

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a long, flowing blue gown with a matching cape, stands on a sandy beach. The background shows a sunset over the ocean with a cliffside in the distance. The sky is a mix of purple, pink, and blue.

*Longing*  
FOR  
A  
*Lady*

JANE MAGUIRE



*Longing*  
FOR  
A  
*Lady*

*By Jane Maguire*

Longing for a Lady

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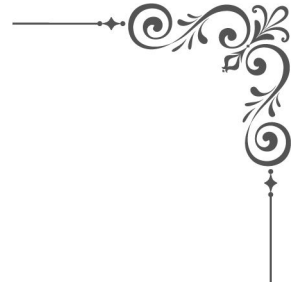
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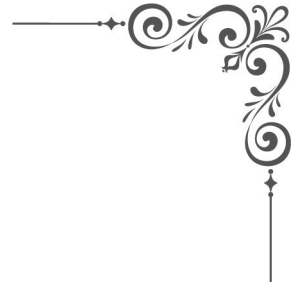
# **The Inconveniently Wed Series**

*By Jane Maguire*

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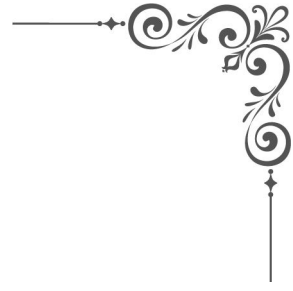
Book 3: [Longing for a Lady](#).





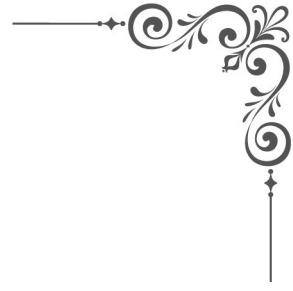
# **Dedication**

*To my husband, for always being my rock*



# **Content Advisory**

This book deals with the subject of early pregnancy loss.  
Reader discretion is advised.



# Prologue

## January 1819

“Leaving so soon, Will?”

Despite the cries of merriment and strains of music that echoed into the night from behind the kitchen door, the question rang through the air, high and clear, above the other noise. Causing William Harris to abruptly halt his trek away from Northleigh Manor. Instead, he turned back in the direction of the voice so he could ascertain that he hadn't merely conjured up something he wished to hear.

Sure enough, the door Will had just closed behind him as he stepped into the chilly blackness now hung open again, and Lavinia Bathurst stood in the doorway, her bright eyes regarding him with a touch of mirth.

“Miss Bathurst.” He bowed, his ability to remember good manners fortunately not decimated by this unexpected encounter. “I hope you passed a pleasant evening and Christmastide.”

Lavinia quirked an eyebrow, rendered momentarily speechless, before pulling the flimsy crimson shawl she wore more tightly about her shoulders and dashing down the gravel path to his side. “Really, Will, such formality! I thought we'd known one another too long for that. Especially after what happened last month, with you *saving my life* and all. At the very least, you can call me Lavinia. And I certainly hope you don't wish me to address you as ‘Mr. Harris.’”

Regardless of what had transpired last month, he highly doubted that Lavinia's parents, the Baron and Baroness Bathurst, would agree with her insistence on familiarity with a humble surgeon's apprentice. Then again, Lord and Lady Bathurst were presumably still in the kitchen, presiding over the annual yuletide celebration they held for their tenants. Contrasting with the revelry that occurred within the stone walls behind them, the outdoors was calm, without a breath of wind, and they were decidedly alone.

“Very well. Lavinia,” he relented with a trace of a smile. Her name felt so good on his lips. Almost good enough to make him forget that he had no right to use it or to think of her the way he did. Standing there beneath the stark light of the winter moon, she looked enchanting, her hair shining like the palest gold and her cheeks flushed a rosy pink.

Yet his thoughts took a bleak turn. What if the color in her face signaled overexertion? What if the brightness in her eyes indicated the beginning of a fever? He dared to place a hand upon her arm and began guiding her gently back in the direction of the house. “You shouldn’t be out here in the cold. You could catch a chill.”

“You worry too much.” She pulled her arm out of his reach, thwarting his efforts to return her to the kitchen door. Instead, she grabbed his hand, dragging him to the side of the small portico and pressing her back against the stone pillar. “I’m in perfect health now. Thanks to you. However, if you’re concerned, you should know it’s on account of you that I’m out here. I couldn’t let you leave without a single word passing between us for the entirety of the night. Why, I’d almost think you were avoiding me! And why do you need to rush off in any case? You should pour another cup of wassail and enjoy yourself. The celebration could go on for hours yet.”

He froze, trying to disregard the way her gloved fingers still brushed against his, and racked his brain for an acceptable response.

Of course he hadn’t *wanted* to avoid her. On the contrary, the sight of her tapping her feet in time to the reels, and the sound of her laughter as it floated through the bustling space, had been at the forefront of his notice all evening. At one point in time, he would have approached her easily and carried out a friendly, polite conversation, casting down any other feelings he had for her as though they didn’t exist. However, circumstances were different now. They had been ever since the day he held her life in his hands. Ever since he heard the words she mumbled in her delirium.

“I have an early rise tomorrow,” he said, which was the truth, and a valid excuse for slipping away from the party

before the other guests. “I’m getting on the mail coach to begin my journey to London. My training at Guy’s Hospital starts in just five days’ time.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. Not the hospital, perhaps,” she said, scrunching her nose, “but London. Papa says we will not depart until next week, and I don’t know how I’m to contain myself until then. Are you happy to be leaving? You must be, I daresay, given that London was once your home. Northleigh must feel positively dull in comparison.”

He shrugged. “I was little more than a boy when I left, and truth be told, I’ve grown accustomed to life away from Town. The quiet suits me, I think. I’ll remain in London for the duration of my training but not longer.”

Lavinia looked at him as if she’d never heard anything so perplexing. “I think London is marvelous. The entertainments. The balls! I’ll be presented at court in a fortnight, and I’m finally to have my first Season. I feel as though I’ve been waiting my whole life.”

“You will be splendid,” he said, smiling despite the heaviness in his chest. “Of that, I have no doubt.”

And she would be. Lavinia, with her gentle prettiness and vivacious nature, was made to flit about in high society. She would no doubt charm the scores of people she was soon to meet, and some titled gentleman would take her as a wife in no time. Then, except for occasional retreats to the country, she would spend the rest of her days in London, surrounded by enthralling people and endless diversions. Until the surgeon back in Devonshire who filled his time setting bones and tending agues became nothing but a distant memory. If she thought of him at all.

“Thank you.” She grinned widely at the praise. “I do hope you’re right.”

Suddenly, a shiver rushed over her, the first sign she was affected by the cold. She looked so delighted by her prospects that he didn’t have the heart to allude to her former illness again and the necessity for caution. However, he quickly shrugged out of his greatcoat and draped it over her. If she



refused to take direction to go inside, he could at least see that she didn't freeze while standing with him.

His hands were atop her shoulders, his intention being to ensure the coat rested securely around her and wouldn't slip down when he returned his arms—very properly—to his sides. However, Lavinia's hands darted up, pinning his own in place, pressing them down so firmly that he could feel her delicate bones beneath the layers of thick wool and flimsy satin.

She gave another of her captivating smiles, smaller this time but still just as capable of twisting him in knots. "I'll miss you, you know."

He had no words—at least, none that were both appropriate and truthful—and so, he remained silent. But he also couldn't bring himself to pull away.

What was the meaning of this sudden declaration? He peered into the brilliant blue of her eyes, searching for answers. Had Lavinia been partaking too freely of the wassail? Had she made such assertions to everyone in attendance, from the vicar down to the lowliest stable boy? His older sister, Maggie, had opined on several occasions that Lavinia Bathurst was a shameless flirt. And perhaps there was a grain of truth in Maggie's words, but still, she could never see this matter as he did.

Maybe the current problem lay with him as well. Was *he* the one who had imbibed to excess? But no, thinking back, he felt certain he'd taken a lone cup of wassail and that more than an hour past.

Still, he was acting like a man half-sprung. Standing far too close to Lavinia—*Miss* Bathurst. Not releasing his grip. Impervious to the fact that the kitchen door could swing open at any moment and they'd be dallying for anyone to see.

This was madness that needed to stop. However, when he shifted one hand out from under hers, it didn't fall back to his side. Rather, as if of its own volition, it traveled upward to the wispy tendrils that framed her face. The only other time he'd done something so intimate as touch her hair was when he'd pushed damp locks away from her fevered brow before

administering a compress. That gesture had been strictly professional and underlaid by his sense of anxiety. Her hair now, elegantly arranged and glimmering like thin strands of pale gold, was another matter entirely. It begged to be stroked for the pure pleasure of it.

He ran a finger over a curl close to her ear, his only regret that his gloves prevented him from experiencing the silky softness of it. She drew in a quick breath, her body tensing. He'd gone too far; he needed to pull back and cease this immediately—

Her lips were on his. In the time it had taken him to blink, she must have popped up on her tiptoes and closed the remaining distance between them. He would have thought it a dream, except his dreams were never this vivid, or this gratifying. The feel of her soft, full mouth joined with his brought him a thrill he hadn't dared to imagine.

A better man would have known his place and put an end to this at once. As for him, he was nothing but a lovesick fool savoring the last few moments he might ever get with the woman who made him that way.

He leaned down and returned the pressure of her mouth, allowing himself to become absorbed in the embrace. He ran his hand over the back of her neck and trailed it down to the slender curve of her waist, holding her close to him. Her fingers still gripped his shoulders, kneading gently as her lips parted just a touch. Offering him an invitation he couldn't refuse. His tongue traced over her bottom lip, giving him his first taste of her. The mixture of cinnamon and cloves, cider and port, and a sweetness that had to be uniquely her own went straight to his head. He wanted—no, needed—to take in more of it, like a man receiving his first scraps of nourishment after being plagued by starvation for far too long. Her tongue pushed forward, brushing against his, and she made a high-pitched sound from her throat. Causing a jolt of desire to course through him but also snapping him out of his dreamlike state and plummeting him back to reality.

Somewhere between them, there existed a point of no return. They couldn't risk continuing, only to discover they'd

already passed it.

He shifted his head slightly, and as he did, Lavinia gave a tiny gasp before quickly lowering herself back to her heels. She still peered up at him, though, her eyes wide, her breath coming in shallow pants.

He needed to apologize to her at once for his lack of decorum. For forgetting his place, and all common sense along with it.

But as if she could see right through to his thoughts, Lavinia shook her head and reached out to give his hand a final squeeze before crossing her arms over her chest. “Are you certain you will not come back inside and enjoy the festivities a little longer?”

As if he could return to the party and carry on while pretending this encounter had never happened. “I really should be going.” After all, he had a valise to pack. A coach to board when it came rumbling onto the main road at the dawn’s first light. And a life to lead that kept him far removed from the likes of a baron’s daughter.

“Very well. I suppose I should return inside.” She spoke with her usual lightness, giving no indication that either their embrace or his departure ruffled her. Indeed, she appeared the same Lavinia as always, with bright eyes and a smile never far from her lips. “I wish you a pleasant journey to London, and I hope you enjoy your time there. Well, as much as possible when spending one’s days in a hospital. In any case, I have every confidence there won’t be a finer surgeon in all of England.”

“Thank you, Miss B—Lavinia,” he said, allowing himself the familiarity this one final time. “Likewise, I wish you all the best for your Season in London. You’re sure to be the most charming debutante ever to grace St. James’s Palace.”

Her ready smile broke through again. “You’re too kind.” When he said nothing else, she turned her face downward, nuzzling it into the collar of the coat he’d loaned her. Her eyes closed for just an instant, giving him a view of her long, curved lashes, before she popped her head up, grabbing hold

of the garment about her shoulders. “I should return this to you.”

She pulled it off and thrust it into his hands, her jerky movements the first sign that something rattled her composure. “Here. Thank you for lending it to me. I’ll bid you good night now.”

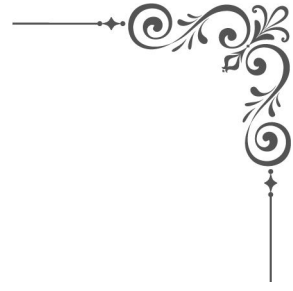
“I ... You ... Of course,” he stammered, feeling his own facade of equanimity slip as he watched her move toward the door.

The time had come to say their final farewells. Yet the most absurd idea sprang up in his mind. What if they could see one another in London? What if they could stroll together through Hyde Park on days free from rain? What if they could procure a table at Gunter’s and linger over ices? What if he could see her face brighten with delight as she watched the fireworks at Vauxhall?

It was an impossibility, of course. Ladies of the ton didn’t traipse around with apprentice surgeons, even if the surgeon in question was more well-to-do than most. The fact was, they would never run in the same social circles, and Lavinia would forever remain far above his reach. She would forget him the minute she arrived in London. And if he knew what was good for him, he would forget her too.

That’s all there was to it. And so, he turned away from the house and toward the gravel path, toward the moon that would guide his way home. He didn’t chance one final look back at her. Instead, he let his voice travel backward through the crisp, still air.

“Good night.”



# Chapter 1

## January 1820

The newsprint stared her in the face, the letters arranged in a particular way that alerted Lavinia Bathurst her life was ruined. She screwed her eyes shut and reopened them, as if that second in darkness could erase this unwanted revelation. Alas, the words on the pressed white page remained the same—shocking and so very, very damning.

*The Duke and Duchess of Sheffield are pleased to announce the marriage of their eldest daughter, the Lady Helen Carlisle, to Henry Bradford, the fifth Earl of Carington. The wedding took place on Monday, the third of January, at—*

She stopped reading there. Any details that followed were inconsequential. Those first few lines, on the other hand, spelled her certain downfall.

“Lavinia!” her mother snapped from across the breakfast table, temporarily distracting her from the encroaching wave of despondency that threatened to consume her. “You’ve gone as white as a ghost. Are you suffering from malaise?”

Lavinia didn’t often find herself lacking something to say, but at present, words escaped her. She could only look at her mother, dumbfounded, as she continued to clutch the newspaper between her stiff fingers.

Her mother arched an eyebrow as she awaited a response that didn’t come. But when she happened to glance down at Lavinia’s clenched knuckles, a look of comprehension spread across her face. She thrust her arm across the table, snatching away the newspaper in a gesture that lacked all her usual poise.

She held the page in front of her, hurriedly scanning its contents until her eyes grew huge and their usual pleasing blue became dark. “So it *is* true.” She scrunched the paper in her fist and tossed it to the floor, her mouth turning down in disgust. “Devil take that deuced, good-for-nothing blunderbuss!”

Under different circumstances, hearing her proper mama use such vulgar language would have sent Lavinia into a fit of giggles. Instead, she could think only of the first part of her mother's speech. The words swirled through her head, adding to her discomposure. "What could you possibly mean, Mama? Did you already know something of this?"

Her mother's pale skin took on a pinkish tinge that crept from her throat up to the silvery blonde roots of her hair. "Perhaps we should retire to the drawing room, where you could recline on the sofa, and then—"

"Just tell me," Lavinia cut in, having to restrain herself from reaching out and gripping her mother's arm.

Her mother bit her lip, her eyes darting down to the table. "It seems ..." She paused, each agonizing second feeling like an eternity, before the truth abruptly came tumbling out. "Your father wrote that he heard rumors to that effect upon arriving in London. Of course, we had no way of determining their veracity. I maintained hope it was merely a misunderstanding."

No wonder her mother had been so vague when Lavinia asked for news of London upon the arrival of her father's letter three days prior. How insufferable she'd found it having to wait at Northleigh Manor, in the far reaches of Devonshire, not knowing what transpired in Town. But given Lavinia's situation, her parents had decided it best that her father journey on to London as usual, to take his seat in the Lords and carry on as though nothing were amiss, while she and her mother remained behind. On tenterhooks. Awaiting news that would either allow for her triumphant arrival onto the London social scene or necessitate the continuation of her shamefaced seclusion in the country.

It would seem it was to be the latter.

"By rights, someone should call the man out." Her mother's features scrunched as if she'd just sniffed something exceedingly vile. "If only you'd been blessed with a brother or some other audacious male relation. Lord knows your father cannot do such a thing."



Indeed, her father approaching Carington and demanding satisfaction was another concept that would have caused Lavinia to burst into laughter had she still been capable. Baron Bathurst wasn't known for his ability to shoot or fence. On the contrary, he cared for very little these days besides immersing himself in the books in his library and sipping brandy at White's. His sedentary lifestyle was reflected in his increasingly ample girth, not to mention how he'd begun complaining of rheumatism of late. Involving himself in a duel, especially with a much younger, lither man, could only end badly for him.

Her mother let out a sigh. "It's unfortunate, without question. But to be fair, I suppose no man would want to find himself on the wrong side of the Duke of Sheffield."

Yes. Because that was Lord Carington's father-in-law now. Because why would a man settle for a baron's daughter when he could have a duke's? Even if the baron's daughter wrote to him beseechingly, explaining her desperate situation and begging for help.

The pastry Lavinia had consumed for breakfast roiled in her stomach, and she swallowed back the bile that began to rise. Absently, she trailed her fingers over her midsection, feeling the heat of her skin through her thin muslin dress. The surface remained flat for now. Yet as the weeks slipped by, her belly would protrude more and more until even those who disbelieved the rumors of her ruination at Lord Carington's house party wouldn't be able to deny the evidence.

"Please do not distress yourself, dearest. It isn't good for you in your condition." Her mother spoke with atypical gentleness, reaching over to pat her arm. "When your father heard whisperings of that dastardly earl's marriage to another, he thought it prudent to seek out an alternative solution to your predicament, just in case. So you see, all hope is not lost."

The nauseating heaviness that weighed on Lavinia lifted for just a moment, although it quickly resettled itself. She could tell by the tension on her mother's face that whatever the nature of this solution, she wouldn't like it one bit.

Her mother didn't stall in delivering the news this time; rather, it rushed from her lips in a flurry. "Your father has procured another marriage prospect for you. Although you rebuffed him last Season, the man still seemed amenable to the union when your father made discreet inquiries. Fortunately, the rumors that surround you and even mention of your—*interesting condition* haven't put him off. Your father need only say the word, and Viscount Throckmorton will take you as his wife without delay."

The knots in Lavinia's stomach twisted while her skin turned to ice. "But ... but ... I cannot! The man spits when he talks and looks only at my chest while doing so. He smells like a musty larder. He's old enough to be my grandfather!"

"But that is precisely the point," her mother exclaimed, not put off by her daughter's abhorrence. "The old lecher is unlikely to live much longer, and then you'll be free to do as you wish. A dowager viscountess, with a child who is well provided for. After three unproductive marriages, Throckmorton is so desperate for an heir that I doubt he cares where it comes from. If one believes the talk that circulates, he is no longer capable of siring one himself, so despite any desires he may have, he shouldn't trouble you much in that regard. You can gaze at me in horror all you like, but present circumstances considered, I don't know what other option you possess that you feel would be more agreeable."

Her mother was trying to be helpful, but she may as well have reached across the table and slapped her for the way the words stung. This was what her life had come down to. She'd been careless and overly trusting with a man who subsequently jilted her and brought her so low that she was supposed to feel gratitude for a marriage proposal from a repulsive coot more than three times her age.

Her eyes traveled wildly around the room, from the discarded newspaper that rested on the carpet to the painted landscapes upon the walls to the frosty gardens beyond the window. As if somewhere, another solution awaited her. There had to be another way. Something ... Anything ...

A face—one that had been familiar to her since she was little more than a child—flashed in her mind. A head of neatly cropped brown hair, a pair of inviting hazel eyes, and lips that turned up in the most endearing smile. He had nothing to do with the situation at hand. Yet he'd helped her once, at a time when no one else could. As if by magic, he'd known exactly what to do, defying others' advice because he alone realized how to save her. Maybe, just maybe, he could do so again.

She jumped from her seat, nearly toppling her chair in the process. "I'm going to see Will."

"Who?" Her mother peered up at her with knit brows as she tried to make the name signify. Suddenly, her bottom lip dropped, and she pushed herself to her feet. "Surely you are not referring to William Harris. As in, the surgeon? For what possible reason could you desire a visit with him at this moment?"

Lavinia spun away from the table and strode toward the doorway. Her mother knew full well that she owed Mr. Harris her daughter's life. If she still didn't understand why Lavinia would wish to see him, she would have to sit and mull it over in confusion. Lavinia had no time to stop and explain it to her.

"He may no longer even be here," her mother called out just as Lavinia reached the threshold of the breakfast room.

Once she'd set her mind to this purpose, she hadn't thought anything would stop her, but those words were enough to make her halt in her tracks and whip around to face her mother once more. "What do you mean? Where else would he be?"

Will's hospital training in London should have been through long ago, and he'd assured her of his plans to return to Devonshire immediately afterward. She hadn't considered the possibility that he would change his mind. Since the day he arrived in the village six years prior, he'd always seemed to belong there. Strolling through the fields in all weather with his dog at his side. Going from cottage to cottage with his uncle, the elder Mr. Harris, a longtime surgeon himself, as they checked on patients. But could London have had more

appeal to him than he anticipated? On a morning when her life had come crashing down around her, was she to discover that Will, too, was lost to her?

“Now that he is a surgeon in his own right, I heard he plans to establish himself in Lynnford,” her mother said, appraising her carefully as she delivered the news. “From what I understand, he intended to depart early in the new year. Whether that has already transpired, I do not know.”

Lynnford. At least that was still in Devonshire and a far sight closer than London. Still, Lavinia’s stomach churned with fresh regret at the thought that he was no longer just a couple miles away. And that his departure could have occurred without her knowledge.

She should have made more of an effort to see him over the past few months or at least to inquire after him. However, once the previous Season ended, it seemed like she and her mother had attended one house party after another, including the fateful affair at Lord Carington’s. Then, there had been the month in Hampshire visiting her recently married sister, Anne. Truth be told, she’d spent very little time at Northleigh Manor of late, and she’d passed the days since her return caught up with wondering what was to become of her predicament.

She couldn’t change that now, and if this one desperate hope for salvation had already passed her by, she would deal with the consequences as they came. Nonetheless, she at least had to try, to see for herself if the man who’d saved her once still lingered nearby.

“I’m going to the village,” she asserted, filled with fresh resolve that prompted her to rush through the doorway with even greater speed than before. “I want to find out for certain.”

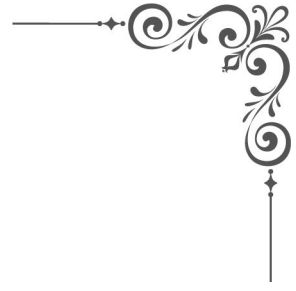
“Oh, Lavinia!” Her mother’s exasperated voice echoed to her down the corridor. “Do not do anything foolish.”

It seemed she remembered how to laugh after all, for a strangled giggle escaped her just as she reached the entrance hall. Not that the sound had any humor in it. Her mother’s admonition came far too late, for nothing she did this day

could surpass how foolishly she'd already engaged in behavior that brought about her ruination.

She pulled her shawl more tightly around her shoulders, impervious to the butler's exclamation as she burst through the door and into the chill of the dreary January morning. This excursion wasn't totally foolhardy. She'd placed her blind faith in Will before, and he'd rescued her. Why not trust in his abilities once more?

Perhaps he'd already journeyed far away and this was nothing beyond a shot in the dark. But what more did she have?



## Chapter 2

Will was packing the last of his books into a large camphor trunk when an insistent knocking rattled the front door. After stretching out his back muscles, which had gone stiff from all the time he'd spent bending down to pack, he let his copy of *The Surgeon's Vade Mecum* slip from his grasp, completing the stack of books, and started toward the stairs.

Could his uncle be home already? He'd gone to visit an old friend in Exeter and said he wouldn't return before the end of next week, but his plans could have changed. Then again, if that were the case, why would he knock at the door of his own house?

Will quickened his pace as the pounding intensified, hoping no medical emergency had sprung up since he'd performed his final few patient visits earlier that day. His instruments were currently packed at the bottom of his trunk.

He rushed to the entrance and pushed the door open, ready to discover the source of the commotion. And came face to face with Lavinia Bathurst.

"Miss Bathurst!" He couldn't stop his eyes from widening or his mouth from gaping. He could only hope his features didn't betray the jolt that pulsed through him from her unexpected presence.

"Oh, thank goodness." She pressed a hand to her chest, which rose and fell rapidly as if she'd been running and needed to catch her breath. "That is, good day, Will. May I come in?"

He glanced through the doorway to the outdoors, seeking any sign of the Bathursts' coach or one of their servants. However, aside from Lavinia standing on his doorstep, the street remained still and empty.

"Of course," he said, recovering from his surprise enough to move to the side and allow her entrance into the house.

“I *am* glad to see you. Very glad.” She smiled at him, although the gesture didn’t light up her face the way it usually did. “Mama tells me, though, that you are soon to be leaving. I never thought I’d see the day.”

Just as he never thought he’d see her back here again. It had shocked him to learn, upon his return from London in November, that Lavinia had completed her first Season without a betrothal. But nor had she returned to Northleigh. Even with the Season at a close, a flurry of parties and invitations had kept her away until it seemed inevitable that a marriage announcement would appear in the papers sooner rather than later.

While, to the best of his knowledge, one hadn’t emerged yet, he was through with allowing himself foolish hopes and imaginings. He knew better than that now. Just as he’d also known, with an undeniable certainty that hit him the moment he stepped back into Northleigh after completing his training, that he needed a change.

“I’ve decided to go north,” he said, trying to keep his voice even despite the bewilderment that lingered from having Lavinia Bathurst in his home. “To Lynnford. My elder sister—Maggie, if you recall—settled there with her husband some time ago. For a number of months now, she’s written that their only source of nearby medical care comes from an apothecary near retirement, so I thought I could put myself to good use there. I spent Christmastide with her, assessing the place and procuring a house. I came back only to bid farewell to Uncle Stephen and gather the last of my belongings. I’ll return to Lynnford, permanently, in the morning.”

“Oh. I see. Well, that’s nice.” She flashed him another smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “Maggie will be glad to have you nearby, I’m sure. Although after having you here for all these years, working as his apprentice, your uncle will certainly miss you. Then again, I suppose he had to make do without you while you were in London. I’m sorry, by the way, that I haven’t seen you since your return. I, too, have been much away, and to tell the truth, I’ve been rather preoccupied of late. But did you pass a happy Christmas? I spent much of



last month in Hampshire with Anne. Quite agreeable. We had plum pudding and dancing and—”

“Miss Bathurst.” He reached out to place his fingertips against her sleeve, and she abruptly fell silent, her eyes locking with his.

There was nothing unusual about Lavinia having much to say. However, as she’d spoken, her voice had grown increasingly more high-pitched, the words flying out in a jumble. Causing the sheer perplexity he’d experienced upon seeing her at his door to give way to flickers of alarm. Something was wrong.

“Would you like to sit down?” he asked, taking extra care to keep his voice calm.

“I—Yes, thank you.” She pressed her fingers against his own, allowing him to lead her toward the back of the house. Really, he should entertain her in the sitting room—the finest room in the house, although it would still pale in comparison to the finery to which she was accustomed. However, of the downstairs rooms, only the kitchen currently had a fire warming it, so he brought her there, to the wooden bench beside the hearth. It hadn’t escaped his notice how her arm felt cold to the touch because she seemed to have walked here covered by only her thin shawl.

He waited until she took a tentative seat on the bench and then lowered himself beside her, careful to keep enough distance so that their bodies didn’t touch. On one hand, he was a man long plagued by infatuation, seeing only brightness and sunshine when Lavinia crossed his path. But on the other, he’d spent the last six years training as a surgeon, learning how to recognize the subtle hints that a person was in distress. Those tiny signals—her high, unsteady voice, the slight tremor in her fingers—were what stood out to him now.

“To what do I owe the honor of your visit?” He studied her as he spoke, noticing the tight set of her mouth. “Did you wish to speak to me about something?”

“Yes.” She leaned toward him, giving an emphatic nod. “That is, I ... Yes. A rather delicate matter.”

He waited, but she said nothing else, only worried her bottom lip between her teeth.

He leaned in too, just a touch, so their faces were close, fully absorbed in one another. “Whatever you say, I hope you know that I’ll hold it in confidence as both a surgeon and friend.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, pulling her shawl tighter despite the heat radiating from the hearth. Her lip remained caught beneath her teeth, turning pale and bloodless, until she abruptly released it, and once more, the words came pouring out. “It’s horrendous, Will. Even worse than the time I thought I was going to die. Never have I been brought so low. I need help. Desperately. Because I ... I ... heavens, I’ll just say it. I’m with child.”

He stiffened, feeling as though he’d taken a tumble from his horse and had the wind knocked out of him. *With child*. His mind raced, fighting to process how this had all come about. Yet her situation involved so many variables that it proved impossible, leaving him with only a dark, crushing sense of dread.

“I was so foolish,” she muttered, filling the heavy silence between them. “But Lord Carington gave me no reason to think he would *not* marry me. That he could so easily wed another despite all that transpired between us. It seems, though, that I have little appeal when compared to the Duke of Sheffield’s daughter.”

So, this wasn’t just a case of Will overlooking a betrothal announcement in the papers. Some bloody idiotic rakehell had knowingly left her in this position. He pressed his palms against the bench, digging his nails into the rough oak surface. Going back to London and murdering a peer would lead to his automatic hanging, but at the moment, the punishment almost seemed worth it.

He tried to push back the fury pounding through his veins long enough to approach the matter as a surgeon, indifferent to everything but his patient’s health. “How long has your

condition been known to you? And are you certain, beyond a doubt, that it's pregnancy?"

She flinched at the word, her hands balling into tight fists. "It hasn't been long. December. And yes, I'm certain. A physician in Hampshire confirmed it. Said I could anticipate a happy event before the end of the summer. Which is why you must help me. I beg you."

It tore at his heart to see her like this, with the brightness in her eyes replaced by dull, pleading despair. He would do anything in his power for her; he hoped she could see that. Yet he was forced to utter an admission that took the knife in his chest and wrenched it deeper. "Please believe that I would like to help you. Only, I don't see how ..."

She shook her head. "Surely there's something. There must be. Perhaps you know a childless couple longing for a baby. Or someplace I could go and just disappear for a time. You're so clever, Will. I'm certain you know what to do."

She tried to smile at him, the way she used to when he paid her a compliment, but her mouth twisted in a manner that looked more like she was in pain. Causing his heart to sink even lower in his chest. "I'm sorry. More than I can say. I simply do not."

"You have to!" Her voice grew higher still, and she unclasped her hands so she could grip his shoulders. "You have to know something. If not that, then ... there are tonics. I've heard of them. If you pretend not to understand of what I speak, I'll know you are lying. You could assist me that way."

"No." He didn't hesitate for even a second this time. "I cannot, and you must promise me that you won't try seeking such a remedy from anyone else either. I won't insult your intelligence by telling you that no such things exist. However, they are of questionable veracity and just as likely to poison you instead. Promise me, Lavinia, that you will not go down that path. I mean it."

"What else is there?" She was nearly shouting now, her nails sinking into his shoulders with even more force than he used to press into the bench. "You saved me once when no one

else knew how. You were supposed to be able to do that again! It's the only hope I have left. Without it, I'll have no choice but to follow through with my father's arrangement and wed Lord Throckmorton."

The blows to his gut kept coming, one after the other. "Throckmorton." He echoed the unfamiliar name, the sound burning like bile against his tongue. He'd never heard tell of the man before this moment, but based on Lavinia's reaction, he despised him already.

"Yes, Lord Throckmorton." The name left a bad taste in her mouth as well, judging by the way she practically spat it between pursed lips. "My mother thinks I should be grateful the disgusting lecher is so elderly, for his number of years left on earth is likely limited. How, though, am I to endure him in the meantime?"

Suddenly, her grip on him slackened, and her shoulders slumped, every bit of her strength dispersing like thistledown in the breeze. "But perhaps it really is the only choice left. I regret to say, Carington and I were not discreet. Whether the news of the particular ... attachment we formed at his house party has now spread throughout London remains to be seen. As I expected to begin the Season with a betrothal announcement, I didn't think it mattered. But now, maybe even going away for a time isn't enough to save me. Those who attended the party will easily deduce what really occurred. They'll pass along the gossip until everyone knows of my rejection and ruin. No other man will ever consent to have me. Besides Lord Throckmorton, that is. I'll be indebted to him for his willingness to overlook my indiscretions. Even though I'd sooner fling myself off a cliff than become his bride."

Will choked back the torrent of vile words that threatened to emerge. He wanted to roar out a curse on Lord Carington. On Lord Throckmorton. On all the bloody ton, for the willingness with which they'd deride and shun her while the other culpable party strutted away to become the son-in-law of a duke. Not caring a whit if the light Will had loved in Lavinia from the moment he laid eyes on her vanished, forever, as

surely as a snuffed flame. Because some people, apparently, didn't appreciate a diamond even when it glittered right before their eyes.

"You're wrong," he said softly despite the anger simmering close to the surface. "I would have you."

She drew in a sharp breath, her eyes becoming large.

"I would never be so idiotic as to think there was someone else better." The mere thought that others could do so caused the fire within him to flare. "I would see you as the woman you are and not let you be defined by events from the past. I would care for you. Your child too. Always. Because you deserve nothing less."

Her hand began trembling against his shoulder. "What are you saying, Will?"

"I'm saying that I could procure a license, and we could be married as soon as next week. You could have a home with me in Lynnford. I received my inheritance this past year, and while not a fortune, it would keep us comfortable. I know it's not the life you envisioned, but it would remove you from all of this. No one there would know the truth of the situation. And even if they did, I wouldn't countenance a word said against you."

Somewhere in the midst of his speech, he must have reached for her hand because it now rested in his lap, clasped firmly in his. He should have released his hold at once, but somehow, he couldn't. It was almost as if he'd stepped out of his body and become someone else. Someone whose propriety and restraint were overthrown by urgency and desperation. How else could he have imagined such a scheme, let alone voiced it to her? Perhaps it was on account of impossible problems requiring extraordinary solutions.

"Married ..."

She stared at his lap, at their entwined fingers. Her breath came in shallow, rapid bursts that caused her chest to bob up and down.

Suddenly, her hand broke free from his grasp, and she was on her feet, peering down at him like a frightened colt. "I ..."

don't know what to say. I never imagined ... Well, I suppose I should say I'm very grateful you took the time to see me today, when I know you must be busy preparing for your journey. I wish you safe travels and much happiness in your new home, and I—oh, I have to go!”

“Miss Bathurst. Lavinia.” He jumped up as well but then froze. Should he reach for her and try to calm her? Or was it better to remain still with his hands planted against his sides? And what should he say? *Yes, go, before I conjure up another plan that will make the situation even worse ... No, stay, and let me find some way to protect you ... Or maybe, simply, I'm sorry. I'm unequivocally, immensely, damn-well, bloody sorry.*

She took a step backward. And another. And then, she bolted, spinning away from him and darting in the direction of the front door.

“Lavinia,” he started to call out, but her name faded away to nothing against the clattering of the front door. He dashed down the corridor, following in her frenzied footsteps, but halted upon reaching the doorstep. She was already partway up the road, heading in the direction of Northleigh Manor at otherworldly speed. Before he'd had the opportunity to offer her so much as a coat to keep her warm for the journey home.

He could have gone after her. Yet what would be the point? She'd already expressed her thoughts on his solution quite clearly. She wanted nothing else from him.

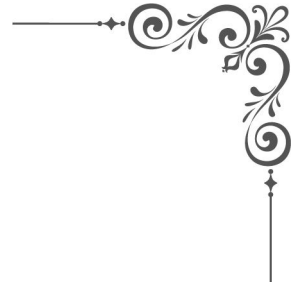
He stepped back into the house, slamming the door closed so hard that the entryway painting, a landscape featuring rolling hills beneath a cloudless sky, rattled in its frame. “Damn it all!”

He slumped backward, resting his weight against the smooth, papered wall. Amidst the melee of thoughts that raced through his head, one recollection stood out above the rest. Not of an event from today but of words spoken more than a year past.

*Will you stay with me always? Promise me ... Always ...*

Her fever had been so high that day that he had no way of knowing if she heard his assent or if she even understood what she asked. Nonetheless, she had decided to place her trust in him. To turn to him, once again, in her time of great need, having full faith that he could make things well.

And he'd failed her.





## Chapter 3

When Lavinia trudged back into Northleigh Manor, her legs burning with exertion and her chest heavy from the crushing blow of defeat, her mother awaited her in the entrance hall.

“Merciful heavens, what was that all about?” Lavinia had caught a glimpse of her mother pacing along the marble floor, but now she halted, folding her arms against her chest and glaring at her daughter with a mixture of pique and confusion. “I had half a mind to send the coach chasing after you into the village, although that certainly wouldn’t have helped with negating the scandal we’re trying at all costs to avoid. I don’t know what you were thinking by rushing away in such a manner.”

“I ...” Never in her life had Lavinia found herself so short on words. The day’s revelations weighed on her so heavily that she could scarcely form a coherent thought, let alone speak.

A rustle from behind caused them both to turn, saving her the trouble of forming an explanation. A footman, wearing his usual smart blue livery, crossed the hall with his typical even steps, carrying a silver tray laden with letters.

“Is that today’s post?” her mother barked out, lacking all her usual refinement.

The footman paused in his undertaking, his head tilting to the side just a shade. “Yes, m’lady.”

They needed no further enticement. She and her mother dashed across the space, surrounding the startled footman as they snatched letters from the tray. Several she recognized as mundane correspondence, which she tossed aside with all the grace of an overexcited puppy. And then, she laid eyes on a letter that made her heart drop. That contained the handwriting she both hoped and dreaded to see.

She plucked it from the pile and bolted down the corridor, not stopping until she reached the corner of the drawing room nearest the fireplace. She stood facing the wall where, even if

her mother chased after her, she wouldn't be able to detect her expression as she read. However, as she undid the seal with shaking fingers, the room remained silent, indicating that she was alone.

This letter, too, could be her salvation. An even more unlikely hope for rescue than the one she'd had earlier in the day, but hope nonetheless. Because maybe the papers were wrong. Because Carington was an earl, and earls—especially those who lay with you in their bed and uttered all sorts of charming promises—didn't behave so dishonorably. Maybe it was all a misunderstanding, and Carington was free to marry her after all. Funnily, the idea brought significantly less pleasure than it had before.

Either way, she couldn't wait another second to find out. Despite the clumsiness of her fingers, she forced the folded page open and let her eyes drift over its contents.

*Dearest Vinny,*

*I received your letter. An unfortunate situation in which you find yourself, indeed. I regret that, contrary to what I might wish, I cannot make you an offer of marriage. As it happens, my duty to the earldom has necessitated my union with another.*

*Please do not let yourself grow uneasy over your future. My marriage will ameliorate my financial situation considerably, and once my affairs are in order, I'll see to it that you receive appropriate compensation. More, too, once the child arrives, if circumstances require it.*

*How I'll miss seeing you in London! Yet this is but temporary, and I trust the day will come when we are reunited once more. Until then, I remain*

*Yours,*

*Lord C*

Lavinia's fingers balled into a fist, scrunching the paper within them. There were a great many ways she could react in this moment. Such as recalling the choice words her mother had spoken about Carington and adding a long string of her

own oaths to them. Or sinking to the floor and sobbing with endless torrents of despair for the infatuation—and more importantly, the dreams of the future—that vanished into thin air.

She did neither of those things. Instead, she tossed the wad of paper into the fireplace, watching it ignite with a strange sense of numbness.

“Lavinia!”

She glanced behind her shoulder long enough to detect her mother flitting into the room before turning her gaze back to the dancing flames. Her mother’s lithe footsteps pattered across the carpet until she stood before the fire as well. “Have you received additional news?”

Lavinia shook her head. “Nothing of any import.” At least, nothing they hadn’t already known.

“I see.” Her mother elongated her spine and held her shoulders high, regaining her usual poise. That was, except for a subtle hint of reluctance in the set of her mouth that didn’t seem quite right. “I’ve received another letter from your father. He says that Lord Throckmorton has requested your presence in London. After that, he’ll see that the banns are read. That being the case, we may as well leave straight away. You’ll wish to see your new London house, I daresay. I hear it’s quite grand, although I haven’t been a guest there myself. And we’ll need to go shopping, of course, for new gowns ...”

Her mother kept talking; of that, Lavinia was certain, for her lips continued to move at a relentless pace. However, Lavinia ceased to hear what she said. Instead, she drifted back into her thoughts, for from beneath the numbness, clarity began to emerge. Clarity so bright and blinding that it outshone any trepidation or doubt that lingered below the surface. Because suddenly, she just *knew*.

“You may wish to visit the jeweler to look at wedding rings,” her mother was saying, “although the viscount may already have something suitable. An heirloom, or—”

“I’m going to marry William Harris.”

Her mother tensed at the interruption, blinking as she tried to comprehend the full meaning of the words. Lavinia braced herself for what was to come. An admonition. An indignant shriek. Instead, her mother placed a hand atop her arm, guiding her away from the fireplace and the letter that was now nothing more than ash. “Come with me to the sofa. I think it best you sit until you’ve had the opportunity to recover your senses.”

Lavinia pulled her arm away, going to the sofa unassisted and lowering herself to the plush velvet seat. “I’ll sit, but not because I’m distraught. I know exactly what I said, and I meant it wholeheartedly. As it turns out, Will has not yet left for Lynnford, and when he does, I can accompany him as his wife. It doesn’t take long to procure a common license. A week, I believe.”

Will had said as much, and she tried to echo his conviction when relaying the plan to her mother. Yet speaking it aloud caused inklings of doubt to creep in once more.

The muscles in her mother’s neck grew tight. “That’s absurd. I never took Mr. Harris for a social climber. Though why else would he consent to have a cuckoo in his nest? I hope he doesn’t have false ideas about what a union between the two of you would mean and that you don’t either. There would be no dowry, for even if you force your father’s hand, he would never truly condone the match. Your position—the world you’ve always known—would be lost to you. You would spend the rest of your days in a surgeon’s hovel. Brought far too low ever to rise again.”

That’s all it took for the clarity to come back. So much so that she let out an abrupt, pinched laugh. “But I’ve already *been* lowered, Mama. Being raised back up by Lord Throckmorton is too great a price, and I will not pay it. I simply cannot. But I must do something, and so, I choose Will. I trust you will not stop me.”

She’d intended to make a statement, but a questioning note crept into those last words. Her parents wouldn’t force her to marry Lord Throckmorton. Would they? Even if they disapproved of the alternative?

“I ... Well ...” Her mother fumbled, at a loss for words herself. That alone told Lavinia that she hadn’t just imagined the hint of distaste that crossed her mother’s features when she spoke of the unsavory viscount.

Her mother quickly pulled her shoulders straight again and clasped her hands before her, the picture of composure. “I do not see why you would desire such a thing. Have you truly considered what your life would be like without all the entertainments you hold so dear? The parties. The balls. The acquaintances, who will accept you again if you only give them time.”

Under different circumstances, this idea likely would have hit her with far more force. Perhaps it still would once the shock had a chance to wear off. However, at present, she couldn’t make it matter a farthing. More important was the fact that her mother hadn’t outright denied her.

She pushed her weary legs back up to standing before folding them into a slight curtsey. “If you’ll excuse me, Mama. I believe I’ll go upstairs to rest now.”

Her mother’s lips parted, the strained lines around her mouth melting away. “Yes, do that, dearest. I think a repose would be just the thing. Once you have refreshed yourself, I imagine you’ll reflect on the situation and come to see it in a different light.”

Lavinia didn’t take the time to agree or disagree either way. Rather, she hastened out of the room and up the stairs with all the strength she could muster, not stopping until she was in her bedroom with the door closed behind her. Despite what she’d said, she didn’t need to rest. Nor did she require more time for reflection. Instead, she hurried over to the escritoire by the window and pulled a stack of paper from the drawer. Clarity had followed her from the drawing room to her bedroom. Telling her exactly what she needed to do.

She sat down on the delicate gilded chair and retrieved her quill, dipping it into the inkpot. Not pressing the quill down so hard that it snapped and she made a hole in the paper. Not sobbing over the message she had to write and the dashed

hopes that went along with it. She simply scribbled the necessary words with almost dreamlike calmness.

*Carington,*

*I received your letter, and it seems I must congratulate you on your nuptials. As such, I can see no further purpose to an association between us. Please do not trouble yourself over my finances or the situation of your unborn child. We will manage without your assistance, and I thus release you from any responsibility hereafter.*

*Once more, I wish you every happiness with your marriage. You will not hear from me again.*

*L*

She signed it off with a flourish before shoving the page to the side of the *escritoire*. She would address and seal it later. First, she had another missive to write. The most important one of all.

Really, this news deserved a face-to-face conversation instead of a letter. Yet now that she'd seated herself alone in the refuge of her bedroom, exhaustion seeped through her bones, making another trip to the village feel like an impossibility.

