline? *Emmeline!*”

Emmeline yelped and almost threw aside the embroidery hoop she was staring at as the sharp words penetrated her abstraction.

“What? Oh, I beg your pardon, Mama,” she said, blushing as she realised she'd not heard a word her mother had said. “I was wool-gathering, I'm afraid.”

“You ought to have enough wool to clothe an army by now, considering how much wool-gathering has gone on of late,” her mama remarked, giving her the benefit of a suspicious look that made Emmeline's stomach squirm. “I

swear you've become oddly jumpy and vague this past week or so. I wish you would tell me what is the matter."

"Nothing's the matter, Mama," Emmeline insisted, doing her best to give her mother a bright smile while her insides tied themselves into a knot.

The front door knocker sounded, two decisive strikes, and Emmeline's breath caught. A moment later, the door opened, the butler announcing the arrivals.

"Lady Montagu and Lady Cavendish for you, Lady Helena."

"Thank you. You may bring the tea in now, please, Havers."

The butler nodded and went out as Matilda and Aashini entered. They greeted Emmeline and Mama and settled themselves in for a pleasant chat. They were early today, Emmeline thought, chewing her lip as she tried to keep half an ear on the conversation and look as though she was actually doing some stitching. She'd never have made a spy, she thought ruefully. Mama was right: ever since she'd agreed to Wrexham's plans she'd been like a cat on hot bricks. Another knock at the door had Emmeline holding her breath, only to deflate when Alice Hunt arrived. The petite redhead exclaimed happily on seeing Matilda and Aashini, and soon the four of them were chattering about what projects they were busy with, the latest foolishness their children had been up to, and whatever gossip had crossed their paths since last they'd spoken.

Emmeline prayed there were not many more visitors this morning, or Mama would task her with entertaining them and she'd never be able to speak privately with Wrexham. As it was, she did not know if they'd manage more than a few words.

Emmeline sighed.

Another knock.

She stared down at her embroidery hoop, heart thudding unevenly.

“The Marquess of Wrexham and Mr Humboldt.”

Emmeline looked up, and her breath hitched. She couldn't help it. Wrexham's presence filled the room, obliterating everyone else in it as far as she was concerned. He'd worn the dark glasses today, the frames giving him an oddly sinister look which did not settle her nerves a whit.

She did not dare look at her mother, though Emmeline could sense curiosity in the weight of her gaze as she watched Wrexham enter, Humboldt guiding him discreetly. He greeted them all politely, his manners impeccable, though Emmeline could feel the tension radiating from him in waves. He did not like this, did not enjoy being here. She did not know how she knew that, what it was that gave him away, for outwardly he appeared entirely at ease. Yet he was vulnerable in this moment, in this strange sitting room where he did not know the layout. He couldn't know if there was a wrinkle in the rug beneath his feet ready to trip him, or if at any moment he might knock into a side table holding some cherished ornament. But he had come, had put himself through the ordeal to see her.

“Miss Knight,” he said, and his deep voice thrilled through her as Humboldt indicated her presence to him and he finally turned her way. “I hope I find you well.”

Emmeline smiled, rather winded at being the focus of his attention, and then remembered herself, forcing her expression into something more impassive. She ought not to seem so delighted at seeing him. She could not afford to make her mother any more suspicious than she already was.

“Indeed you do, my lord, and it is a pleasure to see you looking so well also.”

His lips quirked, the smile mocking, though he said nothing. “Ah, forgive me, I am remiss. May I present this worthy fellow to you? Miss Knight, my long-suffering secretary, Mr Humboldt.”

Mr Humboldt was a small man, perhaps in his fortieth year, and more than a foot shorter than Wrexham, though sturdily built. He had thinning, sandy hair, a pleasant face,

twinkling blue eyes, and a rueful expression that was at once apologetic and friendly.

Emmeline liked him at once.

“Mr Humboldt, how lovely to meet you at last,” she said, and then blushed furiously as she realised her Mama had no idea she had ever heard of Mr Humboldt, for she did not know her daughter had been writing to Wrexham. It was an odd thing to write letters for one man, knowing another would read them.

“The pleasure is entirely mine,” Humboldt replied, warmth in his expression and no little sympathy. The sympathy made Emmeline blush deeper, and she looked away, rattled.

“Please, won’t you sit down?” She directed them to the space on the settee beside her and a chair that was angled to the side. As she had hoped, Humboldt guided Wrexham to the settee beside her and took the chair.

“Lord Wrexham, it is good to see you,” Mama said, giving Emmeline a look that suggested she knew this visit was significant and they would be speaking later. Emmeline swallowed. “You are looking well.”

“I shall take your word for it, Lady Helena, but thank you. Humboldt here is tasked with informing me if I have unduly insulted my valet and he has turned me out in yellow and puce.”

“You always have been a dashing fellow, Wrexham,” Matilda said. “Nothing has changed from where we sit, I assure you.”

Wrexham inclined his head in thanks. “Montagu is well?”

“He is. He’ll be sorry not to have seen you. Your presence in society is missed. I hope this means we shall be seeing more of you? I should be delighted to return your name to our list of social engagements.”

Wrexham returned an enigmatic smile. “Perhaps.”

Matilda exchanged a glance with Helena before carrying on. “Montagu is at Holbrook at present. He had occasion to visit Dern for a few days and decided to surprise our daughter, Catherine. I’ll be joining him there for the Valentine’s night ball. Will you be going?”

“Lady St Clair was kind enough to invite me, yes.”

“Cavendish and I shall look forward to seeing you there,” Aashini said warmly. “And I don’t doubt Ashton will be delighted to rise to the occasion. You two always did enjoy outdoing each other with your choice of waistcoat.”

“Ah, but mine were always tasteful,” Wrexham said, his tone dry, making the ladies laugh.

Small talk drifted back and forth as the tea tray came in and for a while Emmeline despaired of getting even a word in private with the man beside her. But then Alice began telling them some tale of what her son-in-law, Bainbridge, had been up to of late. The ladies were so riveted by his exploits, Emmeline could turn her attention to Wrexham.

“My lord?”

“Have you changed your mind?” The words were prickly and clipped, Wrexham’s body stiffly upright beside her.

Though she had talked herself in and out of the decision a dozen times, the look of brittle pride upon his handsome face chased away her doubts. Emmeline shook her head and then scolded herself for an idiot.

“No!” she said firmly, her chest aching as she noticed the lines of tension around his eyes and mouth.

He hadn’t believed she would go through with it and was waiting for her to recant. The poor man had put himself through what he clearly regarded as an ordeal, just so she might tell him she had changed her mind. Emmeline glanced at her mama, seeing her completely absorbed by whatever absurd tale Alice was relating. She reached out and gave his hand a quick squeeze.

“No, Wrexham,” she said again, softer now. “I have not changed my mind.”

He let out a breath and his fingers tightened upon hers, not allowing her to withdraw them. Emmeline's heart skipped and then did an odd little lurch behind her ribs as he smiled, the sight enough to set her stomach erupting with butterflies.

"Brave, foolish girl," he whispered, the words so tender she felt certain her mother must be able to feel the heat from her burning cheeks. Lord, but this man set her all a-flutter.

"S-So after the ball, then?" she asked, wondering if she had quite lost her mind.

He nodded, releasing her hand. "Humboldt has made all the arrangements, don't worry."

Emmeline gave an involuntary hiccupping laugh as her nerves got the better of her. The other ladies looked over in surprise. She cleared her throat.

"Tea went down the wrong way," she said weakly.

Wrexham grinned, a wicked, wolfish grin that made her wonder if she had completely lost her mind. She glanced at Humboldt and had her answer. He was clearly deeply uncomfortable about his part in this farrago. He held her gaze, a question in his eyes. *Are you quite sure you know what you're doing?*

She was uncertain what her expression reflected, but the smile she attempted must have fallen far short of the mark, for he did not look the least bit reassured.

"Humboldt, I believe I have misplaced my cravat pin," Wrexham said, turning his head towards his secretary. Humboldt and Emmeline stared at the large, rose cut diamond glinting among the folds of Wrexham's snowy white cravat.

"Did you, my lord?" Humboldt asked, a weary note to his voice that suggested it was not only news to him, but hardly the first time such a tactic had been employed.

"I did."

"Well, then I shall look for it. If you would excuse me for a moment, Miss Knight."

“Of course, Mr Humboldt,” Emmeline replied, biting her lip to stop herself from begging him not to go.

That was entirely ridiculous, considering her mother and three of her most influential friends were in the room, but Emmeline still felt as if she’d been shut in with a caged tiger. Silence settled between them as Humboldt went about his master’s pointless errand.

“Are you afraid of me, Miss Milly?”

“No,” Emmeline squeaked, frustrated at the obvious lie behind the breathless denial.

“Only a little terrified, then,” he replied, lips quirking in a self-deprecating smile. “I can hardly blame you for that, but you can trust me. I will keep to our bargain, I swear it.”

“You will?” Emmeline asked nervously, studying his face for any telltale sign he was not being entirely honest with her, or perhaps with himself, but there was sincerity in every line of his face and, when he replied, she heard the honesty there.

“My life may be in danger, but I would rather die than hurt you. I am too horribly aware of the sacrifice you are making, and the risk you take in doing so. I will not betray you when you give so much. You may trust me, I swear it. You will have everything I promised, and I will do all in my power to ensure this works out for the best. Besides which, Humboldt will probably murder me himself if I don’t behave as I ought. He’s *displeased* with me, and that is putting it mildly, I assure you. If there were any other way....”

“Wrexham. I said yes. I meant it,” she whispered, hating the uncertainty she heard in his voice, his obvious guilt at dragging her into his affairs. “We have an agreement.”

“I won’t let you down, love. Upon my honour.”

Emmeline darted an anxious glance at her mother, who was still busy talking with her friends, but the way he had so carelessly called her *love* was playing havoc with her ability to concentrate on his words.

“W-Well, that’s good,” she said uncertainly. “You may trust me also, my lord.”

“I certainly hope so. It may seem the other way about on the face of it, but I am rather putting my life in your hands.”

“I’ll not let you down,” she said fervently, meaning it with all her heart and hating herself for—in that moment—feeling relieved he was blind, for surely anyone with eyes would see what she really meant.

Emmeline glanced again at her mother and friends, reassured that they were not watching her.

The door opened again, and Humboldt reappeared. “Strangely, there’s no sign of that cravat pin, my lord,” he said dryly.

