

A woman with dark hair styled in an updo, wearing a black, short-sleeved, high-waisted dress with a white lace collar, stands in a lush garden. In the background, a large, multi-story stone house with a classical facade is visible under a blue sky with light clouds. The garden features manicured hedges, stone balustrades, and various plants.

BB

BOOK
THREE

MR. WEST

AND

The Widow

A BRAZEN BEAUTIES NOVEL

SOPHIE
BARNES

MR. WEST AND THE WIDOW

THE BRAZEN BEAUTIES

BOOK THREE

SOPHIE BARNES

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Wiltshire, 1820

Colin West finished the tangy tomato and mutton stew he'd been served and downed the last of his Bass ale. He deliberately kept the left side of his face averted from the rest of the Screaming Rooster's guests. The roadside tavern was fuller now than when he'd arrived, the tables near him occupied not just by men, but by women and children too.

Inhaling deeply, he glanced through the beveled glass window beside him and studied the Wiltshire sky. Additional clouds had gathered since his arrival, their murkiness heralding rain. Wildflowers dotting the ditch across the road with a mixture of blues, yellows, and reds swayed from side to side. A gust of wind caught hold of a tree and ruffled its leaves.

Setting his jaw, Colin retrieved the payment he owed from his pocket and dropped the coins next to his bowl. Time to go if he was to make it home before the storm hit. Woodstone Park wasn't far now – a one hour ride at most. He grabbed his hat from the chair beside him and set it upon his head, pulled

his greatcoat collar as high as he could, and stood, hoping to make his escape without any fuss.

Head bowed and with his chin tucked close to his chest, he moved toward the door. The smell of melting lard, roast meat, and charcoal infused the air. One of the servers called out an order. The well-worn floorboards creaked beneath Colin's boots. Laughter erupted from the table to his right. A young boy, no more than eight years of age, rocked back in his chair and blocked Colin's path.

Damn.

"Excuse me," Colin said, his voice gruff.

The boy turned in his seat, his gaze falling on Colin's chest.

"Steven," a large, bearded man, most likely the boy's father, spoke. "Get out of the way, will you?"

Steven shifted as though prepared to do as requested only to lose his balance. His eyes widened in panic, his small hands frantically trying to grab the edge of the table only to have it slide out from under his fingers. With a yelp, he fell, while his father scrambled to grab him.

Colin swooped forward into a crouch, catching the boy before he hit the ground.

Steven stared up at him and gasped, his eyes wide with an all too familiar horror. Twisting, he pushed at Colin as though he'd come face to face with a monster.

"What's the matter with you?" Steven's father asked of his son.

“Nothing,” Steven stammered while scuttling away from where Colin still knelt.

“Forgive me,” Colin muttered, his chest tight. “I only wanted to help.”

“And we thank you for it,” a woman said, her voice pleasant but firm.

Colin closed his eyes briefly, expelled a deep breath and rose, acutely aware of the silence - the fact that all eyes were on him. Straightening, he raised his chin, directed his gaze at the man he presumed to be Steven’s father, and allowed him to see what had frightened the boy.

Alarm pulled at the man’s features. His hand settled firmly upon Steven’s shoulder as he drew him closer. He gave a stiff nod - a show of appreciation while simultaneously telling Colin to leave.

Colin held the man’s gaze for an extra beat, hands fisted at his sides, before swinging away and heading toward the exit. Cutlery clattered behind him and sighs of relief escorted him out. He pushed through the heavy oak door, straight into a gust of wind that nearly knocked his hat off his head. Pressing it back into place, he strode to the stables and collected his horse, Midnight.

Unlike the travelers inside the tavern, the groom didn’t retreat from his presence. Appreciative, Colin dipped one hand into his greatcoat pocket, collected a penny, and tossed it to the man.

“Thank you,” Colin told him as he swung up into his saddle, the leather squeaking beneath his weight.

The groom nodded. “I wish you a safe onward journey, sir.”

Colin snatched the reins, tightened his grip, and kicked his horse into motion. The beast reared its head with a snort, stepping sideways in agitation until Colin turned him about so they faced the right direction. Then, loosening his hold to give the horse power, he urged him into a gallop.

The country road stretched for miles, winding past endless fields. Chased by the worsening weather, Colin whipped the reins and urged his horse faster. Rain was already falling, splashing into his eyes so he struggled to see. Thunder cracked from above and rumbled around him. A flash of light lit up the darkening sky.

The rain fell harder, like water poured from a bucket, drenching Colin and turning the tightly packed dirt road to mud. Like a naughty child bent on mischief, a gust of wind whipped across his head, taking his hat with it.

Colin muttered a curse and gritted his teeth. Another flash of lightning revealed a collection of branches and leaves in his path, and Midnight was racing directly toward it.

“Halt!” Colin pulled on the reins and leaned back. Midnight skidded, his hindquarters dipping as he responded to Colin’s command. An unhappy whinny followed before he straightened, rearing up onto his long hind legs while tossing his head with displeasure. His front legs landed with a hard thud, sending a jolt up Colin’s spine.

“Easy does it,” he murmured, leaning forward to stroke Midnight’s neck. “The bridge is blocked. We’ll have to go around.”

Pulling Midnight sideways, Colin steered the horse to the right, across a waterlogged meadow, away from the road. They’d have to follow the river until they reached the crossing at Pinehill, which would add at least ten additional miles to the journey.

Hell and damnation!

Slowed by mud, Midnight plodded forward at a steady gait. Colin squeezed the reins, his body tense in a hopeless effort to ward off the chill in his bones.

Midnight snorted, fogging the air, and Colin wiped his brow in a futile attempt to get the water out of his eyes.

A heavy sigh pushed its way out of his chest. He glanced around and then he saw it, a glow immediately to his right, slightly obscured by a cluster of trees.

“Come on.” Although he knew he’d likely be turned away at the door, Colin directed Midnight toward the house in the distance. Drenched to the bone, he’d happily risk being spurned for even the slightest chance of getting warm.

Ordinarily, he favored the cooler climate accompanied by rain and frost. With summer came heat and the flood of memories taking him back to Aboukir - to the desert sand beneath his boots, agonized screams of men getting slaughtered, and the cloying stench of death so thick it still made him retch.

He shuddered and buried the thought by focusing all his senses on Midnight's solid stride, the smell of wet dirt, and the stubborn splash of rain.

The house in the distance grew larger, stretching and transforming as Colin made his approach, until it loomed before him, a large square block with a pitched roof and a single light burning behind a downstairs window.

Colin swung from his saddle and landed on the ground with a thud. He patted Midnight, grabbed his satchel, and walked to the heavy front door. The partially washed away gravel beneath his boots shifted and crunched with each step he took.

Fisting his hand, he positioned himself with his left side turned away from whoever might answer his call, and knocked. Water fell from the roof in cascades, splashing onto his legs before turning to rivers that ran down the steps.

He knocked again. Thunder cracked and lightning flashed. Midnight shifted and shook his head with a whinny.

“Stay,” Colin commanded.

He prepared to knock once more when the door eased open just enough to reveal an older woman with narrowed eyes, thin lips set in a firm line, and creases etched upon her brow. Her white cap and black serviceable dress suggested she was a maid.

“Yes?” she asked, staring at Colin with pale, demanding eyes.

“I’m sorry to bother you on a night like this, but the bridge back yonder is blocked by a tree. I’m unable to cross it and with the weather being what it is, I was hoping you might be willing to give me a dry spot for the night, even if it’s in the stables.”

The maid stared him up and down, then glanced past his shoulder at Midnight. “Name?”

He reached inside his greatcoat and retrieved a calling card. Embarrassed to note it was damp and the top corner slightly bent, he returned it to his pocket. “Mr. West of Woodstone Park.”

“One moment,” the woman said. The door closed with a thunk.

Colin cupped his hands and breathed warm air onto his palms. It didn’t do much. He’d need a good hour in front of a fire before he expelled the clammy chill coursing through his veins.

The door swung open again and the maid moved aside. “In you come.”

“What about my horse?”

“It will be taken to the stables.”

Colin thanked her and crossed the threshold, taking care to keep the left side of his face averted. The door closed and the maid dropped her gaze to the large puddle forming around his feet.

“Sorry about the mess.”

“I wager you’ll want to get out of those clothes so you can get warm,” she said, looking up. “A hot bath will help.”

“I don’t want to burden you.” It hadn’t escaped Colin’s notice that there was no butler or even a footman in sight. “A fire will serve just fine.”

“I have my orders,” she said. “A bath will be prepared soon enough. This way, Mr. West.”

Colin followed the maid through a sparsely furnished hallway toward the stairs. The carpet runner was old, filled with patches where tufts had been worn away to reveal the backing. Not a single piece of artwork adorned the walls though discolored marks showed where some had once hung.

The steps creaked and moaned as the pair climbed to the first-floor landing where a hallway extended in both directions with six doors leading off it. Windows at each end provided natural light, though this was greatly dimmed now due to the weather.

“You’ll be staying here,” said the maid once they reached the door farthest to the right. She opened it to reveal a sizable space containing a double bed, a dresser, an armchair, and a table upon which an oil lamp stood waiting alongside a flint box. A brass tub positioned to one side waited to be filled.

“It’s perfect,” Colin assured her despite the thick smell of mildew harassing his nose. He moved so she still only saw his good side, and set his satchel on the floor.

“If you’re able to build your own fire, I’ll see to heating some water and having a meal prepared.”

“Thank you but—”

“Like I said, I’ve got my orders.”

She was gone before Colin could argue.

He stared at the door, then swept his palm across his face and raked his fingers through his sodden hair. Moving swiftly, he shrugged out of his greatcoat and hung it on a wall hook, then crouched before the fireplace and selected a log from a discolored iron rack. After getting the fire going, he warmed his palms for a moment before grabbing the white linen towel that hung by the washstand. He rubbed it over his head with rough movements.

A knock sounded and Colin deliberately turned so his left side faced the wall. “Come in.”

A man with thick white hair and bushy brows entered with a steaming pail in each hand. He had to be well past sixty. “Water for your bath, sir.”

Colin stepped forward. “Allow me to help.”

The man hesitated. “Doesn’t seem quite right seeing as you’re the guest and all.”

“That may be, but I’m not the sort to take advantage. Please. It would make me feel better.”

“Well in that case...” The man set the pails down and rotated his shoulders. “As regrettable as it is, I’m not as young as I once was. But the exercise does me good. Name’s Reynolds. Mark Reynolds.”

“I’m Colin West.”

“Aye. So I’ve heard.” Mark watched while Colin grabbed both pails and emptied them into the tub. “Thought you might like to know that your horse is safely secured in the stables. Gave him some fresh hay myself.”

“Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it.” Mark reached for the empty buckets. “I’ll fetch some more water.”

“Let’s do it together.”

Mark looked as though he’d like to accept but felt he ought to protest. “Pouring the water’s one thing. Having you fetch it is quite another. Not really the done thing, if you know what I mean.”

“I really must insist,” Colin said. No way in hell would he let the old man trudge up and down stairs, carrying water while he lounged on his arse.

Mark hesitated briefly, then shrugged one shoulder. “We’d best get on with it then if you mean to take a hot bath.”

Ten minutes later, after two additional trips, Colin peeled his wet clothes from his body and sank with a sigh into heavenly warmth.

He hadn’t met other servants while helping Mark with his errand. Not in the stairwell nor in the kitchen. When he’d commented on it, Mark had replied, “We’ve got what we need.”

Which made Colin wonder about his host.

What sort of man ran a house this size with a skeleton staff?

A frugal one.

Or one with financial troubles, considering the threadbare linen he'd found on his bed and the otherwise lack of wealth on display.

He climbed from the bath and went to towel off in front of the fire. Warmed by the dry heat from the flames and the humid steam rising from the water, he retrieved a clean set of clothes from his satchel and dressed. He paused briefly before the oval mirror that hung on the wall and stared at his face - one side perfect, the other side ruined forever by meaningless war.

Except it was more than his face that had been destroyed on that fateful day in the desert heat. Lives, not only of the wounded soldiers, but of their families waiting back home, had been forever changed. And then there were those who hadn't made it.

His good friend Richard Hughes had been at his side. They'd been heading up the beach together with James Dale and Grayson Grier, who'd been right behind them. Until a quick shot to the head from a sniper had struck Richard down. Colin had barely registered his demise before a cannon blast sent him flying.

Closing his eyes, he blocked out his tarnished reflection and took a calm breath. It was, he'd learned, the quickest way to ward off the anger that twisted inside him whenever he let his mind linger upon that long ago day.

Best he get out of the room too and away from the mirror. The meal the maid had promised would offer a welcome distraction as well, so he made his way downstairs and went in search of the dining room.

The first door he opened led to a parlor, the next to an unfurnished space where faded curtains and an equally faded carpet seemed to serve as a reminder of better days. He shut the door and continued his progress through the hallway. His hand reached out toward another door handle.

Someone cleared their throat and Colin froze.