Besides, it was safer to communicate this way. Not because she thought her mother's assessment of Will being a social climber had merit, as from her experience, nothing could be farther from the truth. He was Will. Good, kind, guileless, sensible Will. And while she trusted in very little anymore, she still believed in that.

But what if ... what if he'd spoken too hastily? What if, in that desperate confrontation in his kitchen, he'd merely wished to placate her? Because she'd given him no other choice. The thought caused a dull, throbbing ache in her chest, yet she had to ignore it. She couldn't afford to let anything get in her way. Not even pride.

She dipped her quill back in the inkpot, closing her eyes a moment as she brought it to the blank page, just so she could fully gather her thoughts.

*Dear Will*, she would begin simply.

Will.

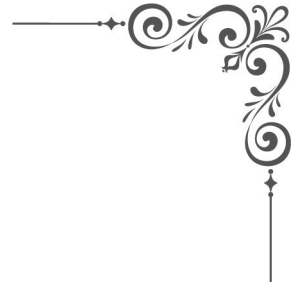
With the rest of the world temporarily shut out, an image of him sprang up in her mind. Clipped brown hair, the color of oak bark. Strong hands, gentle and precise despite their size. And smooth lips that felt surprisingly soft as they pressed against hers, sending warmth shooting through her on a cold winter's night.

Her eyes flew open. Blast her errant thoughts! She'd have to train herself to realize that none of that signified anymore. Not happiness. Not desire. This was merely a matter of survival. As such, there was no use pondering it any longer. She just needed to write. Her quill scratched along the paper, scrawling out the first words that came to mind.

*Dear Will*,

*I'm sorry I ran away. I'm sorry I asked you for something impossible. Did you mean what you said about us getting married? About accepting me, and the child? I do not intend to hold you to words you uttered unthinkingly in a moment of fervor. But if you did mean them ... then yes, I would like to accept your offer. I would like to become your wife.*

*Lavinia*





## Chapter 4

Will's eyes darted up from the book he'd been pretending to read, shifting to the opposite seat of the Bathursts' fine coach so he could hazard a glance at the expressionless face of Miss Bathurst. Rather, Mrs. Harris. Rather, his *wife*.

Heavy clouds had darkened the sky for more than an hour, releasing fat raindrops that pelted the windows and dimmed the carriage interior. Still, he could see well enough to detect that Lavinia was pale—too pale—and he didn't like it. Had she not been sleeping properly of late? Had she neglected to eat something today? Had her time outdoors without proper attire the previous week caused her to catch a chill? He wished she would allow him to examine her or at least to ask her questions. However, his prior inquiry about how she fared, shortly after they departed Northleigh, had caused her to snap that all was well and she wished to be left alone to rest. Thus sending him fetching a book from his valise that he had no ability to read. Not when his head pounded with the suggestion that he may have made a grievous mistake. And worse, that she believed so too.

Lavinia had walked into the church that morning as the picture of loveliness, wearing a silk and lace gown that brought out the blue in her eyes and a delicate diamond necklace that sparkled against her throat. The perfect bride for a gentleman who would cherish her *and* provide her with jewelry and gowns, carriages and houses, and whatever else her heart desired. Not a bride intended for him.

He'd pulled her into a quiet alcove near the back of the church, out of earshot of the waiting vicar, and assured her that if she had second thoughts, they didn't need to go through with the ceremony. He would still help her in any way possible. If he really searched, perhaps he *would* find another place for her to go. Or a family looking to take in a child. A hot, sickening feeling had gnawed at him as he uttered those words, for they brought with them a disquieting realization.

Maybe he hadn't tried harder to find an alternative because of how deeply he longed for something he wasn't supposed to have.

However, Lavinia had allowed no protest. She'd tilted her chin upward, staring at him with peerless blue eyes. "I have no second thoughts unless you do."

They'd been married shortly thereafter, witnessed only by two servants from the Bathurst household. While Lady Bathurst had provided her coach for the day, she hadn't come with Lavinia to the church lest her attendance signify approval. As for Lord Bathurst, Will had to assume he knew very little of the affair. Much like his own family. He'd written to Maggie to inform her of his delayed arrival in Lynnford but had provided no details beyond that. To his uncle, still in Exeter, he'd written nothing at all. He didn't need them telling him how severely he erred.

Although with each passing moment in the coach, that assessment seemed more and more accurate. It was one thing for Lavinia to appear pale and drawn. But just as concerning—perhaps, even more so—was her silence. She'd assured him of her desire to wed that morning. She'd spoken her vows without hesitation. And then, aside from the most abrupt, trivial comments, she'd said nothing else. Nor had she shown even a trace of her bright, ready smile.

She'd had her world pulled out from under her and would need time to reconcile herself to her circumstances. He could understand that. He had no expectations of her. Yet his throat constricted at the thought that she'd been crushed so thoroughly as to never smile again.

He snapped his book closed, no longer capable of even the facade of reading. Instead, he turned his face to the window, where rivulets of rain obscured the view of the passing countryside. Fitting weather, he supposed, to match the mood inside the coach.

He closed his eyes, needing a moment to shut it all out. And was suddenly hit with his own memory of the time he

believed that he, too, would never smile again. And the day that had changed.

Unlike the current winter dreariness, the sun had shone bright and unobstructed that perfect summer morning. Providing a direct contrast to the bleakness that filled him. He was newly arrived to Northleigh, a boy of barely fifteen, sitting alongside his uncle in the study and trying to concentrate on his explanation of bones in the leg and foot. However, his eyes kept drifting to the window, and his mind kept wandering, questioning what was to become of him here. He was in a strange place, learning strange words—*lateral tibial condyle, fibula, lateral malleolus, calcaneus*—while his parents lay cold in a London churchyard.

Eventually, his uncle told him to go outdoors and take some time to restore himself, and he wandered aimlessly down the streets, not sure what he was doing or where he was going. Until, without warning, a figure darted out from behind a whitewashed cottage and into his path. A girl.

“Good day.” She peered up at him with clear blue eyes, her lips spreading into a grin that revealed a row of pearly teeth. She couldn’t be much different in age from him, but her slight frame only came up to about his shoulder. “I believe you’re new here, so I thought I might introduce myself. I’m Miss Lavinia Bathurst.”

From the moment she’d appeared in front of him, the intricate lace and crisp whiteness of her dress revealed her as a person of quality. Now, he knew in what form. His uncle had told him that Baron Bathurst and his family resided in Northleigh Manor, the grand country estate that overlooked the village from afar. He gazed back, unmoving, at Miss Bathurst. Did she expect him to grace her with a reverent bow? The way she continued to look at him, all warmth and eagerness, made him think that perhaps she did not.

Ultimately, he settled on a brusque inclination of his head. “A pleasure. I’m William Harris.” Why did he suddenly feel as though he stood a foot too tall? And as though the intonation of his words lacked sufficient polish?

The girl nodded, causing her pale yellow braid to swish against her back. "I know. That is, my mama, sister, and I were just in the Carters' cottage, and Mrs. Carter relayed the news of Mr. Harris having his niece and nephew from London come to live with him."

"Do you know my uncle?" he asked, unable to picture this sunray of a girl anywhere near Uncle Stephen's austere home.

She shook her head. "Not really. When one of us is unwell, Mama always calls for the physician instead. But I know him well enough to recognize that you look like him a little. And ... well, if you'll forgive my saying so, you appear so downcast that I knew you had to be the nephew of whom Mrs. Carter spoke. I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," he replied stiffly as darkness encroached on the temporary light brought about by her smile.

She regarded him uncertainly for a moment before motioning to the basket she carried over one arm. "It's our day to visit tenants, you see. We bring them little gifts that we hope they find of use or enjoy. Items to help those who are ailing or need a spot of cheer."

She reached inside the basket, rummaging around until she withdrew a plump, fragrant orange. It filled her small palm, and she thrust it toward him. "Would you like this? We grow them in our orangery, and I must say, they're quite good."

He eyed it, once more unable to move or speak. Did she think to solve all his troubles with a piece of citrus fruit? This well-adorned girl smiled so easily and traipsed about so lightly that she'd clearly never experienced true sorrow or hardship in her life. Yet he found he couldn't fault her for her oblivion. Not when she seemed to have noble intentions.

"Never mind." After a moment of his silence, her eyebrows creased, and she pulled back her hand, returning the orange to the basket. "I wished to offer you a small comfort and perhaps return a measure of joy to your countenance, but I understand if oranges are not sufficient enticement. My papa doesn't smile much either. Only when he's reading a book he finds particularly entertaining or spending time with his

hunting dogs. Unfortunately, I have neither of those things to offer you.”

Will could nearly smile at that. At her earnestness. At the way she shuffled her feet, covering her dainty white slippers in dust from the road. Had misery not enveloped him so tightly, perhaps he even would have laughed.

The girl appeared deep in thought, her tongue repeatedly tapping against the inside of her cheek, when suddenly, her face brightened anew. “Come with me.” She swept past him down the road, motioning for him to follow. Leaving him standing dumbfounded behind her.

The best thing, undoubtedly, would be for him to head back in the direction of his uncle’s house and return to his lessons. Not to parade about with a fanciful young miss high above his station, who could understand nothing about him. But was it permissible to refuse a baron’s daughter?

He stood on the road, feeling awkward and gangly. Then, as if they had a mind of their own, his legs were moving, not in the direction of his uncle’s home, but after Miss Bathurst as she stepped off the road and onto the village green. He lengthened his strides to keep up with her near-run, following close behind until she stopped before the tallest out of a group of oak trees.

“Here. This is the spot.” She gazed up at the thick canopy of leaves with a satisfied grin upon her face. Without looking away, she set her basket on the grass and, for reasons unknown, tugged on the fingers of her gloves until they dropped beside the basket. Then, in a flash of white muslin and pale blonde hair, Miss Bathurst hoisted herself onto the thick, lowest-lying tree branch. She moved nimbly, reaching to clasp one of the skinnier branches above her, extending one foot, and then the other, onto a higher branch.

Will could only stare up at her from his place on the ground, still at a loss for words. Was this a typical pastime for high-born young ladies in the country? He knew very little of these matters, but somehow, he doubted it.

Miss Bathurst took another step up, much of her body now hidden by leaves, before nudging her face between two branches so she could shoot him down an expectant glance.

“Well, are you coming?”

She posed the question as though it were the most natural thing in the world. As though she frequently asked morose strangers to join her in climbing trees. Again, he couldn't help but think it wisest for him to walk away from the green and head directly back to his uncle's dim study. Except he couldn't. Despite how she towered above him, her gaze held him in, inviting no protest. Sending him scrambling onto the lowest branch and climbing upward.

“Oh, good.” Miss Bathurst gave a little laugh as she stepped onto a higher branch again. “We just need to go a little farther up. I do hope you're not afraid of heights.”

“Of course not,” he answered, instantly affronted. The suggestion only made him go faster, hauling himself up so he could reach her. Miss Bathurst clearly took no issue with heights. He could only hope her skill matched her confidence. Really, it was imprudent for her to be so high up alone. It would only take a weak branch, or a wrong step, for her to—

“Here we are. What do you think of the view?”

Her words caused him to freeze, and it suddenly occurred to him that his position on the branch below Miss Bathurst's placed her face at his eye level. She poked her head out from a cluster of leaves, and he leaned toward her so he could follow suit, a burst of country air and sunlight hitting his face as he emerged. Below them stretched all of Northleigh. Rows of tidy cottages. The ancient stone church that stood above them all. Northleigh Manor, grand and stately, in the distance. And surrounding it all, lush green grass dotted with wildflowers, and fields replete with crops that swayed in the breeze. All made bright beneath the summer sun and the sky of clear, cloudless blue. Much the color of Miss Bathurst's eyes.

“You like it,” she exclaimed, causing him to turn from the view and face her. Her mouth was spread in a wide grin, making her look exceedingly pleased with herself. “I hoped

that seeing a little more of the place you're to call home might cheer you. I've spent enough time here to realize that this tree offers a superior view to the others. No one else knows. Mama nearly has a conniption when she discovers I've been climbing trees. But I don't mind sharing my secret lookout with you. Especially as it has made you smile."

He hadn't realized. But now that she mentioned it, he could feel that the corners of his mouth had turned upward, and his chest was no longer so heavy. Almost as if he'd outclimbed the crush of sorrow. He turned away from Miss Bathurst's keen gaze to peer at the idyllic scene below them once more. "Yes, I like it. Thank you."

"It's very freeing, is it not? Almost as if you were high enough to stretch out and reach for the sun. I enjoy—"

"Laviniaaaa!"

A singsong wisp of a voice floated up from the ground, putting an abrupt end to her speech. His gaze darted in the direction of the sound, and he squinted against the sun until his eyes fell upon two figures near the cottage where he'd first come across Miss Bathurst. One a woman of middle age, and the other a young lady who appeared not much older than Miss Bathurst; they both shared the same pale blonde hair as the girl in front of him. It glinted beneath the sun as they peered up and down the road, clearly in search of something. Or rather, someone. The mother and sister, then, of whom she'd spoken. Why hadn't he considered their whereabouts earlier?

"Drat." Miss Bathurst pulled her head back to conceal it behind the leaves and swiftly lowered herself to the branch on which he stood. "I was supposed to be waiting outside while Mama and Anne paid a quick call on the Smiths. They thought me too delicate to attend, as the Smith children recently had colds, and Mama says I'm prone to such illnesses."

She made a face. "But never mind. I'll be out of this tree in a flash, and they needn't be any the wiser."

He could have pointed out that the scuffs on her shoes and the small tear in her hem would indicate she hadn't passed the time by sitting demurely outside the cottage. Ultimately,

though, he opted to say nothing. Instead, he watched as she flitted down the branches with the same adeptness she'd used to ascend them, dropping to the grass with a soft thud.

She brushed stray leaves and twigs from her skirts as she peered up at him, gifting him with one more broad smile. "I'll have to say my farewells for now. You, however, should remain and enjoy the view a while longer. Good day, William Harris. I imagine we'll have cause to meet again soon."

"Good day, Miss Lavinia Bathurst," he uttered, but she was already gone, streaking across the grass with her basket of oranges in hand, her long braid thumping against her back and her skirts fluttering behind her. He watched, still concealed in the tree, as she reached the road and her mother and sister awaiting her. The greetings they exchanged were indecipherable murmurs from this high up, but from the way Lady Bathurst pointed her finger and narrowed her eyes as she spoke, it appeared she was chastising her daughter. That did nothing to dim the brightness in Miss Bathurst's features, nor did it stop the little skip in her step as they continued down the road and shuffled into another cottage.

When the door closed behind her, putting an end to his last glimpse of light golden hair, he turned his face up to the sky, taking a deep breath. He would have never dared to do such a thing in the cloying, putrid heat of London. Here, though, the air was clean and fragrant. Warming. Refreshing. Inviting him to inhale it and bask in it and simply *be*. Worries about the future and painful remembrances of the past had vanished, at least temporarily. All that remained were little flashes of a wide smile and slender, white-clad limbs maneuvering up the tree.

Once again, his mouth had turned upward, all of its own volition.

And he'd let it. He had peered out at the sprawling countryside, the slight smile still upon his face. And for the first time since he'd seen his parents buried more than a month prior, he'd allowed himself to think that, maybe, he could find happiness again.



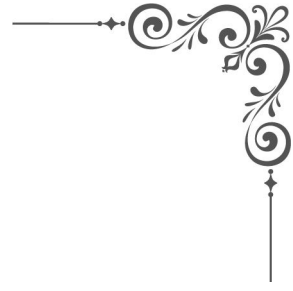
Will pulled his face away from the coach window, irritated with the driving rain and even more impatient with the memory. At least they didn't have much farther to go before arriving in Lynnford. Perhaps the situation would improve when they were able to get out and stretch their legs, and Lavinia could settle in her room and have a good night's rest.

But somehow, he couldn't make himself believe that. When he'd first selected his new house in Lynnford, he had thought it much too large for just himself. In the end, he'd chosen it because of the large room at the back that could serve as a surgery, where he could have patients come to him. Now, however, the house seemed too small and plain, and he wondered why he hadn't chosen something better. Not that he ever could have anticipated entering it with Lavinia Bathurst as his bride.

He stole another glance at her, seated across from him with her hands clasped firmly in her lap. She, too, stared at the raindrops, her hair hanging limp and her mouth pinched in a tight line. Telling him, silently but without question, that she didn't want conversation.

He wished he could dive across the carriage and encircle her in his arms. That when she was ready to talk, he'd know exactly the right words to bring her at least a modicum of comfort. He wished he could promise that they'd find their way together and become a happy little family, even if it was different from the one she had pictured. He wished it would stop raining. That he could make the sun come out for her. Just as she'd done for him.

He choked back the weary sigh that threatened to emerge, and because there was nothing else left, he returned his eyes to his book. Still not reading, of course, beneath his mountain of uncertainty and regret. He could make all the wishes he liked, and he *would* try to make them come true. For her. Whether or not he succeeded was another matter entirely.



## Chapter 5

Lavinia stepped out of the coach before her new home and straight into a puddle. Will had offered to help her descend, as had the accompanying footman, but she'd rebuffed them both. Instead, she'd hopped to the ground unassisted, leaving them watching, wide-eyed, as mud splattered the pale blue silk of her skirts. Didn't they see how it didn't matter? Nor did the rain that beat down, soaking her through in seconds.

She trudged along the soggy ground toward the front door, vaguely aware of the house in front of her. Gray stone, darkened by the rain. An even row of windows stretched across the top floor. A cluster of shrubs and an elm tree, currently devoid of leaves, swayed in the wind beside it. But none of that mattered either.

She moved to the side of the narrow gravel path to allow Will enough room to open the door. Judging by the hesitant glance he shot her, he wondered if performing even that small gesture for her was overstepping. Her shoulders slumped at the thought. He didn't deserve the aloofness she'd shown him today. She was just so ... tired.

She stepped into the house, which was clearly well-tended by someone, for candles illuminated the entryway, and a vase of snowdrops sat atop a polished side table. The space was small but welcoming. And yet another detail that didn't matter a bit. This was her home now, regardless of any opinions—favorable or not—that she held about it. She would do well to get settled without letting excessive sentiments interfere.

“Would you like to go to the sitting room?” Will spoke quietly, keeping ample distance between them, almost as if he feared she might erupt. “The maid—Nell—should have lit a fire where you can warm yourself, and I can call for tea or something to eat if you wish.”

She nodded, kicking off her mud-soaked slippers and pushing them to the side before allowing him to lead her through a door to the right. Her legs were still cramped from

the hours spent in the coach. Her back ached. The thought of eating something made her stomach roil. However, she couldn't turn down the promise of a blazing fire and made her way straight to the hearth. She situated herself directly in front of the flames, letting the heat travel up her body and across her face. Her mama would say she stood too close and should seat herself behind a screen to prevent an unsightly flush. Then again, she no longer answered to her mama. She was a married woman now.

She rubbed her hands together, hoping warmth would bring at least a small reprieve from the uncomfortable fatigue that weighed her down. Then, maybe she could *begin* to comprehend how to carry on from here.

She'd spent the past week convinced that she had made the right decision by agreeing to marry Will. But when she'd awoken that morning, her stomach so twisted in knots that it took a moment before she could pull herself upright, she began to wonder if she erred. It was only the result of nerves, she'd insisted to herself repeatedly, and she couldn't allow such a thing to veer her off course. Even when Will had questioned her certainty about the arrangement and given her an out, she'd persevered until they'd spoken vows at the altar and the decision became irrevocable. Which was what needed to happen, except ... the uneasiness within her—the dull, nagging ache—hadn't dissipated after they left the church and climbed into the coach to begin their journey together. If anything, the sensation had only grown with each bump in the road that jostled her and each mile that drew them closer to Lynnford. Leaving her silent and uncertain. And more exhausted than she'd ever felt in her life.

She would have to let it go, just as she'd done with so many other things of late. From the edge of her awareness, she could detect Will murmuring to someone, presumably his housemaid, in the doorway before his soft footsteps approached the fireplace. Still not getting too close, though. And while he made a slight noise in his throat, he still didn't speak.

She pushed past the aches and fatigue to straighten herself up to full height. Spending time in Will's company had always been so easy, and now it seemed that, too, was on the verge of ruin. She needed to make amends immediately. She could at least look about the room, perhaps offer a compliment—

A sharp pain tore across her midsection, sending her knees buckling. Will lunged for her, but he wasn't fast enough to keep her upright. He caught her waist only in time to sink to the floor with her, at least preventing a hard fall. She took in a shaky breath, trying to process what had happened, when the pain hit her again, causing her to clutch her hands to her stomach.

Will shifted her off his lap so he could face her, and then he was reaching for her wrist, his face awash with alarm. He was speaking to her too, asking questions of some sort, but the words floated above her comprehension. Her only focus was on taking her next breath as pain ebbed and flowed through her body.

Did this mean she was going to die? That even Will couldn't save her this time? Perhaps all this worry—and this arrangement—had been for naught. Her gaze darted around the room, its contents blurring into an indistinct mix of shapes and colors, before eventually coming to rest on her stained skirts. The delicate blue silk no longer contained just spatters of mud. There was also a small patch of blood.

She heard herself gasp, a sharp, panicked sound. Her head whipped back to face Will. He wasn't talking anymore, only looking at her with wide, horrified eyes. But she didn't require words to understand what his expression had already told her. There would be no child.

Suddenly, he was moving again, gathering her in his arms, preparing to lift her. She shot both hands out, stilling him. She wasn't ready to go anywhere yet. She needed a minute. Just a minute ...

At least he understood her silent plea. He settled himself back on the floor, not trying to move her but putting the faintest pressure on her shoulders. She gave in to his gentle

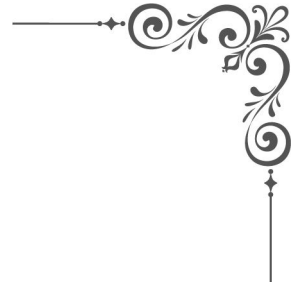
coaxing, letting her weight drop against his chest. Allowing his arms to hold her to him. Resting there, trying to rise high enough above the pain to understand the day's latest earth-shattering turn.

They had married out of necessity. Because she was *with child*, a fallen woman with no other place to turn but the clutches of a depraved viscount. And Will had stepped in to save her because that's what Will did. Even though it meant life-altering consequences for them both.

Except now ... there was to be no child. She turned the words over and over in her mind, yet the concept was too slippery to make stick. Nothing made sense anymore. *Nothing*.

Over the past week, she'd forced herself to accept the situation as it really was instead of focusing on pointless what-ifs. However, they now came bursting into her thoughts like floodwaters overtaking a riverbank, rendering her powerless to stop them. What if she and Carington had been more discreet? What if another scandal came along to distract the ton from what had passed between them, and her reputation could be restored? What if she hadn't pounded on Will's door in a panic and asked him for something impossible? What if their final meeting had indeed been last Christmastide, after that ill-conceived kiss, and she'd left him alone to live a life free of hindrances? *What if, what if, what if?* All those possibilities flitted through her mind, whispers of things that nearly could have been.

Except for one undeniable fact. The world could spin them around and cast them down a thousand times more. It wouldn't alter the vows they'd spoken. From here on out, circumstances could change as much as they liked, but one thing would forever remain the same, bound by the laws of earth and heaven. She and Will would still be married.



## Chapter 6

The rain didn't stop. It only changed. The deluge relented into a sprinkling of drops that bounced lightly off the roof and then gave way to thick, drizzly fog. Only for the cycle to repeat itself all over again in a relentless show of damp, bleak grayness.

Lavinia could no longer say how long the rain had enshrouded them. Days? Weeks? In her new bedroom, she quickly lost track of time, and she had neither the interest nor the energy to attempt refamiliarizing herself with it. She simply slept, consumed by a weariness like nothing she'd ever known.

Every once in a while, something would rouse her from her deep, dreamless slumber. A slender, shadowy figure that had to be a maid rustling around in the grate. An occasional deep bark that sounded like it came from just outside the house. Once, a female voice, loud and near hysterics, had drifted up from downstairs. *What have you done? Have you lost your senses altogether? This will be the ruin of you both ...* Maybe she should have pushed herself upright and discovered more of that conversation, but instead, she'd tucked her head beneath her pillow and let sleep claim her once more.

And then, there was Will. Placing food under her nose that she didn't want but he insisted she eat. Popping in to check her pulse or do whatever else he needed to assure himself that she didn't ail too severely under his watch. Coaxing her out of bed long enough to stretch her legs, so she didn't lose all strength, even though she managed nothing more than short turns about her bedroom. She did it only because he asked it of her, because she wanted the worried lines that creased his face to go away. She'd do him no good by voicing her belief that she may as well stay in bed as much as she wished, for the endless rain and mist might soon sweep them away, and nothing else would matter after that.



But suddenly, something was different. Lavinia shifted beneath her tangle of sheets and blankets, trying to determine what sound had awoken her this time. Yet moments passed, and her bedroom remained perfectly silent. The disturbance wasn't noise but brightness.

She pried her eyes open to discover sunlight streaming through the window across from her bed, casting a soft glow atop her counterpane. The weak, low sunlight of a winter morning, which likely brought little warmth, but sunlight nonetheless. She blinked a few times, the space surrounding her appearing totally different without the dull shadows to which she'd grown accustomed. And then, from near the doorway, came just the faintest rustling noise. So there *had* been a sound after all.

She propped herself up on her elbows, turning to face the partially open door, and met a pair of dark, soulful eyes, fixing her with an intent stare. Will's dog. The same brown-flecked spaniel she'd often seen bounding through the fields around Northleigh. She hadn't realized that Will had relocated the dog along with them. Much less that the dog, an animal of no small size, had taken up residence inside the house.

"Shoo." She frowned at the dog, making a flicking motion with her hand. The animal didn't so much as blink.

"Shoo," she repeated, sitting up fully and gesturing to the door with more force. This animal, with its long, shaggy fur and drooping ears, had little in common with the foxhounds her father had always taken pride in breeding. Still, she couldn't help but remember the day when, as a girl of just nine, she'd gone to the kennel to see a new litter of puppies. Only to have one of the adult foxhounds lunge at her and chomp down on her hand, leaving her trailing both tears and blood as she'd made a frenzied sprint back to the house. Her mother had insisted that her father keep the dogs away from them from that point on, which was just as Lavinia liked it. She wanted no reminders of that grotesque show of blood, the sight of which had always made her queasy. Or of the silvery white scar that marked her wrist to this day.

“I said go away!” She leaped from the bed and across the room, grabbing the door and pushing it closed. Nudging the dog from his position in the doorway and into the corridor in the process. She stood with her ear pressed to the door for a moment, half expecting to hear growling or vicious clawing against the wood. Instead, all that came was the quiet click of nails against the floorboards, retreating down the corridor and then fading down the stairs.

With the upset passed, she pressed her weight against the door, letting out a breath. Despite Will’s best efforts to keep up her strength, her legs wobbled, protesting the sudden rapid movement they’d been forced to perform after their period of infrequent use. She glanced toward her bed, the rumpled blankets inviting her to climb back among them and sleep once more. Yet, for the first time in however many days, fatigue didn’t consume her. In fact, through the haze in her head, a vague sense of alertness started to form, one that could perhaps sharpen if given the opportunity. She could at least *try* to let it take hold.

Her dressing gown lay draped across a chair near her bed, and she sauntered over to it, retrieving the garment and wrapping it tightly around her body. To occupy herself, she would find it nearly enough to stay in her room and examine all the details, now illuminated by sunlight, that she’d never taken in before. The walls, papered in a pattern of delicate pink rosebuds. The little white table in the corner, upon which rested a mirror and her silver comb and brush, set out in a neat row. The window, which offered a view of the towering elm tree she’d noticed upon her arrival.

But suddenly, she wished for more. This was her home, after all, and she had yet to see most of it. She returned to the door and eased it open, relieved that Will’s dog hadn’t taken the notion to come skulking back. Instead, the corridor sat still and empty, the staircase to one side of her and a series of closed doors to the other. Did she have permission to stroll along and open each one, surveying the contents inside? Which of these rooms belonged to Will? Did he rise early, or would he still be abed, lying restfully upon soft sheets, his bare shoulders emerging above the counterpane ...

Abruptly, she spun toward the stairs, her pulse thrumming from the unexpected direction her thoughts had taken. She would survey the main floor then. That seemed the safer option, as long as she could manage the stairs without difficulty. She gripped the smooth wooden handrail, which smelled faintly of lemon polish, resting much of her weight against it as her legs readjusted to the motion of descending. It grew easier with each step, and by the time she reached the bottom, her footing had become more stable, albeit slow.

She peered around at several more closed doors, debating where to start her exploration, when faint noises echoed from a room at the back of the house. A few footsteps. The clink of metal. The gentle sloshing of water. The housemaid hard at work? Or could the sounds be made by Will, not still asleep upstairs after all? She shuffled toward the door that concealed the noise and took hold of the latch, filled with a sudden potent desire to find Will on the other side.

When the door creaked open, there he was, just as she wished. By the looks of things, the room she'd just entered was his surgery, for shelves filled with all sorts of bottles lined the walls, and a series of mysterious instruments lay scattered across a wide table. As for Will, he faced away from her at the other end of the room, cleaning his hands in a basin, although her next step forward caused him to whip his head around.

“Lavinia!” His eyes widened as if he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing. “You've gotten up. Are you well?”

She cleared her throat, attempting to rid her voice of any scratchiness that would come from disuse. “Yes. Yes, I—Dear Lord, what has happened?”

He had turned to face her, revealing that the thick white apron he wore over his clothes was smeared with blood. Likewise, even though he'd been hard at work scrubbing his fingers, they still contained crimson stains. Her stomach immediately heaved.

He followed her horrified gaze down to his apron, his expression turning sheepish. “Please, do not worry.” He thrust his hands back into the basin, scrubbing with renewed vigor.

“Joseph Ward had an unfortunate incident with an axe. He was able to run here, though, before the bleeding grew too profuse, and I don’t anticipate any lasting effects. He was really quite lucky, for he kept all his digits.”

Apparently satisfied with the state of his hands, Will dried them with a towel and turned back to her with a small smile. He meant to reassure her, but her insides continued to churn. The scent of blood, sharp and metallic, hit her now, and she swallowed back the bitterness that flooded her throat.

“Are you certain you’re well?” Just as quickly as the smile had touched his lips, it transformed into a straight, pinched line, and he drew his eyebrows together in concern. “I know you don’t like it when you think I’m over-worrying, but you have turned ashen. Perhaps this is too much exertion at once. Have you been out of bed long?”

He took a step toward her, seemingly forgetting that he hadn’t removed the blood-stained apron. She did her best to steady herself, though her knees wobbled beneath her nightgown. “I ... no ... the dog ...” she mumbled nonsensically, fixing her eyes on the exterior door next to the table. If she could only summon the strength to run for it, she could retreat to the outdoors and breathe in fresh, clean air. She would be free of this room that closed in on her, free of the red splotches that wouldn’t stop staring her in the face and of the memories they evoked. Like the foxhound’s jaws clamped around her hand, sending blood pooling to the ground as she screamed. Or the spot of blood on her skirts as she lay on the floor of Will’s sitting room ...

She lurched forward in her best attempt at speed, but her legs flopped like jelly.

“Lavinia!”

She heard Will call her name, felt his grip on her arm just as her knees threatened to give out beneath her. As always, he had jumped to the rescue. But now he was too close. The coppery smell intensified. The ominous red grew more vibrant.

She jerked in his arms, retching. Casting the scant contents of her stomach directly onto Will's boots.

She reached up to wipe her mouth, and for the briefest of moments, they locked gazes. Once again, his eyes had gone wide, the bright hazel shining in a way that suggested he didn't yet comprehend what had just occurred. Contrasting with her expression, which she could feel quickly changing from shock to horror.

At least she gained the strength she needed to stumble hurriedly across the room and burst through the door to outside, where she gulped in air like a woman starving. She grabbed the nearest source of support she could find—the thick branch of a hawthorn bush—and let it steady her, so she didn't need to sink to the wet grass.

“Lavinia!”

Will called to her again as he rushed through the door, his shoulders stiff and his face more etched with worry than ever. Thankfully, he no longer wore the apron. In fact, his spotless attire made him look no different than a gentleman of leisure, except for the unpleasant splatters on his boots. “I'm sorry. Are you—”

“Will?”

A new voice, loud and bewildered, called out from behind them, causing them both to start. A tall, dark-haired figure was striding across the back lawn toward them, her thick cloak billowing behind her as she moved. Though Lavinia hadn't seen the woman for several years and had never known her well to begin with, she recognized her at once as Will's older sister, Maggie. Come to think of it, she recognized her voice from a much more recent time too, though it was no longer tinged with the same hysteria. *What have you done ...*

Now, it was Will's turn to go from bemusement to alarm, his face turning tense as he brushed invisible wrinkles out of his coat. “Good day, Maggie. I wasn't expecting you.”

The confusion plastered across Maggie's features intensified with each step she took until she stopped in front of

them, her gaze darting back and forth. “Have I come at a bad time?”

“No,” Lavinia answered for him, finding she was also staring between brother and sister. From what she recalled, Will had always spoken fondly of Maggie, even though their visits had turned infrequent once his sister moved to Lynnford upon her marriage. However, the current exchange between them radiated only uncertainty and tension. *This will be the ruin of you both ...* The words flashed back to her again, bringing with them a troubling notion. Did Maggie resent Will’s choice of bride? Or rather, the bride who had been cast upon him.

Lavinia had never heard Will quarrel with anyone, and it didn’t sit well with her that he might start with his sister. Especially if the cause of the discord had anything to do with her. She wouldn’t allow that to happen. She put on as welcoming of a smile as she could manage, repeating her assertion. “No, it isn’t a bad time at all.”

“Ah. Well.” Maggie shuffled her feet and then straightened her posture, forcing a tight smile in return. “Good day then, Will. And Miss Ba—that is, uh ...”

“Lavinia,” she said quickly, nodding in greeting as politely as if they were at a duchess’s garden party. Pretending that she wasn’t standing outdoors in her dressing gown.

Noticing that Will continued to stand rigidly, showing no sign of initiating conversation, she gestured to the back door. “Would you like to come in?”

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than Maggie shook her head. “No. I don’t intend to stay. I merely came because ...” After a moment of hesitation, she took a step toward Will, her features unexpectedly softening. “I was wrong to keep away. The truth is, I’ve been worried about you, Will, and by the looks of things, I had good reason to be. You appear tired, and you cannot be eating well, for you’re getting entirely too thin. I came to invite you to dinner. You could use a good meal. Perhaps a change of scene.”

His face remained strained. “I don’t think—”

“We would love to,” Lavinia cut in, trying to convey the appreciation Will lacked. What better way to ease any conflict between him and his sister than to accept Maggie’s olive branch? Besides, Lavinia’s days of receiving invitations to the ton’s most exclusive dinner parties were over. She may as well try to settle herself in Lynnford and accept whatever socialization she could. It was either that or return to her bed and wallow.

“Oh.” Maggie’s mouth fell open before she swallowed heavily. However she felt about having her invitation accepted, the sentiment was far from enthusiasm.

Lavinia peered at her, perplexed, until the truth crashed into her like a load of bricks. Maggie had come with an invitation for Will. Only Will. Not for the invalid wife who had taken to sequestering herself in her bedroom.

Which led her to yet another disquieting thought. Did Maggie ... *dislike* her? She remembered back to the trips she used to take from Northleigh Manor to the village, always carrying a basket laden with the excess fripperies she couldn’t use herself. The village girls would crowd around her, exclaiming with delight as she passed out ribbons, baubles, sweets. But never Maggie. During her few years in Northleigh, Maggie had always hung back from the commotion as though the contents of Lavinia’s basket didn’t interest her in the least. At the time, that insignificant detail had barely scratched the surface of Lavinia’s awareness. But now ...

“Are you sure you feel well enough for such a thing?” Will asked quietly. “Perhaps it’s unwise to leave the house just yet.”

Lavinia glanced back and forth between the two sets of hazel eyes that stared at her. Both hesitant. On edge. Maybe even a touch fearful.

It would be easiest to agree with Will and stay home. Really, most of the morning’s disastrous events indicated that she would have been better off remaining in bed as usual. She could still return before anything else had the chance to go wrong. But standing in the brisk air, breathing it in as she was hit by the tiniest flickers of warmth from the sun, she found

the idea held little appeal. In fact, it felt far too similar to defeat, and after everything she'd already gone through, she couldn't give in to it now.

"I'll rest a little in the afternoon, and I'm certain I'll be perfectly well at dinnertime," she asserted, flashing them a thin smile even if they couldn't do the same in return. "Thank you, Maggie, for your kind invitation. I can think of no pleasanter way to pass the evening."

"Uh ... good. Good," Maggie stammered after a pause. "Six o'clock, if it's convenient for you."

She was already glancing behind her as if, her task now complete, she planned to sprint toward home at any second. However, her nose wrinkled as a light wind gust blew over them, and she took a tentative step toward Will, looking him up and down. "I'm sorry, Will, but *what* is that smell?"

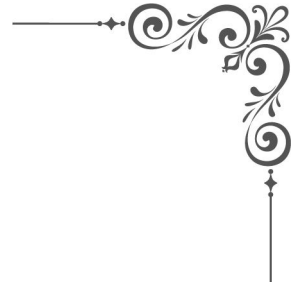
"Nothing," he snapped, his jaw tensing. He spun away from her, veering to the side so he could drag his boots through the muddy water of a puddle. Then, without stopping or looking back, he strode the final short distance to the house, his posture rigid. "We'll see you later, Maggie. And not to worry. I'll have changed into different attire by then."

With that, he stepped into the house, and the door banged shut behind him, leaving Lavinia and Maggie staring bemusedly at the empty space in the garden he'd so recently occupied.

Maggie recovered herself first, stumbling into a brisk curtsey. "Well then. Farewell until this evening, Miss B—uh, Lavinia." She really did flee then, rushing across the grass and back to the road like Will's dog was chasing her.

Leaving Lavinia standing alone, glancing between the closed door and Maggie's retreating form on the road, still none the wiser over the meaning of whatever she'd just witnessed. She let out a sigh, her breath forming a tiny puff of steam in the winter air. She'd intended to pick herself up and be helpful in the process. Yet maybe she'd succeeded only in bringing another spot of trouble to Will's day.





## Chapter 7

Against his better judgment, Will found himself riding up to his sister's house promptly at six o'clock that evening with Lavinia seated in front of him, held secure between his thighs. Normally, he would have walked the distance, for it wasn't much more than a mile. However, he still had concerns about Lavinia's health and doubts about the prudence of going on such an outing after she'd spent nearly the past three weeks in her room, barely wanting to rise from bed. When she'd so determinedly asserted her desire to accept Maggie's dinner invitation, though, he didn't have it in him to refuse. Not when the alternative could be that she'd return to her bed for another despondent stretch of weeks. His company alone, especially in the surgery that morning, had done little to cheer her. Maggie had said that she thought he needed a change, but perhaps Lavinia did too. Somehow, his desire to give her that had overridden the little voice inside him that insisted on all the reasons this dinner was a bad idea.

He jumped to the ground, then reached up to help Lavinia dismount. Maybe Maggie was right about him growing thin, for he'd taken little interest in food over the past few weeks. However, it had been difficult to focus on his own well-being as he'd struggled to keep Lavinia eating, watching her lose a little more strength each day. She'd always been small in stature, but as he lifted her to the grass beside him, her feathery lightness hit him in a way it never had before. Her waist was so slender, and her face so thin and white that she seemed almost like a papier-mâché doll that could crack from one wrong move.

If only he could keep her in his arms like this. To warm her against the winter chill. To whisper just the right things to make her talk and laugh—and eat—until her cheeks regained their rosiness and her gaunt limbs grew soft once more. If only he could make her trust him the way she used to. Then, maybe, she would reach for him the way she had that night by the back door of Northleigh Manor and press her lips against his

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“A moment, if you please,” he said, abruptly releasing his grip on her. He’d do well to dispel any such notion without delay. “I’ll just see to the horse, and then we can go inside.”

She nodded, making the pale ringlets she’d styled with tongs bob against her even paler face. He made quick work of tying the hack to a fencepost alongside a grassy stretch before making his way back to Lavinia’s side. “Shall we?”

Again, she nodded her agreement, and again, his trepidation over the outing resumed its steady climb. However, before he could give it another thought, the front door of the tidy whitewashed cottage swung open, revealing Maggie with her infant son, Owen, resting against her hip.

“Welcome,” Maggie said somewhat breathlessly, bouncing the baby in her arms as she moved to the side to allow them entry.

Owen’s wide, toothless grin, directed straight at him as he stepped into the entryway, was all Will needed to make the corners of his mouth turn up in response. “Good evening, Master Owen. I hope you’re in fine form today and not causing your mother *too* much trouble. A little, of course, is warranted.”

He arched an eyebrow, shooting Maggie the same mischievous glance he used to when they were young, which earned him a swift eye roll. And for the first time that day, the heaviness that had settled over him at the thought of this outing melted away. Leaving only a sense of rightness, like maybe there was wisdom in coming here after all.

He’d missed Maggie over the past few weeks, and Owen along with her. The last thing he’d wanted upon arriving in Lynnford as a married man was a confrontation with his sister, in which she stormed out of his house screaming that he’d ruined himself, and he bit out that she could stay away from him until she saw fit to comment with something encouraging.

For long days, pride and stubbornness had kept them both from taking up the matter any further. But today, Maggie had shown up at his door, and while she may not have been ready to extend her congratulations, her very presence—and her

somewhat uncertain dinner invitation—had been a peace offering. A positive first step. Enough to give him hope that, in time, she could grow to accept his marriage to the woman she viewed as all wrong for him.

He turned to Lavinia, suddenly aware that she was lingering behind him. “Allow me to introduce the newest addition to Maggie’s family, Owen. He was born just this past summer.”

Lavinia took a cautious step forward, running a gloved finger over the infant’s chubby fist. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Owen.” For a moment, it looked like the baby’s infectious grin might spread to her as well, but instead, she pulled her hand back to her side, her expression becoming closed.

Owen peered back and forth between them both, gifting them with his smile for just a moment longer before his face puckered, and he made a few sounds somewhere between a cry and a whine.

Maggie bounced him with fresh vigor, giving a rueful sigh. “He’s been fussing, and truth be told, I think he’s overtired. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to bring him up to his cradle and see if he won’t go to sleep. Please, see yourselves to the sitting room. I’ll be but a moment.”

“Of course.” Will reached out to smooth his nephew’s dark, downy hair. “I’ll bid you a good night then, Master Owen.”

Despite his increasing displeasure, Owen continued to watch his visitors, staring down as Maggie carted him up the stairs and out of sight. Even while voicing his annoyance, the baby still brought a smile to Will’s face. How could he not, when he signified everything that was good and pure and new about the world?

From beside him, Lavinia made a small sound in her throat, standing stiffly as if she didn’t know what to do with herself. It was nothing short of ironic how quickly they’d reversed positions, so that he now gleaned joy from the invitation she’d accepted on their behalf, whereas she looked like she was questioning her decision to come.

He placed a hand gently upon her arm so he could guide her to the sitting room, a space to which he'd become well accustomed during his visit over Christmastide. Perhaps she had grown weary from the short journey and needed to sit. But as they strolled forward, another unsettling possibility turned through his mind. What if, for Lavinia, the baby's presence signified something different than it did for him? Like heartache ... loss ...

He swallowed down the thick lump that pushed at his throat. These questions were far too heavy, and too intimate, to discuss when they possessed only a few moments alone. If he could only think of something reassuring to say to help restore her composure. Even a comment letting her know how much he appreciated her being here.

However, any comforting words he'd begun formulating quickly slipped away as a figure emerged from the kitchen, catching them just as they were about to enter the sitting room. Even in the dim light, he couldn't miss the intensity of the green eyes that fixed on them from down the short corridor.

The burst of happiness that came from being reunited with Maggie and Owen had been enough to make him temporarily set aside his other concerns about the evening's gathering. So much so that he'd even started to wonder if he worried for naught. Perhaps he'd built the situation up in his mind until the conflict in his imagination became far greater than what reality warranted.

But no, judging by the rigid young woman who came toward them with clipped strides, her jaw clenched tight, it would seem he hadn't overreacted after all. If anything, the fury that radiated from her was worse than he could have imagined.

Yet what was he to do? He and Lavinia were no longer in a position to call the whole evening off and make a hasty retreat back to their own house. He'd brought her here, for better or worse. Leaving him with nothing to do but incline his head to the irate woman who now stood before them and speak with all the calm civility he could muster.