“How peculiar,” Wrexham replied, with utter guilelessness. “I must have been mistaken. Ah, yes, it was there all along. Forgive me, dear fellow.”

He returned a bland smile as his long, elegant fingers touched the sparkling diamond at this throat. Humboldt sighed.

Emmeline hid a smile, until it occurred to her to observe that Wrexham was a very good liar.



31st of January 1845, The Vicarage, Holbrook, Sussex.

“He’s a little devil,” Mrs Hogget observed, as Jeb tucked into his second bowl of porridge. “Swore blind he didn’t know where that last slice of apple pie went, and then I found the dish under his bed. A daft ha-porth, you are, lad. Don’t you know better than to hide the evidence?”

Harry bit back a smile at Jeb’s obvious chagrin, though he was uncertain if Mrs Hogget was scolding him for eating the pie or failing to cover up his crimes. Not that he much cared. It was too good to see Jeb back to his old self. He’d been too quiet in the first couple of days since his return, jumping at shadows and following Harry about like a lost lamb.

Jeb scraped the bowl clean, smacking his lips appreciatively. “Is there any more?” he asked, giving Mrs

Hogget a wide-eyed look. She snorted at the obvious ploy and ruffled his hair.

“No, there is not. You’re a bottomless pit, is what you are. Now you run down and see if those useless hens have started laying again, and mind you put your coat on, it’s cold out. When you get back, I *might* have some bread and jam for you. Run along now, quick smart.”

Jeb flashed her a grin and rushed out of the room.

“Ah, he’s a good boy,” she said fondly. “You reckon his ma will leave him be now?”

Harry nodded. “I think so. Last I heard, she’d taken her money and gone to London.”

“Good riddance,” the lady said with a sniff.

Harry opened his mouth to suggest this wasn’t a very Christian attitude before deciding to save his breath. He wasn’t a hypocrite, after all, and whilst he wished her no ill, he very much hoped Mrs Maby went away and did not come back again. Though what he was to do with Jeb when he married Alana, he didn’t quite know.

When he married Alana.

The words spun in his mind with a dreamlike, unreal quality he could not quite get used to. He’d kept his distance since that eventful night, on Lady St Clair’s express instructions. She said she would spread the word of their engagement, and Harry’s heroics in rescuing poor Jeb, in the hopes this story would excite the parish’s sympathy and Lady Catherine’s presence might be swept under the carpet. In the meantime, he was supposed to keep a low profile and hope that his bruises faded somewhat.

The boys had been exceedingly impressed with him when he had taken his first class since that night. Especially when Jeb told them how Harry had flattened the ‘big bugger.’ That was entirely inaccurate—and, considering Jeb had been off his head when it happened and had no clue what he’d done, a downright lie—but Harry was touched by Jeb’s pride in him

all the same, and he wasn't so stuffy as to not appreciate looking like a bit of a hero to his boys.

Harry glanced up at the kitchen clock on the mantle. Alana's parents arrived this morning to hear exactly what had gone on and why their daughter was suddenly engaged to the local vicar. His stomach twisted uncomfortably, the porridge suddenly weighing heavy. He was expecting a summons at some point, to present himself to Mr Cadogan and explain why he ought to be considered a fit prospect for a husband. It was not an idea to fill him with confidence, and with good reason. Jerome Cadogan was a close friend of Nathaniel Hunt, of *Hunter's* fame. The club owner was exceedingly picky about who he allowed entry to his club and took a dim view of those who couldn't pay their bills. Of course, Harry *had* paid his bill... eventually. He swallowed down a groan as the porridge churned unpleasantly in his guts.

"You all right, vicar? Looking a bit peaked, you are."

"Quite well," Harry said gloomily.

What if Alana's parents forbade the match? Though, if they did, she'd probably be ruined after the events of that night. But what if they agreed to it because there was no choice, but then despised him for it? Perhaps they'd think him a fortune hunter, not that he'd had the slightest clue about her fortune, but they might *think* it. What if they cut Alana out of the family in disgust? Despite the fact Harry was the son of an earl, his father was notoriously tight-fisted, which made him unpopular. Nor was the earl especially well-connected because of his well-known proclivity for miserly behaviour. Added to that, the fact Harry was only a third son meant he was hardly a fine prospect for a girl with a fortune, who could claim Lord and Lady St Clair as close kin.

Harry frowned and then jumped as Mrs Hogget set down a large brown bottle and a spoon in front of him.

"What's that?"

"Syrup of figs," she said briskly. "That'll get things moving."

“Moving?”

“You’ve got that screwed up look, like your guts is in a knot.”

Harry rolled his eyes and got up from the table. “Thank you for your concern, Mrs Hogget,” he said with dignity. “But I am not constipated, just a little distracted, is all.”

“If you say so, Vicar,” Mrs Hogget said dubiously as Harry made his escape.

Chapter 18



I was never more shocked when she told me. Poor Ruth is devastated. I don't know what he was thinking. If he was thinking? And Lyall of all people! He's always been so quiet and sensible, dependable. If it had been one of his daft brothers, I'd not have batted an eyelid, but Lyall! According to Ruth, the girl is a manipulative little she devil, and you know Ruth never has a bad word for anyone so I can only imagine what provoked her into saying such a thing. She believes the girl has some hold over Lyall, but the man will say nothing about it. Well, he's always played his cards close to his chest, a secretive lad, but to just up and marry the girl without telling a soul... I don't know what to make of it. Not that there's a thing to be done about it now. She's the Viscountess Buchanan, for better or for worse.

—Excerpt of a letter from Her Grace, Prunella Adolphus, The Duchess of Bedwin to her friend, The Most Hon'ble Matilda Barrington, The Marchioness of Montagu.

Still the 31st of January 1845, The Vicarage, Holbrook, Sussex.

Later that morning, Harry was alone in his study, ostensibly working on his sermon, though he'd spent a deal

more time daydreaming about Alana than actually writing anything sensible. Jeb was busy in the church, keeping an eye on the ladies who were cleaning and arranging the flowers on the altar, and no doubt getting made a dreadful fuss of. That was a good thing, Harry reflected. Jeb could stand a bit of fussing after the past few weeks.

Tap, tap, tap.

He turned, looking at the window behind him and finding his heart jolt with happiness when he saw the object of his daydreams appear before him.

“Alana!” he said, swinging the window open.

“Can I come in?” she asked urgently.

“Well, of course, but you could have used the front door.”

She pulled a face. “No. My aunt said Mrs Hogget is very particular about unmarried ladies visiting *her* vicar. She won’t allow it. It’s one of the main reasons she got the job, apparently, which I am all in favour of. I don’t want the likes of Miss Steadman causing you bother, but as of this moment, it’s a blessed nuisance.”

Harry laughed and offered her his hand. “Can you climb? I think there’s a pot down there, perhaps if you... yes, that’s it.”

He steadied her as she hiked up her dress and clambered onto the windowsill. There was a moment or two of muttering as she fought an excess of skirts and petticoats and had to squeeze the lot sideways through the narrow opening. Once she was through, Harry put his hands about her waist and lifted her down. Her hands tightened on his shoulders, and he could not resist the temptation to pull her close.

“Good morning, Miss Cadogan,” he said quietly, staring at her in wonder.

“Good morning, Reverend Martin,” she replied, lips twitching. “Though you might not think so when you get called up to the house.”

Harry's good humour dissipated. "I was afraid of that. They didn't take it well, then?"

"Mama did," she said with a shrug. "But it's exactly the sort of harebrained thing she expected me to do."

"Finding yourself in compromising circumstances with a vicar?"

"Oh, yes," Alana replied, not paying his scepticism much mind. "She said something of the sort would have happened ages ago if I'd not buried myself in the countryside of late, and she only hopes you're not too stuffy and won't make me repent all my sins. She doesn't want me to be a bore at parties, because she says sinning is a great deal of fun, but that's not the trouble."

"Ah." Harry nodded. He hadn't much of an answer for that.

"It's Papa."

His stomach dropped to his boots. "He knows who I am, or rather, what I was," he guessed, feeling decidedly queasy.

"I rather think he does," she said gravely. "He's not said anything yet, but when Uncle Jasper said your name, Papa asked him to repeat it, and then he asked for a word with Uncle in private, and that was an hour ago and they've still not come out. So... I thought I ought to warn you."

Harry regarded her for a long moment, his guts churning. "And you, Alana? Have you changed your mind? I should not blame you if—"

She reached for him, her hands cupping his face as she pulled him down for a kiss.

"I've not changed my mind," she said, sounding a little breathless. "We're getting married, Harry, so long as you're sure. You were rather trapped into it."

He snorted at that, daring to pull her even closer. "I wasn't trapped, love. I took advantage of the situation. There's a big difference. The truth is, I'd already decided I had to persuade you to marry me before the day of the auction."

“What?” She stared at him, so obviously shocked that he laughed.

“It’s true.”

Alana put her arms about his waist, staring up at him. “But I thought I was a problem you wanted to go away?” she said, the lingering hurt in her eyes making him want to cut out his tongue for having put it there.

“Because I was afraid, Alana. I didn’t think I could ever have a wife, a family, after everything I’d done. I was... I *am* afraid that I’ll mess up. When Montagu offered me that drink, I *wanted* to accept, and if I had, it wouldn’t have stopped there. I’ve known that for a long time now and it’s something I must fight, all the time. It never goes away.”

Harry swallowed, not wanting to illustrate his weakness to her any further than he already had, but she deserved to know the truth, to know what she was taking on.

“I used to think I could just have one drink, that I could control it, but I can’t. I can’t stop once I’ve begun. I’ve come this far, which believe me is a miracle if you’d seen what I’d become, and I’ll never stop fighting, Alana but... but what if I’m not strong enough? What if something happens that sets me off? What if—”

“I believe in you.”

The words were calm but utterly certain, the sincerity in them enough to take him to his knees. No one but Michael had ever believed in him, not really, but he could see she meant it, and the knowledge settled inside him, strengthening his resolve, reminding him that he was stronger than he had ever realised, that he would not let himself down again. For if he let himself down, he would be ruining her too.

“Alana,” he whispered, his good fortune so great he hardly knew how to account for it. “I don’t deserve this. I don’t deserve you.”