“That’s a restricted area, Mr. West.”

He turned his right side toward the maid who’d approached with a near silent tread. “I was attempting to find the dining room.”

“Last door on your right,” she said. “If you make yourself comfortable, I’ll fetch your meal.”

“Thank you, Miss...”

“Mrs. Reynolds,” she corrected.

“Mark’s wife?”

She folded her hands and raised her chin. “He’s never been one for formalities, but you’ll not have my given name, Mr. West.”

“I wouldn’t expect to.” He withdrew his hand from the handle he’d been about to use and walked to the door at the end of the hallway.

The solitary place setting Colin found suggested he would be dining alone. Did that mean the master was presently absent or that he deliberately chose not to join his uninvited guest? He decided it must be the latter once his meal arrived - a savory dish consisting of roast chicken, potatoes, and steamed vegetables. It seemed unlikely servants would offer up such food unless they'd been ready to serve their employer.

“May I ask who the owner of this estate is?” Colin inquired when Mark came to clear his plate. “I should like to know to whom I’m indebted and offer my thanks.”

“Leighton is the name,” Mrs. Reynolds said before her husband could reply. She’d brought a trifle, served in a chipped glass bowl, which she set on the table in front of Colin. “We’ll be sure to pass along your appreciation.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Reynolds, but I—”

“When you’re done eating, you may take a drink in the library. It’s just across the hall from here. You cannot miss it.” She gave him a pointed stare. “I would ask that you not wander about the rest of the house. This is after all a private residence, not an inn. Several rooms are off limits. Is that understood?”

“Absolutely. It was not my intention to overstep in any way. As I explained before, I was merely trying to find the dining room.”

“Good. I shall leave you to finish your supper then. Please ring the bell when you’re done eating, and enjoy the rest of your evening.” Moving briskly with a stiff posture, Mrs. Reynolds turned and left.

“Don’t mind her,” said Mark. He set Colin’s used plate and cutlery on a tray. “She’s very protective of our employer and unaccustomed to having guests.”

“Her loyalty is commendable. I take no issue with it.”

Mark smiled, added a nod, and took his leave, allowing Colin to savor his trifle. The berries, sherry-soaked sponge cake, and custard delighted his taste buds. As soon as he was done, he pushed back his chair and stood. Following Mrs. Reynolds’s request, he rang the bell pull, then went in search of the drink she’d offered.

Contrary to the rest of the house, the library turned out to be a wondrous work of art lined with bays of shelving. Portraits of philosophers and poets bordered the ceiling cornice. An ornate marble fireplace and large bay windows interrupted the shelving and offered comfortable reading nooks.

At the center of the room stood a wide oak table with a globe set upon it and books stacked to one side. A silver tray contained two crystal decanters. Colin selected one, removed the stopper, and sniffed the contents. Brandy.

Satisfied with his choice, he poured a good measure into a glass and took a large sip, his senses jumping to life in response to the spicy flavor. This brandy had more of a bite than what he was used to, burning all the way down his throat and heating his chest.

He took another sip and picked up the book at the top of the pile on the table. Books told all sorts of stories. Maybe this would give him a better idea of who his host was.

He flipped it open and leafed through the pages. It detailed farming and agricultural practices with a green ribbon marking a spot pertaining to water supply for crops.

Colin gave a soft grunt. Apparently, they shared an interest.

He set the book aside and reached for the next one.

Roman aqueducts and Archimedes' system of raising water, along with instructions on how to dig wells.

Colin's curiosity grew, especially when he glimpsed the title of the third book. He picked it up.

Sense and Sensibility.

An odd choice for a farmer. Perhaps it belonged to his wife?

Mystified by the strange assortment of reading material, the lack of servants, and poor overall maintenance to the rest of the house, Colin could only conclude that his host was in financial straits, possibly even infirm, and that he loved books. It showed in the library which, although of modest size, appeared to be exceedingly well kept.

Returning *Sense and Sensibility* to the table, he arranged the books so they were exactly as he'd found them. A log snapped in the fireplace, and he crossed to one of the armchairs near the bay window. Heavy curtains crafted from sage green velvet were pulled shut. The only reminder a storm raged outdoors was the drumming of rain against the glass.

Glad to be warm, dry, and well fed, he sat and dropped his gaze to the low table beside him. A chess set filled most of the

space with a game well underway. He studied the pieces. White was clearly the stronger player and would likely win unless black moved his bishop, setting up a three-step opportunity to take White's queen.

Unable to resist, Colin picked up the piece and made the move.

Thunder boomed in the distance. The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour. Something behind him creaked and a flash of awareness stole over his shoulders.

Whipping around, he glanced at the doorway, certain he'd catch someone watching.

But there was no one.

The doorway remained empty.

Victoria Leighton climbed the stairs to her room while cursing her cowardice. She'd remained closeted away in her study since learning of her guest's arrival - had even taken supper there.

Stupid woman.

She'd spent four hours working up the nerve to personally welcome him while making excuses not to. There was after all next week's shopping list to prepare; her ledgers probably ought to be checked an extra time; then she'd need to tackle her paltry income.

After being informed by Mrs. Reynolds that Mr. West had finished supper and moved to the library, Victoria had finally dared go and greet him.

Pulse leaping and stomach rolling until she feared she'd be sick, she'd walked the short distance, had made it to the open doorway, when one of the floorboards creaked beneath her foot. She leapt out of sight, much like a child caught in the act of causing mischief.

Idiot.

This was her house. She'd every right to be here. And the worst part was she actually longed for social interaction.

Annoyed, she entered her room at the end of the hall and rang for Mrs. Reynolds. Had it not been for her late husband...

She struck that thought from her mind and lowered herself to the sturdy stool in front of her vanity table. The chair she'd initially had, upholstered in creamy silk with rose vines printed upon the fabric, had been sold weeks ago.

"Tell me about my guest," Victoria said when Mrs. Reynolds came to attend her.

"Mr. West?"

The name was familiar. Victoria's brother had once been friends with a Mr. West. He'd mentioned him in his letters.

Mrs. Reynolds began undoing Victoria's chestnut-colored hair. "He's tall, strong of build, and older than you by a few years, I should think."

"Is he pleasant?" Victoria asked while Mrs. Reynolds set the hairpins aside and began unwinding Victoria's long curls.

"I found him grave, but he did help Mark with the water for his bath. Didn't think it was right to let an older man do the hard lifting himself."

Victoria considered this while Mrs. Reynolds ran a comb through her hair. She stared at herself in the mirror. How long had it been since she'd met with a stranger? How long since she'd interacted with the outside world? A lifetime, it seemed.

"That was considerate of him."

“Indeed.”

Victoria caught Mrs. Reynolds’ gaze in the mirror. “There’s something else. Something you’re not telling me. What is it?”

The older woman firmed her jaw and proceeded to braid Victoria’s hair. “Men with tragic pasts can be harsh and cynical creatures. I’m not comfortable with someone like that remaining beneath this roof.”

Victoria frowned. “How do you know he’s got a tragic past?”

“It’s in his appearance. He does his best to hide it. Might have succeeded too if he’d just had a tiny scar. But when a whole side is mangled, it’s hard not to let people see.” She shook her head and clucked her tongue.

Not the same Mr. West her brother had known then. That man had been described as charming, incredibly handsome, and friendly - the sort of man whose company everyone sought.

Mrs. Reynolds helped Victoria change into her nightgown, then bid her good night and left. Victoria climbed into bed and stared up at the cracked plaster ceiling for a few minutes before turning down the light. She was glad she’d changed her mind about joining her guest this evening. Mr. West didn’t seem like the sort of man whose company she would enjoy.

He’d depart soon enough and she would have one less thing to concern herself with.

It was as it should be, she decided as she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

When she woke, however, the lack of sunlight streaming between the thin gap in the curtains informed her the day might not be as inviting as she had hoped.

“I’m afraid Mr. West won’t be leaving anytime soon,” Mrs. Reynolds informed her when she came to help her dress. “The storm is still pretty bad. The river has risen, flooding the fields, and several trees have been knocked over.”

“What else” Victoria asked, noting the look of alarm in Mrs. Reynolds’s eyes.

“Jasper escaped from the barn and—”

“Good lord.” Victoria scrambled from bed, the soles of her feet pressing into the cold floorboards as she stood. “Why didn’t you say so sooner? Quick. Help me put some clothes on.”

“I’m sorry.” Mrs. Reynolds grabbed a chemise from the dresser. Stays followed and then Victoria was putting on one of the three black gowns she’d worn since Gavin’s death a little more than eleven months earlier. “I didn’t want to add to your concerns. Especially since Mr. Reynolds has gone out to find him. I’m sure he’ll return with Jasper soon.”

Victoria dearly hoped so. She’d paid good money for the truffle dog, upon whom she’d pinned most of her hopes for a steady income.

“Has Mr. West risen yet?” Victoria asked before leaving her room. She needed to know if she risked running into him

in the hallway.

“I don’t believe so.”

“Please make sure breakfast is ready for when he does. In the meantime, I shall go help Mr. Reynolds search.”

“Oh no, Mrs. Leighton. You mustn’t. That’s not the sort of weather a woman ought to venture out in.”

“It’s not right for Mr. Reynolds to be out there either. Besides, Jasper is my dog. I must find him and two people searching are better than one.”

“Yes, but—”

“I’ll need my boots and my woolen cloak.”

Mrs. Reynolds didn’t move. “I really don’t think this is wise.”

“You may be correct, but I cannot simply sit here and wait. My boots and cloak, if you please.”

The maid collected the items and helped Victoria ready herself without another word, then accompanied her to the kitchen door.

“Please be careful,” Mrs. Reynolds said as Victoria slid her hands into a pair of brown leather gloves she’d grabbed from the foyer cupboard.

“I will.” Victoria pushed the door open and stepped out into a blast of cold air that brought a spray of water with it. She shut the door and proceeded along the muddied path that led to the barn. She’d start her search there by checking to see if Mr. Reynolds had met with success.

The barn wasn't far, but her cloak was already damp by the time she reached it, the toes of her boots wet from a puddle she'd accidentally stepped into. Whinnies and grunts from the horses greeted her as she entered, the comforting smell of animals and hay like an earthy oasis in the midst of the mayhem outside.

Stepping forward, Victoria checked the stalls on each side until she encountered a horse she did not recognize. Gleaming black and built for resilience, with long legs and muscular thighs, Mr. West's mount was an undeniable thing of beauty.

Victoria raised her hand and gave the horse a few loving strokes before moving on. Finding Jasper's spot empty and realizing he wasn't anywhere else in the barn, Victoria went back outside and cast her gaze about.

"Jasper," she called, her voice muffled by the howling wind. "Jasper!"

The rain was falling heavily now, soaking her through in a matter of seconds. Water dripped in her eyes. Trees at the side of the house creaked as they swayed to and fro. No sign of Mr. Reynolds. He wasn't searching the fields or she'd see him.

Heart thumping, she made her decision and strode out onto the open field where the crop she'd hoped to harvest during the autumn was now submerged in mud.

Her feet sank into the watery soil, filling her boots and putting her slightly off balance. Heedless, she continued toward the canal she'd hired a couple of laborers to dig when the drought in June had cost her an acre of lettuce and

cucumbers. It led from the river and was meant to help with irrigation next year.

“Jasper,” she called again. A tremulous whimper, softened by the rain’s relentless drumming, responded.

Victoria quickened her pace as best as she could. Her right foot slipped and she skidded. Her arms shot out in both directions, jolting her shoulders. With a gasp, she managed to regain her balance and keep from falling.

The canal ditch was just there, half filled by rainwater since the runoff channels had not yet been dug. She edged forward and peered inside, wary of the sodden ground collapsing beneath her and of the wind pushing her in.

It took her a moment to spot the dog - a muddy lump desperately clinging to one side, the lower half of his body submerged in the rising water.

Oh no.

Careful with her steps, Victoria moved to where Jasper was. “I’m here,” she assured him, her soothing voice in stark contrast to her riotous nerves. “I’ve found you. Now let’s get you out of this mess.”

Lowering onto her knees, she reached down. Her fingertips barely brushed Jasper’s paw. His eyes, large and round, begged for assistance.

Victoria swallowed and scooted down onto her stomach. The mud shifted beneath her, molding to her body as she sank deeper.

She reached for Jasper again. Her hands grasped at the underside of his front legs and attempted to pull. He tried to help, his paws clawing the side of the channel as he did his best to climb out.

It was no use. Victoria couldn't get a good grip and Jasper kept sliding backward.

"I need to fetch something solid for you to climb onto." A ladder should do the trick. She pushed up onto her knees and swiped some loose strands of hair from her eyes. "I'll be back in a minute. I promise."

Jasper's shrill howl as she turned away cut straight through her heart. She had to get him out of that channel before exhaustion overcame him and he drowned.

Stepping between rows of waterlogged cabbage, Victoria set her course for the shed where tools and garden supplies were kept. Her soaked and muddied skirts clung to her legs, slowing her progress.