“Good evening, Joanna. Please allow me to introduce my wife, Lavinia.” He stole a glance at Lavinia, who fortunately appeared unperturbed by the unwelcoming glower boring into her. “And Lavinia, this is Miss Joanna Hughes. Miss Hughes is a cousin of Maggie’s husband, Matthew. As Matthew is a midshipman and therefore spends much of his time at sea, Miss Hughes came to assist Maggie prior to Owen’s birth and has stayed on. She is a skilled midwife, you see,” he added, thinking a bit of praise couldn’t hurt.

“Ah.” For a moment, Lavinia said nothing else, managing only to look at him with a hundred questions written across her face. She quickly recovered herself, though, facing Joanna and even offering a small smile. “A pleasure, Miss Hughes.”

Joanna folded her stiff legs into an overexaggerated curtsy, her expression like ice. “My lady.”

Sparks of irritation flared within him. “Joanna, you know that isn’t how you’re meant to address her—”

“You do not need to call me that, Miss Hughes,” Lavinia cut in, somehow appearing no less serene than she did previously. “Even before, I was merely ‘*Miss Bathurst*.’ Now, just ‘Lavinia’ will suffice.”

By rights, Joanna should address her as ‘Mrs. Harris,’ although insisting on that title would be akin to rubbing salt in a wound. Did Joanna appreciate that Lavinia did her a kindness in that regard? And more importantly, did Lavinia suspect—

“We can go in to dinner now. That is, unless you would all prefer to continue standing around and conversing in the corridor.”

He started at the unexpected voice from behind them and turned to find Maggie standing at the bottom of the stairs, hands on her hips. For the second time that day, she surveyed the scene before her with wide eyes as if pondering whether she’d walked in on something with which she would rather have no involvement.

“Dinner, please,” he muttered, offering Lavinia his arm again as they followed his sister into the small dining room. Maggie had put down her finest lace tablecloth for the occasion, and an extra candelabra rested atop the table to better illuminate the space. Making the daggers Joanna still shot him all the more obvious, even once they’d been seated and the serving girl brought in trays of food.

He tried to help himself to the roasted pork with the same nonchalance as Lavinia, as though this were a perfectly amiable gathering among friends. However, a disquieting yet definite truth screamed at him relentlessly. He was a fool. One who should have known better.

Just because he’d never uttered any promises to Joanna didn’t mean the expectation wasn’t there. It had always been there from the moment he’d stepped into Matthew and Maggie’s home for his Christmastide visit and received an introduction to Miss Joanna Hughes. Maggie’s not-so-subtle nudging had started within a day. *Isn’t Joanna a lovely girl ... She’s been such a comfort to me, as I know she would be to anyone whose home she happened to occupy ... You’ll need someone, Will, to help fill that big new house of yours ...*

Maggie hadn’t been wrong. Joanna, with her sparkling green eyes and wide smile, *was* lovely. He’d enjoyed pleasant exchanges with her as they passed evenings in the sitting room, and on an occasion or two, they’d even strolled together along the beach. Her knowledge of midwifery had given them a topic of conversation he couldn’t share with other ladies of his acquaintance, and she’d been keen to hear about his medical training in turn. Really, there was no reason they shouldn’t suit. Except for one glaring, undeniable thing. She wasn’t Lavinia.

He’d tried not to think of Lavinia galivanting from one party to another as he passed a quiet Christmas in Lynnford. He’d promised himself he would find a way to move on in this new town, that he would let his memories and any fruitless desires that went along with them go. Yet Joanna had sat beside him—eagerly, hopefully—and it all seemed to come at

him too fast. He'd made a new vow to deal with the matter in the new year once he had permanently settled in Lynnford.

But then ... then ... Lavinia had shown up at his door, turning his whole world upside down. And obliterating any of Joanna's unspoken hopes in the process.

He supposed he couldn't blame Joanna for sitting across the table from him sullenly, stabbing her fork into the roasted vegetables with a vigor that suggested she wished she were spearing something—or someone—else. She deserved his understanding, not his annoyance. But after three miserable weeks where everything seemed to go wrong, he just wanted *something* to go right. To be easy.

“The food is delicious, Maggie.” From beside him, Lavinia's clear, high voice cut into the terse silence. “Thank you again for inviting us to dine. It's been quite a while since I've had so enjoyable a meal.”

His eyes darted in her direction, first to the soft glow cast across her face by the flickering candlelight and then to the fork that glinted within her delicate grasp. Apparently, her words went beyond flattery, for she'd already partially emptied her plate. And as if to further prove her sincerity, she lifted a piece of potato to her mouth with a small smile.

A subtle flush spread over Maggie's cheeks, and then her lips twitched upward in return. Though he and his sister hadn't gotten the opportunity to speak in private, he knew, without her saying a word, that part of her reluctance in inviting Lavinia to dinner came from fears of inadequacy. Because her house couldn't possibly be grand enough for a baron's daughter, and the food on her table would be far from suitable. Truth be told, the same trivial fears had crept into his head as well. Yet here was Lavinia, smiling and eating more than he'd seen her do in the weeks since their marriage. At Maggie's mumbled thanks, Lavinia inquired about the recipes she used, saying she'd like to pass them along to their own maid if Maggie would be so kind as to share. And then, just like that, the two were conversing, Maggie's hesitation melting away a little more with each word she spoke.



He took a long swallow from his wineglass, spending a moment observing the scene before him. It was funny how that small turn of events had the power to make the weight on his shoulders no longer feel so crushing. He may still have a wife who wasn't supposed to be his and he didn't know how to make happy. He may still have another woman glowering at him from across the table. But watching Lavinia alternate between chatting and placing small bites of food in her mouth, he could see his way past those difficulties to another realization.

Quite simply, that he was hungry too. He'd spent so many days over the past few weeks consumed by worry. Days in which he'd learned that his maid's cooking skills could be described as adequate at best, yet he couldn't bring himself to care. The hunger, along with the fatigue that came after a string of restless, anxious nights, faded into the background, barely worth noticing. But he knew as well as anyone that they'd have to catch up to him eventually.

Perhaps that was what now prompted him to take one bite and then another, and another, the simple fare tasting better than anything he'd eaten in his life. He could get back to pondering the answers to all their difficulties later. At the moment, he just wanted to indulge his newfound hunger and eat.

And so, he did, lulled by the hum of chatter that swirled around him, until before he knew it, the maid was clearing a tableful of empty plates. He looked up, almost as if awaking from a trance, to find Maggie peering at him with a grin.

"It looks like you enjoyed the meal, Will. And for dessert, I have something that I hope you'll like even more." She went to the sideboard, where the maid had set down four china cups, and brought one to the table for each of them. "Baked custard. An old favorite of yours, if my memory serves me correctly."

"Yes. You remembered." He glanced from his sister down to the dessert in front of him, and suddenly, he was smiling too. It smelled of their childhood. Of home, and caring. If he needed additional proof that Maggie wished to make amends,

this was it. He dipped his spoon into the cup and took his first bite of the familiar recipe. "Thank you."

"I don't think I could ever forget your partiality to baked custard when you were young." Maggie popped a bite of custard in her mouth, her grin becoming sly as she turned back to Lavinia. "You see, our mother used to make it herself, and I don't think Will liked anything better. One day, as she set it to cool by the kitchen window, Will decided he simply couldn't wait until dinnertime to have it. When everyone had their backs turned, he sneaked into the kitchen and grabbed a dish right off the windowsill. Nearly burned himself in the process, I believe, but he somehow managed to tuck it in his shirt and dash off to his room. Unluckily for him, he didn't think to bring a spoon, but that didn't deter him. By the time our mother came upon him, he was hidden behind his bed with nothing but a dish licked clean and a face smeared with custard."

His neck heated from the three gazes that fixed upon him, and he fought the urge to kick his sister's foot beneath the table before she thought to reveal any more of his childhood embarrassments. Lavinia bit her lip, her blue eyes wide as she took in Maggie's story. Perhaps the tale of his youthful maladroitness had horrified her completely.

Except then, she laughed. A true, joyful giggle that caused her to tilt her chin up and her cheeks to take on a pink tinge. "How fortunate, then, that there are spoons upon the table this evening. We could have been in for quite a spectacle otherwise."

The comment caused a burst of laughter from Maggie in return, but despite how the humor was fully at his expense, he found he couldn't be annoyed by it. Not when, for the first time in a long time, he could see in Lavinia the girl who used to flit about Northleigh. The one who climbed trees, chatted freely, and giggled as though she hadn't a care in the world. Could that girl possibly come back to him? Even the thought made an airy feeling float through his chest.

"Might you grant me a moment of your time after dinner, Will?" The question came at him in a low, toneless voice,

barely audible above the peals of laughter. Joanna. The one woman at the table devoid of merriment. “My ankle is still troubling me.”

Lavinia turned to Joanna at once, her laughter dying away. “Oh, dear. Are you injured, Miss Hughes?”

Joanna shook her head stiffly. “Nothing serious. I was careless with my footing and turned my ankle during Christmastide. It continues to give me bouts of pain.”

Her injury hadn’t appeared severe even on the day when she’d come to him after stumbling on the front steps, so it surprised him to hear it still troubled her now. Then again, the excuse to give them a few moments alone was perhaps warranted. He looked to Maggie and Lavinia, still in the process of finishing their dessert. And still appearing happy enough in each other’s company, although Lavinia’s eyelids had begun to droop a little.

“By all means. I can see to it right now if you’d like to accompany me to the sitting room.” He looked to his sister while simultaneously letting his fingers brush over Lavinia’s hand. “If you can spare us for a few minutes, that is.”

“Of course.” She flashed a tight smile at him, then at Joanna. “I do hope you’re all right, Miss Hughes. In any case, Will always seems to know just the cure.”

If only that were true. For he seemed to be doing more erring than curing of late.

He waited for Joanna to rise from her seat and motioned for her to lead them away from the table and across the corridor to the sitting room. The candles still flickered in their sconces, casting a low light across the space. He eyed the brocade sofa, which offered the room’s most spacious seating. “If you could sit with your foot up, please, and remove your shoe and stocking.”

Luckily—or perhaps unluckily, depending on which way he wanted to look at it—Joanna was a midwife and not some simpering miss who would fret over such intimacy. Nonetheless, he looked, without purpose, at the blackness

outside the window as she wordlessly completed the task. Only when her skirts stopped rustling did he move forward, seating himself on the edge of the sofa and resting her ankle in his palm. “You must tell me if anything I do causes you discomfort. Yes?”

She nodded her assent, and he began his examination, pressing gently along the tendons and bones. He could tell right away that the ankle contained no swelling. No bruising. The pressure of his fingers didn’t cause her to flinch or grimace. There was nothing to suggest the mild injury hadn’t already healed. Then again, that didn’t seem to be the full reason why she had requested this encounter.

The skin of her ankle beneath his fingertips was warm and soft. The faintest hint of a future that could have been. Yet ... it just didn’t feel *right*.

He should say something. An explanation of sorts. He’d omitted the most intimate details of Lavinia’s situation even to Maggie, and he didn’t plan to start disclosing them now. But there had to be *something* he could say to ameliorate matters. Something unpresumptuous. Something that wouldn’t serve only to deepen Joanna’s hurt.

“Are you happy, Will?”

He froze at the sudden question before, very slowly, bringing his gaze upward. Joanna stared at him, her lips pursed, her green eyes large and intent. Any words he’d thought to piece together swiftly vanished, for she’d spoken first. Asking a question he was at a loss to answer.

Was he happy? Every dismal memory from the past few weeks came rushing at him all at once. Lavinia sitting in his uncle’s kitchen, on the verge of hysteria. Their empty, joyless wedding ceremony and the silent carriage ride that followed. Lavinia crumpled on the floor and then curled up in her bed, not wanting to move. As he could only sit there feeling powerless to stop any of it.

However, his reasons for marrying Lavinia extended far beyond happiness. He’d done it for the girl who had captivated him from the moment she smiled down from the high branches

of an oak tree. He'd done it for the ailing woman who had trusted him above all others. No matter how many years went by, he didn't see how the bond that came from having held her life in his hands would ever fade. And how he would ever rid himself of the desire to rescue her if the need should rise again. Even if she never felt the connection in return.

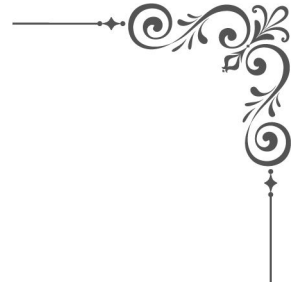
"I can see no lasting effects from the injury." He rose to his feet, releasing Joanna's ankle and setting it carefully yet firmly back on the sofa cushion. "Be sure to rest your ankle if it troubles you, and you should soon make a full recovery. Now, if you'll excuse me, it's getting late, and Lavinia and I should be on our way."

It wasn't late, not really. But suddenly, the thought of lingering in the sitting room and conversing turned daunting. The day had been a whirlwind of highs and lows, and he lacked the energy for any more of them. He no longer wanted to search for just the right words or attempt to do just the right thing. He wished only to go home.

"Will ..."

Joanna called to him quietly as he strode across the room, but he didn't stop. He didn't even look back. He spoke to the closed door right before he pushed it open so he could cross the corridor, reunite with his wife, and—for better or worse—return to where it was just the two of them.

"Good night, Miss Hughes."



## Chapter 8

Lavinia was quiet on the short ride home. In fact, judging by the way she leaned back, letting her weight press into him, Will could have almost thought she'd fallen asleep. Only a quick glance down revealed otherwise, for her eyes remained open, peering absently at the darkened road.

Given that, uncharacteristically, she didn't attempt to start a conversation, there were a number of things he should take the initiative to say to her instead. However, she was clearly tired, as was he. He contented himself without words, letting the rustle of the breeze and the clip-clop of hooves be the only accompaniment to their journey.

They arrived back home after a ride that lasted both too long and not long enough. Maybe someday, the sensation of her resting against his chest, nestled between his thighs, would no longer affect him. Perhaps given enough time, his pulse would stop racing, and the blood rushing through him would stop growing so heated. Though he doubted it. For now, he lifted her down from the horse and onto the pathway that led to the front door, trying to ignore the feel of her slight, soft weight in his arms. He could add it to the list of things he should cast aside because he had no business wanting them.

"I'm going to get the horse settled for the night," he said, more to a nondescript patch of darkness above her than to Lavinia herself. "Why don't you go in? I'm sure Nell can help if you require any assistance preparing for bed."

She stood there in front of him for a moment, her pale eyes shining in the darkness. Ultimately, though, she shuffled up the path and let herself into the lowly lit entryway, where the maid stood ready to greet her.

"Good night," he murmured into the blackness, although the front door had already closed, removing Lavinia from his sight.

He took his time bringing the hack to the small stable behind the house. Brushing him down. Filling pails with oats

and water. It was better for Will to keep his distance while Lavinia readied herself for bed. *Not* to enter his bedroom just as the swish of her skirts hitting the floor floated through the wall.

He kept his footfalls quiet as he walked back to the house, easing the front door open so it wouldn't creak on its hinges. However, no sooner had he shrugged off his coat and hung it on a peg in the dusky entryway than a shadowed figure emerged from behind the sitting room door. Lavinia, still wearing her lacy blue dinner dress and the navy bandeau that stood out against the paleness of her hair.

"Are you all right?" He took a few steps down the corridor in her direction, trying to make out her expression in the dimness. "Do you require something?"

"Yes, I am, and no, I do not." She stood waiting for him in the doorway, the low light emerging from the room casting a gentle glow behind her. "But as we didn't have the opportunity to convene in the sitting room at Maggie's after dinner, I thought we could do so now. Perhaps a nightcap?"

He paused in front of her, glancing at her heavy eyelids and the dark shadows beneath her eyes. Characteristics she could likely detect upon his face as well. Fatigue had no more deserted her than it had him. Nonetheless, for the first time since their marriage, she'd expressed a desire to spend time with him. Only him. And suddenly, at least for the remainder of the night, he no longer wanted to act as the concerned surgeon, lecturing on the dangers of overexertion. He simply wished to be with her too.

"If you like," he said, "although I don't believe I have any sherry."

She made a face. "Good, because honestly, I don't care for it. I'll have brandy. Whisky. Port. Whatever you're drinking."

"A moment, then. You can go in and settle yourself. I won't be long." He turned from her and strode into the darkened dining room, feeling his way to the sideboard and the small crystal glasses within. Beside them rested a bottle of brandy, untouched since the day he'd moved in. Really, he



didn't know what he was waiting for. If nothing else, the spirits should help him blur the memories he needed to forget and make them both sleep soundly throughout the night.

When he returned to the sitting room with the glasses in hand, Lavinia was seated with her legs curled upon the sofa nearest the fireplace, well-illuminated by the dancing flames.

"I asked Nell to stoke the fire before she retired for the night," she said, shifting over to allow plenty of room for him on the sofa. "It's quite cozy. Just the thing after a winter evening's ride."

He crossed the room to her, accepting the proffered seat and handing her a glass.

"Thank you." With a shadow of a smile, she clinked the crystal edge against his and lifted it to her lips, swallowing the brandy in one large sip.

He followed suit, welcoming the pleasant burn as it slid down his throat. Right away, his body warmed, a little of the tension melting away. As for Lavinia, her face had grown more animated while her cheeks had become a healthy shade of pink. Perhaps from the combination of cold and then fire. Perhaps from the brandy. But in any case, he could see it again. The girl he used to know.

"I thought maybe you were overtired," he remarked before she could get the idea that any hesitancy on his part came from a lack of interest in sitting here with her.

She gave a slight shrug of her shoulders. "A little, but I never let that stop me."

"Do you often stay up late?"

"Of course. Even in the country, I made a habit of it in preparation for London. Why, a London ball isn't likely to commence much before midnight. And then there are the theatre performances ..." She trailed off, her brow puckering. "But why I would continue to keep Town hours now, I cannot say. London is practically a world away. I have no excuse but foolishness. Please, let's not speak of it any longer."

He stared down at his empty glass, wishing he'd thought to bring the brandy bottle in with him. He'd intended to ask an innocent question to discover a small facet of her that he didn't yet know. Instead, it seemed he'd reminded her of something that she, too, longed for but couldn't have.

He tipped the glass back to his mouth until a couple of lingering drops hit his tongue. That would have to fortify him for now, enough for him to try again.

"Did you have a pleasant evening?" he asked, steering the subject to something innocuous. But no sooner did the words leave his mouth than they also felt wrong. Yes, she had laughed and conversed with Maggie. But what about her hesitancy around Owen? Or the thinly veiled hostility to which Joanna had subjected her?

Fortunately, Lavinia's face brightened. "Yes, very much so. Maggie is a generous, agreeable hostess. Your little nephew is darling. And Miss Hughes ... Well, it's fortunate we went so you could see to her injury."

"Indeed." He wouldn't have blamed her had he detected hints of scorn in her tone at that last part. However, she appeared to speak guilelessly, the set of her features remaining soft.

"We must all consider ourselves fortunate," she continued, "to have such a skilled doctor in our midst. One who knows how to take an ailment and make it right. Tell me, did you always know you would become a surgeon?"

There it was again, that unfounded confidence she had in him, even though lately, he seemed to be disproving her belief time after time. His neck grew hot, and a dozen contradictory, self-critical statements floated on the tip of his tongue. She looked at him so eagerly, though, her eyes filled with that one precious element he thought had begun slipping away. Trust.

He took a short breath, trying to push the doubts away so he could simply answer her question. "No. Actually, I planned to become a solicitor, like my father. But then, influenza struck our household, and with my parents gone and Uncle Stephen our new guardian, far away in Devonshire, it just seemed more

expedient to become his apprentice. Truth be told, I didn't first think myself suited to the medical profession. My opinions on the matter changed, though, as I got settled. I could do nothing to save my parents, and I have known few things worse than that feeling of powerlessness. But I came to realize that perhaps, in time, I could go on to help others."

He gazed into the flames and swallowed, clearing the tightness from his throat. It occurred to him that after all the years he'd known her, they had never spoken on the subject. She'd never asked. He'd never volunteered. Instead, conversations between them had remained light and cheerful, on topics of little importance. Free of difficulties. But that wasn't real life, was it?

When he turned back to Lavinia, he half expected to see her shrinking away. Instead, he found the gap between them had closed. He'd sat down carefully, mindful to keep to his own small section of the sofa where no aspects of them would touch. But now, the shiny fabric of her skirts brushed against his trouser leg, and when she opened her mouth to speak, the warmth of her breath hit the bare skin above his cravat. "You may have been a very fine solicitor. Yet I cannot help but think you were meant to be a doctor."

She leaned in even closer, and then, she was reaching for him, her finger tracing along his jawline. "You're so good, Will. A good surgeon. A good healer. A good brother, and uncle, and friend, and ... and a good ..."

Her voice became a whisper before vanishing completely, but her body stayed close to his, so near that he could detect the steady thrumming of her heart. At some point between arriving home and settling herself in the sitting room, she had removed her gloves, for her fingertips were bare, their warmth searing into his jaw.

Did he dare move? He studied her face—the crystal blue eyes, the flushed cheeks, the soft pink lips—for any sign of hesitation or pullback. Instead, he saw certainty. Enough to make him lift his hand and mold it over hers, causing her touch to press deeper into his skin. Causing her eyelids to flutter closed.

He'd developed no illusions as to the nature of their union. A marriage only in name, born of necessity. To expect more, after all she had gone through, would be nonsensical. Yet he was a breathing, sentient male, closer to the lone woman who occupied a place in his heart than he had ever again thought possible. As much as he may wish otherwise, he was powerless to extinguish his desires on command. And now, for the first time, he began to imagine something other than a future in which they retired to their own cold, solitary beds each night, both wishing their circumstances were different.

He wasn't so misguided as to envision nights of blind, endless passion. But maybe, they could at least share a sort of closeness. Moments where they could simply *be* together. Embrace each other. Offer a comforting touch that would give them the fortification needed to face a hard, unforgiving world.

It may be far from what he'd wish should he ever slip and indulge in dreams of his innermost yearnings. But at least it would be *something*. He could find a way to make it sustain him.

Without warning, Lavinia stiffened in his arms. Her hand dropped, clenching into a fist in her lap, and her eyes flew open, fixing on the space behind them. He became vaguely aware of a quiet clicking noise and twisted his neck in the direction of both the sound and her horrified gaze. Only to be met with the sight of his spaniel, Dash, happily trotting across the room to them, his shaggy tail wagging and his head held high.

Because even Will's damn *dog* was besotted with her. He'd tried to keep Dash outdoors as much as possible, where he wouldn't disturb her as she convalesced. However, since the day Lavinia had entered the house, the mischievous spaniel never missed an opportunity to slip in through the kitchen and patter upstairs so he could sit before her closed bedroom door. Dash had been his loyal companion from not long after the time he arrived in Northleigh as a boy of fifteen. Except now, the dog only had eyes for Lavinia.

Lavinia, on the other hand, was having none of it. She jumped from the sofa, pressing herself against the wall nearest the fireplace with her arms folded tightly across her chest.

“I’m sorry.” He lunged forward, grabbing Dash by the collar just as he came round the sofa on his zealous path to Lavinia. “Dash is prone to forgetting his manners and rightfully could be accused of excessive enthusiasm, but he means no harm, I assure you.”

She stood rigidly, eyeing Dash as if she feared he might charge at her at any moment. “I do not care for dogs. Not since the day one nearly took off my hand.”

He felt his jaw go slack as he looked from the stony-faced Lavinia to Dash, whose tail now thumped in a steady rhythm against the sofa leg. How had he not known this? On more than one occasion, he’d encountered her on the roads of Northleigh as Dash trailed behind him. Then again, those meetings had placed a far greater distance between her and the dog, for they’d occurred prior to when Dash assumed the role of her ardent protector. Likewise, during the rare instances when he’d seen her without gloves, he’d noticed the thin silver scar running along her wrist but considered it impolite to draw attention to it. Despite any mild curiosity he may have felt as an apprentice surgeon. How was he to suspect the mark’s cause?

“I’m sorry,” he repeated thickly because what else could he say? He started to rise, securing his grip on Dash’s collar. “If you will just give me a moment, I’ll see him back outside —”

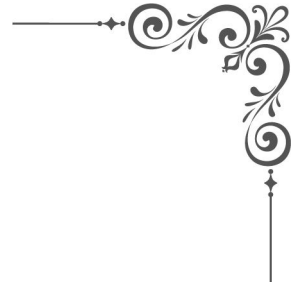
“No need,” she cut in, taking a few tentative steps around the perimeter of the room, in the direction of the doorway. “It’s late, as you said, and I believe I’m tired after all. I’ll bid you good night.”

*Wait.* He wanted to call out to her, to make her slow her increasingly rapid strides. To get back what they’d had mere seconds ago. However, he wasn’t so blind as to fail to recognize how the moment had already passed.

He let her go without another word. Even a “good night” seemed pointless, for she was already rushing through the door, her footsteps sounding along the wooden floor of the corridor and then up the stairs. Dash’s ears perked up at the sounds, and the dog stared at the empty doorway, sniffing the air where Lavinia had just stood, eager to follow her scent out of the room. Finding himself still captured by an unwanted hold, though, he gave a few halfhearted whimpers and dropped to his haunches.

Will followed suit, falling back to the sofa with a sigh. There was little need to rush Dash outside now. Instead, he buried his hand in the dog’s silky fur, scratching him in his preferred spot behind the ears. Dash nuzzled his leg appreciatively, but he didn’t take his eyes from the doorway. Which was exactly where Will realized he was gazing as well. He quickly turned away, staring into the weakening fire instead. Best not give himself cause to contemplate who was the bigger lovesick fool: him or his dog.

He supposed he should be glad that he and Lavinia had discovered yet another unknown facet of each other this evening. Something real. Except with it, their small step forward had retreated as surely as an ebbing tide.



## Chapter 9

Lavinia stabbed her sewing needle into the stem of a silk geranium, affixing it to the straw of a formerly plain poke bonnet. Now that she'd spent the afternoon pulling out fripperies from one of her unpacked trunks, the bonnet featured a brim edged with lace, a crown wrapped in pink grosgrain ribbon, and a side motif of flowers interspersed with wispy white feathers. An idle day and a mundane pastime, which resulted in headwear she could have worn while riding along Rotten Row or perhaps while shopping on Bond Street if she wished to attract attention. Were she to display the bonnet while traipsing around Lynnford, she would simply look ridiculous.

She tossed her handiwork onto the sofa beside her and dropped the needle back into the sewing box at her feet. What was the point in continuing with so useless a project? A small pang hit her at the memories of London, its thrilling bustle now endless miles away from her and so far out of reach. Yet the jolt it gave her was indeed only a small one. Almost a necessity, given how dramatically her circumstances had shifted from the life she'd led mere weeks ago. However, the spurs of regret didn't hit her with the force she would have once expected. Not really. Not when an even more pressing matter weighed heavy on her.

The realization had started as a dim spark during their time at Maggie's five days prior. Since then, she'd kept close to the house, familiarizing herself with her surroundings while resting enough to further recover her strength. But in those long, uneventful days, the idea had grown and grown, developing until the magnitude of it hit her like a repeated slap to the face.

She'd run to Will in her time of crisis, thinking only of how to break free from the mess in which she'd become ensnared. She'd accepted his proposal because, in the muddle of terrible circumstances, it seemed like the best option for her. Never had she considered what the arrangement could cause



him to lose. That he could have someone else. That his honor could cause him to rescue her at the expense of his own happiness.

Why had that possibility not occurred to her before? During their time in Northleigh, she'd witnessed numerous instances of village girls approaching Will, eager to stroll alongside him or engage him in conversation. And why wouldn't they? He was kind and intelligent, not to mention decidedly handsome. But at that time, it had been easy for her to brush such observations aside, to vanquish the occasional twinges these scenes evoked as quickly as they sprang up. After all, just as he'd had his path, so she had hers. A future filled with parties and riches, with flirtatious lords, including a devilishly tempting earl ...

She shuddered at the thought, pulling her legs onto the sofa and hugging her knees against her chest. She should have known. Just because her world had shattered, leaving her future hanging in a perilous limbo, didn't mean Will's life stopped too.

Perhaps she'd never considered the possibility of another woman because of his polite but reserved demeanor around the young ladies of Northleigh. Perhaps she'd never thought he had the time or that he hadn't been in Lynnford long enough to establish any sort of relationship. Perhaps she'd just never *thought*.

However, one look at Miss Joanna Hughes had swiftly dispelled her of her ignorance. She may have become overly fixated on her own interests, but she wasn't so self-absorbed as to miss the ire directed at her and Will. Not to mention Will's uncertain, awkward glances that night. Plus, his hesitation to bring her to Maggie's house in the first place.

She pressed her forehead into the soft muslin skirts draped across her knees, trying to calm the flurry of her thoughts. Yet they refused to relent. The truth, obvious as it was, wouldn't stop staring her in the face, repeating itself over and over.

*Of course* Will would pair well with Joanna. The woman was already a relation by marriage, highly esteemed by his

older sister. She was young and astute, and with her wide green eyes and honey-colored hair, she could no doubt be quite lovely when her mouth wasn't twisted in a perpetual scowl. More importantly, she was a midwife. Someone who shared the medical knowledge for which Will clearly had a passion. She would never do something so ridiculous as swoon at the sight of blood. She would know how to create a pleasant, comfortable home for him. She wouldn't be afraid to bear his children. She probably even enjoyed large dogs traipsing through her house.

A twinge not unlike the ones she'd experienced as a youth upon seeing Will laughing with a village girl grabbed at Lavinia's stomach. But the feeling was different too. Hotter. More insistent.

She'd lived most of her life with plenty of whatever she desired, giving her little cause to feel covetous of others. Still, she knew enough to recognize the current sensation as envy.

The kitchen door creaked open, breaking the dismal series of deliberations rushing through her head. Thank heavens. She unfolded herself, pushing the leftover scraps from her ill-conceived creation into the sewing box and jamming the lid closed. She hurried out of the sitting room and back to the kitchen where Nell, the maid-of-all-work, was hefting a large basket onto the worktable.

"Did you get everything?" Lavinia asked, watching as Nell began removing a promising array of items from the basket.

"I believe so, mistress." Nell pulled the list she and Lavinia had written together from the bottom of the basket and scanned its contents, ultimately giving an approving nod.

"Good." As much as Lavinia knew nothing about the task they were about to undertake, the ingredients spread out on the table appeared satisfactory to her as well. "Let's get started right away. I want to ensure we're finished before dinnertime."

She reached to the far edge of the table where Nell had laid out a crisp white apron for her and stretched it around herself, securing it with a tight knot. It may be too late to give Will back what he'd already given up for her. She could never

make herself into a woman like Miss Hughes. But she could still give him *something*. Nothing large or life-altering. Just the smallest token, really, a triviality. But she'd seen it make him smile once before. If it could do so again, her efforts would be worth it.

"I trust you have the recipe book?" At her inquiry, Nell shuffled across the kitchen, her ample height allowing her to reach to the top of a high shelf. "And you did say you've made this before, right?"

Nell turned back to her, flushing to the roots of the few reddish curls that peeked out from her cap. Despite her height, she looked so young, probably not even of an age with Lavinia herself, and often seemed to lack confidence in her tasks. Yet she was forever eager to please. "Well, no, not exactly. But I'm certain it cannot be too difficult. The book says so. See, mistress?"

She opened the cover and thrust the book forward for Lavinia's perusal, revealing the letters printed across the first page. *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*.

"Yes. Very well then." Lavinia nodded with confidence she didn't quite feel. "If you could please turn to the correct page, we can begin."

Nell laid the book on the table in front of them and flipped to the page she'd already turned down at the corner. "Let's see ... I should start by setting the cream to boil. Would you like to crack the eggs? Four of them, it says. You can use this big bowl I set out."

Lavinia reached for the basket of eggs, newly brought in from the market, and lifted one into her palm. "I suppose I'm equal to the task," she remarked dryly, running a finger over the smooth shell. Though in all honesty, she had never handled an uncooked egg, nor was she entirely certain how to proceed.

"Just tap it against the side of the bowl until the shell cracks." Nell gave her an encouraging smile. "Then, you can pull the shell apart and let the insides fall into the bowl."

That didn't sound so complicated. Lavinia gave the egg a gentle knock and then another until a distinguishable crack appeared. As Nell had instructed, she eased the shell open, cringing as the slimy insides slid along her fingers. And there, just as required, was a golden egg yolk resting at the bottom of the bowl.

"I did it!" She wiped her hands on her apron, grinning down at her handiwork. Any mess on her fingers aside, this may not be so difficult after all.

She picked up another egg, hitting it with more confidence this time, sending its contents promptly into the bowl. Tiny fragments of shell floated on the surface, the result of her perhaps being a touch overzealous. But surely a few such minuscule bits wouldn't make a difference to the finished product. Would they?

She glanced toward Nell over by the hearth, ready to ask for guidance, but the maid's head was cocked to the side, her brow creased in concentration. "Do you hear that, mistress? That scratching noise?"

Lavinia took a few steps toward Nell and stilled herself. Indeed, a faint scraping sound traveled across the kitchen, seeming to originate from around the back door. "Yes, I hear it. But what is it?"

"I hope it's not mice. Maybe you should speak to Mr. Harris about the practicality of getting a cat." Nell stalked toward the door, peering around for signs of any unwanted visitors. However, as soon as she set her hand upon the latch, a look of recognition flitted across her face. "Oh! Unless it's—"

She got no further with her hypothesis. No sooner had she cracked the door open than it flew forward the rest of the way, sending her fighting to regain her balance. True to his name, in rushed Dash, bounding across the kitchen with his tongue hanging out in a ridiculous-looking half-grin.

Lavinia screamed, stumbling back toward the wall as she fought to remove herself from Dash's path. She screwed her eyes shut, certain he would follow her wherever she went and not wanting to witness the moment when he lunged for her and

knocked her to the ground. She flinched at the click, rattle, and crash that echoed around her. But somehow, miraculously, she remained upright, untouched. Her eyes flew open, no longer willing to keep her blind to the chaos. And there, standing on his hind legs with his shaggy front paws propped against the worktable, was Dash. He sniffed enthusiastically at the ingredients spread before him, putting his tongue down to lap up a few spilled drops of cream. Beside him, a canister of sugar had already been overturned.

“Nell, do something!” Lavinia shrieked as his nose traveled to her bowl of eggs. Dash had failed to launch an attack on her, but he now sought to destroy the next worst thing: her cooking project.

Nell clambered forward, encircling her arms around Dash’s midsection and pulling him from the table. Her face was flushed a deep pink, and her cap rested askew on top of her curls. “Troublesome creature. I really don’t know what’s gotten into him, mistress. He behaved himself well enough when it was just me and him here, before you and Mr. Harris arrived. Lately, though, he takes any creak of the door as an invitation to steal inside and make mischief.”

“Indeed.” Lavinia scowled at the dog, who still swung his tail eagerly, not troubled by the reprimands in the least.

Nell took hold of Dash’s collar, leading him back toward the door. “I’ll see him outside at once. Perhaps I could go to the stable and find a bit of rope to tie him on somewhere so we needn’t worry about him coming back. Why don’t you go rest while I’m doing that, mistress? I can finish the recipe afterward.”

“No need.” With Nell and Dash in the doorway, Lavinia pulled away from the wall, inching a few steps forward. She’d come to the kitchen with a purpose. She refused to let *that dog* deter her from it. “I can continue the recipe in your absence. The steps are written plainly enough.”

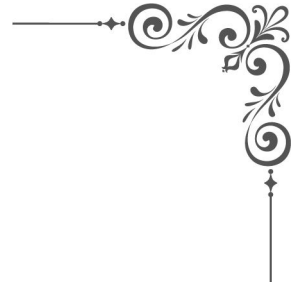
Nell halted, looking like a comment had stuck in her throat that she was trying to spit out. In the end, though, she only nodded. “As you wish. I’ll return as soon as I can.”

As if suddenly realizing he was being escorted from the premises, Dash whipped his head around, shooting a doleful glance first at the array of food on the worktable and then at Lavinia. However, he trotted alongside Nell without protest until the door closed behind them, and Lavinia could let out the breath she'd been holding.

“Drated dog,” she muttered, just for good measure. But the upset from Dash’s intrusion was already fading, giving way to renewed determination.

She went back to the basket of eggs, fortunately untouched by Dash, and struck another against the side of her bowl with an assured thwack. She may not be the woman who’d been intended to occupy this house. She may be totally wrong for a surgeon’s wife. Yet this was her place now. She owed it to herself to at least *try* settling in and finding contentment with it. She owed it to Will as well, because he deserved happiness more than anyone she knew.

Her sudden desire to give it to him burned with an intensity far greater than she could have imagined.



## Chapter 10

The house Will had once considered too large and then too dull now smelled like home. The comforting scent of sweetness and spices filled the air the moment he stepped into the entryway, its warmth embracing him after his walk back from the village in the biting wind.

After a long, busy day, his stomach grumbled in response, although he was reluctant to get his hopes up. Despite how Nell tried, she had yet to place anything on the table that could be considered more than marginally appetizing. But maybe she'd been practicing.

He dropped his medical bag to the ground and was in the process of hanging up his greatcoat when the sound of footsteps fluttered toward him.

“Will! You're back.”

He turned, finding Lavinia, adorned in a soft blue dress that matched the color of her eyes, standing behind him. Immediately, he found the question of whether she was well on the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed it back. He had only to look at her to see that nothing about her appeared *unwell*. Indeed, her cheeks contained a healthy pink flush, and her lips looked on the verge of twitching up in a smile.

He was still hesitant to leave her each day. In fact, he'd at first considered such a thing out of the question, limiting his work to whatever small duties he could perform in his surgery while she rested upstairs. Yet the arrangement couldn't last forever. Patients in the village—those unable to come to him directly—still required his attention, and why had he come to Lynnford if not to provide the medical care the place lacked? Therefore, in the few days since their dinner at Maggie's—and after Lavinia's insistence that she and Nell could manage perfectly well on their own—he'd commenced his work in and around Lynnford, finding no shortage of people requiring treatment for various ailments. However, as he went about his duties, he couldn't help the persistent notion that planted itself at the edge of his awareness. The fear that he would return one



day to find Lavinia back in her bed and unwilling to rise, a broken, hollow shell of her former self.

At the moment, though, she almost looked animated. Much more so than on the other evenings when he'd come home to find her well but subdued, often reclining in the sitting room with a book or embroidery hoop. To have her here greeting him at the door, full of eagerness, was the best sort of development. One he should embrace rather than question.

"Good evening." He smiled at her. At the way the late afternoon sun caught her hair, turning it a striking golden hue. At the scent of the rosewater she must have dabbed upon her wrists, for as he stepped beside her, a floral aroma emerged amidst the spices in the air. At the way she looked happy to see him. "Did you pass a pleasant day?"

"Pleasant enough, thank you. As did you, I hope."

"Yes. Busy, but all went well." He would leave it at that before he repulsed her with talk of wound cauterization or appropriate ulcer treatment. He held out his arm, intending to lead her to the sitting room where they could both relax for a spell before he went and got cleaned up for dinner. However, after just a few steps, she halted, pressing on his arm to encourage him to do the same.

"I was rather busy today as well. Not to the extent you were, of course. Nonetheless, I did find a project to occupy me. Something new. Something for you, actually."

Although he didn't want to startle her, his body seemed to be automatically pressing itself nearer to hers, seeking an extra spot of closeness. Over the past week, he'd seen little flashes of her former brightness, giving him hope that her cheerful disposition hadn't been eradicated completely. But the woman beside him now was truly the Lavinia he used to know. The one who offered no shortage of comments, especially when she was excited about something.

"It's in the kitchen," she continued, her blue eyes nearly sparkling as she looked up at him. "It was supposed to be for later, but I'm not sure I can wait that long. Would you like to

see what it is? It's something I hope will please you, and I can show you right now."

Something for him? Seeing her so lively was all he needed to end his day on a positive note. But the thought that her animation came from doing something for him ... A muscle in his chest, in the vicinity of his heart, grew tight. "I'd like that very much."

"Good. Come with me then." She reached for his hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world, her warm, slender fingers pressing against his chilled ones as she steered them down the corridor. "Perhaps I should ask you to close your eyes. But no, I suppose that would be rather silly. You may as well just see it straight away. It's only something small, after all. And, well, here it is."

They'd arrived in the kitchen, where Lavinia stopped in the middle of the room, gesturing toward the back wall. And there, resting atop the windowsill, were four small dishes, their contents cooling beneath the air that wafted in from a small opening in the window.

"I made custard." She looked at him again with her little smile, studying his face carefully. "With Nell's help, that is. Although due to an ... incident, I did much of it myself. I hope you like it. You see, I haven't been able to forget Maggie's amusing little story about your fondness for custard. But maybe she exaggerated ..."

Lavinia trailed off, her smile fading as she bit her bottom lip. And no wonder. He'd been standing there, glancing expressionlessly between Lavinia and the dishes of custard as he tried to comprehend the improbable scenario of Miss Lavinia Bathurst cooking. In *his* kitchen. For *him*. The incongruity had rendered him temporarily speechless. But as the meaning of the situation began to sink in, that chest muscle tightened again while an odd sort of warmth rushed through his head.

Before he could give her another second of doubt, he spun toward her, reaching for her free hand so that both their palms were joined. "While I may wish I could claim that Maggie

embellished her story, the unfortunate truth is, she did not. I love your surprise. Truly. I cannot thank you enough.”

He squeezed her fingers in his, and her grin returned, shining up at him. “Oh, I’m so glad. You’re most welcome. And I’ve been thinking. I made the custard for tonight’s dessert, but why should we wait that long to have it? We’re alone in *our* home, in which we can do whatever we please, can we not? And personally, I’m hungry right now.”

Her enthusiasm—the brightness of her smile—was infectious. And his rumbling stomach certainly had no objections to the idea. “Why not? As Maggie so keenly informed you, I have a difficult time waiting for custard.”

She released her grip on him and spun around, giving a breathy laugh. “If you could just restrain yourself a moment longer while I fetch us some spoons.”

“I’ll do my best.” Even as she crossed the kitchen, the ridiculous, open-mouthed grin didn’t want to leave his face. It was ironic, really, how much he owed Maggie his gratitude for recounting the humiliating tale of his custard thievery.

He sauntered toward the window, gaining a better view of Lavinia’s creation. The texture appeared a little odd. Lumpy, but somehow thin at the same time. Yet the smell of cinnamon and nutmeg wafted up to him, reminiscent of the dessert he’d enjoyed for as long as he could remember. Indeed, despite any minor flaws, he would enjoy this one more than any of the others because of the thought that had gone into its making.

“Here you are.” She passed him a spoon and reached to the windowsill to fetch him a dish of custard, now just lukewarm to the touch. “Enjoy.”

She bounced up and down on her heels, eyeing him with anticipation, so he wasted no time in dipping his spoon into the lumpy yet fragrant substance and popping a bite in his mouth.

Which promptly triggered his gag reflex. His tongue was coated in bitterness, almost as if he’d taken a notion to consume a bar of soap, while something burned the back of his

throat. He couldn't say what caused the repugnant flavor. Too much nutmeg? Not enough sugar? An unfortunate combination of missteps? Whatever the case, his eyes watered as he forced himself to swallow, and the appreciative smile he attempted to give her just couldn't manage to show itself.

“What's wrong?” Lavinia's voice turned high and unsteady while her mouth gaped and her eyes widened with dismay. “Is the dessert not to your liking?”

“It's ...” He coughed that lone word out of his fiery throat but could manage no more. It took everything he had not to rush to the dining room sideboard and remove the bottle of brandy, pouring it into his mouth until the harsh burn was replaced with one far more palatable. But if he could just make himself stay still and concentrate on not retching, the unpleasantness would fade all on its own. Eventually.

“It's ...” He tried again, fighting past the repulsive aftertaste that lingered on his tongue. What should he say? He'd committed himself to doing anything it took to bring about Lavinia's happiness. But if that involved consuming the full dish of custard, he feared he had stumbled upon a task of which he proved incapable.

“Let me see.” Impatiently, she plucked the dish from his fingers, securing a blob of custard on her spoon and pressing it to her mouth before he could say a word to stop her.

The spoon clattered to the floor and her hand flew to her mouth, just in time for her to gag into it. Her eyes darted wildly around the room, and then she lunged sideways, grabbing a kitchen towel from the shelf and staggering toward the hearth. One of her unsteady hands used the towel to wipe her mouth, while the other reached for a mug and ladled water into it from the pot that hung above the low flames. With several inelegant puffs, she blew away the faint wisps of steam that floated over the mug before tipping it to her lips, gulping water like a traveler rescued after a weeklong stranding in the desert. She repeated the process twice more, seemingly incognizant of anything beyond her need to wash away the bitterness assaulting her mouth. Meanwhile, he remained planted firmly in his spot, keeping up his best efforts at

stoicism, until their eyes locked, causing her to halt as well. Judging by her reaction, he didn't look nearly as placid as he would have hoped.

“How can you just stand there like that?” She hastily sloshed more water into the mug before scurrying toward him and thrusting it into his hands. “For the love of God, drink this before whatever we just ate causes your tongue to fall off!”