“Harry Martin,” she said severely, scowling at him. “Don’t talk such utter rot. You were in the gutter, ruined, and you fought back. You turned your life around and devoted it to

helping others. You deserve every good thing in life, but if you think marrying me is going to guarantee you nirvana, you've got the wrong girl. I'm not exactly a restful companion, if you've not noticed."

Harry grinned at her. "I noticed, love."

"Well, you're not supposed to agree with me," she said with a huff.

"But I like you just as you are. I like that you challenge me, that you'll tell me if I'm being an idiot. I like you, Alana Cadogan. Very much."

She stared up at him, and he noticed the way her eyes had grown dark, her breath coming quicker. Harry watched as she licked her lips, and the sight made his entire body light up with desire.

"Alana, you should probably—" he began, knowing it would not look good if her family discovered her here, but she kissed him before he could force himself to speak the rest of the words and all good intentions went out the window.

Staying sober was one thing, but denying the woman in his arms a kiss if she asked for one was something else entirely. So, he gave her what she asked for, but the more he gave, the more she demanded as the kiss grew deeper and hotter and desperately wicked. She undid the clasp on her cloak, and the heavy material slumped to the floor as she pressed against him. He groaned. "Harry," she gasped as he trailed a path of kisses down her neck.

Dazed, he stared at the line of buttons before him, every one of them undone. He hadn't done that, so she.... He swallowed as Alana drew the fabric aside, so he could see a delicately embroidered corset in shades of pastel pink, the lacy edge of her chemise, and the lush, plump mounds of her breasts above. With his heart beating in his ears, he trailed the backs of his fingers across her satiny skin, delighted when he heard her breath hitch.

"You are so beautiful," he said, giddy with want. "Lovely Artemis."

“Artemis?” she repeated, giving him a curious smile.

Harry nodded. “That’s what I thought, the first time I laid eyes on you. I knew you were trouble: Artemis, goddess of the wild hunt.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “You didn’t like me! I could tell at once. You looked all cross and disapproving.”

Harry shook his head, smiling ruefully. “That was because I liked you a deal too much, foolish creature. I was cross with you for unsettling me so thoroughly. I knew very well that you would turn my well-ordered life upside down, and so you did.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I’m not,” he said, and kissed her again.

He ought to stop this now. She needed to go back to Holbrook, but... but she tasted like innocence and sin all tangled up together and he wanted more, needed more. It had been so long since he had touched a woman. More than five long, lonely years, and now... and now she had burst into his life and made him feel again, made him want again and it was like she had opened a tap and life was surging through him. He was alight with the joy of it, fizzing with happiness and desire and so many feelings he had denied himself because he did not believe he deserved them.

Her hands moved over him, lingering on his bare forearms where he had rolled up his sleeves before moving to the buttons on his black waistcoat. They gave way under her nimble fingers, and she pushed it from his shoulders. Harry gasped as she tugged his shirt free, her cool hands finding his skin and setting fires wherever they went as they slid over his chest.

“Alana,” he croaked. “They’ll come to get me... to....”

She kissed him again, and he forgot what he’d been saying. Her fingers toyed with his nipples, pinching lightly. Harry gasped, staring down at her to see a knowing look glinting in her eyes that made his breath catch.

“Take the shirt off,” she commanded.

He did as he was told, though he doubted it was wise, but he could deny her nothing, and when she looked at him with hunger in her gaze, he knew he was lost.

She smoothed her hands over his torso, studying him, tangling her fingers in the dark hair. “Harry?”

“Yes, love?” he managed, unsurprised when his voice sounded rough and uneven.

“I’m not a virgin.”

He nodded. “I assumed as much.”

She glanced up at him, uncertainty in her eyes. “Do you mind very much?”

He considered this for a moment. “Alana, I have made more mistakes in my life than one man has a right to. Do you seriously think I’d judge you for that? You believed you were going to be married and, whilst I’ll admit, I’d rather not think on it too much, I don’t give a damn. So long as you’re mine now.”

“Entirely yours,” she agreed. “And I know it’s right this time, Harry. It wasn’t before, but this.... You....”

She sighed, and there was so much want in that sigh she did not need to say another word. He kissed her again and his breath caught as her passion consumed him. He had to stop this, he knew. Not only did they need to be ready to face her parents, but he was not about to make love to her before they were married. He’d spoken truly. He didn’t care that she wasn’t a virgin. She had been so young, and had mistaken feelings of affection and friendship for love, and he was not a hot-headed young fool who would let feelings of jealousy spoil everything they had together. But he had begun his life anew, and now Alana was a part of that, and he wanted to do things right, as they should be, so they would wait until they were married and....

His breath caught as her hand coasted down over his trousers and settled upon his arousal, giving a firm squeeze. She caressed him through the material and her touch suspended all thought, holding him captive as pleasure rolled

through him. Harry's eyes closed, and he held his breath. Warm lips pressed against the underside of his jaw, and he shivered.

"Do you like that?" she whispered, her cool breath sending more shivers cascading over him. She laughed softly as he nodded, too enthralled by her touch to say a word. Dimly, he registered the buttons on his falls coming undone, and then her hand was on him, skin to skin, caressing, and he couldn't think, couldn't speak, could only *be* as desire filled him up. In the back of his mind, a little voice warned him he ought to stop this, and he tried to heed it.

"Alana," he managed, but now his voice was a breathless whisper. "Love... perhaps... perhaps..."

"Perhaps?" she repeated, a smile behind the word. "Perhaps there's something else you'd like?"

Her slender fingers tightened around him, and he groaned.

"Anything, anything." He didn't even know what he was saying anymore, too lost in the moment. "Please."

She laughed. The sound made the fine hair on the back of his neck prickle. His skin lit with anticipation as she dropped to her knees.

Harry stared down at her, dazed and out of his mind with desire, as she leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to his cock.

"God forgive me," he muttered, and then choked as he felt the touch of her tongue, hot and wet, and—

His eyes flew open as a voice reached them from deep within the house.

"Oh, don't you worry, Mrs Hogget. You get back to your dough. Temperamental stuff, dough. I'll find the vicar, don't you trouble yourself. No doubt he's busy writing a sermon or praying, something of the sort, but he'll just have to put it aside to greet his soon-to-be mama-in-law."

"Lud! *Mama!*" Alana squeaked, scrambling to her feet.

Panic gripped Harry. Every trace of arousal vanished instantly as he cursed himself for an idiot. He was about to be

discovered in about as damning a position as there was by her bloody mother! This was divine retribution for taking advantage of his fiancée. The thought occurred to him that he'd not been the only one taking advantage, but he pushed that aside, too much of a gentleman to consider it. All thumbs, he struggled in vain to fasten his buttons, then snatched up his shirt to cover the fact they were only half done, just as the door opened.

There stood Mrs Bonnie Cadogan, regarding him—the parish vicar—entirely dishevelled, bare-chested, with his shirt fisted in his hands, and her daughter beside him, holding her dress closed. He could only imagine what she thought of him.

“Well,” the lady said. “I assumed as much when you disappeared, Alana. A good job I came ahead of your father, or a right to-do we'd have on our hands. Reverend Martin, I assume?”

“Mrs Cadogan,” Harry croaked, utterly mortified and ashamed. “I am so dreadfully sorry. I can only—”

The lady rolled her eyes. “Oh, do stop looking so horrified, dear. I was young once, and I'm not dead yet,” she added, giving Harry an appreciative once over that made him blush to the roots of his hair.

“Mama!” Alana protested.

Mrs Cadogan snorted with laughter. “Don't you *Mama* me, you wicked girl. I'm the only thing that stands between you and your Papa this moment, so if you want to marry this handsome fellow before your father murders him, I suggest you put yourselves to rights and do it quick.”

There followed a few moments of frantic rearranging, both Alana and Harry burning with embarrassment as her mother **turned** her back to give them a bit of privacy. Once they were decent again, outwardly at least, Harry dared to speak.

“Thank you, Mrs Cadogan. I can't imagine what you think of me.”

The lady looked around and smiled at him, and for all that Alana must favour her father and uncle in colouring and looks, it was an echo of her daughter's smile, filled with warmth and mischief.

"I think my daughter is a very persuasive creature. She takes after me," she added with a saucy wink that only made Harry blush harder. "I'll ask your Mrs Hogget to bring us some tea for Mr Cadogan will be here soon, I suspect, and we'd best try our best to look like butter wouldn't melt, hmm?"

The lady went out again in search of his housekeeper and Harry let out a breath.

"Oh, my word," he said with feeling, turning to Alana, expecting to discover her looking equally mortified, only to see her go off in a peal of laughter. Harry stared as she gave in to hysteria.

"It's not funny," he exclaimed, a little outraged. "If she'd been a bit quieter, or a few moments later—"

Alana howled, clutching at her stomach. "Oh, H-Harry stop it, I c-can't breathe," she spluttered.

Harry scowled at her, and Alana caught sight of his face, which was apparently terribly funny, for she went off in whoops again.

"How you can find this amusing, I don't know," he grumbled.

"B-Because Mama knew," she said, gasping for breath. "That's why she was talking s-so loudly, to warn us."

Harry considered this and realised she had a point. "You don't think she hates me?"

"Oh, Harry," Alana said fondly, moving to him and kissing his cheek. "If I love you, Mama will love you too."

Harry's breath caught. "You love me?" he repeated, hardly daring to believe the words.

"Harry Martin, I may not be a virginal bride, but I hope you don't think I go about doing things like that with people I

don't love," she said crossly.

"No! No, love, I only...." He huffed out a breath as he saw the devilry twinkling in her eyes. "Little wretch. You're going to tie me up in knots, aren't you?"

Alana shrugged. "Only ones you can get out of if you want to," she said, laughter behind the words.

"I love you, dreadful, dreadful girl," he said, utterly beguiled by her.

"Do you, Harry?" she asked, staring up at him with big eyes, sea green and blue and dazzling.

"Alana Cadogan, I think I loved you from the first moment I saw you. That's why you were such a shock. I wasn't expecting it, wasn't expecting you. How could I have done?"

"I *am* rather a shock to the system," she admitted wryly, and Harry laughed, though his laughter died as he heard voices once more. Male voices this time. He glanced at Alana and linked their fingers together.

"I don't think your father is going to be as easily swayed as your mother was."

"He's not a hard man, Harry. Just be honest with him. You'll be fine, I promise."

Harry did not have time to answer as his housekeeper opened the door and announced with no small pride, "The Earl of St Clair, and Mr Jerome Cadogan, to see you, Reverend Martin."