Blinded by the rain, she peered out from beneath her sodden hood and readjusted her direction. Her body trembled and was only held upright by a pair of increasingly weak legs. She staggered sideways, stepped onto a patch of solid ground, and hastened toward her goal.

The weather-worn door shook on its hinges. With frozen fingers, she undid the latch and eased the door open. A blast of air hit her, wrenching the panel from her hands and slamming it into her head.

Colin stared out of his bedchamber window, his shoulders hunched, his posture stiff. He'd not slept well, his rest interrupted numerous times by the howling wind and claps of thunder. When he'd woken, he'd been more tired than when he'd gone to bed.

He tracked the water droplets sliding over the windowpane, smearing his view. The storm had not diminished during the night. Instead it raged on, tugging at trees and bushes, snapping off branches, filling every hole and crevice with water.

He pushed out a breath and glanced at the dark morning sky where thick, low-hanging clouds assured him more rain was to come. Blasted weather. Instead of letting him get home in a timely manner so he could help plan for the upcoming harvest, it had trapped him with nothing to do but wait.

Bloody nuisance.

If there was one thing he hated, it was knowing he had work to do and being prevented from getting on with it.

He turned his back on the window and grabbed his jacket. A cup of coffee would probably make him feel better.

Breakfast too. And once he'd finished his meal, he'd go check on Midnight. Yes, that would give him something to do besides twiddling his thumbs.

Satisfied with his plan for the first part of the day, he left his room and made his way downstairs. The newel post on the banister wobbled beneath his touch as he descended the last step. He stopped, gave it a gentle nudge to check, and saw that the nails securing it must have come loose. Perhaps he'd try and fix it as a means by which to repay his host's hospitality.

Satisfied knowing he might accomplish something useful - that his delay would not be completely wasted - he continued toward the dining room and almost made it through the door when Mrs. Reynolds came hurrying toward him. The old woman's face was etched with concern. She panted for breath.

"Mr. West," she gasped, her voice raspy. "It's my...my..."

Forgetting himself, Colin turned and immediately hardened his jaw when he realized his error. He stared at the maid, intensely aware that she stared back. Without shrinking away in horror.

He stepped toward her, his movements measured. "What's happened?"

Distress was evident in her wringing hands, but it wasn't his appearance that had struck fear in her heart. It was something else, something more terrifying to her than a man who looked like a monster.

"It's my mistress."

"Your mistress?"

“Yes. Mrs. Leighton. Her dog ran off last night and Mr. Reynolds went out looking for him, but Mrs. Leighton insisted on helping and now...” Mrs. Reynolds gulped down a breath. “Please, you must come help. Mr. Reynolds still isn’t back but Mrs. Leighton is out there. I can see her by the shed but I don’t have the strength to help her myself and—”

Colin placed his hand on Mrs. Reynolds’s arm and grounded her with a firm look. “Take me to her.”

“Right this way.”

Mrs. Reynolds spun on her heels and ran to the servants’ stairs with Colin in swift pursuit. His boots thudded on the steps as he made his descent. The fragrant smell of eggs, bacon, and toast that greeted him when he arrived in the kitchen made his stomach rumble with eager anticipation. He did his best to ignore it as Mrs. Reynolds guided him past the range and into a narrow hallway. The burnt-red terracotta tiles sloped and sagged in spots, especially near the outside door where the threshold, a length of granite, had been worn smooth by the excessive tread of feet.

At some point in the past, this house had clearly bustled with servants.

Mrs. Reynolds yanked open the door, inviting cool air to fill the hallway. “See beside the shed? On the ground?”

Colin nudged his way past her and stared at the spot toward which she pointed. He squinted against the onslaught of wind and rain until he spotted a lump that, upon further inspection, appeared to have legs and hair and... “Good God.”

Without another word, Colin stormed forward, his boots kicking up mud as he ran to where Mrs. Leighton lay. Water already seeped through his clothes by the time he reached her. It dripped from his hair, ran over his forehead, and finally fell from the tip of his nose.

Heedless of his own discomfort or the fact that he'd put on a clean pair of breeches, he knelt and placed his hand firmly upon Mrs. Leighton's shoulder. Her face lay on its side, the cheek that faced him smeared by dirt. And yet, Colin could tell from the sweep of dark lashes resting against her pale skin, the delicate curve of her nose, her full lower lip, and her graceful jawline, that this was a beautiful woman, not a great deal younger than he.

"Mrs. Leighton?" he asked, his heart producing anxious beats as he gave her a gentle shake. Bowing forward, he searched for her pulse and nearly sagged with relief when he felt a weak flutter. He tried to rouse her once more. "Mrs. Leighton?"

She didn't budge and the weather was doing little for her eventual recovery.

Pushing into a crouch, Colin drew her into his arms and lifted her until he cradled her slender frame. With her head tucked securely against his chest in an effort to shield her from the rain and blasts of wind, he started back toward the house at a steady gait, careful not to slip and take her down with him.

"Dearie me," said Mrs. Reynolds, her voice shaking. She'd been waiting by the door and held it open for him as he strode

inside. “Bring her into the kitchen so she can get warm while I go look for my husband.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Colin said in a no-nonsense tone as he went after Mrs. Reynolds. “I’ll search for him while you tend to your mistress.”

“Thank you, Mr. West.” Mrs. Reynolds pulled a chair closer to the range, and Colin lowered Mrs. Leighton into it. She groaned and slid to one side, her eyelids fluttering as she regained consciousness. An angry bruise, indicative of a hard blow, had formed above her right eyebrow.

Careful to keep his left side averted from Mrs. Leighton in case she happened to glance up at him, Colin placed a steadying hand against her upper arm, effectively stopping her from toppling out of her seat.

“Easy does it,” Mrs. Reynolds said, her voice gently soothing. “You’ve taken a nasty hit to the head.”

“Jasper,” Mrs. Leighton murmured, focusing her attention on Mrs. Reynolds. She clasped the older woman’s hand. “Did Mr. Reynolds find him?”

Mrs. Reynolds shared a quick look with Colin. “He hasn’t returned with Jasper yet, I’m afraid.”

“Oh no.” Mrs. Leighton moved as if to stand. “We have to fetch them. We have to—”

“If you’re all right on your own for a bit,” Colin said, addressing Mrs. Reynolds while pressing his hostess back into her seat with a gentle touch to her shoulder, “I’ll head back out to look for them.”

Mrs. Leighton directed her gaze toward him. Rosy lips parted and almond-shaped eyes, a warm shade of brown, widened as though with surprise. Colin instinctively tensed beneath her scrutiny. Bruised and filthy, she was still the loveliest woman he'd ever seen.

A sobering thought since she'd probably think him the ugliest man alive if she saw the other side of his face.

Annoyed by this for reasons he could not explain, Colin spun away from both women and marched to the door.

It opened before he reached it, admitting Mark, who looked like he'd been for a swim in a bog.

"It's bloody awful out there," he said, teeth chattering.

"No arguing that," Colin said. "Come on. Let's get you warm and dry."

Mark snorted. "Looks like you could do with some drying off too. Go for a stroll, did you?"

"Not exactly." He ushered Mark into the kitchen where Mrs. Reynolds hurried to pull another chair close to the range. Although concern was evident in her creased brow, the rest of her face was slack with relief.

Mark drew to a halt when he spotted his mistress. "Please tell me you tripped into the bathtub fully clothed and that you didn't just risk life and limb by going out into that weather, Mrs. Leighton."

"I wanted to help search for Jasper." Her voice was stronger than earlier, but contained a defensive tone one might

expect from a daughter being chastised by her father rather than a mistress receiving a reprimand from her servant.

“It was foolish of you to do so,” Mark said. He dropped into the chair his wife had brought and leaned forward to warm his hands.

“Perhaps, though I did manage to find him before I...” She swallowed and sent Mrs. Reynolds a nervous glance. “He’s in the canal trench we’ve dug, but it’s filling up fast with water, so I don’t know how long he’ll survive. It may be too late already.”

“Where’s the trench?” Colin asked.

“Across the field behind the shed,” Mrs. Reynolds informed him. “You can’t miss it.”

Colin sent her a stiff nod and went in search of the dog, who was frantically clawing at the embankment when Colin reached him. His front legs were spread in a desperate attempt to find purchase while his hindlegs and tail were submerged in the water beneath him.

Without wasting a second, Colin dropped to his knees and lowered himself to his stomach, then reached for the terrified dog. “Come on boy. Let’s get you home.”

Jasper whimpered slightly when Colin grabbed him beneath his front legs and started to pull, but he was a clever pup and realized soon enough that Colin was trying to help him. He kicked his hind legs and with Colin’s added assistance, managed to scramble out of the trench and away

from danger, the wag of his tail sending a spray of mud straight into Colin's eyes.

He laughed and patted Jasper, who pranced and barked while rain streaked over his head.

Pushing into a crouched position, Colin wound his arms around Jasper and stood. The dog's panting breath was hot against his throat as he slogged across the field. An eager lick here and there made him grin despite his discomfort. He was after all sopping wet.

Again.

Unlike yesterday, however, he was also caked in dirt from head to toe with at least an inch of water in one boot and half a pond in the other. So he was glad to return indoors where Mrs. Reynolds was quick to offer a cup of hot tea and a plate piled with toast, bacon, and eggs.

"I hope you don't mind, being a guest and all," Mrs. Reynolds said while Colin removed his jacket and moved a bit closer to the range, "but I insisted Mrs. Leighton take the first bath, so you'll have to wait a while for the water to heat for yours."

"Of course. I wouldn't have it any other way, Mrs. Reynolds."

The older woman smiled at him for the first time since his arrival. "You're a good man, Mr. West. I know Mrs. Leighton will appreciate the help you've offered today. Mr. Reynolds and I certainly do."

The back of Colin's neck pricked with unease. Unaccustomed to words of kindness from strangers, he cleared his throat and managed a gruff, "I'm glad I could be of assistance," before digging into his food.

It took an hour before he was able to wash himself off and put on a set of dry clothes - the ones he'd arrived in the previous day and which had since dried. After raking a comb through his hair, he dabbed a bit of sandalwood oil beneath his jaw and savored the pleasure of feeling like a new man.

Someone knocked.

"Come in," Colin called.

Mark opened the door. "I've come to thank you for what you've done. And to tell you that Mrs. Leighton would like to see you in the library whenever you're ready."

Colin stilled as his heart gave a jolt. He tightened his jaw and responded with a stiff nod. "Thank you, Mark. I'll be right down."

"Very good, sir. I'll tell her to expect you then."

Mark departed, his footfalls fading as he walked away. Colin snatched up his jacket, took a deep breath, and pushed his arms into the sleeves. No need to worry. He'd met with strangers plenty of times before.

None as pretty as she.

His stomach turned over, tying itself into knots. A foolish reaction. She was just a woman - one he would leave behind as soon as the storm had passed. What did it matter if he repulsed her?

It didn't.

Liar.

For some inexplicably stupid reason he could not explain, he wanted her to think well of him.

Cursing himself, he strode from his room, descended the stairs, and made his way to the library. He paused immediately to the left of the open doorway, took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and positioned himself so the ruined side of his face remained out of view as he entered the room.

It took him a moment to find Mrs. Leighton. Slight of build, she stood to the right of the door, her attention fixed on a book she'd pulled from one of the shelves. Although her back was partially turned toward him, there was no denying her beauty. Not even at this angle.

Auburn tresses swept into a loose knot afforded him with a view of her neck, of the delicate bone at the top of her spine as she bowed her head to read. A stray strand of hair lay against that unblemished skin, infusing him with a most bizarre need to tuck it into place.

He shook himself free from the notion and gave the open door a gentle knock.

With a small start and a swift glance over her shoulder to see who was there, she turned. "Mr. West. Thank you for agreeing to join me."

Colin stared at her. It was impossible not to when the hesitant smile she offered lent an almost angelic innocence to her appearance. He'd thought her beautiful when he'd first

seen her, partially covered in mud. Now, he acknowledged, she was much more than that.

This woman, with her almond shaped eyes fringed by long sooty lashes and with a pair of rosy lips parted as if in question, was utterly divine.

Her slender body, gently curved beneath the black folds of her bombazine gown, hid what he imagined to be a pair of dainty ankles and—

“Mr. West?”

He blinked at the realization that he was admiring the tips of her slippers while wondering about her toes. *Idiot*. He snapped his gaze back to hers and cleared his throat. “Thank you for inviting me into your home.”

That hesitant smile curved upward with added warmth, dimpling her cheeks. “I’m glad I did or Jasper and I would likely have been worse off.”

A shudder raked through him.

“Surely not. Mr. Reynolds would have found you both eventually.” He considered her obvious state of mourning and told himself not to pry. Ignoring the voice of reason, he gently asked, “I trust there’s no husband?”

A long inhale was followed by a deep exhalation, as though she needed additional air to steady herself. “He died nearly a year ago.”