She didn't need to ask him twice. He tipped his head back and let the warm water pour down his throat. At this point, it could have been boiling and he still would have swallowed it readily. The brandy would have provided a superior antidote in extinguishing the taste, but at least the mugful of water diluted it enough that he no longer felt in danger of heaving upon his boots.

Lavinia slunk to the worktable in the center of the room, dropping her elbows to the knotted wood surface. “I don't understand.” She let her head rest against one of her palms, gazing more at the offending custard still on the windowsill than at him. “I followed the recipe. Perhaps several small details were beyond my comprehension. What does ‘sugar and nutmeg to your palate’ mean, anyway? Nonetheless, I thought I managed well enough, but it seems I was mistaken. Lord, Will, I swallowed something *crunchy*.”

She shuddered, and he moved quietly to stand beside her, placing a hand against her back and shifting it in gentle circles. “It doesn't matter. The custard wasn't really all that ... well, yes, it *was* bad. But I don't care. All that matters to me is the gesture.”

She shook her head, her eyes turning watery. “It *does* matter. You deserve better. Not just another reminder of all the reasons I'm wrong for you.”

His hand froze as her words sent icy shards shooting through him, hitting him with a reality he had no desire to face.

Of course they were wrong for each other, in a way. The disparities between them were too glaring to allow him to forget they came from two different worlds, unintended to

intersect except in passing. How could he explain that she was the only one he had ever wanted regardless?

He couldn't. Not in a succinct manner that wouldn't just add to her distress. Not when he could see her chin quivering, and all he could picture was her dashing to her bed and staying there for another endless stretch of days.

"Come with me." He removed his hand from her back, offering it for her to grasp instead.

She gave a tiny sniff, only half looking at him. "Where?"

"To the garden. Or perhaps for a walk?" He didn't know exactly. He just needed to get them both away from the kitchen. Away from the source of her upset and the possibility that she would run upstairs in a bout of despair. "It's not a bad afternoon if one is dressed for it. Why don't you ask Nell to fetch your hat and pelisse?"

She hesitated, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. But then, with a sigh, she accepted his proffered hand, using it to help pull herself upright. "I'll fetch them myself. I'll meet you in the entryway in a moment."

A few minutes later, they found themselves on the front pathway with the wind whipping against their faces. But at least the day favored them once more with sun, which shone low on the horizon and offered a scant trace of warmth. He glanced up and down the road, assessing their best course. Toward the village? To the beach?

But then, another idea came to him. A thought he'd had a time or two since moving to this house but had cast aside as the foolishness of an overtired mind. Right now, the notion didn't come across to him as foolish. Or perhaps it did, but he wanted to undertake it anyway. Because maybe it would remind her ... Maybe it would make her smile ...

"I've been thinking. This elm tree looks just right for climbing. If you have no objections to postponing our walk for a few minutes, I'm going to try it."

She peered at the bare, sprawling branches of the elm that stood just to the right of the house and then at him, scrunching

her brows together. “You? Are going to climb a tree? Right now?”

He shrugged. “The sun is out. It’s as good a time as any.”

She continued to stare at him as though she suspected he’d just taken leave of his senses. Maybe it was indeed a stupid, childish plan. However, he couldn’t shake the long-ago memory of standing with her in the oak tree’s towering branches back in Northleigh and the freedom—the lightness—that came from climbing so high. It could be that the ability to glean that sensation was the product of youth, now inaccessible to them. Nonetheless, what did he stand to lose by trying?

Whatever he possessed of Lavinia’s esteem, perhaps. Yet here she was, following him across the frozen lawn, watching his every footstep as they approached the tree. He didn’t take any more time to think it through. He simply raised one boot to the lowest branch, grabbing hold of a higher one to drag himself upward.

Over the past few years—he couldn’t say when, exactly, but likely some time before his eighteenth birthday—he’d cast aside tree-climbing as a juvenile pastime. After all, Lavinia, two years his junior and increasingly the lady, had ceased showing interest in it. Despite his lack of practice, the motions came as easily as if he’d been doing it all along, causing him to scramble up one branch, then another, and another. Until suddenly, the branches turned thinner, and the ground loomed far below. He was an adult—a married man, a *surgeon*, for God’s sake—lingering aimlessly in the high branches of an elm. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to regret his frivolity. For around him ...

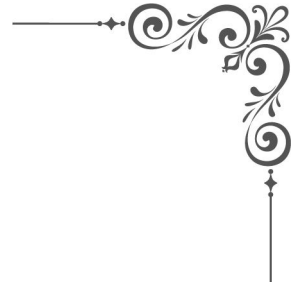
If he turned his neck, he’d no doubt gain a bird’s-eye view of the village. He didn’t, though. Not when in front of him were steep, rugged cliffs, and sand, and then, the ocean. The water stretched endlessly, glimmering a deep grayish blue beneath the setting sun, while the wind brought in its salty smell. The landscape was hard, raw. Yet it was also picturesque.

“Well?” Lavinia’s voice floated through the branches. “Has your detour brought you all the satisfaction you hoped it would?”

He peeled his eyes from the view and looked down to find her staring upward, squinting against the sunrays that shone through the leafless branches. Her arms were lightly crossed, her hands tucked into a fur muff, and she tapped the toe of one boot rapidly against the grass. She was attempting to maintain an appearance of exasperation. Except he knew her well enough to detect the trace of humor in her tone. He was observant enough to catch the shadow of a smile that she tried to pinch away.

“Yes.” Unbidden, a short, quiet sound—one that could nearly pass for a laugh—escaped him before he turned his gaze back to the rolling waves. “Indeed it has.”





## Chapter 11

Lavinia cast her muff to the ground and, for good measure, pulled off her gloves too. Then, after wiping her hands on the sides of her pelisse to make sure they were free of perspiration, she grabbed onto the highest elm branch she could reach, swinging herself upward.

“What are you doing?” From above her, Will’s face peered down, his forehead having regained its anxious crease.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” She assessed the branches a minute before choosing one for her next foothold. “I’m climbing, just like you.”

His frivolous, completely unexpected fancy to climb this tree, which had given him joy mere moments ago, now seemed to be a cause for his concern. “A few of the branches might be slippery. Why don’t I come down a ways and meet you—”

“Really, Will.” She would have rolled her eyes at him had she not been focused on continuing her ascent. “I believe *I* was the one who introduced tree-climbing to *you* back in Northleigh. I’m perfectly capable.”

She would have said more, but she was just two branches up and already in danger of growing winded. A fact she needed to conceal from him at all costs. It seemed all he did anymore was worry. She made herself reach for another branch, pushing back a trickle of irritation.

Then again, how could she fault him? She’d laid the burden of her troubles on his shoulders and certainly given him just cause for concern of late. Besides ... why would he put that much effort into troubling himself over her unless ... he truly *cared*?

Her breath caught in her throat, and she stilled herself a moment, her nails digging into the tree bark as she fought to regain her ability to exhale. She hardly dared to look up, and once she did, she was confronted with the exact sight she’d

envisioned. Will, uneasy but silent, still gazing down at her through the branches.

“I may lack some of the strength I possessed at one time,” she conceded, taking a careful step onto the next branch, “but I mean to regain it. And I’m going to start by climbing. This. Tree.”

She hauled herself upward, forcing herself to take deep but soundless breaths. One way or another, she was making it high enough to stand next to Will.

The air bit at her lungs with each rapid inhale. The bark scraped against her numbed fingers. It didn’t matter. She concentrated on one thought only. *Higher*. And then—

“I should have known better than to underestimate you.” The nearness of Will’s voice broke her focus, causing her to turn her head in its direction. He was right there, his feet on a branch parallel to hers, standing about a head above her. A circumstance she could quickly remedy. She took one final step upward so she poked through a clearing in the branches, making his view into her view. Placing her eyes—her lips—at the same level as his. Her heart began fluttering more rapidly. The result of physical exertion, surely.

“Yes. Well.” She released one of her hands to brush off the bits of bark that stood out against her pale blue pelisse. “I must be more resilient than I look.”

His mouth gave the smallest twitch down, and he swallowed heavily. “Of course you are. Resilient, that is. I didn’t mean to imply otherwise. I just ... I ...”

“I know.” She managed a small smile. Because she *did* know, without him needing to say another word. With her pelisse dusted off, she intended to return her hand to its place on the spindly branch in front of her. Instead, it landed on top of his. He, too, had grown cold from the winter wind. The feel of his skin brought comfort nonetheless.

He peered at their joined hands. At her. Not saying anything but looking as though a great many thoughts turned through his head.

Finally, he leaned a little closer, his woolen coat brushing against her. “Lavinia?” He uttered her name softly. Reverently.

“Yes?”

“I really do love how you made something for me. I wouldn’t have expected—”

“It was nothing.” Under his careful gaze, her cheeks started to flame. “It wasn’t what it should have been.”

“It was more than you know.” From beneath her light grip, he shifted his hand so he could clasp her fingers in his palm, drawing their bodies a little nearer again. “I’m sorry, too, if the help hasn’t been to the level you would expect. To be honest, I hired Nell on a bit of a whim. Without references. However, she recently lost her father to influenza and has a houseful of younger siblings. When Maggie told me about her and said she was looking for employment, I let her unfortunate circumstances overtake all other considerations.”

Of course he had. Why a possibility of that nature hadn’t occurred to her before, Lavinia couldn’t say. He was Will, after all. Always looking to help and fix.

“But I’ve been thinking.” He paused as if considering how to best phrase what came next. “I don’t want to sound indelicate, but ... a surgeon’s pay may not be substantial, but as you know, I came of age to receive my inheritance from my father this past year. As a result, hiring a cook would be within our means. If you wish it.”

Despite his hesitancy, he was still looking at her, his gaze so intent that it nearly felt like it would bore through her. Because he wished to do right by her. To please her. To make her smile.

Because he *cared*.

She supposed she had always known that, right from the beginning of their casual friendship six years prior. Yet the significance of what that meant had never hit her with as much power as it did right here in this treetop.

She let out a long breath that appeared as fog in the air, floating toward Will, where he stood just inches away. “Were I

to accept your offer, we may all be the happier for it. Yet if it's all the same to you, I'd like to try my hand in the kitchen again. I think Nell would too. And maybe, eventually, we'll manage to get it right."

"Yes. Of course. Whatever you like." He spoke so even and low. Close enough that his breath skimmed her face. And he still *looked* at her, attentively, as though he didn't quite understand the woman next to him but was determined to solve all the mysteries she presented.

So, she did the only thing she could do while lingering with him high above the ground, in close proximity and with nowhere to turn. She looked at him as well.

She and Will had had numerous encounters over the years, enough that she could say she knew a great deal about him. She knew he had straight brown hair and hazel eyes. A pleasing combination of features that could be described as nothing less than handsome. She knew he was serious but kind. Studious. Well-mannered. Intelligent.

Yet had she ever truly *seen* him?

Because suddenly, so many details revealed themselves that she'd never noticed before. Like how his right hand, so precise when he worked, now wavered a little as he held her. Or how in the sunlight, his eyes were really more of a pale green with flecks of gold at the centers. And the way they shone ... the way they observed her ... made it appear as if she were the most exquisite creature in existence.

She and Will were already standing so close, but maybe she could lean in just a little more to see what else she could notice. Like the faint shadow of stubble that appeared along his jaw. The shape of his lips ...

His lips. She thought she'd known those too, for she'd felt them against hers at one time. On that night, more than a year ago now, when her head had been filled with dreams of London, and the merriment of Christmastide, and wassail. She didn't know what, exactly, had possessed her, but she'd been impelled to reach for him and take something a gently bred young lady should not have.

But that had been different. Silly. Thoughtless, even.

Her head now spun for reasons that had nothing to do with overexcitement or alcohol. Making her long for things she'd thought she would never desire again. His mouth was a perfect line, a little fuller on the bottom, smooth and inviting. She noticed its every movement. The way he pinched it closed as he swallowed. The way he then parted his lips just a touch.

And she wanted, *needed*, to know—to really, truly know—that aspect of him too.

She made a small sound in her throat as their lips connected. He did as well, or at least she thought she detected a guttural gasp. In truth, the hot, sensual pressure of his mouth against hers captivated her immediately, making it difficult to concentrate on anything beyond the sensation.

They'd done this before, and her body had grown warm and her heart fluttery. This time, her blood was on fire, and her heart pounded in her chest. She swept her tongue over his lips, far too enthralled for hesitancy or demureness.

He stilled, becoming a passive bystander who let her circle and taste. But then, his hand was in the hair at the back of her head, knocking her bonnet askew as he held her close to him, while his tongue joined with hers, brushing over it with ardent strokes.

She heard another sound that had to have come from her. An affirmation. A plea. And though they were already crushed together, she pressed herself into him even more, seeking any additional shreds of closeness. Anything to help alleviate the ache in her breasts, which had become tight against her bodice.

Beneath all the layers of fabric and wool that separated them, did his heart pound as hers did? She hoped so. Maybe if she could bring herself to pull away long enough to glance at his face, she would be able to tell. But she couldn't, not even for a second. Not when she'd already wasted so much time. Not seeing ... Not knowing ...

Now, she knew. His caresses made the world snap back into focus, bringing with them a host of sensations she had thought lost to her or she had maybe never held in the first place. Comfort. Safety. Yearning. Pleasure.

Perhaps they could stay in the tree forever. They could simply *be* together, letting the sensations intensify and surround them, drowning out any hindrances from the outside world. It would simply be the two of them. Connected and secure.

A harsh sound cut through the air, causing her body to inadvertently tense. Not a noise made by her or Will this time, but the unmistakable racket of barking. Will's hand dropped from her hair as his eyes traveled toward the commotion.

Trying to catch her breath, she followed his gaze, although there was really no need. She had become accustomed enough to Dash's bark to realize he was the one who so enthusiastically announced his arrival in front of the house.

But Dash wasn't alone. In fact, it appeared he'd come bounding this way in response to the sound of approaching footsteps that both she and Will had been too absorbed to notice. And there, walking up the gravel path and approaching the front door, was the unmistakable figure of Miss Joanna Hughes.

"It seems we have a visitor," Lavinia muttered thickly, her heated body abruptly turning frigid, although blood still rushed through her head. "If only I had known, I could have asked Nell to prepare tea."

"I didn't ..." Will's voice came out as a rasp. He smoothed his greatcoat, then cleared his throat and tried again. "I didn't know we were expecting company. When I encountered Joanna in the village this morning, she asked if she might borrow my copy of *Domestic Medicine*. She said nothing about coming to collect it this afternoon."

"How fortunate you were home then." She spoke barely above a whisper. For if Joanna happened to look up and spot them at this precise moment, Lavinia would surely melt into a puddle of mortification. "You had best not keep her waiting."

He was still pressed so close, his eyes blazing as if he meant to say a great many things.

“Go,” she said, soft but insistent. “Please. I’ll climb down in a minute.”

The warmth of his body stayed with her a moment longer before sharply pulling away, leaving a stiff, cold ache where the winter wind hit her once more.

He scaled down the branches, nimble despite his lack of practice, landing on the ground with a quiet thump. Dash’s ears perked up, and he wasted no time in hurdling toward his master, which drew Joanna’s swift attention toward the tree.

If only it were summer, perhaps Lavinia could have sufficiently concealed herself behind clusters of leaves. As matters stood, the bare branches left her exposed, vulnerable to Joanna’s scrutinizing gaze.

But what of it? She inclined her head in a halfhearted greeting as if she weren’t ensconced in the high branches of an elm tree in the middle of winter for no apparent reason. Based on Joanna’s bemused yet mild expression, it appeared she hadn’t spotted Will up in the tree alongside her. Beyond that, Joanna could come to whatever conclusions she wished.

Will hurried forward, uttering words too quiet to travel up the tree trunk. Whatever he said, it was enough to make Joanna stop staring at the tree and focus on him instead. She spoke to him in return, also just a murmur, and then they were walking up the gravel path until he pulled open the front door, motioning for her to enter.

She did so without glancing backward. Will, on the other hand, paused on the threshold, his eyes returning to the tree.

A shiver rippled through Lavinia’s body, and the rapid beating of her heart created a sensation far less pleasant than it had previously. *Go*. She mouthed the word, nudging her chin in the direction of the door.

Will’s shoulders slumped, and despite the distance between them, she could see that his forehead had tensed. Nonetheless, he followed her silent instructions and stepped into the



entryway, closing the door behind him. Leaving her in silence, except for the rustle of wind and the distant lull of waves.

She eased herself down to sit on the branch she'd selected as her perch, letting out a deep, shuddering sigh. It was funny how quickly things could change. How she could go from viewing Will's tree-climbing plan as utterly ridiculous, to feeling like nothing could be more right, to having it turn utterly ridiculous again.

She scooted forward, letting herself drop down a branch and then another, far beyond the point of caring about gracefulness. She simply needed to return to the ground as quickly as possible, where maybe, finally, her heart rate would begin to slow.

Her feet connected with the grass in an unsightly tangle, nearly causing her to pitch forward. She shot out her arms to steady herself, praying that neither Will nor Joanna happened to be looking out the front window.

And promptly froze. A pair of dark, inquisitive eyes observed the whole incident from only a few feet away. Because apparently, Dash had neglected to sneak into the house with Will or run around back where he had a little shelter near the stable. He'd instead decided the tree held far more appeal and established himself near the trunk, sitting still enough to appear the picture of obedience.

Lavinia flinched, reaching back for the tree trunk so she would at least have support when the dog came hurtling toward her. But Dash didn't move. He merely sat there, eyeing her just as she eyed him without so much as blinking.

She muttered an oath under her breath before gingerly taking a step forward. She'd already made herself appear foolish once today. The last thing she needed was for anyone to witness her cowering before a seemingly mild-mannered spaniel.

Mild-mannered for the time being, anyway. She crept forward another few steps, assessing the dog for any hint of movement. Still, aside from several minute swishes of his tail as she drew nearer, he remained just as he was. All large eyes,

outlandishly floppy ears, and wind-tousled fur that looked soft as silk.

A rebuke rose in her throat, but it died away before she could voice it. There seemed little point, given that Dash had proven himself to be unfazed by chastisement.

She tried again, softly but firmly uttering a command. “Dash, stay.” His ears twitched, but other than that, he remained unmoving. Good. Maybe she would have more luck getting him to listen by taking a gentler approach rather than screaming in terror or scolding. If she could just assure herself of his compliance, she could walk away unhindered while he remained by the tree.

However, it turned out she wasn’t striding across the grass after all. Instead, she was inching closer to Dash with the strangest notion filling her head. Maybe she didn’t want to be alone. Even if her only choice of companion was a dog.

Her gloves remained on the ground, meaning that the silver scar from the foxhound’s teeth was visible against her wrist. Nonetheless, her hand reached out, approaching Dash, until it shakily landed atop his head. Her body tensed instantly, too panicked to move, as she anticipated a sudden snap followed by a flood of pain.

Except nothing happened. Dash pointed his nose in the air and sniffed, taking in her scent, but aside from that, he stayed seated, seemingly content to have her hand resting on him.

The fur beneath her fingertips was just as silky as it appeared. Nothing like the coarse, musky coats of her father’s foxhounds. She shifted her hand, ready to snatch it away. But unexpectedly, she didn’t do that either. Instead, her fingers bent and made little circles, scratching next to one of Dash’s absurdly long ears.

“Good ... good boy.” She tried out the words, finding they sounded stiff and formal coming from her mouth. Dash didn’t seem to mind. His tail swung more ardently against the grass while he kept his face tilted upward, gazing at her as if she were the most revered creature on earth. Much like Will had

done just moments ago. That was, before he'd gone inside to discuss common interests with the impeccable Miss Hughes.

She pulled her hand back and wrapped her arms around herself, a shield against the chill that shot through her. "I have to go," she murmured because apparently, she talked to dogs now. "I'll go for a walk myself. Alone."

Even in the winter wind, her face grew hot, and she stepped to the side, bending over to retrieve her discarded gloves. "Stupid," she muttered, pulling them over her icy fingers and snatching up her muff. "Foolish." Yet uttering the words aloud did nothing to quell the roiling low in her stomach.

Dash unseated himself and scampered to her side, eager for the opportunity to accompany her on an adventure. She shook her head, putting distance between herself and the dog. "Stay, Dash. Please. Stay."

Something about her pleading must have prompted him to listen, for he stopped in his tracks, his shaggy tail drooping. It was almost enough to make her go back and run her fingers through his fur once more. Almost. There was something about his eyes, though. So deep and doleful, and so observant. He fixed them on her again, staring as if he could see right through her, to her innermost thoughts and desires. Lord, maybe she'd come to the point of garnering even a dog's pity.

"I have to go," she repeated, relieved that her purposeful strides were unaccompanied by the eager patter of paws. At least, she would have sworn that's what the sensation was, although for relief, it weighed rather heavily.

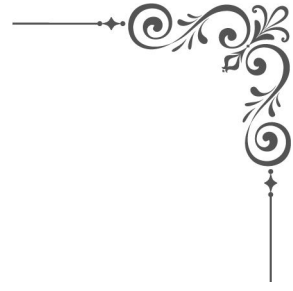
She had no idea where she was going. To the beach? To amble on the moor? She let her footsteps carry her aimlessly over grass and rock, not really caring either way. She couldn't seem to make her mind up over anything. And who even *was* she anymore?

A girl who fled in terror the moment a dog got too close, or a forlorn woman content even with four-legged company? A person who wished for diversions and companionship, or someone who would benefit from reflection and solitude? A

lady working her way to the top of the ton, attending every social function imaginable, aspiring to become a countess, or ... or a surgeon's wife? A new bride who considered herself the luckiest in the world, for she had a husband who showered her with esteem and care—and for that matter, downright devotion—even when she was undeserving. Even after she'd ruined everything for him.

She quickened her pace, drawing nearer to the cliffs that left her fully exposed to the breeze blowing off the water. Reflection and solitude it would be then. But perhaps that's what she needed; time alone to let her face cool and her heart stop racing.

Time to pull herself together, so tomorrow, she could take everything that had gone awry and try again.



## Chapter 12

Will overslept the next morning. For the first time in as long as he could remember, he opened his eyes not to blackness but to a gray yet robust light that signaled half the morning had already slipped by.

Odd. He'd grown accustomed to subsiding on little sleep, still managing to rise before the winter dawn regardless. But last night, after musings about Lavinia and their interrupted encounter kept him tossing and turning for hour after hour, he must have finally drifted off. Causing his thoughts to transform into dreams of her. The bright, pale blue of her eyes, focused only on him. The softness of her lips. The heat of her mouth, the pull of her tongue ...

He jumped out of bed, glad for the burst of chilly air that greeted him. It was what he needed to turn his mind away from pointless imaginings of what could have been. Lavinia's quiet, subdued demeanor the night before gave no indication that she wished to continue what they'd started in the afternoon. Not that he could blame her, given how unexpectedly but thoroughly the situation had gone wrong. Perhaps the interruption had been a sign to them both that they would be better off maintaining a certain distance between them. A friendship, but nothing more.

In any case, other matters required his attention today. To start, he'd promised the elderly Martha White that he would stop by in the morning to see how she fared with the treatment he'd prescribed for her rheumatism. If he didn't hurry, she would think he had neglected his duty.

He dressed quickly, still fumbling with the knot of his cravat as he stepped into the corridor. Where he was promptly greeted with the smell of burning. There was no smoke billowing through the air; at least he could recognize that much. But his breaths came a little quicker, and he rushed toward the stairs, pausing for only the briefest of moments to glance into Lavinia's room to see that it was empty. As he reached the bottom of the stairs, it became clear that the acrid

odor was coming from the kitchen. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, although to the best of his knowledge, Nell's efforts at cooking had yet to result in a fire. At least until this morning.

He threw open the door, shielding his mouth and nose in the crook of his elbow in anticipation of a barrage of smoke. Instead, he was met with a blast of winter air from the open window, which presumably had been pushed up to allow smoke to drift out. Only a faint haze remained, and behind it, Lavinia and Nell were bent over the worktable, murmuring earnestly to one another. Lavinia held a fork, using it to pop something into her mouth before letting out a delighted giggle. "I've done it!"

Her head darted up, revealing that she had a couple smudges of batter on one cheek. Yet when she locked eyes with him, treating him to the most brilliant smile, he could think of no time she'd appeared lovelier. "Oh, Will, I've done it!"

He scanned the worktable, his gaze falling upon a plate of blackened discs. The charred remains of ... something. But there, in front of her, was another plate, and upon it rested a lone golden pancake.

"I made this," she reiterated, helping herself to another bite. "With Nell's guidance, of course. We looked through her book until we found a recipe *not* replete with bewildering instructions, and—well—here we are.

"Not without a few tribulations, I'm afraid." She glanced sheepishly at the plate whose mystery contents were apparently burnt pancakes. "But after a few adjustments, we got things just as they should be."

"Indeed, mistress." Nell's freckled face broke into a grin nearly as wide as Lavinia's. "We did fine work, if I do say so myself. In fact, now that the fire is just right, I'll see to getting the rest of the batter in the pan."

She sauntered over to the hearth, leaving him and Lavinia peering at each other from across the table. With a fresh smile, Lavinia gestured toward her plate. "You can have the rest of this one if you don't want to wait for more. Oh. That is ..."

Her smile vanished as she bit her lip. “Assuming you like pancakes.”

“I do.” He rushed to her side, taking up the fork she’d set down on the edge of the plate. Any trepidation that came from the memory of custard burning the back of his throat was overshadowed by the need to see her face brighten once more.

And this time, thankfully, nothing burned or curdled. The bite he placed in his mouth was surprisingly light, spiced agreeably with ginger, and filled with sweetness from the sugar she’d sprinkled on top. Good all in its own right. But made a thousand times better—so much so that odd sensations lurched through his chest again—because she hadn’t let the events of the previous day faze her. Though she was out of her element, she’d made the effort to try again. Because maybe she didn’t totally resent occupying a station so much lower than the one intended for her. Maybe she could even find small moments of happiness. With him.

“Thank you.” He took another bite, savoring both the taste of the pancake and the brightness in her eyes. “I will have this one if you don’t mind. I overslept and am late in calling on a patient in the village. As much as I would like to stay for more, I should finish up and be on my way.”

She watched him thoughtfully as he chewed. “I could come with you.”

He swallowed and set his fork back on the plate, processing the unexpected request.

“I just thought that since our walk didn’t go ahead yesterday, we could do it today instead. I *would* like to see more of Lynnford.” She turned her eyes down, not quite meeting his gaze any longer. “I wouldn’t interfere while you are seeing to your patient. I could continue the walk on my own. I just thought the journey there might give us a good, uninterrupted opportunity to ...”

“Of course I would like your company.” He reached for her hand, glad when she returned the pressure with a slight squeeze of her fingers. After how abruptly yesterday’s encounter had ended, they were in desperate need of a redo, if



for no other reason than to reestablish their friendship. However, the clouds outside the window loomed ominously, creating a dense, gray blanket low in the sky. “Only, let’s take the horse. It looks like the weather may take a turn for the worse, and I don’t want us to get caught in it. In the event it stays fine, we can ride out together, perhaps into the valley. If you like.”

Her fingers wrapped around his a little more tightly. “I would.”

Which was how, a short time later, he found himself on horseback just the same as the evening they’d visited Maggie, with Lavinia tucked between his thighs. A plan that, had he stopped to think about it, he would have realized was sorely lacking in wisdom. On the ride to Maggie’s, apprehension over an endless array of matters had kept any other thoughts from spiraling out of control. He’d felt her against him that night. Experienced the stir of longing. But looking back on it, that feeling had been a mere pang. As opposed to now ...

Now, the slight jostling of their bodies each time the horse stepped forward made him acutely aware of her heat—her softness—pressing into him. Subdued by layers of bulky winterwear, but there just the same, making memories of the previous day that much more vivid.

What would have happened had they not been interrupted in the tree? Had he been free to continue holding her and immersing himself in the feel of her lips ... her tongue ...

What if they could have climbed down from the tree together? Gone inside together? What if they could have finally experienced each other without the burden of shawls and coats? If he could have felt the true heat of her skin beneath his fingertips.

He flicked the reins, urging the hack on a little faster. The problem with all these imaginings was that they left him devoid of anything to say, thus defeating the purpose of the excursion. Lavinia, too, stayed quiet. An occurrence that had become far more common of late, but it remained unsettling nonetheless. The sooner they got to Mrs. White’s, the better.

The short period of work should help restore his focus, putting him in a better frame of mind to carry out an amiable, sensible—*respectable*—conversation once he finished.

“Here we are.” At least he managed to say that much as they rode up to Mrs. White’s cottage, a small, whitewashed building close to the village center. “I shouldn’t be long. Would you like me to meet you on High Street when I’m through?”

Before Lavinia could say a word, the front door creaked open, revealing the stooped figure of Martha White. “Why, Mr. Harris. I was beginning to think you’d forgotten our appointment.” Although she planted her gnarled hands on her hips, she couldn’t hide the merriment that flitted across her face. He began an apology, but she brushed it away with a flick of her chin. “But never mind. You’ve brought a companion. Are we to receive an introduction?”

“By all means.” He hopped to the ground, reaching up so he could help Lavinia dismount as well. “Mrs. Martha White, may I present my wife, Mrs. Lavinia Harris.”

The combination of Lavinia’s name with his, which had never failed to give him a little jolt on the few occasions he had reason to use it, caused Mrs. White’s pale, cloudy eyes to sparkle. “Ah. A pleasure to meet you, my dear. I was wondering when you might be about town. Everyone’s heard tell of you, but nobody’s seen you. Well, you must come in too. Give a spot of company to an old woman on this dreary day.”

He slipped a glance at Lavinia as he tied up the horse, trying to gauge her reaction to such an uninhibited welcome. For someone who rarely left her house due to health complaints, Martha White seemed to know a great deal about the goings-on of Lynnford. It would undoubtedly give her great joy to talk the elusive Mrs. Harris’s ear off for as long as Lavinia saw fit to sit and listen, which would then give her another story to tell anyone else who happened to grace her doorstep.

Lavinia merely smiled at Mrs. White, nodding her head politely. He supposed she was used to such things after all the tenant visits she used to pay in Northleigh, even though the tenants never would have addressed the baron's daughter so informally. "Thank you, Mrs. White. I would be glad to come in if you're certain I won't interfere."

"Nonsense." The elderly woman moved to the side of the doorway in a surprising moment of spryness, bidding them to enter. "Come and sit down, and then you must tell me, Mr. Harris, where you happened upon such a charming creature."

Lavinia gave a tiny laugh as she stepped inside the cottage, which greeted them with a welcoming burst of warmth from the hearth in the corner. "Nowhere special. I'm simply a girl from Northleigh."

Again, he found his eyes traveling to Lavinia, watching as she walked alongside Mrs. White to her rocking chair by the hearth. In less than a minute, the woman had become enamored with her completely.

*Simply a girl from Northleigh.* It was a good thing Lavinia had spoken, for how would he have answered that question himself without revealing details far too intimate for a casual conversation? She was the girl who had smiled at him on the road and made the sun come out when he thought such a thing was impossible. She was the girl who had climbed trees with him and made him look forward to the future. She was the girl who had trusted him with her life not just once but twice, after having been thrown into his arms under the worst circumstances imaginable. And most of all, the girl who had planted herself firmly in his heart, even though their stations dictated they should have nothing more than a passing acquaintanceship.

Yet it was funny. Yes, she may be all those things. However, standing here in this cottage, far removed from the rules of high society, with the firelight making her hair shine pale gold as she smiled upon Mrs. White, perhaps she was also just as she said. *Simply a girl from Northleigh.*

Though the answer was imprecise, it seemed to please Mrs. White, for as soon as she'd settled herself in the chair, she gave Lavinia's arm a firm pat. "I'm glad Mr. Harris knows a good thing when he sees it."

Lavinia turned then, her gaze falling upon him where he still lingered near the threshold, suddenly unsure of what to do with himself. He'd thought this visit would give him the opportunity to focus on his work as a surgeon, an area where he felt confident in his abilities. So far, though, it was shaping up very differently.

But then, Lavinia smiled. Not the brilliant smile she flashed when something excited her or the polite, eager smile she'd given Mrs. White. This was more subtle, just a small twitch at the corners of her mouth. It traveled right through him, hitting somewhere around his heart. Full of promise and ... and ...

"Will and I have been friends for a long time," she said, her voice quiet. "I consider myself very lucky for that."

His chest tightened, seeming to make the steady thrum of his heart that much more prominent. Her eyes were so blue. So bright and intense, fixating on him, adding an emphasis that words alone could not.

And as for her words ... She considered herself lucky?

He'd gone into their acquaintanceship expecting nothing in return. Wanting, most definitely, but not expecting. Because Lavinia was a high-born lady, so enthralled by London and high society that he knew better than to presume she would remain familiar with a Northleigh surgeon. Any unrelenting but futile desire that came from their relationship was his, and his alone, to bear. So to hear that she considered herself lucky for their association ...

There was nothing he could say to explain how thoroughly he reciprocated the sentiment. He could only look back, hoping his eyes conveyed a message just as hers did.

"A wise way to choose your mate." Mrs. White chuckled, breaking whatever spell had held them transfixed with one

another. “Better that than taking a husband you barely know and realizing after the wedding that you don’t care for him after all.”

“Indeed, Mrs. White.” Lavinia turned back to smile at the woman’s creased face. “Fortunately, in this case, there’s no chance of that happening.”

He had to stop standing there, letting her words go straight to his head—and heart. At least the dimness in the cottage should allow the heat spreading through his face to go unnoticed. He resecured his bag tightly in his grasp, ready to get on with the consultation before they got too far off task and he could no longer think straight. However, he’d gone forward only a few steps when a rapid pounding beat against the door.

“What’s that racket?” Mrs. White shifted in her chair, cocking her ear toward the door. Despite her various health complaints, there was certainly nothing wrong with her hearing. “Spare me the trouble of rising and see who’s trying to beat my door down if you please, Mr. Harris.”

He retraced the steps he’d just taken so he could do as Mrs. White requested, only to find himself face to face with a boy of no more than ten. He was breathing heavily, his cheeks red from cold and his cap dusted with the fluffy snowflakes that must have newly started falling, when he thrust a scrap of paper into Will’s hand. “Oh, good, it’s you, sir. I thought that was your hack I saw out front. This note is from Miss Hughes. She bid me to find you and deliver it at once.”

Will peered at the boy as he uncrumpled the paper, trying to place him. Although he couldn’t recall the boy’s name, he thought he recognized him as one of the many children of Benjamin and Sally Cooper, a couple who lived just a short distance away. Come to think of it, Joanna had mentioned frequent visits with Sally Cooper, as the woman had been experiencing a great many aches and pains as she anticipated the arrival of yet another child. He held the paper close, deciphering the hastily scrawled missive.

“Well?” Mrs. White called from her rocker. “To what do we owe all the commotion?”

He crumpled the paper again, shoving it into his greatcoat pocket. His years of working with his uncle, combined with his hospital training, had rendered him immune to panicking in a medical crisis. Instead, his focus seemed to sharpen until he could think only of how to solve the problem at hand. Fortunately, that ability hadn’t deserted him, despite how his time in Mrs. White’s cottage had thus far proved unnerving.

“Go tell Miss Hughes you have found me and that I’ll be there in a few minutes,” he instructed the boy quietly, waiting just long enough for him to nod and begin scampering down the street before turning back into the cottage.

“Miss Hughes has written to request my assistance with a difficult case.” Even though his mind was already on what he would need to do when he arrived at the Coopers’ cottage, he didn’t miss how Lavinia’s eyes widened. “I’m afraid it’s urgent.”

“Then you must go at once.” Mrs. White flicked her hand toward the door, already shooing him out. “I’m not too poorly myself, and there’s nothing about our visit that can’t wait for another time.”

She set her hand down atop Lavinia’s sleeve, patting her arm again. “And as much as I would like to have you stay and visit longer, I think you’d best be on your way too, my dear. I don’t like the look of that snow. Feels like a storm coming. I can sense these things in my bones.”

Indeed, in the brief time since he’d opened the door, the snow looked to be swirling with even greater intensity. He didn’t like it either. Especially the idea of Lavinia traveling through it if it continued to worsen.

“You’re correct, of course.” Lavinia’s voice came out high and unsteady, lacking the confidence she proclaimed. “I hope to visit again soon. Good day, Mrs. White.” And though her face was awash with uncertainty, she scurried to his side, where they nodded their final farewells before returning outdoors beneath a shower of snow. Not that he could let the

weather signify. He rushed to the horse, releasing him from the post.

“Will?” This time, the apprehension in her voice was undeniable. “Is everything all right?”

He reached for her hand, pressing the horse’s reins into it. “It will be, I hope.” He made his best attempt at a smile. He recalled Joanna once telling him, with merited pride, that in her time as a midwife, she had never lost a mother. For that matter, in his limited experience with such situations, neither had he. He would do everything in his power to ensure that remained true today. “However, I need to get to Sally Cooper’s house at once, as she has encountered complications in delivering her child. Take the horse and get home before the snow has a chance to worsen. Childbirth can be unpredictable business, but I’ll join you as soon as I’m able.”

“No.” She shook her head, thrusting the reins back into his palm. “You take the horse. You have a greater need for haste. You cannot walk if the snow keeps up like this. Besides, what if your duty keeps you away until nightfall?”

“Lavinia.” Her name had a warning note to it, though he hated how it wavered on his tongue. The first crack in his steady, single-minded veneer. He could manage overseeing a difficult childbirth. He could manage a snowstorm. However, the thought of her trudging alone over increasingly snow-covered roads—of something happening, of her losing her way—was more than he could take.

“I don’t have time to argue this.” He placed his hands around her waist, and when she made no sign of protest, he boosted her up, seating her on the horse’s back. “The only way I can successfully concentrate on my work is if I feel confident you are safely home. If you will just go, I can run to the Coopers’ in a matter of minutes, and I won’t let a little snowfall prevent me from walking home once I’m through. Please.”

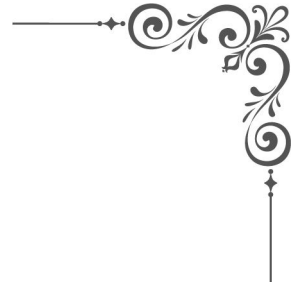
He wished he had time for more of an explanation than that. That he could tell her how much he didn’t *want* to see her go off alone. That he wished the snow would drift away and

the rest of the world with it, leaving them free to gallop away together over cliffs and moorland, just as they'd planned. But as matters stood, his brief words would have to suffice, for he could only gaze at her, praying she would understand.

The argument was still in her eyes. That, combined with shock and worry, and ... and *something* he couldn't name. She didn't argue, though. She took the reins in hand, her focus switching to the road ahead as she steered the horse in the direction of home. Leaving him with only the soft echo of the words she'd uttered before cantering away.

“Be safe, Will.”





## Chapter 13

No sooner did Lavinia ride up behind the house, heading toward the small stable, than Nell burst out the kitchen door, rushing up to the horse.

“Oh, but I’m glad to see you home, mistress. The weather took such a turn and so quickly.” She paused, peering back the way from which Lavinia had just come. “But where’s Mr. Harris?”

Lavinia swallowed back the tightness in her throat. “He was detained. Miss Hughes required a surgeon’s assistance with a difficult case. I know nothing beyond that, for he insisted I ride home.”

“I’d say it’s a good thing you did.” Nell smiled kindly, offering a hand to help her dismount. “Don’t fret, mistress. I’m sure Mr. Harris will see things right and be home as soon as his patient and the weather allow.”

“That’s what he said,” Lavinia muttered as her half boots hit the ground. The reassurances did nothing more to appease her than they had when Will spoke them.

Nell gave her shoulder the tiniest pat before pulling away as if afraid she’d overstepped. She then shuffled forward, taking hold of the reins. “I can see to the horse. Why don’t you go in and warm yourself? I laid a fire in the sitting room, and I just finished a new recipe. Plum cakes. They taste rather nice, if I do say so myself. I can make you a cup of tea when I come in too. You look chilled through.”

She did? Now that she thought about it, perhaps her fingers *had* gone numb in her gloves, and her cheeks tingled from the snowflakes that melted against them. But what of it? The simple fact was, she had arrived home safely, protected from whatever the weather now threw their way, and Will had not. Nothing could have felt more wrong. However, because it seemed far easier to agree than to attempt explaining the tangle of her thoughts, she merely uttered her thanks and trod

through the thin covering of snow on the ground toward the kitchen door.

Only to have a shaggy blur of brown and white go whizzing across her path, kicking up snow as it emitted a series of eager barks.

“Dash!” she shrieked, scrambling forward so she could press her back to the house’s stone exterior, bracing herself for a mauling. Yet the dog merely dropped to the ground nearby, rolling in circles until snowflakes clung to his mottled fur.

She took a slow, bracing breath, feeling her pulse return to normal after the brief upset. She supposed she should have known by now that eager though Dash may be, jumping on her and knocking her over wasn’t his style. In fact, looking at him as he was now, paws in the air and tongue out trying to lick snow from his nose, a person would be hard-pressed to believe that he possessed the ability to do harm. Why, he appeared so ridiculous, she could almost laugh at the sight.

Could Dash somehow sense her thawing to him? For suddenly, he hopped onto his legs, giving his fur a good shake before prancing over to her with dignified little footfalls. He stopped beside her, just short of brushing against her pelisse, setting his dark-eyed gaze first on her, then on the kitchen door. Making it very clear what he sought.

“Dash ...” She studied him silently, nearly reaching her hand out to rest atop his head as she’d done yesterday. But she better not. It was one thing to have him following her around outside, where he could bound through the garden or over the road should he feel a spontaneous burst of energy. It was quite another to have him confined in the house, where he could easily lunge or become entangled with her out of pure excitement.

“Go with Nell,” she commanded, spinning to the side so she no longer had to look at him. Those eyes would be the death of her. She flicked her hand backward as she approached the kitchen door. “To the stable. Go on.”

He didn’t listen. Of course he didn’t. His paws shifted in the snow while his tail began thumping against the back of the

house.

“Dash!” This time, his name came out as an exasperated cry as she pulled open the door just a shade, slipping inside and slamming it behind her.

The kitchen enveloped her in a cloud of warm, fragrant air. The perfect reprieve after time out in the cold. The fire burned high in the hearth, and Nell’s plum cakes, resting on the worktable to cool, *did* smell good.

Yet she didn’t want to lounge by a fire or eat cake as a snowstorm brewed outside. She didn’t want to do anything. Not by herself. She only desired Will.

She sighed, tugging at the ribbon under her chin and casting her snow-covered bonnet onto a bench near the hearth so it could dry. The flowers on it were likely ruined. Not that it mattered. In fact, she could get very little to matter right now, aside from the one thing at the forefront of her mind. Will.

Nonetheless, she forced herself to trudge upstairs to her bedroom so she could brush out her limp hair and change into dry clothing, and trudge back to the kitchen again so she could accept cake and tea from Nell. Although she had thought she didn’t want it, the steaming liquid provided a temporary spot of comfort as it slid down her throat. But with it, another nagging thought pushed its way into her mind.

“Nell?” She glanced out the window at the steady stream of snowflakes that continued to add to the thin layer upon the ground. “Did Dash follow you to the stable?”

“No, mistress. But not to worry. I’m certain he’s not in the house.”

Foolish dog. If he hadn’t gone to the stable or his little shelter beside it, that meant he was still frolicking out in the snow, where he’d be apt to freeze to death if he didn’t watch himself. Lavinia knew he wasn’t in the house; that wasn’t why she’d asked the question. But then again, why *did* she trouble herself to ask it? Why should the dog’s foolhardy behavior make any difference to her?

She bit back the sigh that threatened to emerge, picking up her tea plate and cup. “Thank you. I’ll take my tea to the sitting room and work on my embroidery for a while.”

It was a stupid, mundane task. But what else did she have at the moment? She managed to pass quite a bit of time—at least, it felt like it—jabbing her needle in and out of a fine lawn handkerchief. But when she stopped to examine her work, the border she’d created had gone crooked, and her flowers looked more like blobs.

She threw everything back in her embroidery basket—she would worry about taking out all the stitches and starting over another day—and instead fetched the mindless novel her sister had given her for Christmas. The plot appeared overly romantic and silly, not something that required a great deal of skill to comprehend, but still, she found she couldn’t absorb the words. Regardless, she sat on the sofa, turning page after page. Anything to stop her from staring at the clock and counting the minutes as they passed by. Or from gazing out the window and watching the weather deteriorate.

Not until Nell shuffled in and called out to her did she realize that the room had grown dim around her, making the letters on the page nearly indistinguishable. Dusk must have fallen.

“I came to see if I could fetch you anything.” Nell’s voice carried its usual cheery tone, although she didn’t quite look at Lavinia as she crossed the room to stoke the fire. “If not, I thought I might get started on dinner. Is there anything in particular you would like?”