"Thank you, Mrs Hogget," Harry said, eyeing Mrs Cadogan nervously as she came in behind her husband.

"There you are, Jerome. We wondered where you'd got to."

"Did you, love?" the man asked, eyeing his wife suspiciously. "It seemed to me you shot out of the house like a scalded cat."

“Nonsense. I was just eager to meet my son-in-law, so I got Alana to bring me on ahead, that’s all. I knew you’d catch up.”

“Well, and so I have,” Mr Cadogan said, turning his curious gaze upon Harry.

“Mr Cadogan, sir. A pleasure to meet you.” Harry shook his hand firmly and swallowed when Mr Cadogan did not let go, his grip just a touch too tight for comfort.

“Is it, son? I do hope so,” he said, his manner warm enough, but a glint in his eyes that promised retribution if he found anything amiss.

“Shall we sit?” Mrs Cadogan said brightly. “The tea tray will be in directly and Mrs Hogget promised us some of her sugar biscuits. If the smell was anything to go by, we’re in for a treat.”

“She’s an excellent housekeeper,” Harry said, grasping at the conversational opening like a lifeline. “A wonderful cook, too.”

Mrs Hogget arrived with the tea tray and Harry enjoyed a few moments of respite whilst Mrs Cadogan poured tea and handed around the biscuit plate. Once this was accomplished, an awkward silence filled the room. Harry darted a panicked glance at Alana, who gave him an encouraging smile, but didn’t seem to have much help to offer.

“How is Jeb?” Lord St Clair asked, and Harry was never more relieved for something other than himself to talk about.

“Much better, my lord, thank you. I feared the ordeal had depressed his spirits for he wouldn’t let me out of his sight at first and seemed very low, but today Mrs Hogget has been scolding him for stealing pie, and he managed two bowls of porridge and bread and jam for breakfast, so I think perhaps the worst is behind us.”

The earl laughed. “That is good news.”

“This lad is the reason Alana and Cat were all dashing about the countryside when they ought to have been safe at home, I assume?” Mr Cadogan asked mildly.

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied, rubbing the back of his neck and wondering how on earth to justify that.

“Oh, Papa,” Alana said crossly. “You know very well Harry had nothing to do with us being out and about. He knew nothing about it, and would have told us off for being reckless had he been aware of it.”

Mr Cadogan sat back in his chair, regarding his teacup with a considering expression. “Really? Reverend Martin has something of a passion for reckless behaviour himself, does he not? Or I am wrong?”

His blue eyes turned upon Harry, his gaze cool and assessing.

Well, here it was, then.

“Once upon a time, that would have been true, sir, and I suspect you know of my behaviour better than I do. I have only just cleared my debts with *Hunter’s*, and too much of that time has been lost in the bottom of a bottle. Many, many, *many* bottles, if you want the unvarnished version. I remember little of it, which is perhaps more of a kindness than I deserve. I can only tell you I am deeply ashamed of the man I was, and of the way I behaved. I have changed, Mr Cadogan. It took time and a deal of hard work, but it stuck, and I have no intention of ever drinking again.”

“Said many a sot,” Mr Cadogan replied dryly, his gaze unwavering.

Harry nodded. “I know it, and for that reason I thought never to marry, never to have a family. I did not believe I could do it, that I was whole enough to trust myself with such a gift.”

“What changed?” Mr Cadogan demanded. “Why should that not still be true?”

“I changed, for one. I know now that I can trust myself, and a very wise man suggested that, if I were happy, if I loved and was loved in return, the chances of ever failing would be greatly diminished. I know now that he’s right. For I could not

endure to let Alana down. If she will take this chance on me, I'll never give her, or you, cause to regret it."

Silence.

"I can tell you, Jerry, Harriet adores the fellow, and I think we can agree she's no fool. He's served the community with great dedication and kindness in the years he's been here, and he's very well-liked and respected," Lord St Clair told his brother, and with such obvious sincerity Harry was speechless and exceedingly touched. "I'll vouch for him. You know I'd not let Lana marry just anyone, but he's not a fortune hunter. Honestly, you should have seen his face when she told him she was an heiress. It was an absolute picture."

"Hmm." Mr Cadogan frowned, steepling his fingers.

"Oh, Jerry!" Mrs Cadogan said crossly. "Do stop tormenting the boy. You said yourself there's hardly a choice. Alana was bound to do something dreadful eventually, and you know very well you'd decided to let them marry before you even left the house."

"Papa!" Alana said, glaring at her father with reproach.

Her father shrugged, apparently unrepentant. "He's marrying my daughter. My *last* daughter.... The least he can expect is to be made to sweat a bit. If a fellow isn't sweating cobs when he meets his father-in-law for the first time, he's clearly not as invested in the situation as he ought to be."

Harry let out a breath. "Sir, I promise you. I'm a nervous wreck."

"Excellent," Jerry said, grinning and holding out his hand to Harry. "Welcome to the family."

Harry took it, only to have his soon-to-be father-in-law's punishing grip tighten upon him once more.

"And if you get the notion into your head to take to the bottle ever again, I'll cut off your balls," he whispered, still smiling.

There was a muffled laugh from the earl, and Harry forced a smile too, nodding his agreement.

“I’ll hand you the knife,” he promised, and Mr Cadogan chuckled.

“Good lad. You’ll do.”

Chapter 19



Dearest Lana

And yes, I know I ought to put Miss Cadogan, but it seems so strange and wrong to be formal with you, even in a letter. You'll always be Lana to me, my dear friend.

I hope and trust that this letter finds you well and happy. I really do mean that too, because I have news. I know that when you first spoke of breaking our engagement, I did not take to the idea as well as I might have. Firstly, I want to apologise for that, Lana, because you were right. I knew you were, in my heart, the moment you said it, but I was afraid. I was afraid of a world where I did not have the security of all the plans we'd made laid out before us. We had been so certain, and I felt like a fool to discover everything we had spoken about would come to naught.

Not so now. Lana. I must tell you. I have met someone. Her name is Miss Tyler, and she's quite simply the most wonderful girl I've ever known – except for you, my dear friend. I hope I may still call you that, Lana? For you will always be my friend, but now, at last, I know what you were trying to tell me. We were only ever friends, weren't we? More like siblings than lovers,

but with Miss Tyler, it's so different. I have a future, a happy one, and I cannot wait for it to begin. So, thank you, dear Lana, for being as brave as you always are and speaking the truth. You set us both free, and I will never stop being grateful for that, and for knowing you.

—Excerpt of a letter from The Hon'ble Oliver Cootes to Miss Alana Cadogan (daughter of Mr and Mrs Jerome and Bonnie Cadogan).

13th February 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

For the next two weeks, Alana was allowed many public outings with Harry, including attending Cat's lavish eighteenth birthday party at Dern, but they hardly got a moment alone. It was probably for the best, she supposed, as it seemed they could not be trusted to keep their hands off each other if they were. Or at least... *she* couldn't be trusted, she amended ruefully. Though how anyone could blame her when faced with Harry Martin all in black with that pristine white dog collar? There was something about his clerical robes that stirred her up, she realised, feeling dreadfully wicked. It was just whenever she saw him looking so very... vicarish, she had the irresistible urge to do something sinful and make him lose his mind. She really was a dreadful girl, she thought with a smirk.

Their engagement had been announced on the first of the month and Harry had acquired a common licence, so they need not wait the requisite three months before marrying. There was still a deal of speculation about the night in question. The presence of the wicked Marquess of Kilbane at the Lamb, and that he'd been seen talking to the beautiful daughter of the Marquess of Montagu on the same night, had not gone unnoticed. News of Kilbane having paid for the carriage in which Cat and Alana had then jaunted off had not helped matters. Alana did not want her friend to suffer any undue gossip for her part in their adventure, not when Cat had been

trying to help her. Besides, the sooner she married Harry, the happier she would be.

Seeing him every day, talking to him and spending time with him had only confirmed her feelings that this felt entirely different from her relationship with Oliver. It had happened so fast, too fast perhaps, but she had been with Oliver for years only to discover it wasn't right. This was. She knew it in her heart.

Harry was the first thing she thought of in the morning and the last thing at night. She was restless with impatience whenever they were apart, and when they were together, she was desperate to touch him, to be alone with him. It wasn't just her, either. She saw it in his eyes—the desire, the need—and it made her ache even more knowing they both suffered the same torment. But it was soon to be over.

Aunt Harriet had kindly suggested the Valentine's night ball become a wedding celebration. In that way, they could spread the news of their marriage far and wide, and hopefully overpower any other stories people might have on their minds. So they would be married tomorrow, followed by a lavish wedding breakfast, and then culminating in the grand ball.

Today, however, Alana was enjoying her last day as an unmarried lady. Sitting beside her on her bed, with their skirts billowing around them, were Cat, Emmeline, and Aggie. In the centre, looking rather worn and battered, was the old top hat.

“Well, it seems rather moot now,” Alana said with a sigh. “I mean, I'm getting married tomorrow.”

“All the more reason to take one now,” Cat said firmly. “I can't believe I actually waited until I was eighteen. I have such magnificent self-control now I'm a mature woman,” she said airily, putting her nose in the air with a refined little sniff.

Aggie gave a bark of laughter. “Mature! What a rapper.”

Cat stuck her tongue out at her friend, and they all fell about.

“Oh, very mature, Cat. Now, hush, you rowdy girls. Hoydens, every one of you! And here's me, about to become a

respectable married lady.”

Cat sighed. “Lucky Lana. He’s dreadfully handsome.”

“Yes, he is,” Alana replied, not beyond feeling smug at her good fortune. “Well, then, here I go.”

Alana stirred the bits of paper around with her fingers, closed her eyes, and pulled a dare free. It was an old one, the paper yellow and crackling. She peered at the faded writing.

“Dance in a garden at midnight.” Alana looked up and pulled a face. “It’s freezing out!”

“Oh, but how romantic! Dancing in the snow,” Cat said with a sigh. “I should have liked that one, if only I could find a fellow to dance with,” she added wistfully.

“Snow?” Alana said in alarm.

Cat nodded. “According to Pippin, it will snow tonight.”

“We’ll catch pneumonia!”

“Not with a handsome vicar to keep you warm,” Aggie pointed out.

Alana snorted. “Well, he’d better. Who’s going next, then?”