“I’m sorry.” He was a cad for making her state what he’d suspected to be the case, for making her address the loss she’d

suffered. And it had been a loss. Her anguished expression proved it.

She held his gaze until the silence became pronounced before suddenly dropping the book she'd been holding onto the table where *Sense and Sensibility* still remained. An awkward pause followed, then she seemed to collect herself and gestured toward the armchairs. "Please, come have a seat. There's tea if you like."

Her artlessness suggested she was unused to entertaining guests. A strange occurrence in an upper-class woman who didn't look more than five and thirty.

Accepting her invitation, Colin crossed to the proffered seat. As he passed her, he took a deep breath and was instantly struck by the sweet, fragrant scent that swirled in the air around her. It was like peonies after a cool spring shower - an understated perfume that served to enhance the allure of the wearer rather than overwhelm them.

As far as Colin was concerned, it was tempting as hell and a blatant contrast to the bolder scent of roses worn by his mistress, Isabella.

He took his seat and waited for Mrs. Leighton to do the same, then watched with interest as she served the tea - first his cup and then her own. Her hands, he noted, were delicately formed with slender fingers that quivered ever so slightly beneath the weight of the pot, until several drops missed the cup and stained the white cloth that covered the table.

"Forgive me." She set the pot aside and reached for a napkin with which to dab at the mess. "I'm not accustomed to

having visitors, though I dare say that's no excuse for clumsiness."

"It's as good as any." He raised his cup and sipped his tea.

"You're too kind." This was said without glancing in his direction. Followed immediately by, "I wish there were more I could do to repay you."

"For not minding about the spill?"

"Of course not." A nervous chuckle escaped her. She took a quick sip of her own tea, then sent him a hesitant glance. "For ensuring my livelihood. As you may have noted, the situation here at Leighton House is not the best. But Jasper will change that, I'm sure. Which is why I'm doubly grateful to you for saving him."

Colin knit his brow. He wasn't quite sure how a cross-breed like Jasper would improve Mrs. Leighton's finances. "If it's not too bold of me to ask, what do you expect of Jasper, exactly?"

"He's a truffle dog," Mrs. Leighton declared. "One of the finest ever bred in these parts, according to the man from whom I bought him."

Colin almost forgot himself and turned directly toward her. He stopped at the last second, his posture stiff as he carefully asked, "You know the seller well?"

"Not at all. I think he was a traveling salesman."

"And he convinced you to purchase Jasper." Anger was quickly brewing inside him. There were no worse creatures upon this earth than those who took advantage of others. And

as unfortunate as it was, Mrs. Leighton had clearly been conned.

“It seemed like a good investment.” She sent him a swift glance accompanied by a weak smile. “Granted, I know very little about truffle hunting, but I’m certain I can learn. The important thing is for me to acquire additional income, and with Jasper already trained to—”

“Jasper is no such thing,” Colin said. He stood, his jerky movements rattling the china. “That dog will never find a single damn truffle.”

“But...but...”

“He’s all wrong for that sort of work. For one thing, he’s not a poodle, a spaniel, or a setter, besides which truffle dogs are obedient and extraordinarily clever. They do not run off and get stuck in water-logged holes during storms.”

Mrs. Leighton stared at him, her eyes as wide as Steven’s had been at the tavern. The slightest gasp let Colin know that it was indeed his misshapen face, not his words, that prompted this reaction. Because he’d forgotten himself after all and in his frustration, he’d turned to her directly, allowing her to see the scarring that puckered his skin and made him look beastly.

It took Victoria a good second to recover from what she'd just seen - just long enough for Mr. West to turn his back. She gave herself a proverbial kick to the head. Judging from his rigid posture and fisted hands, her poor reaction had clearly upset him. As it should, considering she'd been gaping at him as though he'd just sprouted horns.

She cleared her throat. "Forgive me. I simply didn't realize...that is to say, I did not expect...I mean--"

"It is I who should beg your forgiveness, Mrs. Leighton, for making you witness to something no gently bred lady should see."

"I was surprised - caught off guard. That is all."

"You were shocked, for which you ought not be blamed. The fault is entirely my own. I forgot myself in a moment of anger and acted without thinking."

Anger on her behalf, she reflected, because she'd been taken advantage of. Embarrassment heated her skin, causing her to flush with discomfort.

“What a fool you must think me,” she muttered. Her husband had certainly shared that opinion, believing her incapable of intelligent thought or action. She’d never doubted his leaving Leighton House to her had been a vindictive move, intended to save his blood relations from sinking into debt.

Mr. West sighed, visibly releasing some of the tension from his body. “I do not think you a fool, Mrs. Leighton. Too trusting, perhaps, though that tends to be the trait of kindhearted people, for which there’s no reason to feel any shame.”

“Then you mustn’t feel any either. Especially when there is absolutely nothing—” She bit her tongue and snapped her mouth shut before the words “wrong with you” could escape her. To say as much would only insult his intelligence since there was no doubt his face had been partially ruined.

A grave injustice and a definite blight on his otherwise handsome features, which included a square jaw, an angular nose, a shrewd mouth with a full lower lip, shortly trimmed hair that reminded her of late autumn leaves, and eyes that gleamed like liquid gold.

She huffed a breath and determined to try again. After all, their conversation had been pleasant earlier, if perhaps a bit stilted due to her lack of practice playing hostess. But it had been so long since she’d had a conversation with someone besides her two loyal servants, she did not want the interaction to end just yet.

“Please, Mr. West. Come and enjoy the rest of your tea. I beg you.”

A moment of hesitation ensued before he quietly asked, “Are you certain you wouldn’t prefer that I leave?”

“Quite so,” she assured him, this time with deliberate firmness. Another pause followed before he returned to his seat, taking great care, she noted, to keep the scarring averted from her throughout the entire process. And yet in doing so, its existence became more pronounced, until she saw no way out but to boldly ask, “Will you tell me what happened?”

He sent her a cautious glance while drinking his tea. Upon returning his cup to its saucer, he said, “To be honest, I’d rather talk about something else, if that’s all right with you.”

Victoria bit her lip. She’d asked out of sympathy, not to be nosy, though he would undoubtedly think her such. The awkward atmosphere between them now was entirely of her making, and she felt terrible for it. All she wanted was to put her guest at ease, but his appearance clearly troubled him and instead of helping the situation, she kept bungling it.

Perhaps if she opened up a bit more - made herself vulnerable to him - he’d see that she meant well?

“Very well,” she agreed. “Let’s speak of my troubling situation instead. Perhaps you can offer me some advice on how to avoid debtor’s prison.”

A distinctive grunt rose from his throat before he muttered, “Go on.”

Bolstered by her own daring, she folded her hands in her lap and proceeded. “When my husband died, he willed Leighton House to me, no doubt to save his dear nephew from

being saddled with insurmountable debt. Instead, that burden was placed upon my shoulders. For although I initially saw my inheritance as a gift, it didn't take long for me to realize it was a millstone about my neck. Enormous amounts of money have been borrowed from one lender to pay off the next - a scheme my husband managed with cunning until he died and all those he owed demanded I pay them."

"Have you considered selling?"

"Of course. But I would be out on the street if I did that. The money the house would fetch might be enough to pay everyone back, but it won't see me settled as well. My only immediate recourse was to sell off the art and furniture individually. The relief is temporary though. I need to procure an income if I am to cover what has been borrowed and squandered while also ensuring my own future."

"Hence the reason you leapt at the opportunity you saw in a truffle dog." When all she could do was nod in silence, he asked, "What about your family? Have you no parents or siblings who might lend support?"

"No." She swallowed hard, recalling with bitterness what she had lost. "My mother died when I was an infant, Papa some eighteen years later when he learned of my brother's death in battle. The news led to an apoplectic fit that weakened his heart but left his mind clear enough to see me taken care of. I was married off the day before he died."

"And with your father having no living heir, I presume your husband received whatever wealth your father owned?"

“Yes. As you have no doubt surmised, it slipped between his fingers. All of it spent, my dowry included.”

“I’m sorry.”

So was she. The worst part of all was that she’d believed in Gavin. He’d been a family friend, almost thirty years her senior. She’d known him all her life and had trusted him. It hadn’t occurred to her that he’d lied when he told her he had invested the money her father had left them and that the returns were impressive. Funds came from somewhere, after all. Just not from where she’d thought. And then he’d died and the fantasy world he’d made her believe in had vanished, replaced by angry lenders who wanted their money.

“You mentioned a brother who died in battle,” Mr. West said, his gentle voice scattering her thoughts. “My sympathies, Mrs. Leighton. It’s a tragedy to lose a relation in such a meaningless way.”

“Meaningless?” Victoria glared at him, confounded by his heartless audacity. “My brother believed in standing up for this country. In doing so, he laid down his life. I’ll not let you suggest his death was meaningless in any way.”

“Forgive me. It was not my intention to cause offense.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly while sending her a cautious glance. “Having been to war myself, I no longer view the act of dying in the name of a flag as noble, but rather as senseless. Especially when one’s king remains comfortably safe at home, far away from all the bloodshed.”

The bitterness in his voice was enlightening. It also made her want to know more. Not so much because she was curious,

but because she longed to talk to someone who'd shared a similar experience with her brother - to help her understand what he'd been through.

Gripping her teacup between her hands, she dared herself to ask, "Which battle did you participate in?"

He leaned forward, bracing his forearms on his thighs. "I was in Egypt. Aboukir, to be precise."

A rush of exhilaration sent her heart racing. Of all the Napoleonic conflicts, what were the chances? Again, the name West struck a chord, but to suppose he might be the same West who'd served with her brother was far too great a coincidence, surely. But what if it weren't?

"What is it?" Mr. West asked with a frown. "You look slightly startled."

"Only because I can scarcely believe what you've just revealed." When he raised a questioning brow she explained, "Richard was in Aboukir too. He was stationed there with three university friends - a Mr. Dale, a Mr. Grier, and a Mr. West. I don't suppose...that is to say...I mean I realize it's highly unlikely but--"

"You're Richard Hughes's sister?"

The wide-eyed shock with which Mr. West stared at her drew a nervous laugh from her throat. She quickly flattened her lips and nodded. "Indeed."

"But that's...that's..."

"Extraordinary?" she offered, adding a wary smile.

“Unquestionably so.” He continued to stare, infusing her with no small amount of self-awareness. “We tried to find you when we returned, to offer our sympathies and to relate our experiences with Richard, but you weren’t to be found.”

“Most likely because I’d already married and moved by the time you arrived.”

“And you’ve been here ever since? In this very house, no more than a one-hour ride from my own estate?”

“I suppose so.”

He huffed a breath and shook his head. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

Victoria waited to see if he might say anything more. When he didn’t, she asked, “I’ve always wondered what happened. The letter Papa received was brief and unsatisfying.”

Mr. West stilled. He sank back in his chair and seemed to consider how best to respond. “Richard’s death was swift and painless. A sniper struck him in the head. He died on the spot.”

“You were with him when it happened?”

“I was at his side,” he confessed, his words slow and measured as though it took effort for him to think back and recall what had happened. “But a cannon blast sent me flying at almost the same time, and then another one struck a crate full of gunpowder I’d landed close to. Ripped my cheek and part of my ear off. Almost took out my eye.”

“Good lord.”

“It could have been worse, I suppose. I could have lost an arm and a leg had it not been for the excellent surgeon who tended to me.” He chuckled as though attempting to lighten the mood. Sobering almost immediately, he said, “I never forgot about Richard, however. Neither did James or Grayson, with whom I meet once a year for a drink in his memory.”

“I honor my brother in much the same way,” Victoria confessed, while thinking back on the last time she’d seen him. He’d looked so smart in his red coat tails and white breeches when he’d headed off with that boyish smile of his pulling at the edge of his lips. The memory tore at her heart and made her throat ache as she forced back emotional tears. “He should have come home. Had he done so, Papa would not have died as he did while I—”

She snapped her mouth shut and turned her gaze away from Mr. West.

“You believe your situation might have been better if Richard had lived?”

“To think as much would be incredibly selfish. Richard died. Pitying myself is—”

“Only natural.” When she said nothing to this, he quietly said, “What you have suffered as a result is no small matter.”

“It seems almost laughable when compared with what you yourself have been through.” Needing to move - to do something with her hands - she picked up the teapot and refilled both cups.

“Anyone who has had the misfortune of inheriting someone else’s debt would probably disagree. And judging from those books over there, you’re not exactly sitting around waiting for a miracle, but working to improve upon your crop production.”

“You’re right. The drought this past year hasn’t helped, which is why I attempted building canals linked to the river. As luck would have it, the downpour started as soon as most of the work was completed, flooding everything and drowning the crop.” She suddenly laughed, for what else was there to do besides crying? “Everything I do turns to muck.”

He seemed to consider this for a second, then tilted his head, allowing her a rare glimpse of shiny red tissue that rippled across his left cheekbone. “When is the last time you went anywhere?”

“I don’t recall. Mr. Reynolds runs most of my errands.”