Enough with sitting still and trying ineffectively to keep distracted. Lavinia jumped up from the sofa, rushing to the window that overlooked the road and pressing her face to the cold glass. Outside, large, wet flakes of snow continued to fall, standing out against the blackening sky. Will could be home any minute, and after working all day and then enduring the elements, he could do with a hot meal. Then again, he could also be gone for hours more, working well into the night with Miss Hughes as they attempted to safely deliver Sally Cooper of her child. Or perhaps they’d already done so, but the

weather prevented him from returning home. Perhaps he'd tried to set out on foot, but the snow had proved blinding enough to make him lose his way. Perhaps the weather proved no obstacle after all, but he'd forgone coming home in favor of accompanying Miss Hughes back to Maggie's.

"You needn't prepare anything just now." Lavinia spoke to the windowpane instead of Nell, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "We can have whatever is in the larder if we grow hungry."

Not that she could envision developing the faintest desire to eat. Uncertainty had tied her stomach in knots. That, combined with powerlessness, and guilt, and ...

"I should return to the village." She hadn't meant to voice the words aloud, but she must have, for Nell's retreating footsteps halted and she made a sound of protest.

"I should," Lavinia repeated, and now that she'd started, her thoughts wouldn't stop tumbling out. "I should ride back and find Will. Whether he's still at the Coopers', or ... or elsewhere. I never should have left him without the horse. Not in these conditions. It's growing dark, and the snow will not cease, and anything could happen!"

"Of course you shouldn't ride out." Nell was at her side in an instant, gesturing frenziedly at the window. "Not alone, in the dark, in this weather, short though the distance may be. Mr. Harris would never condone such a thing. Not to mention, he would never forgive me if he knew I allowed it to happen without at least trying to stop it. Pardon my impudence, but how do you think he's going to carry on with his work if he has to worry that you'll do something foolish in his absence? Because he does worry, you know. I can see it plain as day."

Lavinia spun away from the window, a low sound of frustration rising from her throat. Yes, she knew all too well that he worried about her. Too much, at times. But only because he *cared* for her. The realization hit her anew, causing the knots in her stomach to tighten.

Well, now she knew what it meant to worry for him in return. It was a cold, jittery feeling that overtook her whole

body. Because she cared for him too. Except somehow, *care* didn't feel like nearly a strong enough word to describe whatever pulsed through her veins.

"You and I will have dinner then. Just something cold." She tried to look at Nell without frowning or holding her neck too stiffly. Whatever they ate would likely stick in her throat and roil in her stomach. But at least she would be doing *something* to occupy herself.

They dined together in the kitchen, contenting themselves with slices of bread and cheese. Or something to that effect. She hardly knew what hit her tongue before she swallowed it down, and it didn't matter. The only thing that remained at full attention was her ears, listening for any hint of footsteps outside. However, the only detectable sounds came from within the kitchen. The crackle of the fire. The clink of Nell's teacup. Why, even the noise of Dash's irritating scratching outside the door was absent.

"Nell, have you seen Dash lately?" She blurted out the question as a fresh chill trickled through her body.

Nell paused, then shook her head. "Can't say I have. I imagine he's taking shelter by the stable."

She was right, of course. Even though Dash hadn't followed Nell as instructed earlier in the day, he no doubt had the sense to put his snowy frolicking to an end and seek refuge since then. Didn't he?

Lavinia rose from her seat, brushing a few stray crumbs from her skirt. "I believe I'll go out and check."

Nell's eyes turned wide with horror. "You're going out in this to search for a dog? But I thought you didn't even like—"

"I will not go far past the house, and no, I don't plan to secretly sneak off with the horse," Lavinia cut in before Nell had a chance to come to erroneous conclusions. She went to the bench where she'd left her outerwear to dry and shrugged the pelisse over her shoulders. "If you could fetch me a lantern, I would be much obliged."

Nell stayed where she was, appearing on the verge of protesting again. But after another moment of hesitation, she did as Lavinia asked, getting up to retrieve a lantern and handing it to her just as she slipped on her second boot.

“Thank you.” She clutched it tightly in one hand and pushed open the door, exposing herself to a rush of winter air. “I shan’t be long.”

Before Nell could make any additional objections, Lavinia hurried outside into a torrent of snowflakes that was almost mesmerizing in the darkness. Yet it was nothing to prevent her from making the short trip to the stable. She held the lantern out far in front of her, allowing it to illuminate her path as she plodded forward. At least the wind hadn’t come up too severely, meaning the heavy snow swirled gently rather than creating a thick white cloud that obstructed her visibility. Nonetheless, the combination of night air and snowflakes bit at her cheeks. It would only be for another moment, though. She simply needed to shine her light into Dash’s shelter, assure herself of his welfare, and be on her way.

Approaching the stable area but still keeping a safe distance, she leaned over, holding the lantern near the opening of the little wooden structure where Dash slept. Well, where he was supposed to sleep when he hadn’t mischievously wriggled his way in somewhere else.

The shelter was empty. Without thinking, she took a few steps closer to it, bending until she was at eye level with the door. Still, her light flashed across only bare boards.

“Dash?” She spoke his name for good measure, although clearly, he wasn’t about to appear in the shelter. He must have slipped into the stable after Nell and somehow, for once, kept quiet enough to escape detection.

She straightened herself, hurrying over to the wide stable door and flicking the latch open. The horse, settled in his stall for the night, gave a gentle whinny in greeting, but aside from that, the only sound came from her footsteps creaking on the floorboards.



“Dash?” She did a slow circle, allowing the lantern to hit each corner as she went. Revealing endless amounts of hay and absolutely no sign of a dog.

Dash!” She bolted from the stable, calling his name out into the night. Why did Will have to own the most ridiculous dog around? One who did no shortage of dashing about, as his name implied, and causing trouble without the good sense to cease even on a snowy winter’s night. And why was her heart pounding so heavily that the beat vibrated through her ears?

Could Dash have been so foolish as to bound down the road in search of Will? Could he, too, have possibly lost his way in the snow?

“Dash! Here, Dash!” She tried to sound commanding, but her voice came out high and shaky before breaking altogether. She ran around the back of the stable and, when that proved empty, across the garden and to the side of the house so she could have a view of the road.

“Dash!” She was shrieking now, a sob emerging from low in her chest. With jerky movements, she swung the lantern in every direction, but all that appeared were piles of untouched snow.

This was all her fault. *She* was the one who had turned Dash away at the kitchen door. She’d let an old fear transfer onto a new but undeserving source, and because of it, something had happened to him.

She didn’t have Will. Now, she didn’t even have his dog.

She swiped away the couple of icy teardrops that stung her cheeks. There was no time for such things. She just needed to determine where else to look because she’d be damned if she returned inside with yet another reason to sit passively and wait. Perhaps she could journey just a little farther down the road. Or return to the back and do additional exploration of the field behind the stable.

From behind her, something rushed across the snow. Not the breeze, but a more powerful force that only grew in intensity as it approached. She whipped around, casting the

lantern out so it could shed its dim light in the direction of the disturbance.

Four shaggy, snow-covered paws hurdled toward her. A pair of overly floppy ears flew almost upright in the air while a long pink tongue drooped from a mouth that nearly looked like it was grinning.

“Dash!” This was the part where she usually pressed herself against the closest wall and awaited an impending rampage. Except there were no walls near where she stood, and she wasn’t cowering. Instead, she was running, charging at the dog just as he did to her until they collided in a tangle of wool, fur, and snow.

“Oh, Dash, where on earth were you?” She crouched low to the ground, allowing him to sniff along the length of her gloves and pelisse. When he finished, she placed her fingers atop his head, scratching to displace the thin dusting of snow that had settled there. “I’m sorry. So very, very sorry. What do you say we go in now?”

He assessed her with huge dark eyes, giving his tail a few tentative swishes. “I mean it. Truly.” She popped back to her full height, giving his head one final pat. “Now, come along.”

She took off at a clunky run, snow spilling into her boots with each step, and for once, she could think of no better sight than Dash leaping to catch up with her. They both ran, to the extent the uneven terrain would allow, not stopping until they reached the entrance to the kitchen and she could usher him inside.

“Good heavens!” Nell dropped the plate she’d been drying, watching in alarm as Dash leaped to the middle of the kitchen and shook out his shaggy coat, sending water droplets flying everywhere. “I’m so sorry he followed you in, mistress. I’ll see him out at once.”

“No need.” Lavinia waited until Nell halted her sprint toward Dash before dropping to the bench beside the door, catching her breath while she began tugging off her wet boots. “Dash shouldn’t be outdoors in such weather. He can sleep inside tonight.”

Nell's mouth dropped, her brows scrunching together as she tried to process the incongruity of what she'd just heard. "As you wish, mistress. But did something happen? I thought I heard a commotion out front, although by the time I got to the window, I couldn't see a thing."

"No, nothing." Lavinia glanced over at Dash, who had already flopped down beside the hearth, letting himself dry out beside the flames. As for her, her racing heart had already begun to slow, the frantic sensation replaced by a strange sort of calm. "It simply took me a little extra time to find Dash. All is well now, except I think I had better go change."

"Yes, do." Nell watched as she started across the kitchen, the perplexity still not wiped from her face. "The last thing you want is to catch a chill. Mr. Harris would be beside himself."

Oh, Lavinia knew, and she had no intention of letting that happen. Will was going to appear any time now, just as Dash had done. She'd made her mind up on that fact. And then, finally, they were going to be together, free of any worries.

Nails clicked along the floorboards, catching up to her strides, and a wet nose nudged itself into the folds of her skirt. She wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

She and Dash climbed the stairs together, heading to her bedroom, where Nell had kept the fire going. She stood before it, removing her damp stockings and dress with the snow-covered hem, letting the warmth travel over her body. Letting a little more of the deepest-rooted tension melt away until her eyelids nearly grew heavy.

Maybe the best thing would be to flop upon her bed and try to fall asleep early. And then, perhaps when she awoke, the snow would have passed, and Will would be back home. It was an appealing plan, albeit one she doubted she could execute successfully. Until she laid eyes on him again, a part of her would remain on high alert, not quite able to rest. But maybe ...

She grabbed the dressing gown that rested atop her armchair and pulled it on over her shift in anticipation of the

chill in the corridor. Not that she would be in the corridor for long.

Will's door was the one next to hers. Closed, as usual, leaving her to imagine what was inside. Yet this evening, she was through with mere imagining. She tiptoed over and opened it carefully to prevent creaks, almost like a thief wanting to avoid detection. But could her actions really be considered wrongdoing? Perhaps she overstepped, in a way. Regardless, the venture also felt necessary.

The warmth of Will's room drew her in at once, for Nell had kept his fire going as well, anticipating his return. Dash, just as happy with one fireside versus another, slunk in after her and silently lowered himself before the grate as if he, too, recognized the need for discretion. With Dash settled, she closed the door softly behind her, allowing herself to fully take in the space.

There was nothing elaborate or remarkable about the room. Damask curtains that covered a window about the same size as hers. A writing desk where Will could see to his correspondence if he didn't wish to go down to the study. A washstand that contained a basin and a set of shaving implements. A large bed with a solid mahogany frame. It was a bedchamber no different from any other. Except it belonged to Will, and that made it so much more.

She'd satisfied her curiosity and would do well to return to her room without delay. Instead, she found herself creeping forward, her footfalls noiseless against the floorboards as they brought her to the edge of his bed. She ran her finger along the counterpane and up to the pillow where he must rest his head each night.

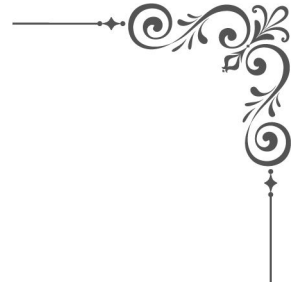
She could resist temptation no more. She flopped onto the bed and buried her face in the pillow, where she was hit with a faint burst of the scent that was distinctly Will's. She didn't know what created it exactly. His shaving soap? The time he spent outdoors in the fresh air? Whatever the case, there was something about him that had always smelled so good. So comforting. So enthralling.

She shouldn't be here. Especially not with the way her mind was beginning to race. Envisioning him lying next to her, running his hands over her in all the right places. Imagining they were a newly married couple like any other, driven by passion to the point where nothing else mattered.

No, she shouldn't think of any of that right now. Not with Will out in the snow, or in the throes of treating a medical emergency, or in the company of the woman who should have been his wife instead. However, she couldn't make herself rise just yet.

She needed another minute. Or perhaps two or three. Just a little more time to breathe in his scent and become swathed in the mixture of warmth and security that could only come from so intimate a setting. *Then* she would return to her room, lie in her own bed, and wait for the sound of the front door opening and boots crossing the entryway.

Nothing would feel right until that happened. But she would take whatever small fragments of comfort she could grasp while waiting.



## Chapter 14

By the time Will got home, the entryway was quiet and still, lit only by the lantern he'd carried to light his path. He had no idea of the hour, for when he found himself absorbed with patients, dealing with matters of life or death, time ceased to exist. Judging by the silence of the house and the darkness in the corridor, it had to be very late.

With that in mind, he eased off his snow-covered boots carefully, setting them down without making a sound, along with his greatcoat and hat, so they could dry by morning. However soon that came.

When he rose for the day, he would need to clear paths both in front and back of the house, for snow had covered the ground in drifts, some nearly reaching his knees. For the time being, though, he'd had enough of trudging through snow. Besides, he had more important matters to see to. One last small task before he rid himself of damp, frosty clothing and sought the comfort of his bed.

He took his time going up the stairs, feeling the numbness begin to seep from his toes with each tread. Lavinia's door was the first one on the right. The one he passed every time he went up or down the corridor, leaving him to imagine how she fared inside. He hadn't entered her room since she ceased requiring his services as a doctor, and he didn't plan to now, whatever he may desire to the contrary. However, if he could catch the briefest glimpse of her through a crack in the doorway, assuring himself that she was well and safe, then perhaps he, too, could recover from a long day by sleeping unhindered for the rest of the night.

He eased the door open just a touch, enough to detect the low firelight that cast the room in shadows. Enough to see that Lavinia's bed was fully made up, showing no sign of having been slept in.

His stomach immediately dropped, and his limbs began tingling once more. Had she still been downstairs and he just neglected to see her? In the sitting room or perhaps the

kitchen? Those were perfectly plausible explanations, ones he should investigate without delay. Yet he couldn't help the other scenario that pushed its way to the forefront of his thoughts. What if something had happened to her on the way home? It was only a short distance, but in the snow, she could have lost her way. The horse could have slipped, or—

A noise floated across the wall from his bedroom. Nothing substantial, only the faintest rustle. But a noise nonetheless.

He made it to his own door in two strides and shoved it open, no longer concerned about keeping quiet. As in Lavinia's room, the flames in the grate had nearly died out, providing just the faintest hint of light. Beneath their glow, soaking up as much warmth as possible, Dash was stretched out on the rug in front of the hearth, his tail making a few light thumps against the floor as he slept.

That was it then. The noise had come from Dash. Will's stomach clenched once more, and he took a quick scan of the room as he prepared to flee it so he could begin his search downstairs. The drawn curtains. The end table strewn with a couple of his books. The lump atop his bed.

Wait. Something on his bed? And not just any something. A figure. One so obvious that he didn't know how he neglected to see it—her—the second he entered the room.

Perhaps he'd already climbed into bed and fallen asleep, wandering into a dream. Because each time he crept forward a step, the figure became a little clearer, leaving no doubt as to her identity. And what other explanation could there be for the fact that Lavinia. Was. In. His. Bed?

His breath hitched, his heart lurching again but in a manner totally different than it had with his previous alarm. Any moment now, he would draw too close, and she would vanish, startling him out of his dream.

Except it seemed he was already awake, and she didn't disappear. Instead, the glint of her hair became more golden. The gentle sounds of her inhales and exhales became just loud enough for him to detect. The subtle curves beneath the dressing gown she wore became more pronounced.



She lay nearly in the middle of the bed, one cheek pressed to his pillow, leaving ample room for him to sit beside her. If he dared. Perhaps it would be better if he sneaked away and found another spot to sleep while simultaneously *not* thinking about why she had chosen to retire atop his bed for the night.

Regardless, it seemed that yes, he did dare, for he found he was lowering himself to the bed, settling on the edge of the counterpane. Reaching for a pale lock of her hair that had slipped from its braid, which felt like silk to the touch and *didn't* disappear into thin air. He stroked it with a lone fingertip, brushing it away from her face in a moment that was profoundly, undoubtedly real.

And though it was the gentlest touch, she stirred, her eyelids fluttering open.

“Will?” Her voice was soft yet husky from sleep. “Are you really here?”

With her eyes still bleary in the dimness, she slid her hand across the counterpane, stopping when she encountered an obstruction. The edge of his thigh.

He knew before opening his mouth that as soon as he spoke, his voice would sound low and throaty as well. “Yes. I told you I would be.”

Her eyelids drifted closed again, but a small smile crossed her lips. “Good. And ... and Sally Cooper?”

“She’s well,” he whispered, because speaking too loudly might break the spell. He needn’t describe the baby’s breech position or Sally’s hemorrhage following the birth that he and Joanna had finally, thankfully, gotten under control. He would just tell Lavinia the one thing that mattered above all others. “She has a new daughter.”

“I’m glad.” Her words were the faintest murmur, still accompanied by that tiny smile before it floated away and her rosy lips parted. Throughout their brief exchange, she’d seemed to be hovering between wakefulness and sleep, but now, it looked like the latter won out and she’d drifted off.

No matter. Anything else they had to say to one another could wait until morning. For the time being, perhaps he could allow himself just one more moment to gaze at her, so breathtakingly lovely stretched across his counterpane.

“Will!” Without warning, she scrambled up onto her elbows as if suddenly shocked into alertness. She stared at him, her eyes huge and shiny, her chest rising and falling with each hurried breath. And then, she launched herself at him, pressing her face against his shoulder and clasping her hands around his neck. “Oh, thank God. I was so worried.”

He had already established that he wasn’t in a dream, yet nothing about the situation seemed in line with reality. Lavinia was in his bed. Clutching him. *Worrying* about him. He had no words to give her, none of the reassurances he’d long considered his duty to provide. All he could do was hold her in return as he waited for his mind to stop racing and the blood to stop pounding in his ears.

Except suddenly, Lavinia flinched in his arms, her eyes darting around wildly as if she’d been startled from sleep once more. “I ... I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep ... *here*. I just ... I ...”

Her words were his undoing. Rather, the hesitancy—the apology—in them, as if she feared he considered her an intruder, an unwanted guest who had gotten in his way. He’d spent so much time taking his endless stream of desire for her and shoving it down, always letting politeness, along with the damnable knowledge of his inferior social station, take precedence. However, it would seem that even he had a breaking point.

He crushed his mouth against hers, absorbing the soft fullness that he’d craved ever since their kiss in the tree. Something—maybe the low light or the flash of heat after spending so long in the cold—made the sensation even more intense than the day before. They deepened the kiss at once, his tongue sliding between her parted lips, too desperate for a taste of her to wait any longer. And her tongue stroked him in return, twining with his in a fervent rhythm that suggested she also chased something she craved.

He needed to touch her. Starting with the ribbon at the bottom of her braid, which he pulled undone, opening his eyes just long enough to see her wispy hair begin to come loose. He could spend hours running his fingers through the silky strands, marveling at the novel sight of her hair spilling down her back. Except right now, he needed more of her.

With their lips still joined, he lifted his hand from where it rested against her back, atop the stiff linen of her dressing gown, and brought it to the side of her neck. He ran his fingers down the smooth, pearly skin to her collarbone and then lower again, following the deep vee of her dressing gown to her shift's neckline, where it rested against the swell of her breasts. Tempting him, begging him to go lower still and discover what lay beneath.

Could he truly trust that he hadn't entangled himself in a reverie? That so many things he'd barely dared to imagine could now come true? Could he trust himself at all?

The thin thread connecting him to reality gave him the jolt of strength needed to pull his lips away and raise his fingers enough so they barely skirted the surface of her skin.

"Lavinia." He managed her name, though it came out as little more than a croak. Yet it was enough to make her eyes fly open and her breath hitch as she was hit with the sudden loss of contact.

Now, he just needed to make his brain function properly. To ignore the arousal pushing against his trousers with an ache like he'd never known and make certain not to go over a line that she didn't wish to cross. For once crossed, there would be no going back. He needed to form words. *Are you certain ... Do you wish to ... to ...*

She lifted her hand from the back of his neck and placed it against his jaw. Gently, but with just enough force to keep him gazing straight ahead. At her, where she lingered so close that her heat and scent seeped into him. Perhaps words escaped her as well, for she remained silent. Her head moved, though. A tiny little nod, telling him the answer to his unspoken questions. His heart lurched, the sensation of it shooting

through his body, while his brain fought to process the implications of her assent.

Her mouth swiftly connected with his again, and his fingers pressed into her skin. His tongue traced over her lips, taking in one more hint of her sweetness before he turned his caresses to her throat. Her collarbone. He planned to explore every part of her. *Taste* every part of her.

He tugged at the belt of her dressing gown until it fell open and he could push it from her shoulders. Leaving her in only the thin white shift that did little to conceal what lay underneath but was still too much. He dropped kisses into the depression between her breasts as his hands moved to the ribbon at her neckline. A present to unwrap. And as much as he could have wrenched away the impeding scrap of cotton and been done with it, he made himself savor the moment, waiting until the ribbon came loose and the shift sagged. Leaving her bared to him, awaiting his touch.

He dipped his head, running the tip of his tongue over one perfect mound on his journey to the taut point in the center. She gasped, clinging to his shoulders as he licked and sucked. Holding him close as he dragged his kisses inward and began his ministrations on the other side. She wriggled against his mouth, her throat emitting high whimpers of pleasure that also begged for more.

He understood. He wanted more as well.

Drawing his legs up to kneel on the bed, he encircled her in his arms, easing her back to lie atop the mattress. The blood pounded through his veins as he was once more treated to the best sight in the world: the object of his desires sprawled across his bed. Except this time, it was even better, for she was awake, eager, and waiting for him. Concealed by only the smallest barrier, which he planned to do away with in *very* short order. He took hold of the crumpled shift that had settled about her waist and pulled, watching as it slid over the slight curve of her hips and down her legs until it was a hindrance no more.

Did he remember how to move? How to breathe? For a moment, all he could do was gaze down at her. At the curtain of hair, as pale as moonbeams, splayed across his pillow. The swollen lips parted in anticipation. The full, rounded breasts with rosy tips. And now, the slender legs with the thin patch of curls in between.

“You’re beautiful,” he choked out because nothing could be truer than that. And with the words, the yearning to continue his exploration overtook him once more.

With a soft nudge, he coaxed her legs apart, making a place where he could kneel between them. Then, he lowered himself too, stretching out down the bed with his head hovering above her midriff. Another area for him to discover.

He held her hips as he trailed kisses down her stomach and onto her thighs. The skin was smooth beneath his lips, smelling of something sweet and tempting. He continued lower, gliding his hands to the backs of her knees and propping them up, using his tongue to swipe across one of the creases.

She shuddered, making another of those high, throaty noises that went straight to his groin. Another day, he would finish studying the length of her body, bringing his caresses as far as the arches of her feet. For now, he worked his way back up her thigh. Heading for the place where she seemed to most crave touch. And where he most longed to touch her.

Her intimate folds glistened with moisture. Awaiting him and causing him to somehow become even harder. He let his finger go first, tracing it through the heated wetness. Followed by his lips. Then his tongue. The taste of her arousal was nearly his undoing. It shot through every nerve ending, consuming him. Leaving him desperate for more. Yet he took his time, letting his tongue explore every secret crevice before finally circling over the most sensitive place of all.

She cried out, fisting her hands in his hair, holding him firmly against her in a wordless plea to keep going. He was more than happy to oblige.

He captured the swollen bud in his mouth as his finger caressed her entrance, dipping into the tight heat. She was all he could have dreamed of. More. Everything about her intoxicated him. The feel. The taste. The breathy sounds she made with each flick of his tongue and stroke of his finger. Every moan drove him farther out of his head, robbing him of everything but the need to give her pleasure.

Her nails dug into the back of his head as her body tightened, approaching a breaking point. And then, she shattered beneath his mouth, her muscles pulsing around his finger as she cried out, a tangled yet recognizable sound. His name. *Will*.

He planned to stay with his lips pressed against her, taking her in for as long as he could, wringing out wave after wave of pleasure until the spasms died away. But she was grabbing at him, urging him upward, and he broke free in a haze, stumbling back to his knees.

Again, the necessity of forming a coherent sentence flashed at the edge of his awareness, although his brain was slow to complete the task. He swallowed, trying to make the blood stop rushing so vigorously through his head. Maybe they'd taken their intimacy as far as it should go for the moment. Maybe release had brought her newfound clarity. Maybe it was too soon. He had to ask her.

*Do you ... do you want ...*

She reached up for his cravat, her fingers fumbling with the knots until the piece of cotton came loose in her palm, and she threw it to the side of the bed. "Please," she whimpered, grabbing a fistful of his shirt and tugging it free from his waistband. She turned to his waistcoat then, her movements shaky as she tried to free the buttons. "Please."

The urgent little cry vibrated through him, giving all the confirmation he sought. She *did* want. And as he did away with the remaining buttons so he could shove the waistcoat and coat from his shoulders, his own wanting took over with renewed force. He pulled his shirt free the rest of the way,

casting it over his head so his torso was finally clear of obstructions. Leaving just one final obstacle.

Lavinia no longer grasped at his fastenings. Instead, she lay with her arms sprawled to her sides, her breaths coming quick and heavy, as her eyes followed his hand to his fall. Watching unabashedly as the last set of buttons came undone and he slid his trousers over his hips.

He eased himself over her, resting his weight on his forearms as he leaned in to kiss her, stretching his legs out so he could kick his trousers off fully. Their lips connected once more, the contact bringing a spark of longing. And as for their bodies ...

Finally, it was just the two of them, skin against skin, her silky heat searing him in the best sort of way. He shifted upward, the brief friction drawing a groan from his throat as he settled himself at her entrance. So close to where he most wanted to be.

Somehow, he managed to pull his lips away from hers again, to raise his head enough to peer into her face. A final appraisal before taking that last irrevocable step.

“Will.” She cried out his name, her body twisting beneath him as her hands clamped firmly around his shoulders. And before he could pass another second in torturous deliberation, she thrust her hips upward, seating him tightly inside her.

They both made sounds—unintelligible moans that tangled together—and with deliberate slowness, he raised himself up before plunging into her again. *God*. From just those two simple movements, he could feel himself drawing precariously close to spending. Yet he’d come this far by taking things slowly, relishing the pure bliss of each moment, and he had no intention of veering off course now. For this wasn’t one of his rare casual liaisons in London, born solely of a physical need that never seemed to be quite satisfied afterward.

This was Lavinia. The source of his true desire. His *wife*.

Her head was thrown back against the pillow, her eyes closed as she anticipated the next stroke. He gave her what she

wished for, thrusting deeper into her wet heat as he brought his mouth to her ear, whispering what he wished for in return. “Open your eyes. Look at me, my darling.”

He rose over her once more, the feeling of sinking back down that much more intense as her eyes drifted open, locking with his. Pale and clear, shining with the same passion—the same need—that must be reflected in his own. Reminding him that, in this moment, she was unequivocally his. Just as he’d been hers from the day she stepped in front of his path back in Northleigh.

He continued the languid rhythm, each stroke sending fire blazing through his veins, bringing him closer and closer to spiraling over the edge. Beneath him, she propelled her hips upward to meet each of his movements, actively chasing the same thing he did. And *oh*, did he want to grant it to her again. Transferring his weight to one arm, he slid his other hand between their thighs, circling a finger over the bundle of nerves at her apex.

That was all it took for her to come apart, for her body to begin throbbing around him, drawing him in even more tightly. All thoughts of restraint vanished from his head, and with a couple frantic thrusts, he was joining her, spilling himself deep inside her while consumed by waves of sensation too potent to name.

Eventually, he caught his breath, and flickers of reality began drifting back. Even then, he didn’t pull away but rather shifted with her in his arms so they were lying on their sides, still joined. A position that just felt *right*.

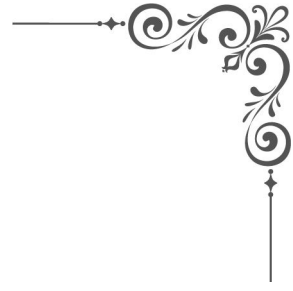
He brushed back the wisps of hair that had tumbled onto her cheeks, and she nuzzled into him, closing her eyes as she rested her head against his chest. A position of quiet, unquestioning trust.

Once more, a tangle of things to say tried to clarify itself within his mind. *You’re everything I’ve ever wanted. I love you. I always have.*

But because he could reveal none of those things without the risk of scaring her away, he contented himself with drifting



to sleep while holding her securely in his arms.



## Chapter 15

“Lavinia.”  
From far away, Will’s voice called to her, floating over her as if part of a dream.

“Will you open your eyes for me, my sunshine?”

“Mm.” She shifted her body a little, vaguely aware that she was tangled up in sheets. No surprise, given that was how she’d spent most of the past day. Or two. Or maybe even three. Truth be told, she’d lost all concept of time. She only knew that the snow, which had initially caused her such worry, had ended up giving them the greatest gift by enclosing them indoors together, cutting them off from the outside world. Granting them hour after hour of uninterrupted time, in which they had little cause to do anything that involved leaving Will’s bed. As it turned out, that arrangement worked quite well, for the longer they stayed there, caught up in a haze of pleasure as they got to know one another in the most intimate ways, the more she felt like it would never be long enough.

She hadn’t known anything like this before. Hadn’t wanted to know, not after what happened with ... she was loath to even think of that other man’s name. But this wasn’t a hurried, clandestine, somewhat pleasurable experience that ultimately meant nothing and led nowhere. These were drawn-out moments filled with caring and tenderness. Moments in which Will regarded her like she deserved to be worshiped—and worship her he did, until her body lay sated and her heart did funny little flip-flops within her chest.

The tingling between her legs started again, and she stretched her arm toward Will’s side of the bed, blindly attempting to connect with his bare skin. Yet her hand ran across nothing but a cold counterpane, causing her to startle back to full consciousness.

“Will!” She couldn’t help but exclaim his name, for instead of lying stretched out in his usual position beside her,

covered in nothing but bedclothes himself, he sat on the edge of the bed. Fully clothed. “Is something the matter?”

“I’m sorry to wake you.” He spoke quietly, resting his hand gently against her shoulder. “I wanted to bid you farewell. I’m afraid I must leave for a few days.”

She struggled up to a sitting position, trying to push the haze of sleep out of her head. “Leave ... leave for where?”

His forehead took on just a hint of the line that appeared when he was anxious. “A letter came through from my uncle. He was writing from Millton, where he had been called to the girls’ school. It seems they’re experiencing an outbreak of typhus, and the cases have spread to the point that he cannot manage them all himself. As the letter was already a few days late in reaching me on account of the weather, I’ll head out at once. He wouldn’t have asked were it not important.”

“Of course you must go.” She tried to sound reassuring, although all too quickly, the wave of carefree pleasure that had surrounded them was evaporating, letting memories of her anxiety on the night of the snowstorm sink back in.

Yet the situation this morning was nothing like that night. The snow had long since stopped, and the letter’s arrival could only mean that the road to Millton, some twenty miles south, was clear enough to facilitate travel. As if to further prove the point, weak rays of sunshine attempted to break through the clouds outside the window.

“I don’t know what I’ll find when I get there.” The crease in his brow deepened despite his best efforts to keep his tone even. “I can only hope that the disease will be brought under control quickly, and I can return home in short order.”

“With you overseeing matters, I’m certain it will be. You must take as long as you need.” She lowered her cheek to the hand on her shoulder. The strong, capable hand that was skilled enough to heal and fix. If nothing else, she could appease herself with the knowledge that the schoolgirls in Millton were receiving the best of care.

His half-smile made her declaration worth it. “Thank you. You’ll never be far from my thoughts, and I’ll write if there’s any change of plan. In the meantime, if you wish for a diversion while I’m away, I daresay Maggie would be glad of your company.”

“Yes.” She could hope that were true. “Perhaps I’ll pay a call.”

He shifted, leaning in to press a soft kiss against her lips. “I should really go now, my darling. I hope you can get back to sleep.”

Taking in one final breath from beside his neck, she flopped back to her pillow. “Farewell. Be safe. I’ll be thinking of you.”

He bent over, his lips caressing hers one more time. And then, all too quickly, he was gone, his footsteps echoing downstairs and through the door of his surgery.

She pushed herself up again, kicking away the sheets. Will was a surgeon doing his duty, and as his wife, she needed to support him in whatever way possible. At least he’d been able to go off with far less trepidation than he had during their frantic parting at Mrs. White’s, and in turn, she had little cause to get herself tied up in knots over his absence. It would only be a short absence. A necessary one. Still, drifting blissfully back to sleep had become an impossibility. Besides, judging by the brightness outside, it had to be at least midmorning.

She dressed quickly, opting for a simple sprigged muslin frock and twisting her hair into an unembellished knot. After all, nothing she chose to do today would result in the need for her to be decked out in her finery. She supposed she could take out Nell’s cookbook again and ask for assistance in attempting another recipe. Or try to fix her atrocious embroidery. Or, now that the snow drifts had diminished, take a stroll about the garden, for she was certain to find an eager companion for the excursion in Dash.

However, none of those possibilities felt quite right. With each passing moment, reality crept up on her more and more, making the world somehow appear too bright, too jarring. She

missed Will already; she wouldn't try to deny it. But it wasn't just that keeping her on edge. There was something else causing the mild churning to start low in her belly. Something disquieting yet unnameable.

She had to get away and clear her head. To go somewhere where not everything reminded her of him. Of *them*, together, and the fact that now, they were not.

That settled it. She would call on Maggie, just as Will had suggested. Now was as good a time as any. Whether or not he was correct about his sister welcoming the visit remained to be seen. Certainly, the other lady of the household would not. But perhaps it was time to remedy that. In any case, the effort would provide her with a welcome distraction.

Even the brisk yet pleasant air that greeted her as soon as she stepped outdoors should have been enough to help her feel settled again and restore her focus. Except it wasn't. Her feet still plodded down the road, on course for their intended destination. But as they did, her mind raced, filled with countless thoughts of the past days—the past months, really—that drifted about in such a snarl it was difficult to make sense of anything. Being alone—being *intimate*—with Will had brought about a light, fluttery, almost ethereal sensation akin to drinking too much champagne. But as with champagne, the effects couldn't last forever. Eventually, the morning after had to come, leaving the imbibor with a throbbing head and churning stomach, and none of the sparkle. And sometimes, as she knew all too well, situations that brought about the most pleasure in the moment led to the worst aftereffects of all.

By the time she approached Maggie's front door, her plan to go visiting seemed notably lacking in wisdom. Maggie might view her presence as an imposition, and she doubted her ability to be a charming conversationalist at the moment. Why hadn't she contented herself with doing something at home? And *why* wouldn't her mind stop racing?

“Lavinia?”

Someone called out from behind her, the voice expressionless and cold. Not Maggie. Her heart sank a little.

She didn't need to turn to realize who approached her.

“Good day, Miss Hughes.” Sure enough, as she forced her neck to pivot so she could glance over her shoulder, she was greeted with the same piercing green eyes and pinched mouth she'd encountered during her first visit here. She pulled her body up to its full height, trying to look as if she hadn't just been lingering near the entrance to Maggie's home, debating if she should flee. “I came to see if Maggie and Owen were about.”

“I don't believe so, no.” Miss Hughes sauntered past her, inclining her head in the barest of greetings. “They accompanied me when I went to look in on Sally Cooper. After we left, Maggie said she wished to stop at the bakery and would meet me at home when she was through. Though I cannot imagine her being long if you'd like to come in and wait.”

That was as enthusiastic an invitation as Lavinia was ever likely to receive from Miss Hughes. She would be remiss in turning it down. Besides ... a new idea began to take shape.

Joanna was a midwife. By all indications, one who possessed great knowledge and skill. Perhaps she would know ... perhaps she could ...

The half-formed idea hit Lavinia like a wave crashing against the cliffs, robbing her of the ability to exhale. Not the usual sense of giddiness that followed a flash of inspiration. Nonetheless, maybe this was what she needed to set herself right again.

“I would.” Before she could give it another moment's thought, she hurried after Joanna to the front door, stepping into the entryway behind her. “Actually, Miss Hughes, I was wondering if I could have a private word with you while we wait. It's concerning a rather delicate matter that could use the expertise of a midwife.”

Miss Hughes eyed her up and down, her face unreadable, before abruptly turning away to focus on undoing her pelisse. Silence stretched between them, and Lavinia glanced down at her own buttons, wondering if it was worthwhile to do the

same. Had Miss Hughes changed her mind about the invitation? But then, she mumbled faintly, directing her words at the floor. “Joanna. You may call me Joanna. If you accompany me to the sitting room, we can discuss your concern.”

“Thank you.” Again, Lavinia found herself following at Joanna’s heels, rushing to keep up with her as she strode into the sitting room and plopped into an armchair. Her demeanor remained reserved, but at least she *had* agreed to the meeting. A small victory, in any case, one Lavinia would gladly take.

She lowered herself to the sofa cushion nearest the armchair, clenching her fingers so she didn’t begin twisting them in her lap. Where to start . . . Should she first make small talk, inquiring after Joanna’s health or whether she’d passed a pleasant day thus far?

“What can I help you with, Lavinia?” Joanna got right to the point, vanquishing the need for such a conversation. Yet her mouth was no longer set so tightly, and her eyes no longer appeared so flinty. In fact, they almost looked . . . kind.

Making the falsehood Lavinia was about to tell that much more challenging.

“I’ve come on behalf of my sister, Anne,” she blurted out before she could question herself further. “She’s newly married as well. Only a matter of months. In Hampshire.”

Yes, Anne. The older sister who hadn’t written so much as a word since hearing the news of Lavinia’s nuptials. Why would she, when associating with one so scandal-ridden could sully her own reputation? Anne was now married to a baron, after all, and no doubt wanted to retain her high place in society. However, it was as good a story as Lavinia could invent.

“She has a concern so sensitive in nature that she is hesitant to seek guidance herself,” Lavinia continued, the words tumbling out even faster now. “Therefore, I thought I could intervene on her behalf and pass along whatever knowledge I gather. You see . . . I believe Anne is very happy



with her new husband. However, she would prefer if, for the time being, it remained only the two of them.”

Lavinia paused for breath, suddenly aware that she’d been wringing her hands after all and that her heart was pounding. She barely dared to look at Joanna, afraid of the scorn that would be written across her face. But when she did, Joanna’s features contained the same expression of neutrality.

“I see. So, she wishes for a way to prevent pregnancy?”

“Yes.” Somehow, Lavinia managed to speak without her voice faltering, though heat crept into her cheeks. “I assume there’s something you can recommend. A tonic, or ... something.”

“I can assist you. Rather, your sister.” Joanna paused a moment, continuing to gaze at her mildly. “Do you plan to write to her with the information I tell you, or would you like me to give you the tonic to deliver to her yourself? That is, if you have the means of doing so.”

Lavinia tried to stay very still, despite how her insides tightened. She and Anne had never been particularly close. More rivals than friends, really. Why, then, did the thought she might never again see her sister—or anyone in her family, for that matter—give her such a pang? “I’ll take it now, please,” she said, swallowing away the bitterness at the back of her throat. “I’ll find a way to see that she gets it.”

“Wait here then.” Just as she had earlier, Joanna moved briskly, rushing from the room before Lavinia could utter another word.

Lavinia rose from the sofa herself, unable to sit demurely as if she were at ease. She paced the length of the room, trying to recall her logic in coming here in the first place, though her thoughts still felt like slippery fragments.

Fortunately, Joanna didn’t make her wait long. “Here you are.” She approached Lavinia where she’d stopped by the window, holding out a small amber bottle. “To be taken by the teaspoon, three times a week. Not more. This isn’t a guarantee,

you understand. But I hope it gives your sister the result she seeks.”

The bottle hovered before Lavinia’s eyes, right in front of her, yet not so close that she couldn’t still turn away. She could go home. Await Will. *Talk* to Will of the fears she just couldn’t quell by herself. Maybe she could find a way to speak of the past hurt she tried so hard to push below the surface and her desperation to not have it come back again. Maybe instead of recognizing it as yet another way in which she proved herself all wrong to be his wife, he would reassure her and understand. But even if that were the case, right now, he felt impossibly far away.

“Thank you.” She snatched the bottle from Joanna’s palm, shoving it into her reticule as if the glass had scorched her. Had she looked away for even a second, she would have missed the way Joanna’s teeth clenched. But even though her expression quickly returned to its former neutrality, Lavinia knew what she’d seen.

Because Joanna was no fool. And Lavinia, it seemed, was the greatest fool of all.

A door squeaked, and footsteps sounded in the entryway. “Joanna?” A voice echoed into the room, and the footsteps drew nearer until Maggie appeared in the doorway, still in her cloak with Owen resting against her hip.

“Oh, Lavinia.” She shifted the baby in her arms, smiling at the toothless grin he bestowed upon their visitor. “I thought I could hear voices. Have you come to join us for tea?”

“No.” Lavinia clutched her reticule tightly against her as if its contents could jump out and reveal themselves at any moment. “No, thank you. I just realized the time. I really should be going.”

She crossed the room with speed to rival Joanna’s, stopping only when she encountered Maggie, still standing in the middle of the doorway. “Thank you again, Miss Hughes—Joanna—for your company,” she mumbled, not turning back as she spoke the words. She couldn’t. Not with Owen staring straight at her, carefully appraising her with wide blue eyes.

Without thinking, she reached for the little hand he'd shrugged out of his blanket, and he gripped her in return, setting his tiny fist around her finger.

Her throat grew tight, making it difficult to breathe, and she ripped her gaze away from Owen's, slipping past Maggie to exit the room.

"Good day," she managed to call as she fled the house, although it came out so strained and low that Maggie and Joanna might not have detected it.

Another day—perhaps as soon as tomorrow—she would return for tea, give Maggie the news about Will's departure, and converse so eagerly and cheerfully that Maggie would forget all about her peculiar behavior from today. But for now, she just needed to be alone.

Fortunately, the road from Maggie's was uncrowded, requiring her to do nothing but nod a few swift greetings as she hurried along. By the time the cottages began to thin out and she drew nearer to her and Will's home on the outskirts of the village, it was deserted entirely, leaving her alone with her thoughts once more. Not that she could make any sense of them, even now. But that didn't matter. She would try harder to decipher them once she reached the security of her bedroom. Once she could cast off her reticule, which seemed to be searing a hole through her clothing and into her skin.

A low rumble started behind her. The sound of hooves and wheels and churned gravel. She moved to the side, glancing over her shoulder at the coach barreling down the road, the noise intensifying as it hurdled in her direction. How strange. She hadn't noticed any sign of the coach back in the main part of the village. For that matter, during the brief time she'd spent in Lynnford, she hadn't noticed such a coach *ever*. It clearly belonged to someone of means, for it was large and glossy red, fitted with golden wheels, and pulled by a team of two identical black geldings. And adorned with some sort of crest. A detail that became clear as the coachman gave the reins an abrupt tug and the coach jolted to a halt right beside her.

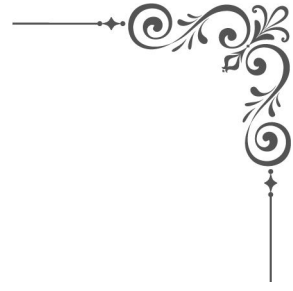
She staggered backward a step, her heart beginning to race. Why had the coach stopped? She wanted nothing to do with it; she only wanted to get home.

Her inner desires, of course, were irrelevant to the coach's occupants. With a slight rattle, the door came open, revealing a plush red velvet interior. A finely dressed figure—a gentleman—rose from his seat. And a deep voice boomed through the crisp, still air. “Lord, Vinny! Is that really you?”

Her heart, so rapidly pounding, suddenly seemed to seize. As if it no longer wished to keep beating. As if it would turn the blood in her veins to ice. Whatever it took to extricate her from this nightmare without delay.

Yet seconds passed, and she was still standing there, her breath continuing to come. Giving her no choice but to say something in return.

“Carington?”



## Chapter 16

Henry Bradford, the fifth Earl of Carington, looked both exactly the same as Lavinia remembered and not the same at all.

His hair, visible beneath the brim of his top hat, was its usual shade of reddish brown. His face, narrow but strong, still contained the same amber-colored eyes and thin lips that revealed a set of gleaming, slightly pointed teeth. His thick greatcoat and black wool trousers, both the best money could buy, added to his typical air of nonchalant sophistication. Yet this combination of features that had once ignited sparks in her now left her cold and empty. Her friend Catherine had once opined that Lord Carington looked rather like a fox, and Lavinia hadn't disagreed. *His grin is sly*, she'd thought as she tiptoed after him down quiet corridors, trying to hold in the giggles that came from champagne and the thrill of doing something illicit, *in the most delicious way*. Now, she understood what Catherine had likely been trying to get at. The danger Carington presented. As if she were prey he could snap up and swallow whole.