“Me!” Cat exclaimed. “Obviously.”

She snatched up the hat and placed it on her lap, staring down into it.

“No peeking!” Aggie scolded.

“I wasn’t,” Cat retorted, but closed her eyes for good measure. “At last,” she said with a sigh, and trailed her fingers through the dares.

“Oh, come on, choose one,” Alana said, laughing.

Minutes had passed, and Cat still hadn’t made her choice.

Cat cracked an eyelid and glowered. “Hush, this is a significant moment in my life. It must be exactly right.”

Sighing, they all waited until Cat suddenly snatched up a dare. She held it aloft, triumphant, and then shook her head.

“I can’t look at it,” she said, panic in her voice. “I’ve waited so long and wanted this forever, and now... what if it’s disappointing, or awful, or...?”

“The hat is never wrong,” Emmeline said quietly.

Everyone turned to look at her. She had hardly spoken tonight, watching rather than participating, which was not entirely out of character, but she seemed somehow withdrawn. Cat regarded her with interest, and nodded.

“You’re right, of course. Well, then... Oh, it’s an old one again,” Cat said, carefully unfolding the paper with shaking hands. She took a breath. “Do something that frightens you. *Oh!*” she exclaimed, grabbing hold of Aggie’s arm.

“Good heavens, as if she needed any encouragement to be reckless,” Aggie groused.

“But it’s Mama’s dare!” Cat said, tears sparkling in her eyes. She gave a happy sigh. “Oh, it *is* perfect. Isn’t it perfect? So romantic.”

“Hmm,” Aggie said, clearly unconvinced.

“Well, it worked out for Mama, didn’t it?” Cat said stubbornly.

“It did,” Emmeline agreed. “And it’s terribly romantic.”

Cat grinned at her before turning to Aggie and offering her the hat. Aggie held up her hands in a defensive gesture and shook her head.

“No. No, I won’t, thank you. I have no intention of getting myself in a silly fix. Papa would murder me.”

“Oh, Aggie!” Cat exclaimed in frustration. “After the scandal he caused? I think not. Besides, you must do it. You’re a Daring Daughter too.”

Aggie shrugged. “I don’t care. I’m not taking one.”

“*Yet,*” Cat predicted darkly before turning to Emmeline. “Come on, then, Em. If Aggie is going to let me down, it’s your turn.”

“Oh, I wasn’t going to. I don’t really... I mean, I don’t know if...” Emmeline stared at the hat in dismay and then took a deep breath. “Well, I suppose I may as well in the circumstances,” she said, with an oddly resigned note to her voice and a wry smile.

Alana wondered what circumstances she was referring to, but didn’t like to ask.

They watched as Emmeline plucked out a dare and unfolded it, the colour draining from her face as she read.

“Oh, my,” she said faintly.



14th February 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

Cat reached for Aggie’s hand as they watched Alana repeat her vows to Reverend Martin. Aggie sighed and handed Cat a handkerchief.

“Don’t look at me like that. It’s just so terribly romantic,” Cat said, sniffing and dabbing at her eyes.

Aggie smiled. “Yes, it is. They look happy, don’t they?”

“Blissful,” Cat agreed. “Lucky girl.”

“Your turn will come, Cat, but you must be patient. You’re barely eighteen, not eighty. If only you weren’t always in such a hurry,” Aggie whispered.

Cat shrugged. “But I feel like I must, like something is always pushing at me. Don’t you ever feel that way? Like life is passing you by and you must grab hold of it with both hands and just let it take you where it will.”

Aggie returned a blank look and Cat sighed.

“Just me, then.”

“Shh.”

They both turned to glare at Fred, who was sitting beside Aggie and scowling at them. “Stop chattering.”

“We’re not chattering,” Aggie objected. “We aren’t monkeys.”

Fred muttered a scathing remark, so Aggie elbowed him. Judging from the sound he made, she had sharp elbows. He rubbed his ribs and glowered at her, but said nothing more. Satisfied, Aggie returned her attention to the wedding.

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

The elderly Reverend Bidewell looked about ready to burst with pride as Reverend Martin leaned in and kissed Alana. She turned a very becoming shade of pink, and then scandalised everyone who didn’t know her by grabbing hold of Harry’s coat and pulling him back, not letting him go until he kissed her again. When she finally released him, Harry, too, was pink, but looking rather pleased with himself.

“Is that Harry’s father?” Aggie hissed, gesturing to a thin-faced, taciturn man sitting in the front row on the opposite side of the church.

Cat pulled a face and nodded. “Papa says he’s an old nip cheese, can’t bear to put his hand in his pocket. She said Harry’s not seen him in years, but the moment he heard his son was marrying an heiress, out he came from the woodwork.”

“And back he’ll go, if I know Alana,” Aggie said with a laugh.

Cat grinned and nodded. “Thank heavens he’s not staying for the ball.”



Alana sighed happily as she looked at Harry.

“What?” he asked, holding a spoonful of meringue suspended in the air before him.

“I was just thinking how terribly handsome you are,” she said, grinning.

Harry ate the meringue, sending her an amused glance. “You’re not half bad yourself, Artemis.”

“Harry, how did that awful man produce someone as lovely as you? I mean, I know he’s your father, and it’s not terribly Christian of me to say so....”

“Not Christian at all, love,” he pointed out, but with no condemnation in his eyes.

“Yes, but he’s so....” Alana buttoned her lip as she realised nothing good could possibly follow that statement.

It had occurred to her, rather belatedly, that being a vicar’s wife might mean she would need to restrain her tongue somewhat, and there was no time like the present. After all, Harry had agreed they would not be allowing his father to interfere in their lives, so if the old skinflint wanted to walk about looking as if he were conducting an inventory of everything Holbrook had to offer, that was entirely his own affair.

“Well done, love,” Harry said, his expression admiring. “Soon you’ll be able to do that without looking as if you want to burst.”

Alana snorted. “Hush now, or all my good intentions will go out of the window.”

She smiled at Harry and then waved at Jeb, who caught her attention from his place of honour next to Lady St Clair. He grinned and waved back at her.

“He likes you,” Harry observed.

“I’m very likeable,” Alana said loftily.

Harry’s expression became serious then. “Alana, about Jeb....”

Alana reached out and covered his hand with her own. “Jeb must stay with us. Of course he must. He needs you, and I’d best keep him close by in case I must rescue him from another calamity.”

Harry swallowed, emotion shining in his eyes. “Well, I hope that won’t be necessary, but... thank you, love. You are a wonder.”

“I know,” she replied with a smirk.

Harry laughed and then turned at the sound of a discreet cough to find the butler at his elbow. “Forgive me, Reverend Martin, but Lord Kilbane has just arrived and begs a moment of your time.”

Harry and Alana exchanged a glance. Kilbane? *Here?*

“Whatever can he want?” Alana asked warily.

Harry shook his head. “I can’t imagine, but we’d best find out.”

The *we* made her smile, for it never occurred to Harry to leave her out of the mystery, and so they excused themselves from the wedding breakfast and hurried to the door.

Pippin had been quite right about the snow and, though the hour was growing late and the weak winter light fading, the world shone white and bright still. Against the pristine backdrop stood Kilbane and Pirate, like dark ink figures on a clean sheet of paper.

“Martin,” Kilbane said, giving a brisk nod. “I’m leaving in a few days for France. I intend to be gone for some time, years probably, and I have neither the hours to spare nor the patience to sell this creature, so... have him back.”

“Back?” Harry looked blankly from Kilbane to Pirate and back to Kilbane. “I don’t understand.”

Kilbane gave a sharp tut of impatience. “It’s not a difficult concept, Martin. I’m giving you your bloody horse back! I’m travelling light and can’t be doing with dragging him to the south of France with me.”

Harry took a few hesitant steps down the stairs towards Pirate, stroking the horse’s sleek neck in wonder. “You’re *giving* him to me?”

“Don’t look all dewy eyed,” Kilbane said in disgust. “It’s just easier. I don’t care about the price he’ll fetch, we both know I’m disgustingly wealthy. I can buy a dozen horses just like him in France once I’m settled. I just don’t want the hassle, and the damned horse is hassle, so he’s yours.”

“My word, Kilbane, I...” Harry began, his eyes shining with such happiness Alana’s heart felt as if it might burst out of her chest.

“Don’t.” Kilbane shot him an arctic look and held up a warning finger.

“God bless you,” Harry said, with such obvious sincerity he was glowing with it.

Kilbane looked positively murderous now, and Alana had to hide her smile behind her hand.

“God damned clergymen,” Kilbane muttered furiously. “If I want your bedamned blessing, I’ll bloody well ask for it.”

“Would you like to join us, my lord?” Harry asked, ignoring the man’s obvious indignation. “We’re celebrating our nuptials, there’s a ball tonight and I’m certain—”

“Go to the devil,” Kilbane said succinctly. “I’ll leave Pirate with St Clair’s grooms.”

“Thank you, my lord. You have no idea what this means to —”

Kilbane made an exceptionally rude hand gesture as he stalked away, leaving Harry and Alana staring at each other in shock.

“This day is truly miraculous,” Harry said, his expression so obviously joyful that Alana hugged him. “First, I get to marry a wild, wicked, beautiful goddess, my lovely Artemis, and then... then Kilbane *gives* me Pirate. That *did* happen, didn’t it? I didn’t imagine it?”

“You didn’t imagine it,” Alana agreed, squeezing him tighter. “It’s you, Harry. You bring out the best in people, you make us all want to be better. Even Kilbane.”

Harry snorted and shook his head. “I doubt that very much, but I’m touched you should think so.”

“I do think so,” Alana said firmly. “But we’d best hurry back inside, the meal must be over by now and the dancing will begin soon. Everyone will think we’ve had enough and run away if we don’t appear.”

Harry took her hand, grinning. “Well, then. Let us go, for I intend to dance with my wife and let every fellow in the place turn green with envy.”

“Isn’t envy a sin, Harry? That’s not very Christian of you,” she said happily.

“No,” Harry said with a laugh. “It isn’t, is it? What a shocking influence you are on me.”



Cat darted back behind the door as Harry and Alana went back to join their guests.

He was here. Kilbane was here and he was leaving. *For years.* Panic thrummed beneath her skin, making her feel lightheaded and uncertain. Kilbane was going away. He was going away for years and she wouldn’t see him. She might never see him again.

No.