“I’m not referring to shopping, Mrs. Leighton, but rather to social calls.”

Her lips parted with surprise. She blinked. “Social calls?”

“As a newly minted landowner with little experience, you ought to surround yourself with people who can advise you. Have you no such friends in the area?”

“Gavin didn’t believe in letting me socialize with others unless he was present. He often thought my opinions to be naïve or just plain silly, so he feared I’d say the wrong thing and humiliate him. And since he rarely wished to go anywhere, I never managed to foster the sort of relationships

that would have enabled me to seek advice without looking as though I was taking advantage.” Hot embarrassment flooded her cheeks on the heels of this confession. More so when she noted the dangerous look in Mr. West’s eyes.

“I see,” he muttered.

“Not that I don’t miss interacting with others.” Lord help her. If he didn’t already, he’d surely think her a pitiful fool now. “But it’s been so long. Returning to Society would be impossible for me at this point.”

“And why is that?”

She sent him an incredulous look. “I could not even manage to pour your tea without spilling.”

“You’re simply out of practice.”

“That doesn’t ease my concern in the least.”

“And yet, if you’re to re-marry then—”

“Re-marry?” She gave her head a firm shake. “I shall do no such thing.”

“It would be the simplest solution for you, to find a husband who’s willing to cover the debt you owe. He’d lend the support you obviously need and give you a roof over your head while protecting you with his name.”

“No. Absolutely not.” Victoria stood, hands balled at her sides while struggling to catch her breath. “I will never surrender my independence, which means I’ll just have to figure out how to run things effectively before it’s too late.”

A log snapped in the grate. Outside, beyond the heavily draped windows, tree branches creaked and moaned in response to the gusts of wind sweeping the landscape. Colin's chair squeaked and he felt the legs shift as he changed position in order to better face Mrs. Leighton. Victoria. The manner in which she'd responded to his appearance no longer mattered. Or so he told himself, because it *couldn't* matter if he was to offer the help she so clearly needed.

He stared at her, at the way the light from a nearby oil lamp played upon her skin making it glow. It was hard to grasp that it was actually she, Richard's sister, or that he'd stumbled upon her like this because of a fallen tree. Offering her some advice and then leaving her to apply it while he moved on with his life, wasn't an option. Not any longer.

"If you're adamant about remaining unwed and turning things around on your own," he said while mindlessly rubbing the bottom of his teacup with his thumb, "you'll need guidance."

"I'm sure I shall." She directed a pointed glance at the larger table that stood in the center of the room with the globe

placed upon it. "I've found a wealth of knowledge in books."

"And while I commend your determination to educate yourself on estate and farming matters, I fear it shan't be enough."

"It has to be." She drew a ragged breath indicative of great agitation. "As you are already aware, I have no family, friends, or acquaintances to turn to for help."

"Which brings me to my proposal."

Colin paused before adding anything further. What he was about to suggest required some forethought. Once the offer was made, there would be no going back. And based on his own past experiences with women, everything within him revolted against the idea of choosing to embroil himself with one again, for any reason. Except this was not just any woman. This was Victoria Hughes - Mrs. Leighton.

Hell and damnation.

He stood, causing his chair to sigh with relief, and paced the length of the room with measured strides, ever conscious of Mrs. Leighton's gaze. Needing something to do while he thought things through, he approached the fireplace and snatched up the poker which he immediately set to good use, moving a piece of stray firewood closer to the flames.

He didn't want additional responsibilities or complications, but he couldn't stand by and do nothing either. Which left him with two options. He could cover Victoria's debt outright, or he could give her the knowledge with which to solve her own problems.

Frowning, he tried to decide on the best course of action. The first was clearly the simplest. He'd send her a promise note worth the sum she required, and tell her to call on him if she needed additional help from him later.

The only problem with this was that it felt too easy and left him with a distinct sense of dissatisfaction. He sighed and poked at the larger log in the grate. The right thing to do was to educate her so she would be able to build her wealth and become the independent landowner she wished to be.

But this would take time. He could not afford to delay his return to Woodstone Park any longer. But maybe she could join him?

His grip on the poker tightened as anticipation swept through him. Yes. This could work. Provided she agreed.

Swallowing any doubts he might have over spending great lengths of time with her in his home, he took a deep breath.

"I'd like to invite you to visit with me at Woodstone Park," he said, voicing the idea before he could change his mind. "While there, I'll instruct you on farming matters and investments. I'll share invaluable information so you can get out of debt and grow your own fortune."

The silence that followed was far from complete. It was filled by a mantelpiece clock ticking away the passing seconds, by embers crackling, and the rumble of thunder away in the distance, but it was enough to convey Mrs. Leighton's dismay. Unable to resist, he tore his attention away from the fire and glanced at her. She was gaping at him, her eyes

impossibly wide, so it was fair to say he'd shocked her. If he were honest, he'd shocked himself too.

“While I'm sure you mean well, Mr. West, I—”

“You may call me Colin, if you wish. Your brother and I were close friends. It feels a bit odd for his younger sister to stand on formality with me.”

She hesitated, a clear indication that she was uncertain about being on such familiar terms with a virtual stranger. Nevertheless, her wish to accommodate won out and she gave a swift nod. “Very well. If you will agree to call me Victoria.”

“Indeed,” Colin murmured, unable to ignore the rush of warmth that settled within his chest. “I would be honored. Doubly so if you will accept my offer to help you.”

She set her teacup aside with exaggerated care, as though giving the matter a great deal of thought while she did so. Rising, she strolled to the larger table, drawing Colin's attention toward her delicate fingers as she traced them over the edge.

“Why would you do this for someone you've only just met?”

Colin snapped to attention and cleared his throat in an effort to mask that he'd been admiring her hand. Ignoring the fact that he was as hideous as she was pretty, he met her gaze boldly. “Because I'm obligated to do so.”

She blinked in response to this statement. “That's not true. By saving me today and by rescuing Jasper as well, you've done more than enough.”

“You mistake my meaning, Victoria.” A pink hue darkened her cheeks, and she quickly dropped her gaze, as if flustered. Perhaps it was too soon for him to address her thus, yet he could not regret doing so when it seemed to stretch across time and bring Richard closer. Nevertheless, he hadn’t meant to cause her discomfort. He strove to distract her from it by saying, “When my friends and I were sent to join Sir Abercromby’s forces in the Mediterranean, we swore an oath to each other that those who survived would forever ensure the wellbeing of the families belonging to those who didn’t.”

“But it’s been so long.”

“Too long.” He returned the poker to its holder and clasped his hands behind his back. “I’m sorry for that, for failing to come to your aid sooner. But I’m here now, ready to lend support.”

“Thank you,” – she paused for a second before permitting herself to say– “Colin. I appreciate the offer, but you must see that I cannot allow myself to accept it.”

It was impossible not to frown at her. “Why on earth not?”

“A young widow residing under the very same roof as a bachelor? I’d be ruined in a trice.”

“Which is why I’ve every intention of making sure there are other respectable ladies present.” He didn’t make a habit of relying on other people’s good graces, but he was fairly certain he could depend on James and Grayson in this instance. Their wives included, due to the nature of this particular case. “Will that do?”

“I don’t know...”

“It would be an innocent house party with the purpose of teaching you a thing or two about agriculture and finance. The added benefit would be your social interaction, which as I recall is something you mentioned missing.”

“True, though I also spoke of being completely out of practice and very unsure of how to proceed. To be honest, I do not feel comfortable having to spend time with people I do not know.”

“You didn’t know me until today.” He studied her as she pursed her lips and found it nearly impossible not to smile. Clearly, she was looking for some way to argue his point. Instead of allowing her the chance to do so, he said, “For a woman who’s untrained in making conversation, you’re managing remarkably well. And to ease your concerns a little bit more, I ought to tell you that James, Grayson, and I aren’t people you do not know. We’re Richard’s brothers-in-arms, and that makes us family.”

“I...”

“It would be fun,” he assured her, convincing himself in the process. Hell, including Victoria in the firm group of friends would be a marvelous way of honoring Richard. “I’m sure the boys and I can tell you a story or two about your brother and vice versa. Plus, we’ll have picnics, garden games, horse riding and—”

“I thought the idea was for me to learn how to run an estate.” This was said with a teasing twinkle in her eyes and a lopsided grin so impish it actually made Colin chuckle.

“Of course. And you shall. But that doesn’t mean there cannot be time for a bit of sport.”

The clock on the mantel chimed the hour. Victoria worried her lower lip while sending Colin a look that told him she’d not quite made up her mind. “As enticing as your offer may be, I think I’d like to consider it in greater detail before committing. You shall have my answer tomorrow morning, if that is agreeable.”

Doing his best to hide the strange disappointment that tugged at his heart, he gave a short bow. “Of course.”

For the first time since returning from war, he felt as though he’d found a purpose. His ability to see it through, however, would depend entirely upon a reclusive widow.



Feeling foolish and incapable was not uncommon for Victoria. Gavin had wasted no time reminding her of her countless faults and blunders while he’d been alive. She’d been embarrassed by it more times than she could remember. For bringing him the wrong pair of spectacles, sending the trousers he’d planned on wearing off to be washed, or speaking so loudly she risked being overheard by the servants, among many other transgressions. But she’d never truly believed herself an addlebrained dolt until today when Colin had told her that she had been lied to, hoodwinked, taken advantage of by a flimflammer.

Lying in bed that night, she stared at the ceiling, thinking back on their conversation in the library. While the offer he'd made was not only generous but a wonderful opportunity, he'd spoken of it as an obligation. Despite his attempts to gain her acceptance, there was no doubt he'd issued the invitation because he believed he had to, not because he actually wanted to spend endless hours teaching her how to manage her own affairs.

She sent a soft snort up into the air. What man would?

An honorable one, she decided.

Mr. West - Colin, that was - obviously had a clear moral compass. He had no doubt about where his duty lay. Had he wished to, he could have easily left without any mention about the oath he'd once made. Instead, he seemed determined to keep his promise to a man who was dead, unable to make sure he followed through.

Unlike Gavin, who'd lied to her throughout their marriage while throwing away all their money, Colin was the sort of man one could admire. He'd been to war, for goodness sake, and had paid for it dearly. She'd studied his scarring as soon as he'd stopped averting that side of his face and had easily concluded that he'd been a handsome man once. Now, puckered flesh, a sunburnt shade of red with a wax-like shine to it covered his entire cheek, from the edge of his mouth and all the way up to his lower eyelid.

It was unsightly, no doubt about that, but it also instilled in her a tremendous sadness on his behalf. The fact that he'd actively striven to hide the scarring from her proved he was

used to people recoiling when they saw the damage the war had done. If only her own reaction had been more subtle, but she'd been shocked, and in the moment she'd not been able to hide that.

The fact that he was still willing to lend his assistance to her after that spoke volumes about his character. Not that she was surprised. In his letters to her, Richard had described him as the most selfless man he'd ever met. And if she could speak with her brother now, she was fairly certain he'd urge her to take the chance Colin offered.

Soft rays of sunshine were falling through the bedroom window when Colin woke the next morning. From outside came the boisterous chirps of birds which were no doubt as pleased as he that the storm had finally passed. He'd be able to resume his travels now, though not before hearing Victoria's decision.

An odd sort of energy rolled around in the pit of his stomach as he went down to breakfast. It worsened when he found the dining room empty. Unlike the previous meals he'd taken since his arrival, however, this one appeared to be intended for two, judging from the extra place setting. He was happy to note they'd been placed on opposing sides so they only had the width of the table between them instead of the full length.

Eager for something hot to drink, Colin gave the bell pull a yank and took his seat in one of the high-backed Jacobean chairs. The light spilling through a set of tall windows brought out the dust and cobwebs that clung to the glass. It also made him aware of how faded the block-printed wall hangings actually were. What had once been a vibrant shade of mint

green covered in flocks of birds and branches had turned to lackluster pastels around the spots where paintings used to hang.

The door opened and Mark arrived with a smile on his face and a cheerful, “Good morning.” He brought with him a pot of coffee along with a bowl of hot porridge, both of which were placed in front of Colin. “It may not look like much, but it will fill you up and see you through until luncheon.”

“My thanks,” Colin told him just as Victoria entered the room, her hair swept into what looked like a hasty updo of her own making. She wore a different gown than the one she’d had on yesterday. This one appeared to be cut in a style intended for practicality, with the fabric a medium weight cotton and lacking embellishment. It was, in short, one of the plainest gowns he’d ever laid eyes on. Curiously, however, the simplicity not only suited her better than all the lace and frills adorning yesterday’s bombazine, but seemed to accentuate her beauty.

“Mr. West?”

Colin blinked, befuddled to realize she must have spoken as she took her seat opposite him, and that he’d missed it. “I beg your pardon. You were saying?”

She smiled softly and his heart responded with an unsteady beat. “I merely inquired if you have slept well.”