She cleared her throat, refusing to let her voice falter in his presence despite the shock. "What are you doing here?"

Walking stick in hand, he jumped to the ground, sauntering over and stopping far too close to her. Yet she wouldn't allow him to see her flinch or turn away. She would draw herself up to her full height, meager though it was, and stare until he damn well answered her question.

"I heard a rumor. A preposterous rumor." His breath contained its usual hint of brandy, though instead of finding it intoxicating, she wanted to heave. She tried very hard not to inhale. "That you had returned to Devonshire and married so low that your father cut off all association with you, and you would never again show your face in society. Of course, I would never believe such a thing without seeing it with my own eyes."

Had his voice always been this loud? It seemed to echo off every pebble and blade of grass. She choked back a sound of annoyance. “One should never put too much stock in rumors, Carington. And in any case, what difference does it make to you? Surely not enough to entice you to amble about the countryside when you could be in London, availing of all the Season has to offer.”

His face, which had started to turn pink from the cold, blanched just enough to be detectable. “Well, I did have to install myself in that detestable little inn in Lynnford for a few days while seeing to business for the duke, but—”

“Business? What business?” She needn’t ask him for which duke, for the answer to that was already plain. The Duke of Sheffield. His *father-in-law*.

“Nothing of any import,” he replied, mirroring her brusqueness. “Besides, I *did* want to see you. To know ...”

He was looking at her midsection. Trying to see through her weighty pelisse for evidence of swelling. Could he know any rumors on that subject as well? After arriving in Lynnford, and once she’d grown well enough to get through her days without the assistance of laudanum, she’d written a sole, brief letter to her mother. Explaining what had happened on her wedding day and assuring her that she wouldn’t write again unless asked. But her mother would have guarded that information as a most intimate secret, wouldn’t she? There was no way Carington could have known. Could he?

“There is no longer a child,” she bit out because she couldn’t stand one more second with that possibility hanging in the air between them. “I miscarried. As such, there’s no reason for us to continue our association. If you will excuse me—”

“Wait.” Carington reached for her, his fingers encircling her wrist just as she moved to brush past him and continue her journey home. “You’re wrong, Vinny dearest. We have every reason to continue associating. In fact, I think we should both settle in for a good, long chat.”

“I don’t want to!” She wrenched her arm, trying to pull her body away, but his grip was too tight. She glanced around, seeking any sign of an approaching passerby, but the road remained devoid of others, save for Carington’s indifferent coachman. Then again, perhaps that was for the best. The last thing she needed was word of her involvement with the earl—and of her resulting shame—to spread around Lynnford.

“This cannot continue,” she hissed, wishing her glare had the power to knock him to his knees. “We cannot be seen together like this.”

“Very well.” Carington’s hold on her wrist slackened just a shade, but the half-smile that crossed his lips still held a foxlike, predatory glint. “Join me in the coach then, so we needn’t worry about the threat of onlookers. We’ll drive as far as you wish or not at all, and if you don’t like what I have to say, you’re free to get out and carry on with—whatever it is you were doing.”

He’d tried lowering his voice, using that seductive tone she’d come to know, but it still seemed to vibrate across the land. It would be a wonder if all Lynnford didn’t hear.

What choice did she have? She plodded the few steps it took to reach the coach, scurrying through the open door with Carington right behind her. At least he’d freed her wrist. She set it in her lap as she sat down atop the velvet cushion, resisting the urge to brush off the place where his hand had rested.

“That’s better.” His lips turned up in a true smile as he slammed the door and scooted onto the seat beside her. “Shall we go for a ride?”

“A short one,” she muttered, ignoring the suggestion in his tone. After all, they were likely to draw less attention while moving than positioned at the side of the road. And if nothing else, the excursion would bring her a little closer to home.

Still grinning, he tapped the roof with his walking stick, causing the coach to roll into motion. However, once they began swaying down the road at an unhurried pace, his



expression turned serious, his eyes boring into her until she had to suppress a shiver.

“What?” she snapped, tugging her pelisse more tightly around her body.

He shrugged. “I suppose I didn’t expect to truly find you here. Looking so ... plain.”

The affront must have shown on her face, for he shook his head, giving a harsh laugh. “I’m not suggesting you are no longer lovely, my sweet, because you are. Only, you are not adorned as I’m used to seeing you. Radiant and glittering, the light of every ballroom. But not to worry. We can soon remedy that.”

Why did it feel like she had taken another step deeper into the fox’s lair? “What on earth can you mean?”

“I *am* sorry for what happened.” He gestured vaguely toward her abdomen, and for a moment, the brightness in his eyes almost made them look soft. Except then, he opened his mouth again, and any shard of humanity disappeared. “But don’t you see, Vinny? You’ve been given another chance. You can put all this behind you.”

That blasted Carington was speaking in riddles, leaving her with nothing to do but sit frozen as she waited for him to continue.

“There are rumors, yes.” He gave an impatient sigh at this inevitable fact of life. “But the ton need never truly learn what occurred. And what if they do? You can be mine again, and I’ll see you so well-endowed that you won’t mind a little gossip.”

“An interesting proposition,” she said, her words acidic enough to burn a hole through the coach, “except for the fact you are already wed to another. Or have you forgotten?”

For the first time since he’d shown himself in the coach’s doorway, Carington’s face crumpled, and he sought out her hand, which she promptly snatched away. At least he didn’t force it this time. “Oh, Vinny, I know I’ve been an ass! I got so caught up in the opportunities dangled before me by old Sheffield that I didn’t stop to think matters through as I should

have. And I was wrong. Lady Helen is as inviting as an icicle. I could better entertain myself by lying in a tomb. And as for the duke ... well, it seems we had a bit of a misunderstanding about the funds we could offer one another as a result of the union. Hard to say which of us felt the disappointment more deeply. In any case, I owe them both nothing. I want *you*.”

“So, you’re offering me favor you are not free to give and money you do not have?” She clamped her mouth closed before revulsion could cause her to spit on the coach’s floor.

“Do not trouble yourself over the matter of the funds. Sheffield and I are already working to fix that problem. I’ll have more than enough to set you up as my mistress. Anything you desire, sweeting, you need only ask for it. A London house. Enough gowns and jewels to overflow your dressing room. That’s a great deal better than whatever you have here. For if the rumors are to be believed—though I fear I insult you by suggesting something so far-fetched—you are married to ...” He paused, his lip curling as he braced himself to utter something distasteful. “A *surgeon*.”

She was going to be sick. She was going to swoon. *No*. She tensed her muscles, forcing herself to remain upright. Carington would *not* get the better of her, regardless of how his words cut deep. She’d spent so much time flitting through life, free from hardships, taking joy from everything. Now, all she felt was a deep-rooted loathing.

The worst of it was that Carington had just offered everything she’d thought she wanted. Pretty, shiny things and endless entertainments in a bustling city. And him. Fool that she was, she had wanted him too.

How had she been so blind as to not realize that it all meant nothing? Ballgowns and soirees and titles wouldn’t secure her happiness. Neither would thoughtless caresses and empty words.

Happiness—the real, lasting kind that made her heart light and radiated to her core—came from having someone to catch her when she fell. From having someone who appreciated her efforts even when they failed. From having someone whisper,

kiss, and stroke in a way that not only brought indescribable physical pleasure but could leave no doubt as to the adoration behind each gesture.

Happiness came from Will. The one who had unquestioningly come to her rescue each time she needed him. The one who had cared for her all along. Even when she'd been too shortsighted to appreciate it.

She grabbed Carington's walking stick, which rested alongside the seat, banging it against the ceiling until the coach pulled to a shuddering halt. Before the wheels had even fully stopped turning, she was on her feet, scrambling past his legs and grabbing the door handle.

"Lavinia, really." He shifted, clearly intending to stop her, but she had already slipped free, stumbling to the ground. That didn't prevent him from calling after her. "If it *is* true, you needn't tie yourself up in knots over it. You could probably even obtain a divorce if you wanted one. Given your connections and his lack of them, I doubt he could do anything to stop it."

Carington's words made the situation so much worse. She couldn't breathe, barely remembered how to move, yet she had to get away.

Her footfalls were clumsy as she fled down the road. Part run, part walk, and all desperation. But at least she was going forward. Without looking back, she managed to force words from her throat. "Do *not* try to contact me again. Forget you saw me here. I meant what I said. Our association is through."

He could have gone after her had he felt so inclined. There was no way she could outrun a team of horses. For that matter, it was unlikely she could have outrun him had he chosen to get back down from the coach. But he didn't. Instead, the door slammed closed, the horses resumed their steady trot, and the coach's wheels began turning once more, quickly overtaking her but then carrying on down the road. And while she had very little cause to feel gratitude toward Carington, she could at least be thankful for that.

The coach ride had taken her a little beyond home, but at least she was still closer than when she'd started it. Another small detail for which to feel grateful. With the way her legs shook, she didn't know how much longer they would carry her.

She nearly sank to her knees the minute their house became visible, for safety was within her grasp. Will wasn't there, the thing she wanted most of all. Nonetheless, she was home. The only place she wished to be.

Her legs managed to hold her up a while longer. Long enough that she could trudge up the path and let herself in the front door. Long enough that she could pat Dash on the head and inform Nell she was going upstairs to rest. Long enough that she could navigate the stairway, one heavy step after another, until she reached the top and burst into her bedroom, securing herself within its walls.

Only then did the full magnitude of what had just happened come down to crush her, leaving her staggering until she collapsed on her bed in a heap. Her body wouldn't stop trembling, and her eyes stung. She shut them, trying to make it all go away.

Except then came an even worse sensation. The silk cord on her reticule seared into her wrist, burning through clothing and skin and bone until it ate at the very center of her. Not because the cord had somehow turned constricting and abrasive but because of the weight contained within the pretty blue pouch with the delicately embroidered flowers. It should have been nothing, a trifle barely worth noticing. Instead, it pressed down like a boulder, ready to overpower her.

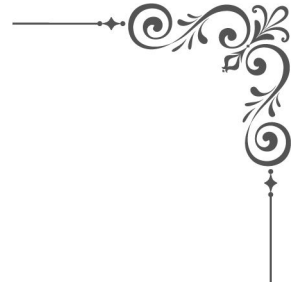
Despite her exhaustion, she jumped back to her feet, tugging open her reticule as she scurried across the room. The cold, smooth glass within connected with her palm just as she crumpled to the chair beside her *escritoire*. She hauled open the drawer and shoved the bottle to the back, beneath a stack of writing paper, until all that remained visible of it was a slight curve. Maybe if she didn't have to carry it or look at it, she could pretend it didn't exist. At least until she determined

whether or not she would do right by taking the substance within. A matter for another day if ever there was one.

With the drawer slammed closed again, she folded her arms across the escritoire, making a place to cradle her head as she forced air into her lungs. Everything was all right now. She was home and safe. Her meeting with Joanna was over. Carington had gone on his way. She need never speak of either of those events again.

So why did the whole day feel like a betrayal?

She'd stepped into the sitting room with Joanna thinking she knew what it took to make herself feel better. That she could find a way to be carefree again and ensure that her happiness with Will would last. But as it turned out, she knew nothing at all.



## Chapter 17

Will finally made his way onto the main road through Lynnford just as muted daylight gave way to the first signs of dusk. It was hard to believe that a full week had passed since he'd galloped down this road in the opposite direction, his horse kicking up snow as he rushed to his uncle's aid. Now, the road was in much better condition, days of rain followed by sun having dried it out and made it appear like the snow had never existed. Nonetheless, he didn't urge the horse forward in a burst of speed or even encourage anything beyond a canter at most. Frankly, he was too tired.

Just as he'd told Lavinia on that drowsy morning when he kissed her goodbye, she had never strayed far from his thoughts, and the promise of holding her in his arms again had compelled him to ride through his weariness rather than stop somewhere for the night. However, he still had a ways to go before reaching their house at the edge of the village. Presently, he was much closer to High Street and the side road where Maggie lived. And suddenly, another face he wished to see flashed through his mind. Owen's.

He only had to go a few more paces before encountering the road down which to turn, and right away, the side of Maggie's cottage came into view. He didn't plan to stay long. He wouldn't even take his coat off. However, after a week of gloom, what better way to remind himself of goodness in the world—of life—than to catch a glimpse of his nephew's undiscerning grin? Even a minute would be enough to restore him. That way, his dejection wouldn't all end up at Lavinia's feet.

He didn't even need to knock before the front door swung open. However, the person standing there wasn't Maggie's serving girl or Maggie herself with Owen on her hip. It was Joanna Hughes, her green eyes intent, her cheeks tinged a rosy pink.

"Good day, Will. I thought that was you I saw through the window." She took a step backward, ushering him into the

entryway.

“Good day.” He nodded a greeting, too weary for small talk. “Are Maggie and Owen about?”

“They’re upstairs resting before dinner. Owen had Maggie up most of the night. She thinks he must be cutting teeth. But if there’s something urgent, I’m sure she would come down —”

“No.” He shook his head, mindful to keep his voice low. “Nothing urgent. I can call again another day.”

“You can still stay.” She gave him a small smile. “Join us for dinner. You haven’t been by in so long.”

“Thank you, but I really should be on my way.” Back to Lavinia, who also had the power to fill his world with sunshine.

“You look terrible, Will.”

He stopped with his hand on the latch, feeling his eyes widen from Joanna’s abruptness.

“That is, you look tired,” she rushed to say, coming to stand beside him. Too close, really, for her skirts brushed against his trousers. “Lavinia told us how you were called to the girls’ school in Millton to assist your uncle with a typhus outbreak. Did you have a difficult time there?”

He exhaled, trying to release some of the heaviness from his chest. “I was too late. By the time I arrived, three of the girls were already gone. The oldest not more than ten. Fortunately, we didn’t lose any after that, though I’d be lying if I said we didn’t come close. It’s a terrible disease, Joanna. I pray we never see the likes of it here in Lynnford.”

“I’m sorry.” She reached for his gloved hand, resting her palm atop it. An overly familiar gesture, but he was too tired to protest. “I know you did everything you could. Your uncle too. As we are both well aware, there comes a time when not every patient can be saved.”

His jaw tightened, making a reply impossible. She was correct, of course. However, he wanted no more talk of illness,



death, and what he could or couldn't have done. He simply wanted to get home. To Lavinia.

He shifted his feet, bringing himself even nearer to the doorway, on the verge of uttering a hasty farewell and making his exit. But as soon as he moved, Joanna cupped his jaw, coaxing him to look at her. Moving her face so close to his. "Don't ride off like this. *Stay*. Sit down and relax. Let me help you feel better."

"I cannot." He took a brusque step out of her reach, his voice dripping with coldness. "I need to go home. My *wife* is waiting for me."

Joanna's eyes took on a frosty glint, and she didn't attempt to hold back her aggravated sigh. "Yes, your *wife*. Tell me, what *is* it about her that gets you all aflutter? What has she done to garner such loyalty? Especially when she shows you none of it in return."

His composure, already hanging by a thin thread, grew dangerously close to snapping. Only the iciness seeping through him kept his words calm and rigid. "And what, pray, do you mean by that?"

"I'll say nothing more on the subject. It isn't my place. But if you stop allowing yourself to be so blinded, maybe you'll see it too."

She practically vibrated in her anger. As for him, fury, along with something else—something weighty that swooped down and gnawed at his insides—kept him frozen. "You know nothing about any of it," he bit out, as sharp as jagged fragments of glass. "Absolutely bloody nothing."

He found his footing then, shoving open the door and striding back onto the front pathway. Joanna called to him. His name, and perhaps some other words too. He was no longer listening. With stiff but effective fingers, he untied his horse and hoisted himself into the saddle, taking off down the road at a gallop so the only sound he heard was hooves pounding against gravel.

The confrontation had erased his weariness, allowing him the burst of speed he had previously lacked. That was, until something worse began creeping in. Something that caused him to pull on the reins and go back to a walk because maybe he wasn't ready to race home after all.

Joanna had spoken out of turn; he had no regrets about telling her so. There was no way she could comprehend everything that had passed between him and Lavinia. Even Maggie, had she chosen to divulge details of their relationship, knew only parts of the story. Neither of them realized the full reason Lavinia had pounded on his door during that January day back in Northleigh. As such, they couldn't understand how desperately she'd needed help and how he'd have sacrificed anything to give it to her. In a way, the bond he shared with Lavinia transcended words. It was just *there*. Always had been, and life events had only served to strengthen it over time. And because of it, Joanna resented them both.

Another day, once their tempers had cooled, he would go back to Joanna and attempt a calm, civilized conversation. After all, he still owed her one after his failed efforts during their dinner at Maggie's. Whether it would make a difference in allowing them all to live harmoniously, he couldn't say. But maybe, eventually, they could come to a place of understanding where envy no longer drove a wedge between them. Maybe they could erase the bitterness that caused her to speak and act in objectionable ways.

He could try to convince himself of a happy resolution all he liked. That Joanna's words were merely the result of jealousy. But although his longing—his *love*—for Lavinia tended to overtake all else, he wasn't blind altogether.

He and Lavinia had parted in the best way possible. No longer connected only in name but also in body. And after all those heated, pleasure-filled moments they'd spent tangled up in one another, in a time and space where titles, money, and social class didn't exist, he'd allowed himself to think that, finally, they'd taken an irrevocable step forward. That they had something real and binding. Something reciprocated.

Yet the horse carried him down the road at a languid pace, and a little more of that cold, heavy sensation trickled into him with each step that drew them closer to home.

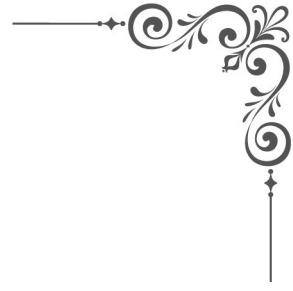
*What has she done to garner such loyalty? Especially when she shows you none of it in return.*

He'd been unwilling to do Lavinia the disservice of pressing Joanna for an explanation, and likewise, he would never breathe a word of the conversation to Lavinia herself. He *had* given her his unfailing loyalty, trust, and devotion, and why would he not? Surely, now that she was his wife, she deserved them more than ever.

She may have come from a station far above his, from a society so foreign it may as well have existed on another planet. She may have entered that society envisioning a future that had no trace of him in it. But that didn't mean ... that didn't mean Joanna's words were the result not just of envy, but of truth, and that perhaps, he didn't really know Lavinia after all.

It couldn't mean that. Except a small but insistent voice in the back of his head had another idea.

What if it did?



## Chapter 18

Lavinia was in the kitchen, flipping through Nell's cookbook, when a door banged at the other side of the house. Will's surgery.

She'd done her best to keep busy with menial tasks in his now weeklong absence. Reading, attempting to bake, visiting, walking with Dash, and *not* moping around and letting herself focus on each small sound that echoed through the house, imagining it was Will stepping into the entryway. Still, she couldn't help the way her heart rate quickened from the noise in the part of the house that had thus far remained silent. Or the way she threw down the cookbook and fled the kitchen so she could scurry across the corridor.

She cast open the door to the surgery, cold and dim from its recent lack of use. Yet it was bright enough for her to detect Will across the room near the exterior door, setting down his medical bag and removing his greatcoat. He straightened in response to the noise from her intrusion, his eyes locking with hers, taking her in. As for her, she'd been granted the sight she longed to see more than anything else in the world.

She had no time for coyness or reserved greetings. Instead, she ran forward, throwing herself into him, breathing in his scent as her head pressed against his chest. She wouldn't allow herself to do anything as silly as sob or blurt out words whose consequences she could never take back. But she could rest here, regaining the sense of safety she always received from his presence, until all felt right with the world again.

For a moment, he did nothing, likely too startled by her enthusiasm to move. But then, his arms were around her, holding her close, and she didn't miss his quiet but shaky exhale. They stayed that way for an indeterminate number of seconds, the quiet duskiness causing everything to melt away but the warm comfort of his embrace. Eventually, though, something drew her back to her head. Maybe the way his body seemed to slump into hers, almost like a stone wall that, after repeated exposure to the elements, finally started to lean.

She lifted her head just enough to peer into his face. “How was your journey? And did you meet with your uncle as planned? I hope everything went well.”

He gave his head a small, nearly imperceptible shake. “I assisted my uncle in Millton. But if you don’t mind, perhaps we could discuss the rest of it in the morning. Right now, I simply ... cannot.”

“Of course. Whatever you wish.” She planned to return her head to his chest but found she couldn’t take her eyes off him. Time and time again, Will had been her rock, steady and sure whenever she needed him. But now, she saw something in him she hadn’t before. Vulnerability. The sense that maybe he, too, faltered sometimes. Her heart wrenched as she gripped his coat even more tightly than before, keeping him close. Was the protective surge that rushed through her akin to what he felt when she came to him with her latest crisis? Because suddenly, she had the overwhelming need to care for him, just as he’d done so many times for her.

Raising to her tiptoes, she pressed the gentlest kiss against his lips, letting one hand drift up to caress his hair. It was an innocent gesture of comfort. Yet his response was needy, his lips crushing into hers, deepening the kiss. His fingers played in her hair as well, pulling at pins until it tumbled loose and he could trace the strands over her back and lower, down to the curve of her bottom.

So quickly, the sparks that had come from awaking in his bed and finding him returned home and waiting for her ignited anew until a full-blown fire raged at her core. Memories of the previous week sent blistering shivers down her spine. Of his hands, his mouth ... of how with his whole body, he’d worshiped her, turning her into a ball of bliss-filled nerve endings.

Well, now it was her turn to worship him. And maybe, a haze of pleasure would overtake them again. One powerful enough to make them forget the outside world and all that troubled them in it.

She shifted her weight forward, pushing with enough force that he stumbled back a couple steps, coming to rest against the door with her still in his arms. Wriggling loose to give herself sufficient room to place her hand in between them, she ran it down the front of him. Over the neatly tied cravat at his neck, the white linen shirt, the plain gray waistcoat, all the while wishing the clothing would disappear so she could touch his bare chest instead. However, there would be time for that later. At present, having even part of him was preferable to waiting another second for more.

With her hands still on him, she sank down to her knees. Placing herself at eye level with his fall. She gripped each small button, freeing it from its hole until the concealing piece of fabric fell away, leaving him bared to her. Leaving her free to reach for what she wanted and stroke along the hot, rigid length of him. He breathed in sharply, casting a hand down to her shoulder to steady himself. It was all the prompting she needed to press her lips against him, getting her first taste of the smooth, sensitive skin.

“Lavinia.” He growled her name through clenched teeth. Half warning, half plea. She could see the war within him. The gentleman trying to shake his head, draw his body up tight, and pull away. And the man being overtaken by primal yearning, his face slackening as shreds of well-honed restraint melted away.

She kissed him again and again, swirling her tongue over the tip of his arousal before drawing him into her mouth. His groan caused a deep, tingling ache between her legs because, in that moment, she knew he’d succumbed to her. To desire. He’d already explored her like this several times, in the most intimate way imaginable. Now was her chance to get to know him in return.

She let her mouth fall in rhythm with her hand, the movements eliciting low sounds from the back of his throat. The sight of him before her like this, completely undone, caused her own need to spiral and her heated skin to burn for his touch. However, she didn’t want it nearly so much as she longed to first render him sated and boneless, the way he’d

done for her. He had to be close to a breaking point, for one hand fisted in her hair, his thighs began quivering—

“Enough.” His voice was sharp and breathless, the word sounding like it had been ripped out of him. He staggered sideways to wrench himself free of her, grabbing hold of her hand to help pull her to her feet as he went.

Leaving her standing instead of kneeling before him, trying to make her breaths come evenly and her head stop spinning. But though her thoughts were blurred by thick, heady desire, she could still see what was right in front of her. The hesitancy creeping into Will’s face. Because apparently, he hadn’t fully abandoned himself to pleasure after all. Instead, his forehead creased, betraying the fear he’d somehow overstepped or wronged her. But for once, she wanted nothing of his honor.

“Don’t,” she hissed, feeling her arms begin to shake by her sides. “Don’t you *dare* apologize or ask me if I’m certain. Not when I want you so much right now, I feel like I could die from it.”

For a moment, they were frozen in place while staring at one another, his pupils wide enough to make his eyes look black. But then, his arms shot out to encircle her, and the room spun until she found she was facing the door and pressing her palms against it to steady herself. From behind her, Will took hold of her hips, pulling them toward him so his hardness teased her through the unwanted layers of her skirts. Making her shiver with unfiltered need.

As if reading her mind, he took bunches of muslin in each fist, shoving them up over her hips so they rested in a pile at her waist. The cold air provided a shock to her bare skin, but she scarcely noticed. What did it matter when she was one step closer to getting what she most desired?

He kissed along the side of her neck, grazing her with his teeth. And as he did, his finger burrowed into her sex, swirling through the wetness that had accumulated at her entrance. Her muscles involuntarily clenched around him, trying to capture a hint of the fullness she craved.



However, all too soon, his finger was gone again, provoking her cry of protest. Thankfully—because she didn't know how she would stand it otherwise—the emptiness was but brief, giving way to something even better. He thrust forward, plunging himself into her, over and over again with rough, hurried strokes. It was the opposite of the languid, gentle rhythm they'd established in his bed. It was also exactly what she needed right now.

Desire flared within her, its force intensifying with each of his thrusts. And just when she thought it was all reaching a peak, his finger returned to the intimate flesh between her legs, rubbing against the sensitive pearl at the apex. Taking her higher again.

“Please, Lavinia,” he mumbled, his breath hot and enticing against her ear, his words strained and heavy. “I need you to come for me—”

He didn't fully finish the sentence before she began spasming around him, no longer able to keep from toppling over the edge. And he fell with her, shuddering against her as he rode out the waves of his own climax.

For long minutes, she stayed just as she was, with her skirts hiked around her waist and her hands bracing her against the door. Will didn't move either, aside from shifting forward a little, allowing his weight to rest on her just enough to remind her of the security—and the pleasure—he gave. If he was anything like her, he needed time to let his heart rate slow. To remember the normal cadence at which a person was supposed to inhale and exhale.

Only her desire to look in his eyes again prompted her to eventually turn around. She'd planned to kiss him—a lazy, gratified caress—but something in his face stopped her. Not the worry she so dreaded seeing, but something more like awe. As if he were suddenly trying to process the fact that he'd just taken her against the door of his surgery. Before dinnertime. Without even bothering to remove their clothing. From there, she could envision his thoughts taking a downward turn. Going back to a place of uncertainty and regret. And blast it all, she refused to let that happen.

“Don’t,” she whispered. A warning. He couldn’t retreat from her now. Not when all she needed was closeness. The snow may have melted, but they could pretend it still swirled outside the windows, giving them nothing to do but lie in bed, tangled up in one another in the most appealing ways.

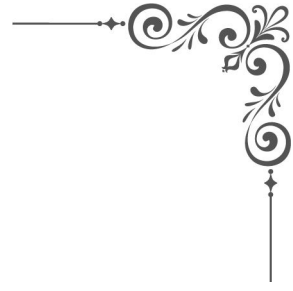
It was unrealistic, of course, to think they could spend an infinite amount of time shut off from all others, focused only on lovemaking. Not to mention that frequent coupling could eventually lead to consequences. But for the time being, she had no interest in either realism or consequences. She would take these all-consuming moments of intimacy for as long as she could. Because maybe, they would lead her to a place where she no longer remembered the secret meeting with Joanna Hughes. Or the coach stopping on the side of the road.

He peered at her, the green-gold of his eyes intense as he considered what he saw. Rather like a surgeon assessing his patient but also more than that. He seemed to look deeper as if he wished to understand what lay at the heart of her.

Whatever he discerned from his study, she couldn’t say. She merely knew that even the simple act of gazing at him in return caused the sparks in her belly to resume stirring.

*Please*, she longed to beg. *Please*. But because she didn’t comprehend how to explain what she needed, she said nothing. Praying that somehow, he would just know.

Slowly, he raised a finger to her lips, tracing it over the swollen skin. And then, she was back in his arms, pressed into him so tightly that her breasts tingled from the closeness. And he was kissing her once more.



## Chapter 19

Will awoke to strange surroundings. A wispy white set of bed curtains. A pink and white floral counterpane. Walls papered in a rosebud pattern.

Lavinia's room.

He turned to his side abruptly, wiping the bleariness from his eyes. Sure enough, there was Lavinia stretched out beside him, a corner of her bare leg sticking out from the wrinkled sheets. Still fast asleep.

A sort of drowsy, euphoric fog filled his head, making it difficult for him to think straight. But little by little, fragments of the past twenty-four hours came drifting back. Lavinia waiting for him when he walked through the door. Their heated encounter in the surgery, which only fueled the need for more. So much so that when they'd stumbled up the stairs, they'd managed to get only as far as her bedroom, for the extra few steps into his own room had proved impossible. At some point, their passion must have subsided enough for him to rise from bed, for he had a vague recollection of going down to the kitchen and fetching them something to eat. A brief interlude before a different kind of hunger claimed them again, after which he'd seemingly slept like the dead.

He pressed his nose into the strands of her hair that spilled across his pillow, inhaling the sweet, floral scent. No wonder he stayed abed so much later when she was about. He could already feel himself growing hard at the thought of pulling back the covers and climbing over her ... caressing her ... joining with her and having her wake up moaning his name ...

Yet through the fog, other scraps of awareness sank in. Such as the fact that he had *responsibilities*. Ones beyond this bed that had gone neglected thanks to his week-long absence. To start, Martha White still awaited his return visit. Not to mention several other patients on whom he'd promised to pay follow-up calls.

With a reluctant sigh, he eased himself off the mattress, inching across the room. The idea of going to his chilled, silent bedroom alone held little appeal, so he made short work of it, taking just enough time to douse himself with some much-needed cold water and pull on a clean set of clothes. Perhaps his quiet shuffling would be enough to rouse Lavinia before he had to set out on his way.

However, when he returned to her room, she remained deep in sleep, still unmoving from the sprawled-out position in which he'd left her. He took a little less care in keeping quiet as he crossed the room again, opting to kneel before the hearth and add wood to the fire. Once he had a sufficient blaze going, he turned back to the bed, expecting to see her stirring. But she stayed asleep, her face peaceful as her chest rose and fell in gentle, even motions.

The sheer adorableness of her made him smile; he could feel the automatic upward pull of his mouth. If he didn't take care, he would soon find himself back in her bed, and his efforts in getting dressed and planning something productive for his day would all be for naught.

At least he could console himself with the knowledge that he needn't stay away for long. He could likely finish up his calls in short order and, depending on how exhausted she was, be back before she'd even fully roused herself.

In the meantime, there was no need to wake her. Instead, he would leave a note on the pillow for her to spot as soon as she opened her eyes. One with more intimate words than she would get in a message conveyed by Nell.

He shuffled over to her *escritoire*, pulling open the brass-handled drawer to retrieve a sheet of paper. Except when he reached into the drawer, his hand connected with a hard, curved bump. He'd never intentionally pried in Lavinia's things, and he had no plans to start. However, something about the unexpectedness of what he encountered prompted him, unthinkingly, to shift the stack of paper just enough to make the edge of the object beneath visible.

Which immediately caused his stomach to drop. It was nothing more than an unlabeled glass bottle, the same type he had by the dozens in his surgery. Yet this one hadn't come from him. Not only that, but something about it had impelled Lavinia to conceal it.

The back of his throat became pinched, and apparently, he wasn't beyond prying after all, for he slid the bottle from the drawer, holding it at eye level. He gave it a tiny shake, peering at the liquid that sloshed within, obscured by the amber glass.

If Lavinia had need of medicine of some sort, why hadn't she come to him? Didn't she know she could trust him with any request, no matter how intimate?

He knew why. Pieces were falling into place, like a dissection coming together to form an image he had no wish to see. His stomach sank even lower, but there was no point in turning back from the truth now. He grasped the bottle's stopper between his thumb and forefinger, pulling it until, with a quiet pop, it came away in his palm. And with it, any faint belief that he'd overreacted or misunderstood the situation fell away as well, for he was immediately hit with the pungent smell of pennyroyal. An ingredient whose purposes were no mystery to him.

With the bottle and stopper still in hand, he turned toward her, half expecting to see a stranger sitting up and staring at him in her place, ready for a confrontation. Yet the face that rested against the pillow was unmistakably Lavinia's, looking angelic in sleep. She was the same achingly beautiful woman he'd always known. The woman he'd finally taken steps forward with, enough that he'd dared to imagine a future filled with happiness and trust—and maybe even love—shared between them.

He'd been wrong.

Since the day she'd stepped into this house as his wife—and long before that, really—nothing had consumed him more than ensuring her wellbeing. He didn't think he'd been restrained in his devotion. And he'd certainly given her no cause to believe that her not desiring children would cause him

displeasure or resentment. On the contrary, he fully understood her hesitancy. Had she only come to him with her concerns, he could have talked through them with her. Offered her numerous solutions.

But no. She'd chosen to seek help from a woman who showed her open hostility rather than him. It made no sense, yet what other explanation was there for what stared him right in the face? The unmarked glass bottle, just like the ones Joanna kept in her medical bag ... Joanna's vague but cryptic comments ...

Lavinia had to have been desperate to do such a thing. But *why?*

Was it his fault for not broaching the subject with her to begin with? He'd just assumed she would feel comfortable talking to him about anything, the same way she'd always done, or so he believed. Truthfully, though, he hadn't given the matter the consideration it deserved. Not when he'd gotten so caught up in the sheer ecstasy of having her in his arms—his bed—that everything else blurred into the background. That was badly done of him, an act of negligence he never should have allowed.

But suddenly, a new realization hit him, one that caused his fist to clench around the bottle and his chest to constrict besides. What if her decision didn't come from fear but from a desire not to have children with *him*? After all, she could have been the mother of an earl. Perhaps mixing her bloodline with that of a surgeon was just too great a drop. Perhaps it bound them too tightly, to the point where she could never go back. He'd allowed himself to grow careless and think of her simply as his wife rather than focus on the discrepancy between them. But perhaps it was a wedge too impervious to surmount.

He shoved the stopper back into the bottle, cramming it into the drawer where it belonged. He no longer made an effort to keep quiet. The future he'd envisioned for them was crumbling around him, all while Lavinia continued to sleep, and he needed to ask her *why* she'd kept this secret from him. But then again, was that what he really wanted? Was he ready to hear her confirm his worst fears aloud?

He allowed himself one more look at her tranquil loveliness. She hadn't so much as stirred.

It was just as well. His head had started aching, and he likely didn't have the right words to deal with the situation at present. Nor did the things he'd planned to write her seem anything short of ridiculous. Nonetheless, he pulled a sheet of paper from the drawer before sliding it closed. The time for love notes may have passed, but he should at least say something to explain his absence. If she didn't have cause to wonder why he'd disappeared, he could stay away longer. Then, maybe when he returned, he would have a better idea of how to proceed.

He dipped Lavinia's quill into the inkpot before letting it scratch quietly over the page.

*Lavinia,*

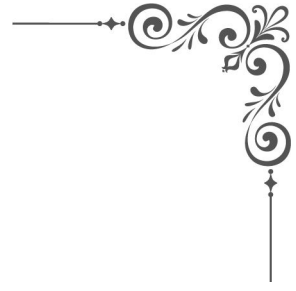
*I've gone to pay calls on patients in the village. They may keep me away for some time. I'll return later.*

*Will*

The words were succinct. Vague. Emotionless. They were all he had left to give.

He left the note unfolded on the escritoire and, without so much as a single glance back toward the bed, hurried out to the safety of the corridor.





## Chapter 20

Lavinia didn't start worrying until darkness had long since fallen and Will still wasn't home.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. In a way, the note she'd found on her escritoire had caused small flares of uneasiness to stir within her from the moment she awoke that morning. Will's words had been so brusque. So unlike the way he'd spoken to her when they collapsed into bed together the night before. Yet she'd refused to let herself get carried away over something that could ultimately mean nothing. Will was devoted to his work and may have simply been anxious to get back to the patients he'd been forced to neglect while away. She knew this about him, and she accepted it. Despite the emptiness that came from waking up without him, she wasn't so selfish as to wish he were any other way.

And so, she'd gotten up and carried on with her day as usual, trying to push thoughts of him to the back of her mind. If she'd allowed herself to dwell on him, she could have found cause for worry there as well, for Will hadn't seemed quite himself after his return from Millton. His unwillingness to discuss it was unusual, making her wonder if he concealed something troubling that she should press him to share. But at the same time, whatever had gotten into him had led to the type of unrestrained passion she yearned for. The type that did indeed make her forget her own troubles and live only in the moment. And whatever else she might be sorry for, she couldn't regret that.

It would be naive of her to think they could carry on like this indefinitely, ignoring issues that lingered so close to the surface, ready to spring free and wreak havoc at the slightest provocation. However, that didn't mean she needed to focus on them today. She wouldn't let apprehension overtake her. She absolutely refused. Except the darker it grew, and the longer the house stayed quiet other than Nell's quiet shuffling, the more determined apprehension grew to slip in.

She pivoted away from her seat by the sitting room window, tired of her view of the black, empty road. Unlike last time Will had been called off on duty, the night was too warm for snow and showed no other signs of inclement weather. The only hindrance he might encounter on the road was the misty fog that hung low to the ground, although it wasn't thick enough to obscure his path home. That in itself should have reassured her. But busy though he might be, it didn't make sense that he would stay away this late when many families were likely heading to bed.

There could very well be a reasonable explanation, such as an unexpected medical emergency like the one he'd experienced with Sally Cooper. But how was she to spend another night sitting idly, at war with her imagination, while not certain how Will fared or even where he was? She couldn't.

Which is why she found herself striding into the kitchen and fetching her pelisse from the hook beside the door. Nell would undoubtedly fail to see the wisdom in her plan and try to convince her to stay indoors. But as it turned out, Nell must have left to attend to a task in another part of the house, and for once, Dash must have followed her instead of Lavinia, for the kitchen was empty. If Lavinia needed any sign that she should follow through with her outing as intended, there it was.

As quietly as possible, she slipped on her walking boots and stole out into the night, crossing the garden so she could retrieve the lantern from the stable and circling back to begin her trek down the main road. She didn't want to cause Nell undue worry when she inevitably discovered her absence. However, Lavinia didn't intend to be gone long. Just enough time to scan the road for any trace of Will. If timing worked out, maybe they'd even encounter one another, and she wouldn't need to go all the way to the village after all.

A fervent pounding began rising from the open land beside the road, accompanied by a high-pitched whinny. As if by reflex, she spun instantly, holding her lantern out into the dark, hazy expanse. A horse, nearly as black as the sky itself, came

streaking across the field parallel to the road. It appeared in and back out of the glow from her light in an instant, and she darted a few steps into the grass with the lantern extended outward, trying to keep the horse in view. However, its thundering hooves were too fast, for just as quickly as the horse neared her did it gallop into the distance, the sound of its strides fading once more. The whole encounter had taken only seconds, so fast that were it not for the noise, she may have missed it entirely. Not so fast, though, that she failed to discern two significant points.

Firstly, the horse, with its impressive size and gait, had to have escaped from its owner. And secondly, the horse's eyes were filled with panic. It ran because something had spooked it.

Though the air was pleasant enough for a winter night, a shiver ran down Lavinia's spine. Something was wrong. She couldn't explain it exactly, but the runaway horse, along with the drifting fog against blackness, combined to fill her with a heavy sense of foreboding.

With her lantern still in front of her, she crept forward another few steps, the fog thickening in just that short distance as it rolled in from the water. She would have to take care not to let fear make her bolt like the horse did while she explored these parts, for eventually, the ground would give way to steep, jagged cliffs that plunged into the ocean below. From where she stood, the fog was heavy enough to be disorienting after all. But even if it weren't, she still wouldn't know which way to go. How could she, when she had no clue what she was looking for?

Her light caught on something in the distance. Just the slightest movement of a shadow in the dark, obscured by the dense haze. She stilled the lantern, squinting across the field, half expecting what she'd seen to be nothing more than an illusion. But her light continued to rest on what was undeniably a wavering figure. A person. A *man*.

The air suddenly felt like it had been sucked from her lungs, making it impossible to utter the name that rushed to her lips. *Will*. However, even through the fog, it quickly

became apparent that the person couldn't be him. Whoever he was, this man didn't quite match Will in height, and his build, from what she could discern of it, looked more slender. But most notably, this man alternated between staggering forward and pausing, his obscured face now fixed on her light. He was in some sort of trouble.

She took off running with as much speed as the uneven, fog-enshrouded terrain would allow, heading in his direction. This was a situation much more suited to Will, clearly. Yet he remained unaccounted for, and if someone ailed in his absence, she could at least do everything in her power to help, meager though it may be.

Only when she had made it partway across the field did the first flickers of doubt begin to creep in. Why was a man stumbling alone at night near the cliffs by her house? Anyone hoping to see Will would have surely kept to the road. Furthermore, she'd never spotted pedestrians come this way at the best of times, let alone in the dark when there was so much fog.

Her sense of foreboding deepened, along with the certainty that something was terribly wrong. And worst of all ... what if, instead of hurrying to the rescue, she was running into danger herself? That's what she always did, wasn't it? Dive headfirst into a situation without sparing a thought for the repercussions, only to be hit with them all later.

But by the time this thought crossed her mind, it was too late. The man's features had begun to come into focus. She would have thought herself imagining things, except with each step she took, the lantern illuminated him—the narrow chin, the reddish hair—a little more until, despite the improbability of it all, she couldn't deny what stared her in the face. She came to a halt in front of him, every ounce of her concern giving way to unrestrained fury.

“Blast it, Carington, why are you here again? Specifically, what possible reason could you have for rambling about near my home in the pitch black? Shouldn't you be on your way back to London by now? Did you even truly have business here to begin with? You haven't been following me, have you?”

Because I already told you, I reject your proposition and have no desire to see you—”

Her words suddenly jammed in her throat as her stomach sank so low that it felt like it might hit the ground. She'd shifted her light just enough to reveal a dark, wet patch accumulating at the shoulder of Carington's greatcoat. Blood.

She heard herself shriek, but then no other sounds would come out. The patch of blood was growing larger by the second, and oh, dear Lord, she was about to vomit. She forced her eyes away from his shoulder and up to his face, which, now that she focused on it up close, appeared unusually wan. She needed to concentrate and not let herself get overcome by hysterics. “What ...”

“A gunshot.” Although she hadn't managed to finish her question, Carington saw fit to answer. However, his voice held none of its usual robustness, and he grimaced as he staggered closer to her. “You must help me, Vinny.”

“A *gunshot*?” His admission snapped her out of her panicked stupor, and she found herself staring at him incredulously. “How on earth did that happen?”

He pressed his hand against the shoulder of his greatcoat, although it did little to quell the blood spilling into the wool. “A disagreement. A problem with the shipment. They cheated us ... Didn't bring all the brandy. Said they hadn't received fair payment, although I told them it was coming ...”

He must have indeed lost a great deal of blood, for his eyes had turned glassy, and his words made little sense. Brandy? Payment?

“They move so fast that they're probably back on the water by now. They had no qualms about leaving me here to rot after the shot scared off my horse.” Despite his obvious physical distress, Carington stuck out his bottom lip like a spoiled child not getting his way. “I'll find a way to send the Customs officers after them; just see if I don't.”

Lavinia's eyes darted in the direction of the ocean, impossible to see through the blackness and haze, and back to

the pale, quaking man who stood just short of pressing into her. The man who traversed the coast alone at night. The man who'd said he was working on a scheme with the Duke of Sheffield to alleviate their financial difficulties. Facts were adding up, yet they still didn't make sense. "But surely you are not ... " Her conclusion seemed almost too ridiculous to speak aloud, but what other explanation was there? "Dear Lord, Carington, have you somehow involved yourself with *smuggling*?"

For a moment longer, his face maintained its affronted, defiant expression. And then, he came crashing into her, leaving her struggling to keep herself upright beneath his weight. "Help me, Vinny," he repeated, his voice a hot rasp against her neck.

There was too much blood. The wetness of it seeped through her pelisse, not to mention the metallic smell that assaulted her nose. And all at once, a thought struck her.

She could leave him here too. Just like the smugglers whom he'd presumably been overseeing before matters went awry. After all, what did she owe him? He'd taken her, the naive girl who'd entrusted him with her heart—or a vague semblance of it—and future, and he'd abandoned her. Ruined her. Thought of nothing but how to further his own interests. Could anyone blame her for feeling spiteful? Vengeful, even?

She gritted her teeth, making herself accept the unwanted weight pressing against her body. Maybe not, but she didn't want to give him the power of making her turn malicious. That had never been who she was, and it wasn't about to be now. She was better than that.