No, no, no. That simply couldn’t be. It wasn’t right. It was not supposed to be this way. Not now, not when she had finally come of age. They were meant to be. They belonged together. He was hers. He had always been hers. She’d known it in her heart for so long now and it only needed a little more time. He needed to understand that she wasn’t a child any longer. She was eighteen now, and old enough to marry and he... he *needed* her. Something like desperation uncurled deep in her stomach, the certainty that if Kilbane left now, something terrible would happen to him and she would never forgive herself. He would leave thinking no one cared, no one gave a damn whether he lived or died, and that....

She couldn’t bear it.

What to do? What to do? If he left, she would have no way of contacting him, no chance of keeping in touch. There was nothing else for it. Her dare had been clear enough: *Do something that frightens you.* Well, her heart was beating so hard right now she thought there was a good chance she’d pass out. Still, the icy temperatures outside should be the equivalent

to a good hard slap. Peering around the door, Cat slipped out into the grand entrance hall, and then out of the door.

She shivered as snowflakes drifted down, settling on her bare shoulders, but there was no time to fetch a cloak. Kilbane would be gone as soon as he'd handed Pirate over, so she must be quick. Her satin slippers were soaked through before she'd taken three steps. They would be utterly ruined, but Cat was undaunted. She ran as fast as she dared, following the footsteps in the crisp white layer of snow. The quiet jingle of tack had her turning to see the guests for tonight's ball were arriving as a carriage stopped in front of the house, and Cat darted behind a large marble column so the new arrivals could not see her. Alana would be pleased, for she had feared the weather might keep some guests away, but they had obviously come early to be certain the snow didn't stop their journey. Cat watched the Marquess of Wrexham step down and take the arm of a short fellow who guided him up the steps. Another carriage was arriving behind Wrexham's, and Cat muttered a curse. Well, it was now or never if she didn't want to be seen.

Picking up her skirts, she ran.

The stables at Holbrook were vast and magnificent, and currently a hive of activity with so many extra animals to be seen to. For a moment, Cat despaired of ever finding Kilbane, but no... there he was, leading Pirate into the family's wing of the huge stable block. Hiding out of sight until she had a clear run after him without being seen, Cat lingered in the shadows, awaiting her moment.

Hurrying inside at the first opportunity, Cat was relieved to be out of the snow and the wind, though it was not a great deal warmer. Ahead of her, she saw Pirate's glossy flank disappear inside a stall. The grooms had already divested him of saddle and bridle, it seemed, though why Kilbane was settling the horse in... but she smiled to herself. He was doing it because he cared, though he'd likely tear a strip off anyone who suggested such a thing. It was just more proof that he wasn't the wicked, heartless creature everyone believed him to be.

Cat padded quietly to the stall, looking behind her to ensure she wasn't seen. From inside, she heard Kilbane speaking softly and paused, listening.

"There's a good fellow. No doubt you'll be glad to get back Martin, hmm? No, don't make out like you care."

Cat peeked around the corner, smiling as she saw Pirate nudging at Kilbane with his great head. The marquess laughed and drew a lump of sugar from his pocket.

"I knew it. Cupboard love, that's all it is. You're anyone's for a lump of sugar, and don't pretend otherwise."

"He loves you too," Cat observed, unable to hold the comment back.

Kilbane stiffened, his violet eyes growing cold in the dim light of the stable.

"What in the name of everything holy are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I came to see you," Cat said, putting up her chin. "I heard what you told Reverend Martin. You're going away."

Kilbane undid Pirate's halter with long, strong fingers. "What of it? That was a private conversation, but nothing is sacred to Lady Catherine, I suppose. When the world is inclined to throw itself at your feet, notions of other people's privacy must become difficult to comprehend."

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop," Cat retorted, stung by the accusation. "But I saw you, and... and I just wanted... I wanted..."

"I know what you want," Kilbane said, his tone dark. "Or what you think you want, but you don't have a bloody clue. You're an infant playing with fire, and you'll regret your idiocy the moment you get burned. Do us both a favour and run along before someone sees you."

"I won't *run along*," Cat said, her temper rising. "And I am sick of you treating me like a child."

"Why? You are one," he shot back, his tone laced with such impatience Cat had to fight not to lose her temper entirely

and prove him right. “You’re a spoiled little girl who wants something she can’t have.”

“And you’re an idiot!” she threw back at him. “You scare everyone off, keep everyone away from you even though you’re bored to death, and dying of loneliness by small degrees, but instead of actually doing something about it, instead of taking the risk of letting someone into your life, you’re running even farther away. What is it *you* want, my lord? Are you secretly hoping someone will stop you? That someone will come after you and beg you not to go?”

Kilbane had stopped in the far corner of the stable. He was entirely still, though palpable fury emanated from him. Cat knew she was going too far, that she was poking at something raw, angry, and wild, and the only reaction he knew how to give was to lash out, but she could not stop herself. His eyes glittered in the darkness, eerie and beautiful and, behind the rage, he was so obviously in pain that the words tumbled out.

“Well, *I’m* begging you,” she said, hearing the tremor behind her plea and not caring. She stepped into the stable, moving closer to him. “Don’t go. *Please*. I don’t want you to go.”

“You’re insane if you think I’m going to change my plans for your sake,” he said, his voice cold with contempt. “Girls like you are ten-a-penny, if too-sweet little blondes are to your liking, but I’ve never had a taste for desperation.”

Cat laughed, shaking her head. “Oh, really, Kilbane, is that the best you can do? Ten-a-penny indeed, though I suppose there’s a ring of truth to the desperation, else I’d not be here, would I?”

He stared at her, his mingled frustration and confusion so blatant she almost laughed, but he caught the glimmer of her amusement and his gaze darkened, making unease slide beneath her skin. His lip curled as he spoke, disgust dripping from every word.

“You’d better hope I don’t show you the best I can do, Lady Catherine, for you might not like the truth. I do not know what goes on in that strange little head of yours, but I am not a

misunderstood hero who only needs the love of a good woman to put him right.”

“No, I know,” she said, wishing he could understand how she did see him, because she suspected she was the only one who did, who had bothered to take the trouble to notice. She saw him, the dark, terrible parts of him that were cold and angry, and the man who had given Pirate back, the man who had seen her safely back home when she’d needed help, on two occasions now. When she spoke again, her voice was soft, cajoling, pleading for him to listen to her. “I know it’s not so simple as that, but all the same. *Please*, don’t go.”

“Why?” he demanded, barely more than a growl.

Cat’s heart kicked unevenly in her chest as she fought to find the right words, the words that would make him stay. “Because I’d be your friend if you’d let me. It needn’t be more than that, if you don’t wish for it to be, but... won’t you give me a chance to prove I can be a friend to you?”

“A friend?” he repeated incredulously. “And what makes you think I need the friendship of some insipid little girl with no idea of the world, of anything outside of the gilded walls of her palace?”

“Because everyone needs someone, Kilbane. Even you.”

There was a taut silence.

“That’s enough,” he said at last, and went to stalk past her.

Cat didn’t think, only reacted, and took hold of his hand as he passed her. “Ciarán, please, won’t you at least think—”

Kilbane snatched his hand from her grasp and Cat stumbled back a few paces in shock. Behind her there came a soft equine nicker, sounding almost amused, just before Pirate put his nose to the small of her back and pushed, hard. Cat gasped as she was thrown off balance, tripping in the thick, luxurious layer of straw bedding to which all of St Clair’s horses were treated.

Somewhere, deep in Kilbane’s soul, he must be the gentleman she had accused him of being, for she was certain he moved instinctively, reaching for her before she landed face

first on the stable floor. His hands firmed upon her arms, steadying her, and for a moment she thought it would be fine, and then his boots got tangled in the heavy layers of her skirts and petticoats and down they went.

Chapter 20



Dearest Mama and Papa,

Please forgive me. I am so dreadfully sorry for the hurt and worry I know I am causing you, and I know you will not understand why I have done this, but I beg you to trust me, to believe in me. I have good reasons for my actions.

Do not come after me, or make a fuss, for you will only risk causing a scandal. We will be back with you very soon, I promise.

—Excerpt of a letter from Miss Emmeline Knight to her parents, Lady Helena and Mr Gabriel Knight.

14th February 1845, Holbrook House, Sussex.

Dancing with Harry was her new favourite thing, Alana decided. For three dances he had been entirely hers, the two of them lost in their own little world as the music swelled and everything around them disappeared in a blur of movement and colour.

“Oh, Harry,” she gasped, laughing and pressing a hand to her heart. “What a marvellous dancer you are. I had no idea.”

“Hidden talents, love,” he said, looking adorably smug. “If you can get us out of here without causing offence, I’d love to reveal some other hidden talents.”

He winked at her and leaned in to nip at her earlobe. Alana did her best to look outraged.

“Harry Martin! And you a vicar. Oh, how I’ve been deceived. Here I was thinking I’d married a good man and you’re nothing but a wicked seducer.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” he said with the most insincere shrug she’d ever seen.

“And thank goodness for that,” she said, laughing and taking his hand. “Come along. I’m sure no one will be surprised if we leave, but I’d best let Mama know.”

“Well, you run along and tell her, and—”

“Oh, ho. No, you don’t. You can say goodbye to her too,” Alana said firmly, not above enjoying seeing her new husband squirm a bit.

“Oh, but, Alana....” Harry subsided with a sigh as she shot him a look. “Hen-pecked, and not even married a day,” he said mournfully.

“Pfft,” Alana said, because they both knew he could be a stubborn devil when the mood took him.

“Mama!” Alana called, finding her mother talking to Matilda Hunt.

“Lana, darling. Don’t tell me, you’re making your escape?” Mama winked at Harry, who returned an awkward smile.

Alana grinned, unrepentant. “Yes. Do you mind terribly?”

“Of course not. I should be more amazed if you stayed. You run along home. I’m quite certain Harry has entertaining plans for the rest of the evening,” Mama added wickedly.

Alana laughed and kissed her mother’s cheek. “Apologise to Aunt Harriet for me, and thank her for everything. It’s been a perfect day.”

“Consider it done, love.”

Alana was just about to leave when Matilda spoke to her. “Lana, dear, have you seen Cat?”

“No, I’m sorry. Not since dinner, I think?” she said.

Matilda's face clouded with worry, but she shook it off and smiled at Alana. "Oh, well. I'd best find her before her father starts to fret. Congratulations, dear. I hope you'll both be very happy."