“I did.” Last night, when he’d taken his first proper look at her in the library, the light had been dim, the space lit only by a single oil lamp and the glow produced by the fire. Now, with the clarity offered by daylight, he saw she was even more

stunning than he'd believed, which meant that his own appearance would also be more pronounced. But hiding from her wasn't an option as long as she faced him directly. So he busied himself with pouring a cup of coffee, distracting himself from what she was seeing. "How about you?"

"I slept well too. Eventually."

This drew his attention. He caught her gaze. "Oh?"

She shrugged one shoulder and seemed prepared to explain herself to him, only to be prevented by Mark's return. The aging servant placed a bowl of porridge before her, then poured her a cup of tea before leaving the room once more.

Victoria picked up her cup and took a careful sip, then returned it to its saucer with a clink. She reached for her spoon. "Our conversation kept me up for a good while after I retired."

"And what have you concluded?" he asked as he went to work on his porridge, which tasted surprisingly better than he'd expected.

"I'd like to accept," she said, her remark undoing the knot in his stomach and pushing a most unexpected sense of relief through his veins. "Provided other ladies will be present as you previously suggested."

Colin nodded. The amount of excitement he felt at the prospect of having her visit his home was astounding. Of course, it probably had everything to do with the fact that his friends would be there as well, provided they were able to

attend. He stilled while staring across at Victoria, who watched him with an expectant look.

They *had* to attend or she wouldn't.

"I'll make certain of it," he promised. This earned him a smile, the blinding sort that threatened to make a man stupid. With a self-deprecating frown, he took another few bites of his food before saying, "We ought to discuss the practicalities. I have to return home today on account of matters that must be addressed with my steward. I'll leave as soon as we've finished breakfast."

"I also have things to do before I can travel," Victoria told him. "The property should be walked in order to identify repairs that must be made after the storm. I've rents to collect from my tenants as well, though that can probably wait until I get back."

"When are they due?" Colin casually asked. He picked up his cup and drank some coffee, the heat more welcome than the weak flavor.

"They should have been paid at the end of June but—"

"That's two months ago." Judging from her answering shrug and the way she quickly resumed eating, it was clear this wasn't something she cared to discuss. But if she was to learn from him and improve upon her situation, he couldn't let her avoid unpleasant issues. So he set his cup aside and told her firmly, "You have to be more assertive. If someone owes you money, then you must collect it. If they refuse to pay, you involve the local magistrate."

She sent him a sharp look. “The Erwins have struggled since their youngest was born, and Mrs. Anderson suffers from back aches for which she requires regular treatment. And then there’s Mr. Cooper, whose sister recently died. Extending the payment date a little under these conditions seemed like the decent approach.”

“Perhaps if you yourself weren’t struggling.” A pattern was starting to emerge here and Colin didn’t like it one bit. He’d not be surprised if these tenants were preying on Victoria’s kindness. “Under the circumstances, however, you’ve little choice but to take what you’re owed if you yourself expect to survive.”

“I do not wish to be cruel.”

“Of course not. But how do you justify being lenient with one while demanding pay from another?” Her failure to answer was answer enough. She hadn’t. Instead, she’d sold off her own belongings in order to scrape by. He sighed as the true extent of her troubles became clear. “What will happen if you lose this property to a debt collector? Will your tenants be better off then, removed from the land they’ve been farming and forced to settle down elsewhere?”

“I suppose not,” she whispered, her pretty mouth framed by brackets.

“To simplify matters, allow me to ask if you would ever hire a servant and ask them to work without pay on account of your own misfortune?”

She knit her brow while staring into her bowl. “No.”

Colin softened his voice. “Your tenants know what’s expected of them and you have been lenient enough. If they are unable to pay, they must be evicted to make room for someone who can, so you can recoup some of the funds you owe.”

“To turn a family out of their home is—”

“Harsh?” He kept a steady gaze on her. “My guess is their pockets are deeper than you suspect.”

“You think they too have deceived me?”

“What I think,” he informed her with the utmost of care, “is that they will not be as hard pressed to find the necessary blunt as you imagine, provided you stand your ground. I’d recommend taking Mark along with you as reinforcement. If you like, I’ll speak to him before I go, make sure he knows what’s required of him.”

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that.” Her cheeks had turned a deep shade of red.

Impulsively, he leaned forward and clasped her hand, the sudden skin-to-skin contact sending a frisson through him while prompting her to gasp. He chose to ignore both responses since his intention had been to offer assurance. “There’s no need for embarrassment over any of this. Running an estate successfully requires a certain amount of knowledge that comes from experience. Most men acquire such knowledge from their fathers. You haven’t, which has forced you to figure it out on your own.”

“A task I’ve obviously failed at.”

“We’ll rectify that,” he promised, giving her hand a squeeze before letting it go.

“Thank you, Mr. West. I’m much obliged.”

“Colin, if you recall. And you’re welcome.”

He left Leighton House one hour later with every expectation of seeing Victoria at Woodstone Park in one week’s time. Which prevented him from returning straight home. Instead, he set his course for Sutton Hall where Grayson greeted him after his three-hour ride.

“This is a welcome surprise,” Grayson said with a grin when his butler showed Colin onto the terrace.

Grayson’s wife, Olivia, who’d been governess to Grayson’s ward, Juliana, until the pair had fallen in love and married a month and a half ago, was also present. Colin had met the petite woman with raven black hair and assessing green eyes just three weeks prior when she and Grayson had hosted a ball. He’d taken an instant liking to her. Olivia was intelligent, sweet natured, and humble, so it was easy to see how she’d won Grayson’s heart.

Colin swept a bow in her direction before approaching Grayson and giving his hand a firm shake. “My apologies for arriving unannounced.”

“We’re always pleased to see you,” Olivia told him sincerely. She’d never looked at him as most people did when they saw him for the first time, with that wide-eyed shock that reminded him of his ghastly imperfections. “You’re welcome to visit with us whenever you like.”

“Though I must confess you have me intrigued,” Grayson said. He gestured to one of the wrought iron chairs. “In your most recent letter, you told me you were for Woodstone Park directly, so why the detour?”

Colin pulled the chair out a little bit farther, scraping the heavy legs across the flagstone tiles. He sat just as a maid arrived with an extra glass and plate plus an additional serving of ginger biscuits. Lemonade was poured and Colin selected a biscuit. He took a bite of the sweet and spicy flavor, then washed it down with his cool drink.

“The weather is to blame. I got caught in a storm and was forced to seek shelter.” He caught Grayson’s gaze and held it. “You’ll never guess whose home I ended up in.”

“You’re probably right.” A gentle breeze teased Grayson’s napkin. He weighted it down with his plate while Olivia refilled her glass. “Will you enlighten me?”

Colin leaned forward slightly, pushing his plate aside as he folded his arms on the table. Savoring the moment, he drew out the anticipation for an additional second, until Grayson raised a questioning brow.

“Richards’ sister’s.” It was impossible not to feel a victorious sense of satisfaction as Grayson’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped.

A very noticeable pause followed, during which the only sound one could hear was that of the bumblebees circling a nearby honeysuckle. Until Grayson shook his head as if to put his muddled thoughts back in order. “Victoria Hughes’?”

Colin nodded. "She goes by Leighton now on account of her having been married."

"Having been?" Olivia asked.

"She lost her husband last year." Colin quickly explained the situation and the problems Victoria faced.

"I wish we'd found her sooner," Grayson muttered. A faraway look filled his dark brown eyes. Focusing them on Colin he added, "We should have done so twenty years ago, when we returned from Egypt."

"Agreed." Colin took a deep breath and expelled it. He noted how much Grayson's features had tightened and that Olivia now clasped his hand as though to offer support.

It was an open show of affection one step removed from embracing and generally frowned upon by sticklers for proper etiquette and social comportment. Colin liked that his friends were comfortable enough with each other and with him to ignore such ridiculous rules.

"The important thing is we've done so now." It was time for Colin to reveal his plan. "In light of the oath we once made to each other - to Richard - I've offered to help as best as I can. But I need your assistance."

"Of course. All you need do is ask."

"Come to Woodstone Park next week with every expectation of a prolonged visit. I've invited Victoria there for the purpose of teaching her how to manage her property and build a fortune, but having her visit with me alone would

likely damage her reputation. Other ladies will need to be present.”

“Were other ladies present while you spent the night beneath her roof?” Grayson asked, an inquisitive gleam in his dark brown eyes while a boyish smile played upon his lips.

“An older maid of all works was present, but otherwise no,” Colin confessed.

Grayson slowly nodded. “It didn’t escape my notice that you referred to her by her given name. Any chance there might be more between you than that of her brother’s old friend simply lending support?”

“Grayson,” Olivia started, her voice a touch harder than usual. “That’s hardly an appropriate thing to ask.”

“Perhaps not,” Grayson admitted. “It’s just that with James and me settled, I’m rather hoping Colin will find his happily ever after as well.”

“That’s not going to happen.” Colin glared at Grayson, unable to fathom that he would suggest such a thing. “Certainly not with Victoria Leighton. A woman like her would never look twice at someone like me, which is just as it should be.”

Despite her apprehension over leaving Leighton House for any period of time, excitement had gradually started to fill Victoria as she'd packed her trunks in preparation for travel. She'd not ventured past the nearest village since she'd arrived here as a young bride. Whenever Gavin had gone to Town for the Season, he'd left her behind under the supervision of Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds and the rest of the servants.

His reasoning had been her awkwardness, the fact that she was clearly better suited to country living than rubbing shoulders with aristocracy.

It had taken a good ten years for Victoria to realize the real reason - that this had been Gavin's chance to bed other women without the hindrance a wife might cause, and to gamble away their money without her being the wiser.

With one final look toward her familiar surroundings, she climbed into the carriage Colin had sent and made herself comfortable on the forward-facing bench. Mrs. Reynolds stepped in next and took the opposite seat, adjusting her bag of knitting supplies. Victoria turned to address Mr. Reynolds, who stood outside, still holding the carriage door open.

“Remember to speak with Mr. Flynn about the canal work and fencing.” The laborer she’d found two days ago had offered an excellent price to undertake the repairs. “Please make sure Jasper goes for a long walk at least once a day. There’s a blue tin of biscuits in my office that you’re welcome to sample. Oh, and don’t forget to—”

“Water the potted plants? Oil the hinges on the parlor door? Toss the vegetable cuttings into the compost?” Eyes sparkling beneath a pair of bushy grey eyebrows, he sent her a lopsided smile. “I know.”

“I suppose you do,” Victoria agreed. He closed the door, and the carriage was off, jolting into motion with the agility of a horse at the races. Victoria leaned back against the squabs and prepared to enjoy the journey, until a thought struck. “What about—”

“Calm yourself, Mrs. Leighton. Mr. Reynolds will take good care of everything while we’re gone. And just to be sure, I left a list for him in the kitchen with daily and weekly tasks outlined. He’ll be fine and so will Leighton House.”

Comforted by Mrs. Reynolds’s words, Victoria blew out a breath and allowed herself to do something she realized she’d not done since Gavin died. She relaxed.

Until the carriage arrived at Woodstone Park some two hours later. Victoria peered out the window. A queasy sensation settled deep in her stomach. This was nothing like Leighton House with its pitched gable roof and half-timbered facade. This was a castle with actual towers and battlements. Pointed peaks were punched into bay windows, and the stones

from which the entire structure was built were so massive and solid, it promised to last for millennia.

Good grief.

The mortification she'd felt over having Colin stay in what was a drab little cottage by contrast was multiplied tenfold as the splendor of Woodstone Park hit her.

"Having second thoughts?" Mrs. Reynolds inquired.

"Many," Victoria whispered as the carriage drew to a halt before the front steps. Four footmen awaited, each smartly attired in crimson livery and powdered white wigs, their shoes polished to a high sheen and adorned with silver buckles.

They started toward the carriage, then suddenly stopped and stepped aside, giving way to a tall individual dressed in a pair of tan breeches, a navy-blue frock coat perfectly fitted across a broad chest, and glossy black boots that must have cost an absolute fortune.

Victoria's heart gave a timid beat. Lord help her. Colin had not looked like this when she'd seen him last. Had he?

Her stomach twisted, not in an unpleasant way exactly, but rather with a curious sort of awareness. For yes, there was the undeniable scarring, but beyond that was a striking presence, accentuated by a physique that was put on perfect display now thanks to his well-tailored clothes and an overall degree of roguishness that likened him to a dangerous pirate instead of a pretty prince.

Victoria sucked in a breath, realizing all too late that she wasn't prepared for this at all.

The door opened in the next instant and there he was, immediately in front of her with his left side slightly averted.

The self-awareness on his part bolstered her courage. She leaned forward, accepted his offer to help her alight by placing her hand in his, and nearly lost her footing when an electrical spark shot up her arm. Fearful she'd fall, she instinctively reached for support, which just happened to be on Colin's right shoulder.

He made a guttural sound as he tightened his hand around hers, gripping her firmly until she regained her balance.

"Are you all right?" His voice was low, a mere vibration of air around them.