Besides ... had her life really and truly been ruined? In a way, it absolutely had. But at the same time, look what she'd gained in return. Things she'd never realized she wanted yet were worth far more than jewels or parties or titles ever could be. Namely, she had a husband she could trust with her life. Someone who would unfailingly care for her. Someone for whom she wanted to do the same in return.

She pivoted as much as possible to wedge her side against Carington's, squeezing her arm around his uninjured shoulder. The whole time, images of Will flashed through her mind. Because Will was proficient and good and selfless, no matter the circumstances. She would try her best to emulate him.

"I'll do what I can to help you, but you are going to need to assist me in return." She took a tentative step forward, relieved when he managed to stagger along with her. "I can do nothing to move you if you lose consciousness in this field, so don't even think about it."

She moved another small step and then another, dragging with the effort of supporting a weight so much greater than hers. However, she couldn't leave him here or he may very well bleed to death, a thought that made her knees turn shaky.

No, she would allow herself none of that. She just needed to get him back to the house. To Will's surgery. Not that she would have a clue what to do there, but maybe Nell could help, and they could get his injury fixed up, and he'd even be well enough to go on his way and disappear from her life for good, just as she wanted.

Another low rumbling started in the distance. The same steady sound that had approached her before: the unmistakable pounding of hooves. Taking care not to jostle Carington's shoulder, she swung her lantern toward the noise. It could be nothing more than his runaway horse heading back in the direction from which it had come. However, her light revealed a flash of something else galloping down the road. Not just a horse, but a rider.

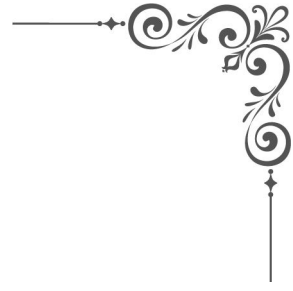
"Help!" she screamed, lurching forward with as much speed as she dared. "Please help."

The horse had already made a sharp turn and started across the field while the rider stared straight ahead, fixated on her light. And though the fog had done nothing to abate, and her lantern cast only a dim glow, she knew. Will was on his way home. He had come to her rescue as he always did. She was just seconds away from him, the person she wished to see more than any other.



And the person she most dreaded to see all at the same time. Because suddenly, two worlds—two opposite pieces of her life—that were never supposed to intersect were about to collide. How would she even begin explaining this to Will? Carington may be an earl, but he wasn't even fit to shine Will's boots. And now, she needed to ask Will to save him. Even though she barely understood the nefarious dealings in which Carington had entangled himself.

Even though she'd known of his presence here, and spoken to him, and decided to keep everything concealed. Her own little web of deceit.



## Chapter 21

“Will!” Lavinia waved her lantern so it flashed in the darkness, although he was already on a steady path toward them. She couldn’t allow herself to get distracted by fears and misgivings. First and foremost, she needed to ensure Carington didn’t perish under her watch. She would deal with the repercussions of the encounter after the fact.

“Thank God you happened upon us.” She watched, not wanting to take her eyes off him for a second, as he pulled the horse to an abrupt halt and jumped down in front of them. Had she not been struggling to support Carington’s weight, she would have leaped into his arms. Thankfully, Carington stayed silent, for having to listen to his commentary on top of everything else would be unbearable. “He needs your help. Please. He’s been shot.”

She could tell right away that Will wasn’t himself. It was ridiculous to notice such a minute detail at a time like this, but he didn’t radiate his usual clean, pleasurable scent. Instead, he smelled like an alehouse, something she’d never encountered from him before. Even in the low, flickering light, his face appeared unusually flushed. And as for his eyes, they shifted back and forth between her and Carington, filled with a thousand questions. All which he deserved answers to, and all which she had no idea how to give.

Maybe something was amiss with Will, and his troubles had only been amplified by finding her standing in the middle of a field at night while accompanying a profusely bleeding man, but that didn’t negate his razor-sharp instincts as a surgeon.

“If you could lower the coat from his shoulder and manage to support him just a moment longer,” he instructed, already tugging free the knots in his cravat.

She did her best to comply with the same unflinching precision he displayed, though her heart pounded so rapidly it felt like it might jump out of her throat. At least Carington remained a passive participant who let them do as they liked

without saying a word. But perhaps that meant he was on the verge of losing consciousness.

“Good.” Will gave the brief word of praise as he assessed the damage beneath Carington’s torn shirtsleeve. “Now, if you could just take care to hold the lantern steady.”

Satisfied that he had enough light to work with, he wound his cravat around the top of Carington’s injured shoulder, securing it with a tight knot. Carington broke his silence to give a low moan but promptly fell quiet again, his face covered in a ghastly sheen. Will nudged himself in beside her to take her place, finally relieving her of the weight she’d been struggling to keep upright. “As much as I don’t want to move him, I can do little more unless we go back to the house. It isn’t far. Do you think you can manage another short distance?”

He spoke directly to Carington now, trying to meet his glazed eyes and make him focus. His efforts earned him a slight nod, which was all the encouragement he needed to shuffle forward, dragging Carington along with him. Leaving her stumbling along beside them, trying not to heave from the blood covering her pelisse and the horribleness of the whole situation.

It was a testament to Will’s proficiency as a surgeon that he didn’t take this opportunity to ask her where the man had come from and how she’d encountered him in the first place. Somehow, he seemed to have fixed all his attention on finding the path home, back to his surgery where he would be better equipped to deal with yet another disaster she’d laid at his feet.

Never had she been so relieved to catch the first shadowed glimpses of the back of their house appearing through the haze. She burst forward, her legs no longer so shaky now that she had a target in sight, until she reached the door of the surgery, wrenching it open and holding up her lantern to guide Will’s way.

“I need the bottle of brandy from the dining room,” he said as he reached her, not even pausing for breath as he trudged inside with the half-conscious Carington slumped against him.

“Of course.” She set her lantern down on his desk and rushed off to do as he asked. Anything to be productive. Anything to feel like this night wasn’t doomed to end in calamity.

By the time she returned, Carington was sprawled across Will’s examination table with his sleeve cut away, his face slack, and his eyelids fully closed. Oh, Lord. What if he’d—

“I gave him a small dose of laudanum,” Will clarified, apparently able to read her thoughts from just the brief glance he spared her while accepting the brandy bottle, “before I start tending to the wound. Fortunately, it looks like the bleeding has already begun to slow. Thank you for bringing the brandy, for he may need it before I’m through. I’ll let you know once I’m finished here.”

He’d already opened another bottle and started pouring its contents over Carington’s bloodied shoulder, clearly refocused on the task at hand and ready for her to leave him. However, her feet suddenly planted themselves against the floor, unwilling to move. She should be fleeing as fast as possible from the gruesomeness before her. But how could she when, once again, she’d be forced to sit idly by, plagued by ignorance and uncertainty? How could she have any sort of peace while not knowing if Carington succumbed to his injury right beneath her roof? Or if he made a full recovery, enough to tell Will exactly who he was and of his association with her ...

“I’d like to stay.” Her voice came out low but unwavering, and she made sure to look only at Will’s face and none of his surroundings. “Please. I’ll keep out of your way and certainly will not watch as you work, but I’d like to stay in the room.”

Her out-of-character request no doubt gave him cause for a dozen more questions, yet he didn’t so much as turn his head. “As you will. But could you please fetch Nell and tell her I need the fire and candles lit?”

“I’ll do it.” The prospect of having a task to complete set her in motion again, rushing to comply without delay. “Nell showed me how.”

She grabbed the tinderbox and knelt before the hearth, eager to create the light and warmth Will needed. At least she was doing *something*. Not enough to distract her from the sound of Will reaching for items in his medical bag or to make her forget that nothing was right with the world, but something.

The flame she'd created sprung to life, filling the area with a soft glow. "The man was lucky," Will muttered, the added light revealing that his forehead was creased from concentration. "The bullet merely grazed him. If he can recover from the blood loss and avoid excessive inflammation, I see no reason he won't live."

"Good," she replied automatically, although the word sounded brittle. It *was* good that they needn't feel like they had Carington's death on their hands, regardless of her uncharitable sentiments toward him. But what came next? How long were they to keep the hapless man in their house? An earl. A son-in-law to a duke. A sly-faced charmer who'd thought nothing of casting her—and his unborn child—aside in favor of furthering his own station.

How long before he recovered his strength? How long before the truth came crashing down around her?

A quiet groan snapped her attention over to the examination table, where Carington began stirring, his head lolling mildly back and forth. Her feet flew faster than ever before, taking her to Will's side, next to the examination table, in an instant. She could look at Carington more closely now that his shoulder was wrapped in a spotless white bandage. Could watch as his eyelids fluttered, and he drifted back from his laudanum haze.

Will stared down at him too, but not at his face or even the area of his injury. Will's gaze focused on Carington's signet ring.

"Will ..." she choked out, barely above a whisper, because she had a thousand things to tell him yet didn't know where to start.

But it was too late. Carington's eyes were open, his pupils dull and unfocused as he lifted his neck, trying to take in his surroundings. He glanced around—at the table scattered with Will's instruments, at the bandage covering his shoulder, at the solemn-faced surgeon who stood beside him. And then, his eyes fell on her, locking in place, as he managed a hint of that devious, predatory grin. "You did it, Vinny. You saved me. But you always were a good girl, weren't you?"

Carington may have been weak from his ordeal, but his words had the power of a stormy sea, drowning her beneath its relentless waves.

And Will drowned along with her. The way he froze, his features growing tight, revealed the exact moment when recognition hit him. Perhaps not full-fledged comprehension, but the undeniable sense that ignorance was about to give way to an alarming truth.

She tried to speak or even shake her head. However, she was powerless to do any of it.

But Will ... Will turned stony-faced, erasing all traces of his momentary horror. His ability to concentrate on his duty as a surgeon would never cease to amaze her. Yet she couldn't help but think that his composure hung by a very thin thread.

"Is there someone we should alert of your presence here?" Will's focus was sharper than ever as he addressed Carington, but he no longer seemed to be a surgeon monitoring a patient. Instead, he sought out clues as to the man underneath.

"Only the proprietor of that ramshackle inn in Lynnford to tell him the earl wants his coach sent over. I should leave this place as soon as possible, and the duke can see to his own bloody business from now on." Carington used his good arm to prop himself up, his gaze remaining solely on her even as he answered Will's question. "Perhaps you'd like to come with me, Vinny. To take another little excursion together."

"Shut up, Carington!" The way he said *excursion*, almost as if it were a salacious word, made her body tremble with outrage and her voice turn high and hysterical. Did he not have the presence of mind to realize that the surgeon beside her

was, in fact, her husband? Did he just not care? “It was nothing like that, and no, I would not.”

Carington shrugged his good shoulder, as if it made little difference either way, before finally breaking his gaze so he could turn to Will. “I don’t suppose you could give me another spot of laudanum, or a glass of brandy. My shoulder hurts like the devil.”

“By all means.” Will reached for a bottle on the table beside him, pouring a little of its contents into a spoon. Everything about him had turned brittle. His tone. His movements. His face remained hard and masklike, although raw fury burned in his eyes. Because now, any unknown details had clarified themselves to form a complete picture, one that gave him no doubt as to what—and whom—he dealt with. Ironically, *she’d* been the one to scream Carington’s name in her outrage. She’d revealed his identity and thus sent them hurtling down a slippery slope from which there was no climbing back up.

“Much obliged.” Carington accepted the spoon with a nod of his head, oblivious to the fact he’d ruined everything for her once again. If he saw fit to keep talking, so help her.

But he didn’t. Giving a final look around, he lowered his head back to the table, closing his eyes and sighing as contentedly as if he’d just fallen asleep in his vast curtained bed at his Somerset estate.

A relief if ever there was one. Except the damage had already been done. And though her mind may be racing, still not fully reconciled to all that had just occurred, she couldn’t let Will go one more second without an explanation.

“Will, I don’t even know where to begin.” She clutched his arm, her revulsion at the blood splattered against his sleeve secondary to her need to keep him close as she attempted to explain. “Truly, I don’t understand why Carington turned up here. His comments when I encountered him in the field led me to believe he was stupid enough to get himself involved with smuggling. It’s nearly unthinkable that such a thing could take place so close to our home and with an earl nonetheless.



And that he had to be there at the very time I went out. Perhaps I'm horrible for saying so, but I would have rather remained ignorant of the whole incident. I would have rather never seen him—"

"You should go to bed, Lavinia."

She staggered backward a step, her breath catching in her throat at the sharpness of his words. The man who had held her close, reassured her no matter what, and looked at her like she was the light of his world was gone. Instead, he pulled his arm out from under her grasp and strode to the opposite side of the room, plunging his hands into the washbasin without a glance back.

She forced herself to swallow despite the bitter taste in her mouth. Will's coldness was like a weight in her chest, threatening to make her collapse. Yet he was fully justified in his anger, and she couldn't let it stop her from trying again.

"I *cannot*. Not when there are still so many things I need to explain to you." And if he refused to look at her or be near her, she would just have to explain them to the back of his head from the other side of the room. "This whole awful incident with Lord Carington ..."

She paused, suddenly hit with the magnitude of having Carington remain in such close proximity to them. Under their roof. Sleeping as if he hadn't ruined things for her all over again. "Before we proceed, should we not see about summoning Carington's coach? He requested it, after all, and if he requires further medical attention, I'm sure he can seek it elsewhere. I don't know how we can even begin to rest easy while he's still here, and—"

"I don't plan to let it stop me." At last, Will turned back in her direction. But he didn't come to her outstretched arm. Instead, he brushed past her to grab the brandy bottle from the table beside Carington, lifting it to his mouth to take a hearty swig. "It would be foolhardy to go back into the fog at this time of night to do his bidding, especially when, if what he says is true, his coach could attract men with a death wish. In any case, I gave him enough laudanum that he shouldn't stir

until morning. Should he require any further treatment before then, I'm sure he'll have no qualms about demanding it, and somehow, I'll find the will to comply. In the meantime, I'm going to my room, where I intend to do everything in my power to forget about the vermin plaguing my surgery. I suggest you go to your room and do the same."

"I told you, I cannot!" She nearly reached for him again as he began stomping toward the doorway but instead clamped her arms against her sides. He wouldn't thank her for her obstinacy. But at the same time, she couldn't just let him walk away without another word. "Please, Will. I want to forget about everything that has happened too, but I also need to speak with you first. I cannot simply go upstairs to sleep without a second thought. Not when Carington—"

"Stay down here then. It's all the same to me." He still wouldn't look at her, and his voice continued to drip with coldness. Yet she couldn't miss the hurt that had crept in. All while her own heart shattered in turn.

"Will, I—"

"I really don't want to talk anymore tonight. I'm too tired. I'll see you in the morning."

"Will!" She screamed his name now, unable to stop hysteria from breaking through. But it was too late. Will had already marched into the corridor, slamming the door behind him. Making his message perfectly clear. He wanted nothing more to do with her right now.

All the determination and insistence that had built up inside her came crashing down at once, making her knees buckle and sending her sinking to the floor. The floorboards were cold and unwelcoming beneath her, but that wasn't enough incentive to make her rise again. She stayed just as she was, glancing dazedly around the room, its shadows making it look almost like the product of a dream. Or rather, a nightmare.

How had this happened? How could she have *let* this happen?

A soft, rhythmic noise drifted down from above her. Carington, snoring gently in his laudanum-induced stupor.

“Damn you,” she whispered to his sleeping frame, and because that brought her no satisfaction, she tried it again with more power. “Damn you!”

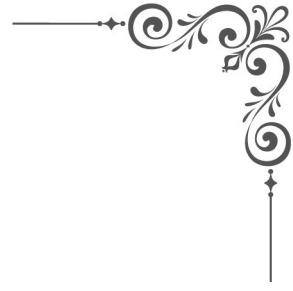
However, the words still did nothing to make her feel better. And suddenly, she understood Will’s urgency to get away from a subject he had no more energy to deal with. The blood may have been cleared away, but if she had to look at Carington for one more second, she would be sick.

She pushed herself to her feet, staggering across the room using every remaining ounce of strength she had. Her footfalls were light, yet they seemed to pound out an ominous message with each step she drew closer to the door. *Will doesn’t want to see you. He’s angry at you. You hid the truth from him, and now he may never forgive you.*

Very well. She would respect Will’s wishes and leave him in peace, even though the effort might kill her. After everything she’d taken away from him, she could at least give him that.

But tomorrow ... tomorrow, Carington would leave, and Will would be ready to talk to her. He had to be. She would lay every scrap of truth—even the painful bits she barely dared admit to herself—at his feet. And somehow, she would find a way to make him understand.

She burst out of the surgery, slamming the door behind her too.



## Chapter 22

Will should have known better than to keep drinking. Actually, he should have been sensible enough not to begin drinking in the first place. However, once he'd prolonged his patient visits for as long as possible the day before and still felt reluctant to return home, he'd found himself at the village tavern. Trying to reconcile the fact that Lavinia kept secrets from him. That the real, trusting—loving?—marriage he'd dared to envision for them was nothing more than an illusion.

Time, combined with a few mugs of ale, had convinced him that maybe he misunderstood something about the situation. That he should at least try talking to her.

But then, in one of the most terrifying moments of his life, he hadn't found her at home but outside in the dark near the cliffs, screaming for help through the fog. With company. A man with whom, as it turned out, she was better acquainted than any other.

He winced, picking up the brandy bottle from his end table and letting the last few drops trickle into his mouth as a noise drew his attention to the window. A large crimson coach, adorned with an elaborate crest on the door, rolled up out front. At least one small thing had gone right. He'd sent a note to the inn at first light asking for Lord Carington's coach to be sent over, and his request had been met without delay.

*Lord Carington.* Even thinking the name made him sick to his stomach. Then again, the brandy he'd consumed while lying in bed without sleep, listening to the sound of Lavinia pacing the floor through the other side of the wall, could also be to blame for that. It had likely contributed to his splitting headache as well—the worst he could recall experiencing in his life.

He dragged himself across the room and down the stairs, each step feeling more like a mile. A bitter taste rose in his throat at the thought of laying eyes on Lord Carington again. The obviously affluent man he'd unquestioningly worked to

save, just as he would any other regardless of station, only to discover the damnable truth of his identity. Yet it was better for him to go down and be certain of the loathsome swine's departure than to cower in his bedroom.

By the time he arrived in the surgery, Lavinia was already there, standing next to the earl who had risen from the table and redonned his tattered coat. And what of it? At least the pounding in Will's head helped dull the dagger piercing his chest.

"Your coach has arrived," he uttered brusquely, trying to ignore the burn of Lavinia's gaze that he could feel without looking in return. "I'll see you out the front door."

"Capital." Carington's face, while still pale, was no longer quite as sallow, and damn him, he even had a little jauntiness in his step as he followed Will from the surgery. His ruined clothing aside, one would be hard-pressed to know of the ordeal he'd gone through just a short time ago. "And while you didn't inquire, let me tell you that aside from some menial discomfort, I feel as fit as ever. Your work seems quite competent. I'm certain it will tide me over until I see my physician in Somerset."

"Capital," Will mimicked, his voice frigid. They were in the entryway now. So close to having this repulsiveness out of his sight.

Carington shot him a look, his eyes narrowing, but ultimately, he turned away, reaching into his pocket. "Allow me to procure your fee."

"No need." Although Will's aching head—and whole body, for that matter—made his reflexes slow, the words shot out of his mouth instantly. He wanted nothing to do with coins from a patronizing earl. He simply wished for the man to get. *Out.*

Carington started to open his mouth, seemingly on the verge of protest, but decided against it. Instead, he gave another of those nonchalant shrugs with his good shoulder. "I'll take my leave then."

If Carington had remained true to his word and left without delay, perhaps they could have finished the encounter with no additional damage done. However, he paused with his hand on the latch, turning back to fix his eyes in the worst possible place. Squarely on Lavinia. “That is, if you’re certain you won’t accompany me, Vinny.”

“No!” Lavinia rushing forward, stabbing a finger into Carington’s chest, was the only thing that stopped Will from heaving him through the doorway. “I just finished telling you, and I’ve told you on multiple occasions past, that I never want to see you again.”

“Just leave. I think my *wife* has made it clear you’re no longer welcome here,” Will snapped.

Lavinia’s voice was high. Carington’s was loud. They both tumbled in his head, intensifying the ache and making it difficult to think straight. He needed this to be over so he could sit down. So he could move on. Whatever that meant.

Carington may be rich and titled and powerful. He was also hopeless at taking a hint. Either that or he refused to back down from a situation without getting his own way. He stepped away from Lavinia’s jabbing finger, his mouth curling up in a sneer and his eyes glittering with a combination of malice and pity. All for Will. “I can see why you would be so eager to lay claim to her, given how far she is above you. But have you really deluded yourself into thinking she could be happy in such a place, tied to a *surgeon*? You clearly don’t know Vinny at all.”

Will didn’t think about what he was doing. A white-hot fire blazed within him, blinding him to anything but fury. Causing his fist to connect with Carington’s jaw, sending the man stumbling into the wall.

For a moment, Carington cradled his face, his eyes wide and disbelieving. However, the shock quickly gave way to outrage of his own. “You dare to assault an injured earl? I could have the constable after you.”

“Yes, do that. Perhaps you could also explain to the constable what you’re doing in Lynnford and why you have a

gunshot wound. You may be above the law, but I'm sure the revelation, if publicized, would still have repercussions." Will swung open the front door, looking pointedly at the waiting coach. "For the last time, get out. Whether you choose to keep up your association with smuggling, or whatever the hell it is that peers involve themselves with these days, makes little difference to me. However, if you get shot again, have the good sense not to do it at my doorstep."

Carington could have done a great many things. Continued to spew his vitriol or even dealt a blow of his own, in which case Will would have had to summon the energy to fight back. But he didn't. He gave one last glare to him and Lavinia before storming from the entryway, finally allowing Will to slam the door and strike the offending sight from view.

The earl's parting look of defeat should have been enough to bring Will at least a modicum of satisfaction. Yet he was too weary. How could a person feel heavy but empty all at the same time?

"I'm going back to bed," he muttered before he could be met with another barrage of words he wasn't ready to hear. But as he peered at the staircase ahead, the task of climbing it suddenly felt gargantuan.

"No." Lavinia took off at a run, and while she didn't attempt to reach for him, she planted herself in front of the bottom stair, effectively blocking his way. "*No*. I respected your wishes last night and didn't force a conversation, but I refuse to carry on without you hearing me out. Of all the places in England, Carington had to show up here, and it isn't fair that—"

"You're right," he cut in, the pain in his chest throbbing forcefully enough to overtake the pain in his head. "It isn't fair that innocent schoolgirls can grow ill beyond the point of saving while titled pieces of human refuse come through ailments of their own making nearly unscathed."

She flinched, giving a quiet gasp. "I'm so sorry. For the girls. For all you had to go through this week."



Tentatively, she extended her arm, bringing her hand to rest against his until he regained his wits enough to pull away. His skin already prickled with abnormal heat, but her touch was downright scorching.

“Do you know what else isn’t fair?” he continued, because in no way was he in the proper frame of mind to keep going with the topic at hand. Except maybe, the subject he was about to introduce in its place was even worse. Still, despite everything, he couldn’t stop. He’d insisted he didn’t want to talk, but now that he’d uttered those few fateful words, others insisted on following. “That a person can do everything in their power to show their unfailing devotion to another and find that still, they are deemed unworthy of trust and honesty.”

Under different circumstances, the wateriness that made her blue eyes glisten would have enticed him to pull her into his arms and whisper soothing words against her ear. However, the world no longer seemed like the same place it had been before. He remembered how to do nothing but stay where he was with his arms against his sides.

She swiped at her eyes with an impatient flick, straightening her body to stand as tall as possible. “I’ve made countless mistakes. I won’t deny that. But you must understand. On the day when I learned of Carington’s marriage ... the day I showed up at your door ... I wrote him a letter saying I never wanted to hear from him again. Seeing him driving up the road from Lynnford all these weeks later was the most horrifying shock I could have imagined. He didn’t lie about me joining him for a carriage ride, and I’m ashamed of it, but I didn’t know what else to do! He grabbed hold of my arm, and the thought of anyone seeing us and discovering our association was more than I could bear. Looking back on it, I should have kned him in the bollocks and run. In any case, he made the ridiculous proposition that I accompany him back to London; I reiterated that I never wished to see him again, and that was the end of it.”

The fury that had started to cool after he slammed the door on Lord Carington pushed its way back through his heated body, making his head throb even more. As for Lavinia ...

what should he even say to her? At this point, he had more questions than answers.

She didn't take her eyes off him for a second, her gaze so deep that it nearly had the power to knock him over. "I would—I *should*—have told you what happened, but I thought I'd seen the last of him once and for all, and I didn't want to cast yet another burden upon you unnecessarily. Our meeting was so brief that I had no idea Carington planned to stay in the area and for what reason. I went out last night looking for *you*. Because I was worried. But what I found instead was Carington."

For the first time, her voice wavered just a touch, and she quickly cleared her throat, determined to keep going. "I thought of leaving him there, you know. Of abandoning him the way he'd abandoned me. But I didn't, and do you know why? I've watched the way you relentlessly help others, regardless of circumstances. Because you're *good*. And instead of giving in to abhorrence and bitterness, I wanted to be good too. And that, Will, is the full, unobscured truth."

The mistiness returned to her eyes until he almost enveloped her in his embrace and told her he would never let anything hurt her again. Almost. He wanted to unfailingly place all his trust in her, even if the sentiment wasn't reciprocated. But what if Carington, a man of her station, was right? What if he didn't really know her after all?

His thoughts were a distorted swirl in his head, tumbling beneath the pain of sleeplessness and too much brandy. However, one stood out above the rest, refusing to be silenced without answers. The point gnawed at him like a mace, denying him the ability to rid himself of doubt. He didn't want to ask about it. He would rather go to his room and sleep until the pain—both physical and otherwise—vanished into nothing. But if he did, could he ever be at peace in their marriage? The secret could hang over them for years to come. Not to mention have dangerous consequences if Lavinia didn't take care.

"Can I take that to mean your renewed association with Lord Carington had nothing to do with your staunch yet secret

desire to prevent a pregnancy?”

Her body slumped, all the power she'd put into her previous explanation draining away in the blink of an eye. However, there was no hint of incomprehension on her wide-eyed, bloodless face. Questions, maybe, and even disbelief. But she clearly understood his meaning.

“Of course it didn't.” She spoke hardly above a whisper. Not trying to plead ignorance. Simply explaining. “That had no bearing on my actions at all. If anything, it made me want to erase what I'd done.”

“Then why, Lavinia?” It was all he could do to keep from gripping her shoulders. “If you had concerns, why would you not come to me? Have I ever shown you even a second of reproach? Have I ever been anything less than eager to do your bidding? I don't believe I've been subtle in my regard, but in case it has escaped your notice, let me make something very plain. I am hopelessly, damnably, irrevocably in love with you. I would move heaven and earth to make you happy. I never expected the sentiment to be reciprocated. But why was it not enough for you to at least feel you could confide in me?”

“Because I was afraid!” she burst out, her voice breaking at the end. “You were away in Millton, and I let my worries build and get the better of me. I acted without fully thinking things through because that's what I have the abominable propensity to do. But I couldn't help it. I didn't know how to explain ...”

She paused, letting out a long, unsteady breath. “When I found out I was increasing, and Carington set me aside, my whole world fell apart. I was *ruined*. It should go without saying that I didn't intend to have a child with Carington in that manner, and he certainly wanted no part of it. But still ... the loss *hurt*. For days afterward, I felt so empty, like everything was hopeless and I would never be happy again. As it turned out, though, I was wrong. Little by little, happiness trickled in from places I had never imagined. Happiness came from being with *you*. And I'm so afraid of that slipping away. Looking back, the feelings I had for Carington were nothing more than passing lust from an ingenuous girl. And if the loss

could still ache that much ... the pain of losing your child would surely be too much to bear. Because the way I feel about you, it's so ... it's ... Will, I ...”

The single tear that slid down her cheek made his heart splinter. He ached for her and all she had gone through. All he'd been powerless to prevent.

But at the same time, her speech caused the tiniest flicker of hope to ignite deep within him. Because she'd been about to say something, words he imagined himself hearing, ones that would sound better than any others. Yet something had stopped her, and only silence hung between them now. Did she have second thoughts about her declaration? Had he misunderstood its purpose in the first place?

“You *what*, Lavinia?” He didn't intend for his voice to come out as tersely as it did. He simply desired clarity, one way or another, but his head pounded so fiercely that the room spun and nothing made sense. Had he possibly turned delirious?

He tried to reach for her, so he could hold her close and seek out the truth in her eyes, but the stars bursting across his field of vision made it impossible to see clearly.

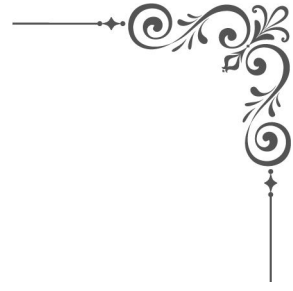
“Are you all right?”

Her voice came to him as through a fog, from miles and miles away. Had his skin been this clammy all along? Beads of perspiration coated the back of his neck and forehead. He was hot. So hot.

Fevered.

A sinking feeling punched him in the gut as his brain finally made the alarming connection.

And then, there was only blackness.



## Chapter 23

Had Will been fully sentient, he surely wouldn't have allowed Lavinia to sit by his bedside and risk contagion. She sat there anyway.

She sat while Joanna came and dosed him with willow bark. She sat while the retired apothecary arrived to confirm what they feared—typhus—and left some sort of tincture. She sat while Maggie penned a hasty note to their uncle Stephen, bidding him to come at once.

All the while, Will drifted in and out of consciousness, uttering words that made no sense. And while she'd thought the world came crashing down on her once before, it was nothing compared to having to sit and watch him in such a state.

She kept busy with small tasks where she could. Helping Nell or Joanna keep a constant supply of soaked linens atop his overheated, rash-ridden body. Strewing herbs and orange peel around his room. Trickling cordial water down his throat.

Perhaps she could have found a scrap of peace if her efforts seemed to be doing any good. But they didn't. Three days after he'd collapsed in front of her by the stairs, his fever continued to rage with unrelenting vehemence.

And so, she kept waiting by his bedside. Waiting for his uncle, who should have arrived long ago, to come and fix things with the same skill Will seemed to have with all his patients. Waiting for some sign that his fever might break and the angry splotches on his skin might vanish all on their own.

Sitting there and watching over him, murmuring words he likely couldn't hear, was the least she could do. The constant haze of fatigue that hung over her and the ache in her back from the rigid wooden chair were menial discomforts if they meant she didn't have to take her eyes off him for a second.

Because what if she did and ... and something *happened*? What if she never had the opportunity to lay eyes on him—to speak to him—again? It was an idea too terrible to fathom.

Especially after the fever had overtaken him when their relationship still hung in the balance. She hadn't earned his forgiveness. Nor had she uttered the declaration she so needed him to hear.

No. She would stay where she was and continue watching over him. Caring for him without fail, the way he'd always done for her when she most needed it. If only she possessed the same power to heal that he did.

"Lavinia?"

A small voice startled her from her thoughts, and she turned her cramped neck to find Maggie standing in the doorway, her brow crumpled. She tiptoed in, coming to stand by Lavinia's side to peer at Will's listless form. "I was hoping I might find some improvement when I called today, but that doesn't look to be the case."

"No," muttered Lavinia dully. If wishing Will back to health were enough to cure him, he would have recovered a thousand times over. Unfortunately, their desires had nothing to do with it. "Matters are much the same."

Maggie studied her younger brother a moment longer before laying a hand atop Lavinia's shoulder. "You should go rest a while. I can sit with Will."

"No," Lavinia answered instantly, trying to widen her eyes so her eyelids didn't droop. How would she explain to Maggie her reasons for being unable to leave Will? She couldn't voice them aloud. She only hoped Maggie would accept her answer without the need for clarification.

Maggie sighed, but the look she gave Lavinia was a kind one. "You'll do him no good if you exhaust yourself to the point of collapse. In fact, having to tend to you would only distract us from Will's care, and with Uncle Stephen still not here, our present circumstances are already difficult enough. Go to your room and lie down, and I promise, if Will so much as flinches, I'll come and rouse you. Yes?"

Lavinia gave a sigh of her own, long and deep. She didn't want to admit Maggie was right, but she was. Lavinia had

made a vow to herself, with no intentions of betraying it, not to leave this room. Yet Maggie loved Will too. She would undoubtedly do everything in her power to keep him safe under her watch. Perhaps Lavinia could go to her bed for just a short time to restore herself, knowing that Maggie would alert her should anything with Will change.

She eased herself from the chair, giving her stiff legs time to readjust to straightening and bearing weight. “Very well. For a short time only. If you promise to wake me immediately should the need arise.”

Maggie nodded, lowering herself into the bedside chair before Lavinia had a chance to change her mind and sit down again. Leaving her with nothing to do but give Will one final long look before creeping across the room and letting herself into the corridor.

Where she found herself colliding with Joanna.

“Oh!” She stumbled sideways so she no longer trod on Joanna’s toes. “I apologize. I didn’t realize you were here.”

Joanna bristled as if she’d been accused of wrongdoing. “As the oldest Cooper girl was free to mind Owen, I thought I could come and possibly be of some help.”

“And I’m most grateful,” Lavinia answered quickly. Not only because she was too weary for even a hint of a confrontation but because it was true. At present, Joanna provided the best source of medical knowledge they had. Anything beyond that was irrelevant.

“Maggie just went in to sit with him, so I’m going to rest. Very briefly,” she added, for suddenly, she was the one who needed to give an explanation.

“You should.” Joanna’s features softened in a way Lavinia had never seen before. Her expression held no judgment. Only understanding. “You would do yourself no favors by becoming exhausted to the point of illness.”

“That’s just as Maggie said.” Lavinia suppressed another sigh, resigning herself to shuffling next door to her bedroom, even though her heart would remain on the other side of the



wall with Will. But suddenly, a new idea took hold, causing her to halt. “Actually, Joanna? Before you see to Will, do you think you might accompany me for a moment? There’s something I need to give you.”

Joanna pursed her lips, studying Lavinia carefully. But instead of asking questions or downright refusing, she gave a tiny nod. Fortunate, given that Lavinia was unsure she had it in her to repeat the request.

Lavinia continued the remaining few steps to her bedroom, opening the door and motioning for Joanna to precede her inside. Perhaps she would be better off forgetting the whole endeavor and simply trying to sleep. However, if there was a chance that doing this could remove even a fraction of the burden weighing heavy on her ... well, she had to try.

She trudged over to her *escritoire*, pulling open the drawer and reaching underneath the shuffled stack of paper. The place where Will had clearly found what she’d so hastily concealed there. She grabbed hold of the fateful bottle, turning and extending her hand toward Joanna. “Here. I need to give this back to you.”

Except for her mouth, which gaped just a touch, Joanna remained unmoving.

“Please.” Lavinia took another step closer to her until their hands nearly touched. “It hasn’t been used. And as I think you already know, it was never intended for my sister.”

“I know.” Joanna’s cool tone gave away nothing of what she must be thinking as she finally reached out to accept the bottle. Yet she had to be filled with questions ... assumptions ...

“I don’t know why I came to you with that ridiculous story.” Lavinia blinked, fighting through her fatigue. She owed Joanna an explanation of sorts, and the time was now, before her determination had the chance to wane. “Confusion, I suppose, along with fear. For the past weeks have challenged me in ways I never imagined, and after losing the baby on my wedding day—”

“What?” Joanna stared at her with wide, searching eyes.

Lavinia felt her eyes widen in turn as the realization hit her. Joanna didn't *know*. Whatever reason Will had given for their marriage, he hadn't disclosed her pregnancy. It shouldn't have surprised her, really, for it was yet another example of how he always sought to protect her.

However, Joanna was a midwife. One who'd found herself set aside by the man she likely envisioned as her suitor without a satisfactory explanation. If nothing else, Lavinia could give her the truth, for whatever good it might do for them both.

“Will married me so hastily because I went to him seeking help after discovering I was with child. The man responsible decided to marry another.” The truth of that situation would never cease hurting. Yet the pain had diminished into more of a dull ache. Perhaps because out of those horrible circumstances had sprung something far better—different, and less opulent, but decidedly better—than what she'd had before. If only she'd be allowed to keep it.

She swallowed, willing herself to keep going. “On the evening of our wedding, I miscarried. Had that happened only hours earlier, our futures could have turned out very differently. Except it didn't. Will and I were already married, and if nothing else, I'll thank fate for that, for having him as my husband is the best thing that has ever happened to me. Only ... I don't want to go through that loss again. Not with Will.”

Joanna remained silent and assessing, as was so often her way. But when she spoke, her voice was gentle. “I can tell you with absolute certainty that one loss will oftentimes not lead to another.”

Lavinia closed her eyes a moment, bidding the tears to stay behind her lids. She supposed she knew that already, in a way. Nonetheless, fear was a powerful motivator.

“Will should have married you,” she blurted out, finally giving voice to the doubt that had lived inside her head from the moment of her introduction to Miss Joanna Hughes. The thought of having her time as Will's wife erased made her skin

instantly turn cold. But what if Will's life could have been made better without her, with an uncomplicated wife instead? Someone who was competent in all things. Someone fearless.

“What foolishness.” Joanna shook her head, folding her arms tightly across her chest. “How could he, when his heart belongs to you? It always has, I think, since long before I first met him.”

Lavinia gulped in a mouthful of air, the task of breathing suddenly turning difficult. She supposed she knew that too. Will had always shown her as much, and he'd told her as well, right before he collapsed.

“I love him,” she whispered, not trusting her voice to go any louder without breaking. They were the words she'd been trying to utter when her tongue tangled and Will collapsed at her feet. Why had she been foolish enough to hesitate? The answer, once again, had to be fear. Of placing herself in another position of defenselessness. Of fully letting go of her heart. Yet everything else aside, speaking the words aloud emphasized just how true—how right—they were.

“Well, that's all there is to it.” Joanna attempted something resembling a tiny smile, but it was too tight-lipped to have true joy in it. But nor was it cloaked in bitterness. Rather, her face held a look of ... acceptance. “Now, if there's nothing else, I should leave you to rest while I go check on Will.”

“Of course. Don't let me delay you any longer.” With the conversation Lavinia had so urgently needed to have with Joanna now completed, a fresh wave of weariness swept over her. She coaxed her feet into action, plodding over to the bed.

“Thank you,” she said to Joanna's retreating form. But Joanna was already out the door, too far away to reply.

At last, Lavinia allowed herself to sink onto her counterpane and be surrounded by the soft comfort she'd foregone for three days now. But as she stretched out her stiff body, another set of eyes peered at her from the doorway. Deep brown ones, belonging to someone who'd obviously snuck in alongside Maggie and Joanna.

“Come in, Dash.” She patted the space beside her, assuring him of his welcome.

Even Dash knew something was amiss in the house, for he’d been slinking around with none of his usual eagerness. He accepted her invitation, though, ambling over and stationing himself at her bedside. Not demanding attention but simply peering up at her as if he would stay there, keeping watch, for as long as she bid him.

“Oh, we may as well do this all the way.” She patted the counterpane again, shifting over to give ample space.

Dash looked at her another moment, his tail making a few uncertain swishes against the floor. But then, with one graceful leap, he sprang onto the bed, dropping his large, shaggy body next to her.

“Good boy, Dash.” She placed her hand atop his head, scratching behind one floppy ear to confirm he’d done right by jumping up to her.

The motion of gliding her fingers steadily back and forth, combined with the rhythm of Dash’s gentle breathing, made her eyes drift closed and the tension in her shoulders begin melting away. It was hard to believe that such a creature had once made her scream in terror. There was nothing sinister about Dash. On the contrary, he was a scruffy ball of enthusiasm and loyalty. Why had she let a past experience thwart reason and blind her to that fact for so long?

But better late than never. Eventually, she’d found a way to overcome the fear. And maybe ...

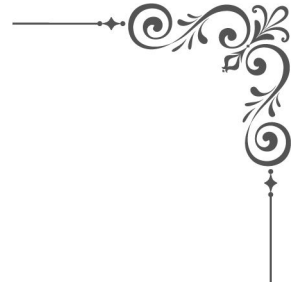
Her eyes drifted open, meeting with Dash’s deep, soulful gaze. Maybe if she’d let go of fear once, she could do it again.

She could never erase the rejection she’d experienced and the vulnerability that came from giving her love, body and soul, to another. Likewise, she could never fully negate the risk of loss. It would always be there, a possibility able to swoop in and crush her. But if she let the fear of these things forever hold her back ... what might she miss out on? What if, on the other side, there existed an opposing joy, equally as

poignant? A joy that she—and Will—could have if only she dared to reach for it.

She nuzzled a little closer into the warmth of Dash's body, shutting her eyes once more. Over the past weeks, a plethora of emotions had overwhelmed her like a swelling tide, with uncertainty always in the midst. But now, at long last, a spot of clarity shone through. The sort she hadn't experienced since the day she just *knew* she should marry Will. And if for no other reason, she could rest peacefully for a short spell because of that.

She knew what she wanted from the future. And while it might not be easy, she would do everything in her power to take it. As long as the opportunity hadn't already passed her by.



## Chapter 24

“Lavinia? Lavinia?”  
A voice called to her from far away while something nudged at her shoulder.

Lavinia sat bolt upright to find herself face to face with Maggie, as all too quickly, reality came shooting back, and a panicked word escaped her throat. “Will?”

“He’s well. That is, he’s no different from when you left him,” Maggie rushed to say. Thank heavens. Lavinia’s heart, which had almost seemed to stop, resumed its steady beating. “I roused you because Uncle Stephen just arrived. I thought you would like to know.”

The revelation wasn’t as good as news that Will had made a full and miraculous recovery in her absence. Yet, given present circumstances, it was the next best thing.

“Yes. Yes, of course I wanted to know. Thank you.” She clambered up from bed, straightening the wrinkled fabric of her dress as she rushed out of her room.

When she arrived in Will’s bedroom, his uncle had established himself in her chair by the bed and was already pulling instruments from his medical bag.

“What’s to be done?” she called to the back of his graying head, one that matched the dark gray of his clothing. He was the same austere figure she remembered from back in Northleigh. However, she knew better than to mistake his taciturnity for rudeness and likewise assumed that he would take no offense to her getting right to the matter at hand without a formal greeting. He seemed a man dedicated to his vocation, and as a result, he had to be a surgeon of great skill. For he’d been Will’s teacher.

Without turning around, Stephen withdrew his hand from the bag, revealing a small jar. “Bloodletting. It’s the best course of action at this point.”

Lavinia heard herself gasp, although the sound seemed to come from far away rather than from her own throat. Because suddenly, time froze, the people around her faded away, and she no longer stood in Will's bedroom.

Rather, she was in her old room back at Northleigh Manor, propped up in bed by a mountain of pillows as she struggled to breathe through the worst, most constricting throat pain she'd experienced in her life. She was so hot, so tired. Yet movement at her bedside caused her eyelids to fly open and remain stuck that way, terror making it impossible to close them. Her family's longtime physician, Dr. Browning, had returned with his lancet and bowl.

"No." She would have screamed and jumped from bed if at all in her power. Instead, she could only cross her arms over her body and speak in a pitiful rasp. "No. No, no, no, no, no."

"Calm yourself, Lavinia." Her mother appeared next to her, placing a hand on her arm, which made her flinch away. "I know you do not care for the sight of blood, but this continued treatment is necessary and for your own good."

Lavinia had to be on the verge of delirium, hysteria, collapse, or a terrifying combination of all three. But still, she managed to detect how her mother's voice wavered despite her best efforts at assuredness.

Consciousness spiraled toward an abyss, about to escape her entirely. Dr. Browning would bleed her again, and that would be the end of her. She had to stop it. To make her mother understand.

Her brain had become enshrouded in fog. But through it, one face remained implanted in her thoughts. One answer. One hope.

"William Harris. Will. I want Will."

When she awoke again, the space had become dim, and a new voice appeared.

"There are too many people about, and the room has turned stifling. If I'm to see to Miss Bathurst properly, I must ask that everyone else leave."



She blinked through the haze of pain, heat, and confusion, trying to establish her surroundings. She must be still alive or she wouldn't hurt like this. And the voice ...

William Harris appeared at her bedside, taking her wrist into his sturdy hand. Oh, thank God. Through some miracle, the voice belonged to Will.

She lacked the ability to tell him that her body burned and her throat felt near the point of closing over. But he didn't require her words to begin his examination. Rather, he got right to it, gently feeling around her neck and mouth in silence.

He'd brought a black medical bag, just like Dr. Browning's. He rummaged inside, pulling out several items and placing them on her bedside table. All meaningless to her, except one, which gleamed brighter than the rest.

A lancet.

Will planned to bleed her too. He agreed with her physician that bloodletting was the proper treatment for her. Even though she knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that one more round would kill her.