"I think we will," Alana said, smiling up at Harry before he led her out of the door.

Bundled up in scarves and cloaks, Harry and Alana walked back to the vicarage.

"We could have taken a carriage," Harry pointed out, but Alana shook her head.

"No, this is perfect. Look at that sky, Harry."

They paused, looking up at an expanse of black velvet, studded all over with glittering stars.

"It's so quiet when it snows," she added, her voice a whisper.

"Nothing is quiet when you are around, Mrs Martin," Harry observed with a smile. "And that's just the way I like it."

"I'm not being noisy now," she objected, slanting an accusing look at him.

"No," Harry said, leaning towards her and brushing his lips over hers. "But my heart is thundering because you're with me."

She laughed with delight at that and then exclaimed: "Oh, my dare!"

He frowned down at her. "Your what?"

"My dare. I'm a Daring Daughter, you see. I ought to have done it before I got married. It's how a lot of my friends found their husbands."

"By performing dares?" Harry asked sceptically.

"Yes. Sometimes the dares are just about giving confidence, sometimes they're fun, and sometimes there really is a risk involved. It's all the luck of the draw, but the hat seems to know who needs what."

“The hat knows?” Harry repeated, staring at her as if she’d run mad.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Alana said with a huff. “You don’t understand, but it’s true, I swear it.”

“If you say so,” he replied, obviously humouring her. “So, what was your dare?”

“To dance in a garden at midnight,” she said, smiling at him.

“Well, we are in a garden, and it’s dark, though....” He pulled out his pocket watch and held the lamp up so he could see. “It’s barely eight o’clock.”

“Oh.” Alana sighed.

Harry set down the lamp. “How about we dance now anyway, and when we go on our honeymoon this summer, we try it again? We could dance at the Boboli Gardens in Italy.”

“Won’t they be closed at midnight?”

Harry shrugged. “When did such a minor concern ever bother you? You said it was a dare, didn’t you?”

Alana gazed up at him. “You are quite wonderfully perfect.”

“It will go to my head if you keep saying such things.” He grinned, before sweeping a majestic bow. “May I have the pleasure?”

“You may,” she said, accepting his hand as he pulled her into his arms.

It was ridiculous, of course, the snow made it slippery, and they laughed and shouted as they danced and slithered around the garden. Just as they were becoming too breathless and hysterical to go on, big, silent flakes drifted down from the sky and they paused, staring up at it in wonder as icy touches caressed their faces.

Alana turned to look at Harry to find him gazing at her, his eyes soft.

“I love you.”

She sighed and leaned into him. “Just as well, really, because I adore you.”

He laughed and kissed her, then snatched up the lamp. They ran the rest of the way home, Harry towing her behind him. They burst into the vicarage, which Mrs Hogget had left cosy for them, with lamps lit and fires burning. Jeb was staying at Holbrook tonight, much to his delight, and was no doubt getting his head turned by the idea of maids and footmen at his beck and call.

With numb fingers, they helped each other with coats and cloaks, pulling off sodden boots and shivering as they ran up the stairs to Harry’s bedroom... *their* room now.

Alana gave a bark of alarm as she flew inside and skidded to a halt as she stared at the bed.

“Good heavens!” she exclaimed.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck, grimacing. “I ought to have warned you, I suppose.”

“Yes, yes you ought,” she said, unable to take her eyes from the monstrous bed that dominated the room. “That is... That is....”

“Awful,” he said. “Hideous and—”

“Grotesque.”

“That too,” he agreed, walking up behind her and sliding his arms about her waist. “It belonged to the last vicar. He was rather more of the, er, fire and brimstone variety. Apparently, he had the bed made for the room. I couldn’t afford to replace it, so I’ve had to live with it.”

“Are those skulls?” she asked sceptically.

“Yes.”

“And the stations of the cross. On a bed.”

“Yes.”

“Is that...?”

“Adam and Eve and the serpent.”

“Oh.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Alana giggled. “Now I shall feel thoroughly wicked all night. How delightful.”

“Dreadful girl,” he whispered, and kissed her neck.

Alana shivered.

“Are you cold?”

She nodded. “Freezing. Take my clothes off and warm me up.”

“Well, if you insist,” he said gravely.

The shivers continued as Harry began unbuttoning and unlacing, and even when he manoeuvred her to stand before the fire, they did not stop, for she was not really cold at all, only alight with anticipation. By the time she was in her shift and stockings, Harry’s breathing had quickened, his eyes grown dark, and Alana was bursting with impatience. Mama had suggested she let Harry have this time to unwrap her, ‘like the best kind of present,’ but it was not in her nature to remain passive and keeping her hands to herself was a struggle.

Unable to take any more, Alana grasped hold of her shift and tugged it up over her head.

Harry’s sharp intake of breath was her reward, the flush of colour high on his cheeks as he gazed upon her, making her smile.

“Will I do?” she asked, knowing full well that the look in his eyes was pure admiration.

“Do?” he repeated, his voice husky. “You’re a work of art, love.”

He reached out and cupped one full breast, testing the weight and squeezing gently. The shock of his icy hand and the desire that lanced through her made Alana gasp.

“Harry,” she whispered, and flung herself at him, her arms wrapping about his neck. She kissed him hard, and he responded in kind, his hands moving over her as he explored

the unfamiliar landscape of curves before him. “Too many clothes,” she protested, tugging him to the bed.

He followed, attempting to undo buttons as he went. Alana climbed onto the bed and pulled him after her, his movements awkward as he struggled out of his waistcoat. She tugged the shirt from his waistband, and they broke the kiss for long enough for him to yank it over his head and throw it aside.

“Quickly!” she demanded, impatient now as she tried to help him with the buttons on his trousers, but they only got in each other’s way. Harry pushed her hands aside, laughing.

“Stop helping!” he protested.

“Then hurry up!”

“I’m going as fast as...” His words died on a groan as she slid her hand beneath the fabric of his small clothes and caressed his cock.

“Faster,” she whispered, eyes glittering with mirth.

“Can’t. Can’t think,” he murmured.

“Oh, then I’d best stop.” Alana let go of him and flopped back onto the bed, her expression one of complete innocence.

“You are cruel, Artemis,” he growled, shedding clothes so fast it was a wonder he didn’t rip seams and buttons in his haste to be free of them.

“And you are too good,” she said fondly, opening her arms to him as he went to her, covering her with his body. The heat of his skin blazed against her, warming her through, exquisitely hot and silky contrasting with the rasp of coarse hair. “But I think you could be wicked if you put your mind to it.”

Harry’s lips quirked, a devilish glint lighting his eyes that made her heart skip with happiness and anticipation. “If it’s wicked you’re after, I may have just the thing.”

“Is that right?” she whispered, stroking a hand down his powerful back to his buttock. She gave a squeeze and grinned up at him. “Mine,” she said with a happy sigh.

He snorted. "All yours. Now be quiet and keep your hands to yourself for a moment."

"Not a chance," she retorted, though any other words died in her throat as he bent his head, drew her nipple into his mouth, and sucked.

One hand coasted over her belly, her hips, down one thigh and back again, toying with the curls nestled in the valley between. Alana closed her eyes and threaded her hands into his thick hair as he continued to kiss and gently bite, first one breast and then the other. His questing fingers sifted through the curls, seeking the hidden place beneath. She gasped as he found it, widening her thighs to allow him better access. Harry chuckled softly and though he did not stop, he kept his touch light, teasing, never quite enough. Alana moved restlessly, lifting her hips into his caresses, trying to encourage him to give her more, to touch her harder, quicker.

"Harry," she complained, when her efforts failed to yield results.

He looked down at her, the picture of innocence. "Yes, love? What can I do for you?"

"I think you know very well," she grumbled.

"Poor little wife, how cruel your husband is to you. Do you still want me to be wicked?"

"Yes. No. I don't know... I want you to stop teasing me," she pleaded.

"I don't think so, not yet," he said, looking the farthest thing from any vicar she could imagine in this moment.

He sent her a smug smile and moved down the bed, kissing her as he went. His mouth trailed a path across the underside of her breast, her ribcage and belly, the jut of her hip and the tender skin on the inside of her thigh. Alana's breath hitched as she stared down at him. He glanced up then, his eyes dark with wanting, before he pressed his mouth against the soft patch of curls.

"Harry," she whispered. "Please."

“Well, as you asked so nicely,” he murmured, and gently parted the curls, exposing the delicate peak of her sex.

The touch of his tongue was enough to send her thoughts scattering into the wilderness. Alana sighed, his soft murmur of encouragement allowing her to relax into this voluptuous pleasure without the slightest trace of doubt. The more wanton she became, the louder she moaned, the more he praised her. He told her she was lovely, so sweet. He insisted she tell him how to touch her, that she call out his name and order him to give her more, and so she did, surprising herself with just how demanding she could be.

It was right, she realised, as the world became fuzzy at the edges and the pleasure so unbearably good that she held her breath. It had never felt this way before, but with Harry it was love and trust and friendship, with the added spice of desire.

“Perfection,” she whispered, as his mouth closed over her, and he gently suckled.

Alana shattered with a cry that tore from her mouth without her ever thinking to muffle it. The sound was unrestrained and immodest, but she didn’t care, and she knew Harry didn’t either.

Before she had time to catch her breath, Harry’s firm hands were pushing her thighs wider as he settled between them.

“Alana,” he said, her name barely more than a growl. “Please....”

“Yes,” she said, laughing until he pushed inside her, one swift movement that had her gasping and grasping his shoulders, holding on tight as he groaned and took hold of her wrists, pressing them into the mattress over her head. He stared down at her, breathing hard.

“I’ve wanted this since the first time I saw you,” he admitted, the words raw. “I thought I would lose everything for wanting you. It was too much, like you had bewitched me, but... but I have you, I have everything.”

“You do,” she said, the words breathless as he moved inside her, stealing her ability to think.

“Love me, Alana. Keep me from falling.”

“You won’t fall, Harry,” she whispered. “You’re far too strong, but I’ll always be here.”

He groaned, a raw sound somewhere between pleasure and pain. Alana closed her eyes, losing herself in him, in the moment, and in the joy of how perfectly they fit together as he loved her. Time went away with the world. Nothing else existed outside of this room, this touch, this kiss, until they were both dazed and overwhelmed. Harry slid his hands into hers, lacing their fingers together and Alana looked up, finding him watching her, his face taut with effort, flushed with passion, and with such a look in his eyes that her throat tightened with emotion. But then he moved, just so, and her breath caught, and the sensation overpowered everything else as he gasped, and thrust quicker, faster.