"Yes. Sorry." A flush of embarrassment warmed her face until she feared she'd turned scarlet. She carefully removed her hand from his shoulder then allowed him to guide her onto solid ground. "Thank you."

"My pleasure." He held her gaze for a second before stepping past her so he could assist Mrs. Reynolds.

The aging servant climbed from the carriage with hesitant movements accompanied by a sharp look directed at Colin. Unnerved by the shocking effect he'd had upon her with barely one touch, Victoria turned to admire her new surroundings, allowing her poor heart a chance to return to a slower rhythm. One could not blame him for thinking her an absolute fool, just as Gavin had done.

She scowled at the handsome facade and its beautiful stained-glass adornments. Maybe her husband had been right

about her. Maybe she was too awkward to step out in public if she couldn't even climb from a carriage without nearly tumbling straight into her host.

There was a good chance coming here was yet another mistake on her part. Perhaps she ought to—

“Victoria?” Colin's softly spoken question banished all thought and drew her attention directly toward him.

He was standing with the afternoon sun at his back, shading her from its glare. The edge of his mouth twitched as soon as her gaze met his, creasing his scar in a way most would likely describe as highly unflattering. Oddly enough, Victoria rather liked the effect. Or maybe she liked that he'd chosen to put down his guard around her, which eased her own state of self-consciousness slightly.

“Welcome to Woodstone Park.” He held his arm toward her. “Shall we?”

She nodded, and accepted his escort with a smile of appreciation, relieved when sparks didn't fly from the spot where her hand touched his arm. What a curiously inexplicable thing that had been. More so considering she wore gloves.

“I trust your other guests are waiting inside?” They'd started up the front steps with Mrs. Reynolds trailing behind while the footmen bustled about the carriage, unloading the luggage.

Colin stiffened beneath her touch, just long enough to inform her that all was not as it should be - that her question

troubled him for some reason.

He cleared his throat. "I'm afraid they haven't arrived yet, though I've no doubt they will soon. They did assure me they would be here."

"I see." Victoria mulled over this piece of information as she entered Woodstone Park's foyer. This wasn't what they'd agreed on. She'd trusted him to safeguard her reputation, for although Mrs. Reynolds was there, her presence alone would not be enough if word got out that Victoria was Colin's only guest.

She sent him a wary glance and noted the way his jaw had hardened. He did not strike her as the deceptive sort but rather as helpful and considerate. Then again, she'd been fooled by men before. But Colin had been friends with Richard and Richard had spoken highly of him.

With this in mind, she decided he probably was being honest, though that did not help solve the problem of her being alone with him until the rest of the guests arrived.

She tried to think of a solution, but before she was able to do so, he let go of her arm and stepped away.

"Please accept my sincerest apologies. There's a comfortable inn three miles up the road. If you would prefer to take a room there until my friends get here, I understand."

The suggestion was certainly worth considering. But the pained expression around Colin's eyes, indicative of embarrassment and regret, caused her to hesitate. For reasons she could not explain, whether it be because he was going out

of his way to help her or because he looked downright sorry for letting her down, she had no wish to disappoint him.

She took a deep breath, exchanged a look with Mrs. Reynolds whose blank expression offered little guidance, and returned her attention to Colin. “Thank you, but the footmen have already finished unloading, so the simplest course of action would be for me to remain where I am.”

“Indeed.” The crooked hint of a smile he gave her warmed a spot deep in her heart and assured her she’d made the right decision. He turned and gestured toward a pair of older, stern-faced servants who stood nearby. “Allow me to introduce you to Mrs. Plath, my housekeeper, and Harrington, my butler. If you need anything while you’re here, please don’t hesitate to call upon them. Mrs. Plath, I’ll trust you to show Mrs. Leighton and Mrs. Reynolds where they will be staying?”

Mrs. Plath inclined her head. “Certainly, sir. This way, Mrs. Leighton. Mrs. Reynolds.”

Victoria sent Colin a hasty glance but, he was already engaged in deep conversation with Harrington, his back turned slightly toward her.

Mrs. Reynolds cleared her throat and nodded in the direction where Mrs. Plath was headed. “Perhaps we should follow?”

“Right.” Victoria hurried after Mrs. Plath up a wide and intricately carved wooden staircase. A scarlet runner curved over each step, muting their footfalls, while Mrs. Plath’s keys, which hung from her waistband in a large bunch, jangled with each step she took.

The staircase turned and Victoria’s fingers trailed over the polished wood railing. She glanced down into the entryway, certain she’d see Colin there, only to find him already gone.

She blew out a breath and slowed her pace, her mood a bit dimmer than when she’d arrived. Most likely because she’d been so looking forward to meeting his friends and their wives. As apprehensive as she was about interacting with strangers, she missed having female friends.

“I trust this will suit?” Mrs. Plath inquired when they finally reached the room where Victoria would be staying. The space was large, nearly twice what she was accustomed to, with sunlight streaming in through three tall windows.

A massive fireplace promised to offer substantial heat, while the cream-color palette with which the room had been decorated was wonderfully soothing. A bowl of fruit sat on one table while a vase filled with lovely pink roses stood on another.

“It’s perfect,” Victoria whispered while taking in the gauzy drapes that hung from the canopy bed in soft folds and the richly embroidered bedding. This room was beyond luxurious, which once again made her cringe at the thought of the guest-room she’d offered Colin.

“Mrs. Reynolds will stay in the room next door, so she won’t be too far, should you need her.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Plath. I know we’ll be very comfortable here.”

Mrs. Plath gave Victoria a hard look accompanied by a stiff nod. “Dinner is at six o’clock sharp. You’re both invited to join Mr. West this evening. For the sake of propriety.”

“Goodness,” Victoria muttered once Mrs. Plath was gone. She glanced at Mrs. Reynolds. “A bit starched, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m sure that’s how Mr. West saw me when he arrived at Leighton House.”

“Oh?”

“It’s only natural for servants to be protective of their employers. Especially when there’s good reason for it.”

Although the footmen arrived just then, directing her attention elsewhere as they brought in her trunks, she could not forget Mrs. Reynolds’s comment. It stayed with her as she freshened up later and changed into her evening attire, as Mrs. Reynolds did up her hair, and as the two of them descended the stairs.

“You think Mrs. Plath believes I might be aiming to take advantage?” Victoria asked as they walked to the parlor.

“Certainly, though I think she’s more worried you’ll hurt Mr. West in the process.”

“Hurt him?” What an utterly ludicrous thing to suggest. “He is not the one who depends upon me for assistance. If anything, he has every advantage while I am taking a big risk in coming here. My reputation aside, there’s a chance he will not be able to help or that the advice he offers won’t work. If that happens, I’ll have wasted a great deal of time on this visit - time I could have spent solving my irrigation issue or acquiring a loan or...something.”

A warm smile pulled at Mrs. Reynolds’s lips, causing her eyes to crinkle at the corners. “Quite so, Mrs. Leighton.”

Victoria studied Mrs. Reynolds’s knowing expression. Over the years, the old woman had somehow become so much more than a maid. She was a dear friend, a mother figure Victoria often relied on for advice. Yet it seemed she was leaving a great many things unsaid at the moment.

“You know I value your opinion. So if there is anything I have just said that you disagree with in the slightest, please say so.”

Mrs. Reynolds glanced toward the parlor door before quietly saying, “Your reason for coming here is perfectly sound. And while I’ll admit to being wary of Mr. West when he sought us out during the storm, his commendable actions since then lead me to believe he’ll do what he can to live up to your expectations.”

Satisfied with this analysis, Victoria entered the parlor where Colin was waiting. Smartly dressed in a burgundy velvet frock coat and black breeches, he reclined on a striped silk sofa. With his ankle propped across one knee, he read from a book with a contemplative interest that piqued her curiosity.

Noting her arrival, he instantly set the book aside and stood. Appreciation darkened his golden gaze to amber. Or perhaps it was merely the firelight playing tricks on her eyes.

“Vi—” he sent a hasty look in Mrs. Reynolds’s direction and promptly cleared his throat “—Mrs. Leighton. You look especially lovely this evening.”

It was difficult not to smile in response to such flattery. Even though it made her horribly self-aware since she knew she was average looking at best. Still, her heart hopped about and a hot wave of pleasure swept over her shoulders. She instinctively moved toward him.

“Thank you, Mr. West. If I may, I’d like to compliment your appearance too.” When he raised an eyebrow and gave

her a skeptical look, she changed her mind about saying she found him handsome for fear it would sound insincere. Instead she told him, “If we were in Town, I’d proudly be seen on your arm.”

His answering smile was slow and filled with a hint of surprise. “You honor me, Mrs. Leighton.”

Pulse racing, Victoria dipped her head in acknowledgement of his comment while trying to hide the ridiculous warmth that consumed her face like a raging wildfire. Thankfully, Colin greeted Mrs. Reynolds next, allowing Victoria a chance to gather her wits.

She was a grown woman for heaven’s sake. A widow no less, while he...

Well, to be fair, he was rather charming.

No. Stop it.

You’re here to learn from him, not to get carried away by fanciful notions.

Although it had felt as though he might have been flirting with her just now, if only a little.

Preposterous.

A successful man like him would never be drawn to a failure like her. With a shake of her head, she dropped her gaze to the book he’d been reading. Her pulse leapt as she snatched it up and noted the spot he’d marked with a dark green ribbon.

“Sense and Sensibility?”

He turned away from Mrs. Reynolds and shrugged one shoulder. "I've never read it, but you gave it a prominent spot on your library table, so I thought I'd give it a try."

"And?" She held her breath in anticipation of his answer. For reasons she dared not consider, his opinion of her favorite book mattered more than what was probably wise.

"I don't hate it."

She stared at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh dear," Mrs. Reynolds murmured.

Colin looked as though he'd like to tug on his cravat. Instead, he shifted his feet. "It's all the romance," he explained.

An agonized look captured his gaze, and Victoria suddenly understood. Or at least she believed she did. The expressiveness about his eyes was so achingly painful, she wanted to throw her arms around him and tell him all would be well. She wondered if he knew how much he revealed with his eyes.

"*Ivanhoe* is more to my liking," he added, his features relaxing as his thoughts moved past whatever dark musings he'd just been having. "Have you perchance read it?"

"No," Victoria admitted. "I can't say I have, though I'd very much like to."

It looked as though he might comment, but then the butler arrived to announce that dinner was served. Colin offered his arm to Victoria. Together they led the way into the dining room while Mrs. Reynolds picked up the rear.

“If I recall correctly, Mrs. Leighton, you grew up in Hampshire then moved to Wiltshire when your father came into his inheritance.” He sat at the head of the table with Victoria to his right and Mrs. Reynolds to his left.

“That’s right.” A footman stepped forward to refill Victoria’s glass, his frothy lace cuff additional proof of Colin’s extensive wealth. Not that he’d let it get to his head. On the contrary, he seemed extremely unpretentious. And of course she liked the fact that he’d remembered the detail his friend had related to him more than twenty years earlier.

“Richard taught me how to skip stones in Hampshire, on the lake in our back garden. We used to swim there too in the summer and would take our skates out onto the ice during winter. He was older of course so his legs were much longer.” She grinned as she thought back upon her childhood. “But that didn’t stop me from racing him. I even won a few times, though I’m rather inclined to believe he let me.”

“I’d not be surprised. Your brother always did find tremendous joy in other people’s happiness.” Colin raised his glass and appeared to reflect on the way the candlelight bounced off the crystal. He shifted his gaze to Victoria, snaring her with a look so intense it rendered her breathless. “I don’t think he counted a day as a good one unless he’d managed to make his friends laugh.”

“Telling jokes was his specialty.” It was strange to think of the Richard she remembered - a brother who’d always been four years her senior, until he’d died and she’d one day grown older than he ever would. It wasn’t fair. Life, as it turned out,

was anything but. Had he lived, he'd be three-and-forty years old now, most likely married with children and... She shook off the sadness beginning to grip her and attempted a smile. "There was the one about a wife wishing she were a book so she'd always have her husband's company. 'Ah,' replied the husband, 'then I should wish you an almanac that I might change once a year.'"

Mrs. Reynolds snorted while Colin gave a low chuckle. "I remember that one."

Victoria set her cutlery aside. "Do you remember any others?"

He opened his mouth, then clamped it shut. "I'll have to think on it and see what I can come up with."

She narrowed her gaze. That sounded a lot like avoidance - as if he had indeed thought of a joke but had chosen not to share it with her. Bothered, she thought to press him. But that would be badly done, no matter how much she longed to reminisce about her brother. So she chose to accept Colin's decision, her brief disappointment quickly forgotten when he began telling her of the time he and Richard sneaked out of their rooms at Eton so they could attend a boxing match.

"Here it is," he told her after dinner once they'd adjourned to the library, an impressive space spanning two levels. There was even a walkway overhead, built like a balcony, which could be reached by way of a spiral staircase. Mrs. Reynolds, who'd welcomed Colin's offer of tea, sat in an armchair some distance away, her attention on a series of floral prints with accompanying descriptions.