She had no more strength left to fight. Therefore, what else was she to do but make peace with it? Will was her friend. The one who'd climbed trees and had a special smile that, though infrequent, seemed to be reserved just for her. Just as well she spend her final moments with him than a crotchety physician who saw her as nothing more than a difficult patient.

Will trickled something into her mouth—brandy?—and poured a little on his lancet. Her heart made a final effort to accelerate, for he was moving close, so close.

Except he didn't touch her arms. His hand went to her chin, carefully easing her mouth open. "I need to act quickly. Do you trust me, Lavinia?"

His face was the only thing left in her field of vision. Brown hair. Brown eyes. Or were they gold? Green? It didn't signify. All that mattered was the expression in them—one of unfaltering certainty. Plus something else. Something

unnameable but so clear and earnest that she knew she could place her faith there, body and soul.

And so, she nodded.

The gesture that had allowed Will to save her life.

All at once, she was snapped back to the present, to the sight of Stephen Harris undoing the lid of his container. A container of leeches. As he did, Will made a sound. One that was low and muffled enough to make it nearly indecipherable. But she understood it nonetheless. *No*.

“No.” She was no longer an ailing girl, struggling to make a sound, in her bed back in Northleigh. She had a voice—it also had to act as Will’s voice at present—and she would damn well use it. “No, you cannot.”

Her frantic protest didn’t cause Stephen so much as a second’s pause from his task. “I assure you that given William’s condition, this is the most appropriate treatment.”

“No!” She sprang forward, wedging herself in the small space between chair and bed. Perhaps she looked comical, a woman a good foot shorter than him whom he could lift to the side with the slightest exertion. She would stand there anyway for as long as she could, placing herself between Will and harm. “It’s a horrible treatment, and didn’t you hear what Will just said? He doesn’t want it.”

Maggie stepped forward from where she’d been waiting near the doorway, her eyes wide with dismay. “Lavinia, you’re overwrought. You must not interfere—”

“Maggie. Miss Hughes. Might you give the new Mrs. Harris and I a moment alone?” For the first time since Lavinia had stepped into the room, Stephen rose from his chair and turned around, looking expectantly at his niece and her companion.

Maggie opened her mouth in protest but seemed to think the better of it. Instead, she hurried from the room without another word, Joanna at her heels.

Leaving Lavinia to face Stephen with no one but the silent, unmoving Will. She planted her feet more firmly against the

floor, willing herself not to tremble.

At least Stephen wasn't the sort to waste time. "I understand you may have concerns." The mild words were likely the closest she would ever get to compassion from him. But just as quickly, his tone became brusque. "However, you need to entrust such decisions to those who are skilled enough to make them. You certainly wouldn't want to feel as though William's death were on your hands."

He may as well have fetched a scalpel from his bag and stabbed her with it for the way pain shot through her body. No. She couldn't let herself begin to even contemplate such a thing, or she would descend into a state of misery from which there was no return. But all the same ... what if he was right?

What if she was indeed too overwrought to think straight? What if she'd merely imagined the sound Will made?

Except she hadn't. Despite the cloying fog of exhaustion and terror, she knew beyond a doubt what she'd heard. *No*.

Stephen's patience came to an end, for he pushed around her, securing Will's arm in his grip. Making Will shudder and flinch beneath his touch, groaning as he attempted, unsuccessfully, to shift to the side.

Stephen released his hold, staring at his nephew as though he presented the greatest sort of medical mystery. And then, he turned back to her, doing nothing to stop her as she reasserted her position between him and Will's bed. She waited, steeling herself for another reprimand or even physical displacement. But when he moved, it was to reach for his medical bag and return the container to its depths.

"Very well then. If you're so determined to refuse bloodletting on his behalf, there is nothing more we can do at present than wait. But let it be known, I do *not* condone this. Should you change your mind, I'll be downstairs. In the meantime, I pray nothing happens that we will both come to regret."

"I—"

Lavinia tried to speak, but opposing torrents of both relief and dread swept over her, taking her breath away. Had her voice not failed her, she may have lost her resolve and called him back because surely doing *something* had to be better than more waiting. But Stephen had already marched from the room, likely offended by the mere sight of her.

Leaving her and Will alone once more. For better or worse.

She sank to the edge of Will's bed, taking the compress that had fallen aside and dipping it in the basin before replacing it on his searing brow.

Once more, she became a girl back at Northleigh Manor, prying her eyes open as she shifted against her mound of pillows. Heat still raged through her body. Her throat still felt scraped raw. But at the same time, the lump that had threatened to choke her was gone. She could swallow. She could *breathe*.

Dr. Browning was nowhere to be seen. Nor her mother. But Will sat beside her, pressing something cool against her neck and forehead.

Will. He'd ... he'd *saved* her.

Her eyelids turned too heavy to keep open, sleep swooping down to claim her once more.

But she'd said something first. Sitting here now, on the edge of Will's bed with her hand against his burning skin, she remembered words that must have previously gotten lost in the delirium she'd experienced that day. Ones she'd croaked out with all the power she could muster before oblivion set in because she needed so badly for him to listen. For him to protect her. *Will you stay with me always? Promise me ... Always ...*

And he had. He'd remained a frequent visitor at Northleigh Manor throughout her fortunately quick recovery. Any disapproval her parents felt due to what he'd done and his position overall was grudgingly set aside because his actions had *saved her life*. As such, he'd kept close until certain of her return to health. Until she was well enough to get back to the

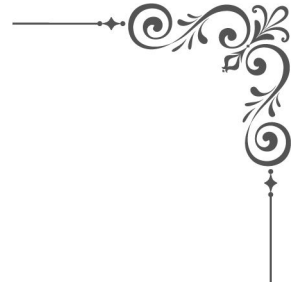
society that enthralled her and to leave Northleigh far behind. Because she'd been too foolish to recognize that she could traverse all of England—all the world, for that matter—and never find another who cared for her as deeply as Will.

She would never possess a touch as skilled and powerful as Will's, but she ran a finger over his heated face anyway, hoping that, at the very least, he would know she was there. For whatever good that might do.

"I love you," she murmured. Not the way she'd envisioned telling him this for the first time. Not the way he deserved. Yet she couldn't waste one more second without saying these words if there was even the slightest chance he could hear them.

She shifted her body to rest against the head of the bed in preparation for the longest night of her life. "I love you, and I pray I've done right by you."

Will had once held her life in his hands. Now, it seemed his life rested in hers.



## Chapter 25

Will's body was on fire. His brain along with it. So often, he'd tried to push past the heated, all-consuming fog and struggle back to sentience. But the fog proved too thick, keeping him trapped.

He was a doctor; that much hadn't escaped him. As such, nor had the fact he was gravely ill. And powerless to help himself.

Voices drifted in and out of his room, all belonging to people doing their best to come to his aid. Maggie, calm and collected, fluttering about in the background, always accompanied by the scents of vinegar and citrus. Joanna, quiet except when she stood beside him and coaxed medicines down his throat. Ones he put great effort into swallowing, for despite any hurt and resentment that lingered between them, he didn't doubt her intelligence for a moment. And Lavinia, keeping her words so soft and gentle that he couldn't decipher them, but they brought comfort nonetheless.

It wasn't until sometime later that a new voice joined the mix. One that had never echoed through this house before but was too familiar for him not to recognize. Uncle Stephen had come. The person who had led him to become a surgeon in the first place and to whom he owed much of his knowledge. If he had a chance of recovery, perhaps this was it.

He wished he were capable of asking his uncle to disclose the severity of his condition, so he could at least know one way or another. But as forming sentences was currently beyond him, he had to content himself with lying there and slipping back into oblivion, trusting that help, in some form, would come.

Lavinia's sharp gasp sent a jolt of ice through his sweltering body, dragging him swiftly back to a semblance of alertness. Using all the strength he could gather, he pried an eyelid open. The room wavered before him, its contents blurred as if covered in dense mist, making it impossible for him to catch sight of Lavinia. His uncle sat close enough to

detect, though, leaning in as he held up ... God, were those leeches?

“No!” Will shouted. At least, that’s what he intended to do. In reality, he may not have managed so much as a croak. He tried uttering the word again, but his mouth refused to cooperate. Blast it all, why could his uncle not see that he was much too far gone for such a treatment?

There was real shouting then. Not his, but from Lavinia, whose shadow suddenly hovered close to him. If only his hearing would sharpen enough to make out what she said. Whatever transpired, his uncle’s voice now came from farther away, and Lavinia spoke in return. Or rather, she argued, her words indecipherable but so insistent.

Had she ... had she somehow understood him? He needed to find just one more scrap of strength to add his voice to hers. However, the fog was closing in on him far too quickly, sending him drifting back into darkness.

A firm hand took hold of his arm, and he tensed, awaiting the sensation of the first leech dropping against his skin.

Whether it came or not would remain a mystery, for in his battle for consciousness, sleep finally won out. And as he slept, he dreamed, the memories of a past day replaying to him with surprising sharpness.

“Lady Bathurst has just sent over a footman to request your immediate presence at Northleigh Manor.”

Will looked up from his pamphlet on inoculation to find his uncle staring at him from the doorway of the study. He stood at once, trying to process the strange request. For what reason could the baroness possibly wish to see him? They hardly knew one another, aside from in passing, as their differing social statuses did nothing to promote an acquaintanceship beyond that.

“It seems the younger Bathurst girl is ill—quinsy, they say—and they wish for you to examine her.” Uncle Stephen folded his arms across his chest, his brow knit even more tightly than usual as he, too, attempted to discover the



meaning behind this odd turn of events. “Why Lady Bathurst asked for an apprentice surgeon in lieu of her longtime physician, I cannot say. I can only imagine that the situation must be dire in order for her to make such a request. If you feel unequal to the task, I could go in your stead. Or shall I accompany you?”

Will’s pounding heart had begun to drown out his uncle’s words. Stephen’s message, though, sounded over and over in his head. *Lavinia Bathurst. Direly ill.*

It hardly seemed possible that anything could vanquish her easy laugh and sunny, carefree disposition. Nonetheless, his uncle had just declared it so. And suddenly, the reason Lady Bathurst had summoned him above others meant nothing. He simply needed to get to Lavinia without delay.

“I’ll go myself. Alone, as requested,” he said, already halfway across the room. He picked up his medical bag on the way out with barely a pause.

He and the footman arrived back at Northleigh Manor in what had to be record time. Yet as he was led upstairs toward Miss Bathurst’s chamber, it felt like it had taken hours too long. His heart had continued its rapid thudding the whole time as he fought to prevent fear from overtaking him. However, when at last he stepped into Lavinia’s room, it immediately became clear that his worries weren’t unfounded. An array of grim-faced people murmured unintelligible words to one another, and in the midst of them all was Lavinia. Looking so small and frail where she lay propped up in an enormous bed, her skin a sickly shade of grayish white.

“Ah, Mr. Harris.” Lady Bathurst stepped forward from where she’d been standing by her daughter’s bed, her usually refined movements jerky. “Forgive us for the abrupt summons. As you can see, Miss Bathurst has urgent need of medical attention. We thought . . . perhaps a second opinion was warranted. My daughter was quite insistent . . .”

A sulking older man, who could only be the Bathursts’ physician, took Lady Bathurst’s hesitancy as an opportunity to rise from the other side of the bed and say his piece. “You

truly think it wise to listen to your daughter's delirious protests against bloodletting and instead place your trust in this ... this unskilled *boy*?" His glower turned from Lady Bathurst to Will as if he'd never seen anything so offensive in his life.

Lady Bathurst stiffened like she'd been struck, her pale eyes filling with fire. And then, she was storming toward the physician and shrieking, something about impertinence and ineptitude. All while valuable seconds slipped away.

"There are too many people about, and the room has turned stifling." Will's terse, commanding tone caused a hush to fall across the space. Just as he'd intended. "If I'm to see to Miss Bathurst properly, I must ask that everyone else leave."

Several sets of eyes widened in his direction. But insults—whether he gave or received them—meant little to him at present. He had no time for arguments or explanations. He simply needed the noise to clear so he could focus, unhindered, on Lavinia.

He waited for a rebuke from either Lady Bathurst or the physician, already debating the quickest way to appease them enough that they would do as he requested. But instead of protesting, Lady Bathurst swept her gaze over the servants that lingered about the room and brought it to rest on the recalcitrant physician. As she did, she uttered a lone word, her voice like steel. "Out."

Will didn't stop to watch them leave or listen for any final whispered objections. He was already at Lavinia's side, his fingers brushing against skin ravaged by fever. Her pulse was abnormally rapid. And as for her throat ... he eased her jaw open, forcing himself not to start as he was confronted with exactly what he feared. The inflammation had grown so great that her throat appeared in danger of closing over. And if that happened ... he couldn't even fathom the possibility.

He could offer her all manner of poultices and liniments and hope they would do some good. However, these treatments took time, and Lavinia's breaths were labored and ragged. What if time was no longer a luxury she possessed?

He rifled through his medical bag, forcing his own breaths not to grow frantic. He needed to fix this. To do *something*.

His hand came to rest on his smallest lancet, and before he could doubt himself, he plucked it from the bag, along with strips of cotton gauze and a small bottle containing brandy. If waiting for the inflammation to subside on its own was a losing battle, why not drain the abscess directly? The procedure wouldn't be without its risks, of course. By making an incision, he could just as easily introduce a new infection. But if he didn't—and if Lavinia's throat grew so swollen that she lost her ability to swallow ... to breathe ...

He should have had his uncle accompany him after all, so he could seek his advice. As that option no longer remained to him, perhaps he should consult with the physician instead to ensure he hadn't concocted a plan completely beyond reason. But where would that get him? He'd be a fool to think the physician would condone anything beyond bloodletting, which he clearly saw as the only proper course of treatment. And although Will was but an apprentice surgeon, he knew with absolute clarity that sticking another lancet in Lavinia's delicate arm, already marked by tiny red slashes, would do more harm than help.

He didn't have another moment to waste in indecision. He set to work cleaning his lancet with brandy and trickling a little into Lavinia's mouth for whatever pain relief the small amount might provide. There could be no hesitating. Any trepidation he felt had to remain unfailingly shut away, for though she may not even be cognizant of her surroundings, he couldn't risk the possibility that she would notice him falter.

He peered into her pale blue eyes—the most beautiful he'd ever seen—as he leaned in far closer than propriety would normally allow, resting a hand lightly atop her trembling chin. “I need to act quickly. Do you trust me, Lavinia?”

Blood pounded through his veins as he awaited the most significant moment of his life. If she gave so much as a flinch to the contrary, he would take it as a sign that he should cease immediately and defer back to the physician.

But she didn't. She nodded.

The jolt of raw, unyielding energy that had followed shot through his body even in his dream, taking him from sleep back to a state of semi-consciousness. So often since that day, well over a year ago now, he'd stolen glances at her whenever he could, hardly able to believe the flourishing, *healthy* woman before his eyes. Whether he should attribute his success in curing her to great skill or great recklessness, he still couldn't say. Ultimately, he supposed it didn't matter either. Nothing mattered as long as he knew Lavinia remained well enough to continue spreading sunshine through the world.

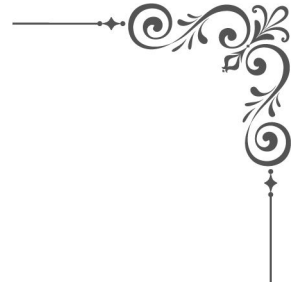
In fact, judging by the light floral scent that wafted through the vinegar, she had to be near him now. His eyelids twitched, enough that he could make out her shadow reclining next to him on the bed.

She shouldn't be here. By getting this close to him, she risked contagion herself. He needed to tell her, to warn her away, but his voice still wouldn't sound, and his lips no longer remembered how to form words. Fresh drowsiness crept up on him, threatening to pull him under. And so, for once, he allowed himself an act of selfishness: the luxury of giving up the fight and falling asleep under Lavinia's watch.

Her voice came to him in another dream, its echo far away but so clear. *I love you*. After that, there was only silence and blackness. But even if he never heard another sound again, those words would be enough to carry him through.

They stayed with him as his body grew drenched in perspiration, and he shook, sensing himself on the verge of drowning. Except then, soft fingers stroked over his forehead, down his face and neck, across his chest.

And for the first time in a long time, the fire within him nearly seemed to abate.



## Chapter 26

When Will first opened his eyes, it was to the blurred vision of Lavinia crying. Immediately, a knot formed in his chest, and he struggled to push his useless body upright.

“Shh.” She placed gentle hands atop his shoulders to still him, her eyes shining in the glow of dim firelight. “I’m merely happy, my love. You should go back to sleep.”

Lulled by the words—whether real or imagined—he let blackness claim him once more, returning him to the foggy oblivion that had become his new state of being.

When he awoke again, sunlight streamed through the window, and his surroundings became a little clearer. Including Lavinia, who, aside from wearing a different dress, remained unchanged in her position on his bed.

The urgency he hadn’t been able to muster while fever racked his body came bursting forward now that the heat had seemingly cooled. “You should keep away.” His voice, while at least functional, came out as a croak, and Lavinia pressed a cup of something cold and sweet against his lips. He took a mouthful and cleared his throat, trying again. “I don’t want you here, risking contagion.”

She shook her head as if she’d never heard anything so ridiculous. “I’ve taken every precaution your uncle suggested. We all have, and thus far, we have all kept well. I’ll do as much as I can to ensure that remains the case. However, if you believe for one minute that I’m willing to leave your side, you had best think again.”

He should argue with her. He should insist. Yet once more, he was besieged with the need to sleep, because that was apparently all he was good for anymore.

The next few days—or were they hours, or weeks?—passed much the same way, a constant cycle of waking only to have fatigue consume him shortly thereafter. Still, each time he opened his eyes, the world grew a bit sharper, while his periods of alertness became a little longer.

He soon became aware of others visiting his room as well. Uncle Stephen, checking his pulse and administering tonics. Nell, dropping off trays of chamomile tea and bland food and carrying in an endless supply of clean linens. And, of course, Lavinia, nearly always sitting and waiting on the bedside chair or on his bed itself. After losing so much time to illness, he had inquiries for every one of them, but they all insisted on the same thing. He needed to keep himself quiet and rest.

He did try to do as they encouraged. However, as his cognition increased, so did his questions. So many events tried to clarify themselves within his brain but remained distorted behind the fevered haze that had accompanied them. Matters concerning his uncle's arrival. Lavinia's constant presence. And her broken final words to him as he'd collapsed at the worst possible time.

He wanted to leap from bed and demand answers from them all. Mostly, Lavinia. If only he were well enough to fold her into his arms, stroke her hair, and whisper questions in her ear about things he may or may not have imagined. As matters stood, he could barely stagger to the other side of the room without growing weary.

He'd survived the fever; for that, he should feel nothing but gratitude. However, during a rare moment one morning in which he awoke to an empty room, he found himself sitting on the edge of his bed and struggling so hard to knot a cravat that he threw the uncooperative scrap to the floor with an oath.

“Are you going somewhere?”

The high, melodic voice caused him to turn toward the doorway, where he found Lavinia leaning against the frame and observing him, a trace of amusement flickering in her eyes.

“Of course not,” he answered churlishly, smoothing down the waistcoat that he'd at least managed to successfully button. Yet as she started toward him, flashing a small smile that made her face radiant, his irritation began dissolving until he could nearly smile in return. He sighed, trying to exhale any

remaining frustration. “I suppose I just wanted to do something other than lie in bed in my shirtsleeves.”

Her pale blue skirts swished across the floor until she stopped in front of him, bending over to retrieve the cravat. “Why is it,” she murmured, folding it around his neck and drawing her eyebrows together as she concentrated on tying a knot, “that you are a wonderful surgeon but a terrible patient?”

He didn’t know whether to scowl or laugh. Surely, he was allowed at least a little tetchiness at becoming so diminished and helpless. To the point his wife had to tie his cravat, which she was doing in a series of large, uneven knots. Funnily enough, though, that realization made his mouth turn up at the corners and his heart give a sudden tug.

“I don’t know.” As Lavinia appeared satisfied with her handiwork, he dropped backward to lie on the bed, staring up at the familiar patch of ceiling. “I’m just so ...” So what? Exasperated? Apprehensive? Confused?

“Bored,” he settled on, for that described at least a bit of the problem.

Lavinia moved to hover above him, filling his view with a swath of pale hair, pearly skin, and bunches of blue fabric. “I could read to you. Enough time has passed that I cannot imagine your uncle objecting to the extra stimulation.”

To an extent, lying back and listening to the soothing hum of her voice sounded like the perfect way to spend the morning. But at the same time, if she was willing to stay and have more than just a few hushed words between them, there was something far more important they needed to do. “Actually, I was hoping we might discuss a few things. Matters that, to me, are sorely lacking in clarity.”

She tensed, her face clouding over, and he struggled back to a sitting position so their eyes were at the same level. “Please, Lavinia.” As he still had reservations about embracing her fully, despite how the risk of contagion should be greatly diminished by now, he contented himself with brushing his knuckles along her bare arm. “I’m beyond the point of a relapse, I assure you. And given what a blur these



past days have been, I'd rest much easier after receiving answers to my questions."

She bit her lip, her face once more creased in thought. "I ... I don't know. You deserve answers, of course, and I have things I wish to tell you as well. But what if it's all too much too soon? Will you promise to alert me if you feel even a hint of fatigue? If your head starts to ache, or if—"

"Yes, I promise," he insisted, wishing he could kiss away the indent at the bridge of her nose. He'd spent so much time worrying about her that he could hardly fault her for doing the same thing in return. Especially after their last meaningful conversation, when she'd poured her heart out, and he'd responded by crashing onto the floor. The inconclusiveness of that encounter was the most frustrating mystery of all.

But he would start with a different topic. One equally as important yet somewhat safer.

He cleared his throat, waiting as she seated herself beside him on the bed. She clenched her hands tightly in her lap, the old habit he recognized from whenever she grew anxious. Her eyes fixed on him, though, the set of her mouth clearly indicating she was ready. As was he.

At least he'd thought he was ready. "After my uncle's arrival, when he was set to begin treatment. You were there, I think ..." He trailed off, the fragments of memory suddenly too jumbled for him to put into words. But they *were* real, weren't they? The container of leeches. Lavinia's gasp. *No. No, you cannot ...*

"I know I shouldn't have interfered. It wasn't my place to speak against your uncle. Please understand that in doing so, I thought only of your best interests." Her eyes had gone huge, and she reached out to clasp his shoulders, her prior reserve forgotten. "I suppose I let my own experience of how you were able to devise a cure for me other than bleeding when I knew I was too weak to withstand it cloud my judgment. You were so weak as well, and though I was too distraught to fully see reason, I thought for sure I heard you protest, and ... and it seemed to work out, for your fever broke on its own that very

night, but if my interference impeded your recovery in any way, I'm sorry. I tried to do what felt most prudent, what I thought you wanted, and—”

“You did hear me,” he cut in, his voice a rasp. So she really had been there all along, looking out for him, trying to anticipate what he needed. And she thought she should apologize for her actions? “You did exactly right. Although I esteem my uncle and have him to thank for so much of what I know, situations do arise from time to time when we're in disagreement over an appropriate treatment. This was one of those occasions, and you understood that. I may very well owe you my life.”

She gave him another of her brilliant half-smiles, though her eyes glimmered with unshed tears. “Only fitting, given that I owe you mine. In more ways than one.”

She leaned into him then, resting her forehead against his chest, and, heaven help him, he didn't have the strength to warn her away. She felt so right against him, her warm, soft weight, that he folded his arms across her back, holding her close. “I would do it all again, a thousand times more if need be. Nothing matters to me as much as knowing you're safe and well. Nothing.”

She lifted her head to look at him again, her face so lovely it nearly glowed. “I feel the same way. I didn't know it was possible to love another person more than life itself. But it is. And I do.”

His hand that had been tracing circles across her back suddenly froze as his breath caught in his throat. Lying in bed, with only his thoughts for company, he'd spent so long trying to determine if the whispered *I love you* that kept echoing through his head was real. He'd been delirious, after all, and could have easily imagined what he most wanted to hear. The matter of how to broach that subject with her had plagued him ever since. But now, he didn't need to. She'd brought it up all on her own. And this time, he was certain he didn't dream.

He couldn't speak. He needed a moment, for what were the appropriate words when receiving the gift one wanted more

than anything else in the world? Especially after believing that it was next to impossible to obtain.

Fortunately, Lavinia didn't expect a speech. Instead, she placed a hand against his jaw, bestowing him with more gentleness than he could fathom. "I love you so much. I'll forever count your offer of marriage as the luckiest circumstance of my life. My only regret in all this is not telling you these things sooner. I know I was a fool, spending so long blind to what lingered right in front of me. But no more. From now on, I refuse to let a single day pass without reminding you of the depths of my love."

His head felt strangely light, although under no circumstances would he tell her to end the conversation. Besides, this wasn't an aching, weary sort of sensation. On the contrary, he had more energy than he'd experienced in days. Almost as if he were miraculously cured and could run outdoors, rush up the elm tree, and shout his elation over the fields and across the ocean.

But because he wasn't quite too far gone to recognize the unfeasibility of that plan, he stayed as he was, close to her, pressing a hand to the back of her neck. "You cannot imagine how happy you've made me. And it bears saying again how deeply I love you, Lavinia. My sunshine. I think I have since the moment you first led me up that tree back in Northleigh. Never expecting anything to come from it, of course. But fortune has a funny way of leading us places we don't anticipate, does it not?"

He reached around to her cheek, brushing away the few tears that had broken out along with her smile. Perhaps this moment didn't need grand, poetic words. He simply needed to make her understand. To assuage any of her fears.

"I love you. All of you." He would never get tired of uttering that phrase, especially knowing the feeling was reciprocated. However, there was something else he had to tell her, even if it caused a momentary sting. "I want you to know that you, alone, are enough. We don't need to have children to make our lives complete. As long as I have you by my side, I'll be happy."

She paused a minute, searching his face, and when at last she spoke, her voice had gone quiet. “You’re so ... so *good* to me, Will. And with you by my side, I’ll always be happy as well. But I want you to know that during the worst of your illness, I discovered something.”

She moved her hands back to his shoulders, tightening her grip. “Yes, I’m afraid. Maybe a part of me always will be, but I don’t want to let that stop me. For I keep imagining having a little piece of us both to hold in my arms, a child with your strength, intelligence, and goodness. And, in time, I believe there’s nothing I would like more, if we may be so fortunate.”

He’d tried so hard not to think of that image himself, but now it flooded him. A child with Lavinia’s pale beauty. One who would smile at him and light up his world. And the more the vision flashed in his mind, the more he wanted it too. At least as a possibility.

He hugged her against him, resting his chin atop her wispy blonde hair. “If that’s what the future has in store for us, I would like that very much as well. But we’ll do it on your terms, Lavinia. There are various precautions we can take in the meantime. And you must promise that you’ll never hesitate to share how you’re feeling.”

“No, never again,” she murmured into his chest, nuzzling a little tighter. “For the rest of our days, there will be only honesty between us, in all things. I swear it.”

With the warmth of her body pressed into him, his eyelids grew obtrusively heavy. However, fatigue didn’t come to claim him accompanied by the same weighty sense of uncertainty as before. Now, there was a lightness, making him nearly believe that if he slept, it would be peaceful and dreamless.

“I think we’ve done enough conversing for the moment.” Lavinia pulled her head out from under his, flashing him another placid smile to ease the blow of him losing her embrace. Very gently, she nudged him backward, encouraging him to pull his legs up and lie on the pillow, waistcoat, cravat,

and all. “You should rest again, my love. I certainly don’t need another reason to anger your uncle.”

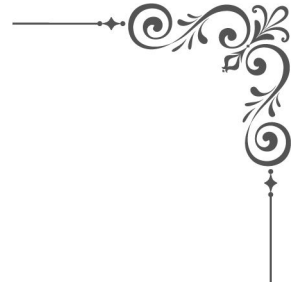
Because it was Lavinia, he would do as she asked and not act like the terrible patient she accused him of being. Nonetheless, he couldn’t help the short sigh that escaped him as he fought to keep his eyes open long enough to catch a few more glimpses of her. Eventually, he would cease sleeping half the morning away like an infant still in leading strings. Eventually, when he took to bed in broad daylight with Lavinia beside him, it would be for a purpose far different from resting.

“Patience, doctor.” She leaned over him as if reading his mind, her loose strands of hair tickling his jaw. “Every day, you grow stronger. The time will come when this period of convalescence is nothing but a memory. When we lie in this bed together in the future, we’ll do much more than sleep. But in order to achieve all this, you now need to rest.”

Her words reached him somewhere between consciousness and oblivion. Perhaps he would dream after all, of soft lips and heated caresses. While a poor substitute, it would do him until he obtained the real thing.

He almost struggled back to wakefulness so he could ask her to stay nearby before the dream had a chance to vanish. But he didn’t need to. At the edge of his awareness, he detected her shuffling her body, stretching her legs out beside him on the bed. Stroking his hair, murmuring words that almost sounded like a song.

He went to sleep, knowing that she was his and he was hers. That someday soon, he would awake to reality even better than a dream. And for that, he could rest easy indeed.



# Epilogue

## Three months later

“Are you happy, my darling?”

Lavinia took one more look at the late afternoon sun slanting across the lawn of Sydney Gardens before turning to Will, squeezing his arm as they continued with their leisurely stroll. “So happy. This is lovely.”

She smiled at him and, because she felt especially daring, popped up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to his lips, unconcerned with what any passersby might think. Whatever it took to show how much she appreciated what he'd done for her.

When the time finally came that he'd recovered enough from his illness to carry out his usual activities without growing fatigued, she'd prepared herself for having him focus on his work with even more intensity than usual. But while he'd certainly wasted no time in getting back to his patients, he'd also fallen into bed late one night, after a particularly busy day, and whispered in her ear: *I think we should go on holiday, just the two of us. A delayed wedding trip of sorts. Would you like to?*

Which was how, six weeks later, they found themselves holidaying in Bath. Will had worried when she suggested the location that it wasn't nearly fashionable enough for her. *We could go farther*, he'd insisted. *Even to London, if you wish it.* But he didn't understand. She had no desire to travel for the purpose of trying to reassert herself in the life she'd left behind. She simply wanted to be with him, without distractions or interruptions. And funnily enough, the thought of venturing too far from the home they'd built together in Lynnford caused an uncomfortable pang to shoot through her chest.

“What are you thinking of? You look like you're drifting away.” Will stalled a moment before veering to the side, pulling her beneath the leafy branches of a plane tree so he could study her face.



She gave her head a shake, bringing herself back to the present. How long had she been caught up in thought? She peered at him in return, the gentle set of his mouth and green-gold of his eyes pulling her in. Assuring her that she could tell him anything. “I’m thinking of how happy I am to be here with you, just as I said. I can imagine few things nicer, truly. But at the same time ... and, oh, this is going to sound ridiculous ... I miss Dash. For that matter, I miss our whole home. And Nell, and Maggie, and Owen, and ... and everyone and everything.”

She would have looked at the ground after making such an admission, but Will’s hand moved to lightly cup her chin, keeping her face angled toward him.

“No, not ridiculous at all.” The way he grinned at her—full of both amusement and understanding—made it difficult for her to refrain from leaping into his arms and scandalizing the other patrons altogether. “As glad as I am for this holiday, I miss them too. Knowing we have such a home to which we can return together makes me happier than I can say. But in the meantime, I hope you won’t mind staying in Bath a few days longer. Indeed, you may find something to encourage your continued presence here.”

He started walking again toward the entrance of their hotel, his lips pressed together in a poor attempt at concealing his lingering smile.

“Such as?” She stared at him now, no longer remembering to pay attention to the path in front of her. Her notice fell on Will alone, for something about the airy quality of his words and the glint in his eyes suggested he knew something she didn’t.

“Could you spare me a while?” Gently, he unhooked his arm from hers, bending to give her a quick kiss on the forehead before stepping away. “I have some correspondence I should catch up on before dinner. Why don’t you continue your stroll a little longer? I’ll see you in our room once you’re through.”

“But—” She began to protest, but he was already hurrying away, back into the hotel. Leaving her standing alone on the lawn.

How unbelievably odd. Why would he depart so abruptly? It certainly wasn't like him to rush off with such a vague explanation, especially when doing so caused her to be left in a strange place unaccompanied.

And then she saw. Across the grass from her, stepping out from beneath the shadow of a large oak branch, was a figure who appeared uncannily familiar. A young lady with deep golden hair arranged artfully beneath her bonnet and a flowing green dress that didn't quite conceal the bump at her midsection.

“Catherine?” Lavinia stared, taking a tentative step toward the person who seemed to be approaching her in return. Did her eyes deceive her? Catherine had been her friend for many years. A guest in her home when Catherine's father, the Earl of Ashton, grew critically ill and she had no other family of her own. A companion who had made her debut at the same time and attended many of the same high society events as Lavinia, albeit with less enthusiasm. A timid but captivating young woman who had found herself betrothed to one of society's most popular viscounts at the same fateful house party where Lavinia first attracted Lord Carington's attentions.

Catherine was Viscountess Kendrick now, in line to become a marchioness. Why would she have traveled to Bath—in her condition—before the end of the London Season? It made no sense. But at the same time, the closer Lavinia drew to her, the more it became apparent that she didn't misinterpret who she saw. Until suddenly, Lavinia was running across the lawn, not able to stop despite the little voice inside whispering that Catherine was far above her now, that she might want nothing to do with her ...

Yet when they collided in an unladylike tumble, Catherine's arms embraced her, and she gave a tiny laugh. “Why, Lavinia! It really is you. After all this time, I can scarcely believe it.”

Lavinia forced herself to take a step backward so she could peer at her friend once more. Catherine could scarcely believe it? She, too, was shocked, almost to the point of speechlessness. She'd just assumed she would never cross paths with anyone from her old life again. Especially here. Now. "Wh-what are you doing here?" she managed.

Catherine laughed again, making her dark eyes sparkle. She'd always been beautiful, but standing here on the lawn, she appeared positively radiant. Married life clearly agreed with her. "I grew weary of London and felt I needed a change. I'm allowed to make such demands, you know, given my 'interesting condition.' Philip had no objections to a holiday. I think the Season holds less appeal for him than it used to. And so, here we are."

Lavinia gave a quick glance around for the viscount whose dashing good looks and charming manners sent the ladies of the ton swooning, but he didn't appear to be among the guests strolling around the gardens.

"Philip has already gone into the hotel to get settled," Catherine explained in response to Lavinia's searching look. "He'll wish to see you later, of course. But for now, he thought we may like a little time just the two of us."

Lavinia grinned at her friend but then froze as the significance of her words started to set in. Did that mean ... had Catherine and Philip somehow known she would be here? Will's face flashed in her mind. The sly smile he'd done a pitiable job of hiding. The way he'd so peculiarly rushed off and left her alone. "Were you aware ...?" She trailed off, uncharacteristically speechless once more. "Did Will ...?"

"I hope you don't mind." Catherine turned her eyes to the ground for a moment, her cheeks flushing a rosy shade of pink. "You stopped writing me, and I grew worried. After I learned of your marriage, your mother told me you had been ill, but I could get little information beyond that. So much time passed without me hearing a word that eventually, I could think of nothing else to do but write to your husband. I apologize if you think me too bold, but I so wanted to know

you were well. As it turned out, one letter led to another until, again, here we are.”

“Of course I don’t mind, and it is I who must apologize for being so remiss with my correspondence.” A lump rose in Lavinia’s throat, which she promptly forced herself to swallow away. She’d stopped writing Catherine for the same reason she’d done so with her family: the fear they’d view a continued association with her as a shameful burden. However, Catherine showed just as much enthusiasm at seeing her as usual. More, really, given Catherine’s tendency toward reserve. Just like they were the same two girls—Lady Catherine and Miss Bathurst—they’d always been. Once more, Lavinia had to clear tightness away from her throat. “I have so much to tell you. And you have much to tell me as well, I think.”

“Indeed.” Catherine absently ran a hand over her protruding abdomen before she linked their arms together, steering Lavinia on a path toward the hotel just as Will had done. “I daresay we could spend the rest of the day conversing and still not find it enough time. But before we get started, there’s something—*someone*, actually—I should take you to. A companion who made the journey along with me in hopes of seeing you, if you would be agreeable.”

“I ...” Lavinia’s eyes darted around the crowded gardens, words failing her once again. Someone else to see *her*? Her heart began beating in a series of rapid flutters.

Catherine brought them to a halt just inside the hotel’s entrance, leaning close to Lavinia’s ear so she could keep her voice low. “If you’ll excuse me a moment, I should go up and see how Philip is getting on. Perhaps we could meet here again in an hour’s time?”

She didn’t wait for a response. Instead, she shuffled across the foyer, moving toward the stairs, before Lavinia could utter a word. This was beyond peculiar. First Will and now Catherine?

Except as Catherine brushed past a wingback chair near the staircase, the figure seated within it rose, revealing a few

tendrils of silvery blonde hair beneath the back of her bonnet. Hair Lavinia would recognize anywhere, for it was so like her own. Her heart gave an abrupt lurch as suddenly, everything fit into place, even before the figure had fully turned around to reveal her face.

“Mama?”

Her mother peered at her from across the room, her clasped hands and neutral expression giving nothing away. But then, she was approaching Lavinia where she still stood in awe near the entrance, her footsteps not quite as measured as usual. Lavinia’s feet twitched, eager to run and crash into her just as she’d done to Catherine, but her mother wouldn’t thank her for making such a scene. Nor did she even know where she stood with her mother. Or what this encounter meant.

And so, she stayed just as she was, clasping her own hands in a gesture to mimic her mother’s, trying to calm the hurried beating in her chest.

“Lavinia.” Her mother stopped in front of her, sweeping her head down in the most proper of greetings. Aware they were in a public venue and could be observed. Unaware of what to do with her body beyond those stiff motions.

For a moment, Lavinia had imagined a joyous reunion with the parent she never expected to see again. But perhaps she’d gotten ahead of herself. Had her mother really accompanied Catherine and Philip to Bath because she wished to visit her? Or could her travels have some other purpose? Or had she even been coerced?

“I’m pleased to see you,” Lavinia said evenly, taking extra care not to let the anxiousness in her thoughts come out in her words. “You’re well, I trust? Or have you come to take the waters? For I seem to recall you saying that no one of great consequence comes to Bath any longer unless their health necessitates it.”

“I am well, and no, I have not.” Her mother seemed to be taking the same caution with her words that Lavinia had. “As for the last part, perhaps I was wrong. For one’s daughter could be considered a person of great consequence.”

So her mother *had* come for the purpose of visiting her? Lavinia blinked, refusing to make a spectacle by letting the tears that stung the corners of her eyes fall.

“You look well, Lavinia.” Her mother’s gaze traveled the length of her, from her walking shoes to the simple hair knot she’d piled at her nape. “I hope the past months have been as kind to you as could be expected.”

How could she begin to explain? The events of the past months had broken her down and brought her to some of the lowest points of her life. Yet she’d always risen, taking the wreckage and rebuilding something even better than before. All because she had Will steadfastly at her side.

“I’m well.” She had to keep her voice low to prevent it from bursting with emotion. “I’m so happy. And I’m in love, Mama, with the most wonderful man on earth.”

Her mother’s head tilted to the side, her forehead wrinkling, but she couldn’t conceal the shadow of a smile that brushed her lips. “I’m not sure if I will ever fully understand you. However, that is of little consequence, as long as you’re happy. As for this declaration of love, I suppose it shouldn’t surprise me. There was always ... *something* there with Mr. Harris, was there not?”

The threat of tears had passed now, leaving only a joy that made Lavinia so light she could nearly float to the ceiling. Her mother was right. Maybe at times she’d gotten too preoccupied by meaningless distractions to notice, but there was always something there between her and Will. Something she would spend the rest of her life celebrating.

“How right you are.” Thus far, she’d kept herself constrained to avoid embarrassing her mother with outward displays of affection. However, she could hold it in no longer. In one swift movement, she encircled her mother in her arms, giving her a tight, satisfying hug before pulling away just as quickly. “Thank you, Mama. For coming. For seeing me. Would you like to join Catherine and me for a walk in an hour? For right now, I’m afraid I have another brief matter to attend to.”

The beginning of her mother's nod was all the answer she needed. Then Lavinia, like Will and Catherine before her, flitted toward the stairs without another word, bouncing up each tread as if walking on air.

Will was in their room just as he said, a small stack of books and papers surrounding him at the mahogany writing desk by the window. He turned to her as she burst through the door, his face placid. "Did you enjoy the remainder of your walk?"

"You arranged all this for me." She rushed forward, leaning against the edge of the desk as she tried to catch her breath. "You hurried away before I could say so much as a word in question, but I know you did. The visit from Catherine. You went out of your way to surprise me."

He shrugged as if he hadn't just proved to her once again that he was the most wonderful man on earth. "Lady Kendrick also had something to do with it. I'll rely on you to give us a face-to-face introduction later. To begin, I thought you might like to speak to her alone."

She flung herself into his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Thank you. A thousand times, thank you. Seeing Catherine was so uplifting. And did you know about my mother accompanying her?"

He gripped her waist, his fingers tracing circles across her lower back. "Lady Kendrick mentioned it as a possibility."

"My mother wished to see me. She's happy for us, Will, in her way." Lavinia would have to take care that her face didn't crack from too much smiling. "I think that's a very promising start. More than I could have hoped. Why, I believed I might never lay eyes on any of them again."

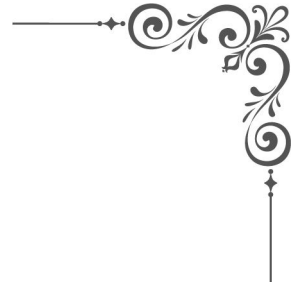
"I'm so glad it brought you happiness." His hand continued idly caressing her, sending fresh warmth shooting through her body. "I recognize how challenging it is to be pulled from the only life you've ever known and cast into something entirely different. And while I know you're coming to settle in Lynnford, I thought you might appreciate a small reminder of your former home."

“How is it,” she said, pressing her face against the side of his neck and inhaling the scent that brought her both comfort and yearning, “that you sometimes know me better than I know myself? That you seem to understand just what I need? I *do* appreciate the reminder. I’m beyond grateful those relationships haven’t been lost to me. But at the same time, I’ve come to realize something.”

He nestled into her, his breath hot and enticing against her ear. “And what is that, my darling?”

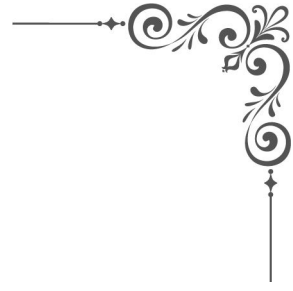
“Reconnecting with my mother and friend was lovely. But I want no part of my previous life beyond that.” She pulled away just a little, enough that she could peer at the face that had come to mean more to her than anything else in the world. The man she loved. “I used to dream of London ballrooms and titles and estates in faraway places, but those things are insignificant to me now. The happiness they bring doesn’t last. So many aspects of our lives shift and change over time, but throughout it all, I’ve discovered one thing that’s a constant. It’s you, Will, and the love you give me. That’s all I really need.”





## Author's Note

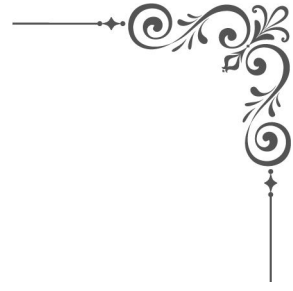
To say the practice of medicine has undergone changes over the past couple centuries would be an understatement. One such difference relates to the definition of the term “surgeon.” During the regency era, a surgeon was more of what we would consider a general practitioner today. While surgeons indeed performed operations, their duties also included setting bones, treating eye and skin conditions, and dealing with other common ailments that required hands-on care. For this reason, they differed from their university-educated, socially superior counterpart, the physician. A physician’s main focus was on diagnosing illnesses based on a patient’s reported symptoms and on prescribing appropriate treatments, all while performing very little manual labor. In a time and place where working with one’s hands was considered ungentlemanly, this allowed physicians to still enjoy high social status, a privilege denied to surgeons due to the frequent need for them to get their hands dirty, so to speak. While changes in knowledge and beliefs caused the line between physician and surgeon to blur as time went on, the distinction was still very much at play during the early nineteenth century.



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## About the Author

Jane Maguire is a Canadian author whose lifelong passions for history, writing, and love stories inevitably led her to begin penning historical romance novels. While her love of historical fiction spans all eras, she focuses her writing on high society in the glittering regency period. She enjoys crafting stories with lots of angst, which makes giving her characters their happily ever afters all the more satisfying.

When she isn't at her computer writing and researching, you can find her vacationing in the Rocky Mountains, playing classical music on the piano, or simply curling up with a cup of tea and a good book. She lives with her husband, two kids, a five-pound guard dog, and a very floofy cat.

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