“Alana,” he said, her name a raw exclamation as his body jerked and he spilled his pleasure inside her.

Alana watched him, discovering the sight of her husband’s pleasure was the most erotic thing in the world as she followed him into bliss, their hands clasped tight together.

When the rapture of his release finally quieted, Harry moved off her, collapsing onto his back as he fought for breath, laughing and shaking his head in wonder.

“Alana, my word.... You are astonishing.”

She smiled, moving to him and laying her head on his chest, enjoying the sound of his heart beating and knowing she had caused it to race so fast. His skin was damp with exertion, and she smoothed her hand up and down his body, revelling in the rise and fall of the powerful muscles under her fingertips.

“Finally, he understands I’m perfect, and he’s the one always in the wrong,” she said with a sigh.

“Wretch.”

She sat up, smiling down at him, and leaned in to press a kiss to his mouth.

“I was an idiot,” he admitted. “I thought I had to say goodbye to this, to....”

He gestured between them with a rueful smile.

“Why?”

“It seemed wrong for a vicar to be so... passionate, I suppose, and I was afraid if I let my guard down, I’d go back to my old ways. But, I don’t want to go back, and Michael reminded me I’m only supposed to be a man, not a saint.”

“Michael is a wonderful man, I liked him very much. But, I have to admit, Reverend Martin, you are very wicked,” she teased, trying her best to look scandalised.

He smiled and shook his head, pushing her down onto her back once more. “Sorry to disappoint you, but it’s not the least bit wicked, because I love you, Alana. So much, and this... this is the very best way to show you that.”

Alana blinked hard, trying hard not to get over emotional. Harry grinned, aware she was on the verge of snivelling, and so she gave a dignified sniff.

“Can’t we pretend it’s *a bit* wicked, Harry? The teeniest bit of depravity, with a soupçon of sin?” she asked, trying very hard to look serious, because it was either that or cry with happiness.

Harry considered this with apparent solemnity. “How about... just a dash of indecency?”

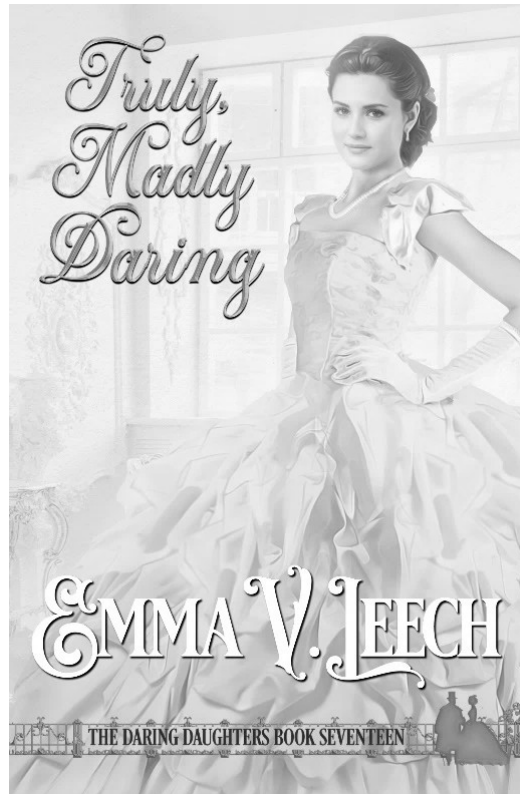
Alana gave a contented sigh. “Perfect.”

“Yes, love, that you are,” Harry said with a chuckle, and kissed her.

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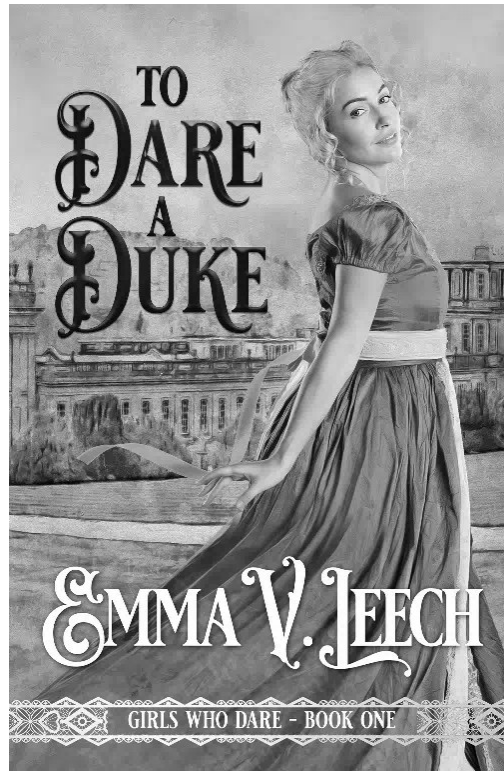
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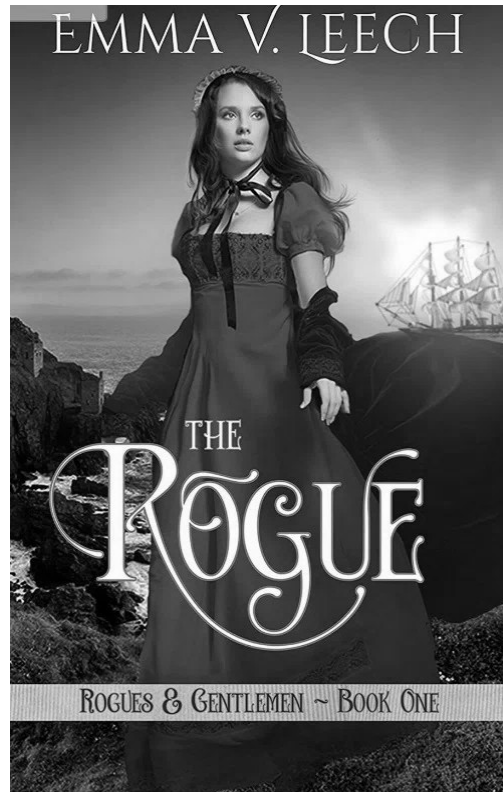
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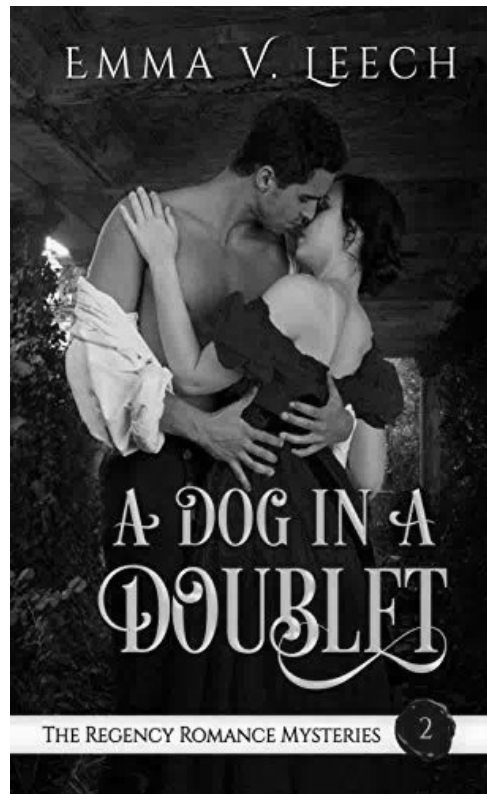
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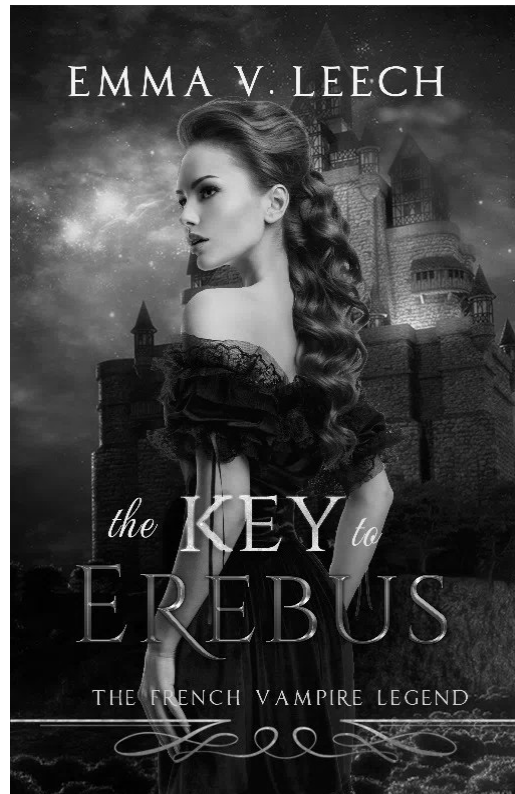
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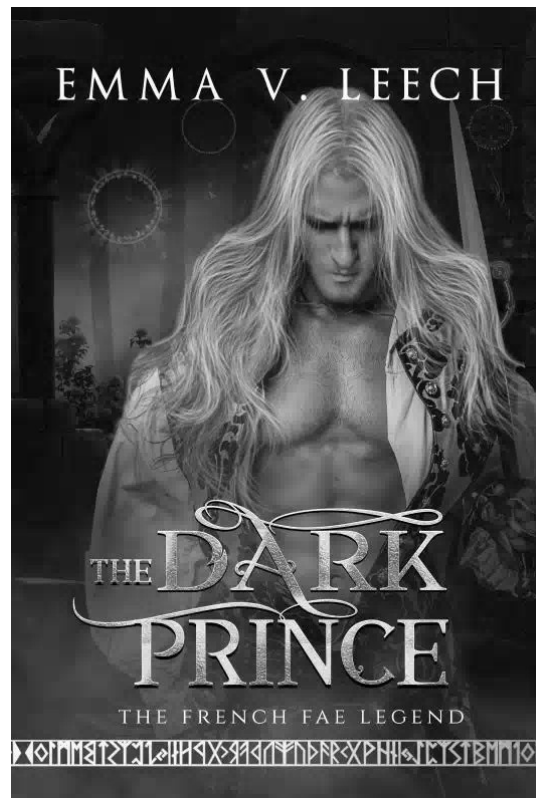
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One Human Woman

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