Colin pulled a book from a nearby shelf and held it toward Victoria. The gold lettering on the spine read *Ivanhoe*, Volume I.

“How many volumes are there?” she asked as she took the book from him.

“Three, but don’t let that deter you.”

She pushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “You seem very certain I’ll like it.”

“What’s not to like?” His golden eyes sparkled with boyish excitement. “There’s a jousting tournament, a witch trial, mystery, and danger. It was released last year and I’ve already read it at least five times.”

Victoria blinked. “Very well. But don’t give up on *Sense and Sensibility*.”

Positioned with his left side toward the bookcases, his scars were mostly cast in shadow, allowing his good side to dominate his appearance for a change. His eyes held hers and the air between them shifted - into what, she wasn’t sure - but she felt it in every fiber of her being.

“I never abandon what I’ve started.”

The sincerity with which he said this could not be denied. But there was something else - something more she couldn’t quite pinpoint - an unspoken implication vibrating along every nerve ending until her stomach was doing cartwheels and making her dizzy.

She shook her head and retreated a step, broke eye contact with him and gave her attention to the book he’d just lent her.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

He cleared his throat. “As you’ve probably already guessed, I remember several of the jokes your brother used to tell. The problem is they’re not the sort a gentleman shares with a lady, least of all when her chaperone’s present.”

This got Victoria’s attention and served as a welcome distraction from the strange response Colin had managed to provoke within her. She glanced in Mrs. Reynolds’s direction before returning her gaze to his. “I may be a lady, but I’m also a widow. And I’d love nothing better than for you to tell me everything you can remember of Richard.”

He answered with a soft laugh and stepped away from the bookcase, allowing the light from a nearby oil lamp to bring his scars back into sharper focus.

“Very well. Let’s take a turn of the room and I’ll tell you one of my favorites.” Clasp ing his hands behind his back, he started forward at a slow pace and waited for Victoria to fall into step beside him. Then, in a near whisper as they moved farther from where Mrs. Reynolds sat, he said, “A landowner was out walking his property one evening, when he happened upon a young man and woman who were keeping very busy near the fence in one of his fields. Calling to them, the landowner asked what they were about, to which the young man responded, ‘No worries, sir! We are only trying to *prop-a-gate!*’”

Victoria’s laughter was immediate. It burst from somewhere deep within, producing a loud sort of hoot that could only be silenced by slapping one hand across her mouth.

“Everything all right?” Mrs. Reynolds asked from the opposite end of the room.

“Mmm...hmm.” Victoria gulped down a lungful of air and added a series of nods. “Quite so, Mrs. Reynolds.”

The maid frowned but returned her attention to the prints.

“You’re not offended or outraged by the bawdiness?” Colin asked with a very distinct note of interest.

“Not in the least. How can I be when it’s both funny and clever? If anything, I’m grateful to you for sharing it with me. Not only does it cut across time and bring Richard closer, but it makes me feel like I’m part of the group, the family he created away from home.”

“I’m glad to have helped.” He said this with so much seriousness, it was hard to believe he’d just told a joke. “I know James and Grayson will strive to do the same when they get here.”

Oddly enough, Victoria no longer wished for their speedy arrival. In fact, she almost hoped they’d be delayed an extra day, though she would not permit herself to wonder what that might mean.

It was difficult for Colin to recall the last time he'd dreamt. Yet when he woke the next morning, there could be no denying the vivid experience he'd been a part of while sleeping. Worst of all, he wanted to go back, to continue enjoying the touch of Victoria's hand pressing into his chest, the scrape of her fingertips raking his hair, the deep and impassioned kiss...

Expelling a rough breath, he swiped one hand over his face and immediately stilled in response to the damaged flesh that greeted his touch. The humiliation that followed was acute as he acknowledged the potent effect of the dream. He'd defiled her. Unintentionally, yes, but nonetheless.

With a curse, he tossed the blankets aside and stood, then padded across the floor to his washstand where the mirror he used for shaving lay face down on the marble counter. Picking it up, he turned it over and forced himself to stare at his own reflection.

"Look at you," he chastised with no small amount of bitter resentment. Naked, there was no denying the extent of the scarring. It swept down the side of his neck, over his shoulder,

his upper arm, and part of his chest. There it was briefly interrupted before reappearing on his hip where hideous crepe-like burns snaked lower, over his thigh.

His mistress, Isabella, had never taken issue with it. But as an actress who benefited greatly from their acquaintance, pretending she paid his appearance no mind was probably worth the money he gave her.

Disgusted, he snatched up the ointment his cook had made and began to apply it. The soothing effect from the aloe she'd used eased the tightness and offered relief. But it didn't assuage the guilt he felt over dreaming about Victoria in such a despicable way.

He tossed the ointment aside, washed up, and proceeded to dress. Although she'd gradually warmed to him yesterday evening, the manner in which she'd responded when she'd arrived and he'd stopped her from falling was telling. Alarm had widened her eyes and she'd gasped, as though his touch burned. And while she'd done her best to hide her concern when he'd told her the other guests had not yet arrived, he'd seen the anxious look she'd shared with Mrs. Reynolds.

The fact that she'd actually stayed was a testament to her considerate nature. She'd not wanted to cause offense. He'd seen that too, in her sympathetic expression.

But at least he'd managed to make her laugh. The pleasure he'd found in doing so had lifted a weight from his shoulders and warmed his heart. He'd like to do it again, he acknowledged, working on his cravat a little while later. For if he could at least bring her joy, then perhaps when she left - as

she eventually would - she'd take a fond memory or two of him with her.

Suddenly eager to see her again, he shoved his arms into the sleeves of the forest green jacket he'd picked out and put on his boots. As a former military man, he saw no point in a valet. Using one doubled or tripled the time he'd otherwise spend on dressing - time he'd much rather spend on other things, like putting a smile on Victoria's face.

But when he arrived downstairs, he learned that she'd asked for a tray in her room. She would not be joining him for breakfast. Alone in the dining room, he scowled at the scrambled eggs and sausages Harrington had brought him, the steam no longer rising off the rapidly cooling food. Perhaps it was for the best?

No. She'd come here to learn from him, and she'd not be able to do so unless she was able to get past his appearance. Leaning back in his chair, he snatched up a sliver of bacon and bit off a piece, chewing on it while drumming his fingers against his armrest. What he needed was a starting point, the means by which to ensure her presence, a lesson to set things in motion.

He poured himself a cup of hot coffee and took a long sip, then ate his food and headed to his study. There, at the wide walnut desk he'd inherited from his great grandfather, he set his mind to penning a note.

Dear Victoria, perhaps you'd like to...

No. That sounded too casual.

He crumpled the sheet of paper into a ball and tossed it in the bin beneath his desk.

Dear Mrs. Leighton...

No. Too formal.

He discarded this paper as well and started again.

Good morning. I trust you slept well.

He stared at the bold lettering until it felt like the words mocked him, then sent the piece of paper to join the others. At this rate he'd have a large pile of kindling for his fire this evening.

A knock brought his attention to Harrington, who stood in the doorway. "Begging your pardon, sir, but I thought you might like to know the Dale and Grier carriages are on their way up the front drive."

James and Grayson were here? With their wives? Thank Christ! Colin pushed his chair back and leaped to his feet, eager to reunite with his friends.

Striding past Harrington, he cut a quick path to the front door and exited onto the front step.

"I apologize for the delay," Grayson called while helping Olivia alight. "One of the horses threw a shoe, forcing us to take an overnight stay in Gladstone. Most inconvenient."

"It certainly was this time," James quipped with a smirk directed toward his wife, Wilhelmina, who immediately blushed.

"I sense a story there," Olivia teased.

“Careful, darling, or they’ll insist on knowing more about our fondness for rooftop picnics.” Grayson sent his wife a secretive smile before lending assistance to a pretty young lady of debutante age who followed Olivia out of the carriage. “I hope you don’t mind us bringing Juliana along. She wasn’t due to visit until September, but with the Rosegate ball canceled, Mama and I agreed she’d be better off in the country.”

“She’s just as welcome as you and your wife,” Colin said, doing his best not to let Grayson’s ward affront him when she lifted her studious gaze. She proceeded to examine him, not with the usual concern or aversion he’d grown accustomed to from strangers, but as though he were a beetle pinned inside a display case.

Juliana offered her thanks and Colin gave her an answering nod before she strolled off to admire her new surroundings, leaving him by himself for a moment.

He considered his friends as they exchanged soft-spoken words with their wives, feeling like an outsider who could not relate to the intimacy they’d acquired through marriage. Curiously, it left him with a hollow sensation inside.

But then James laughed and crossed to where Colin stood. He grabbed his hand, giving it a firm shake while pulling him into a rough embrace, and it was as though they were back to being rascal boys at Eton.

“It’s bloody good to see you again, Colin. And here, no less.” He took a step back and slid his gaze over the castle’s façade. “We had some great adventures here as lads when

we'd visit you during the summer. I've been looking forward to showing the place off to Wilhelmina."

"And to helping you out," Grayson said. He'd approached together with Wilhelmina and Olivia while Juliana, who'd moved toward a flock of sheep that were grazing in an adjacent meadow, remained apart from the group.

"Which prompts me to ask a pressing question," James said once Colin had greeted both ladies. He leaned toward Colin and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. "Has she arrived?"

Colin swatted away a bothersome fly. "She did so yesterday afternoon."

"Alone?" Wilhelmina quietly asked after a notable moment of silence.

"No. She brought Mrs. Reynolds, her maid of all works, along with her."

"A maid is hardly sufficient," James muttered, his eyebrows dipping until he looked like the serious barrister Colin was used to and less like a love-struck swain. "Not when it comes to—"

"I'm aware," Colin said, his irritation rising. "Which is why I promised to ensure her respectability by inviting all of you to join us."

"Once again, we apologize for the delay," Grayson said, "but we're here now. No harm done, I trust?"

The urge to smack his friend was almost irresistible. Colin hardened his jaw. "Of course not. Let's take some refreshment

on the terrace while the footmen see to your luggage. Harrington will let Victoria know you've arrived."

"Victoria, is it?" James asked with marked interest. "Not Mrs. Leighton?"

Colin glared at him. "Don't be an arse. She's Richard's sister for God's sake." He turned on his heel and started walking. "Come on. The terrace is this way."

"Juliana," Grayson called. "We're heading to the terrace. Will you join us?"

"Of course," the girl replied as Colin set off.

"Grayson tells us you happened upon her during a rainstorm," Wilhelmina said once everyone was comfortably seated around a wrought-iron table. A footman was in the process of serving elderflower juice and vanilla-flavored biscuits. "What a marvelous surprise that must have been."

"It was actually quite shocking," Colin confessed. He eyed a nearby planter from which a late-blooming clematis wound its way onto the balustrade. "I gave up hope of crossing paths with her years ago. I believe we all did."

"How come?" Juliana asked, once again watching him in a manner that made him want to slide under the table, out of view.

"When we returned from Egypt, she'd simply vanished." Grayson explained. He reached for his drink, set the glass to his lips, and took a long sip. "With her father dead and the estate vacated when we arrived, tracking her down became an impossible task."

“None of the locals knew where she’d gone,” James explained.

“She married and moved away,” Colin said. “And now she’s a widow in need of our help. As I understand it, she inherited several debts from her husband that—”

He cut himself off at the sound of approaching footsteps, the familiar click of Harrington’s shoes accompanied by a much softer tread that alerted him to Victoria’s imminent arrival. Chest tight in anticipation of seeing her once again, he rose to his feet and brushed out his coattails, managing to straighten himself right before she stepped onto the terrace.

She wore the same black gown she’d had on when she first arrived, the bombazine swishing as it swept over the threshold. Beneath the bright sun, her skin looked especially pale, but that did not detract from her beauty. If anything, it brought last night’s dream into very sharp focus.

Hard as it was, he pushed all thought of *that* aside and stepped toward her, intent on lending support. Positioning himself between his friends and where she stood, which allowed for a private exchange, he dismissed his butler and met her gaze. There was no denying the nervousness there.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered. “You already know me and everyone else is excited to make your acquaintance. Are you ready?”

She nodded, but the worry that pulled at her lips didn’t convince him. He considered taking her arm and drawing her close to his side, only to reconsider. The way she’d responded to his touch thus far did not suggest a desire for increased

contact. She'd chat with him yes, but there was no doubt in his mind that she'd rather keep him at arm's length.

"If it helps," he finally told her, "I'm terrified of monkeys."

His comment had the desired effect. Her lips twitched with amusement while a fiery light brightened her dazzling brown eyes. "You must tell me more."

"And so I shall. Later." He stepped aside and gestured toward the assembled group behind him. Everyone had risen for the introductions. "Allow me to present James Dale. His wife, Wilhelmina Dale; Grayson Grier; his wife, Olivia Grier; and Grayson's ward, Miss Juliana Edwards."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Victoria said, only the barest hint of a hitch to her voice conveying any uncertainty.

Colin watched her throat work as she swallowed, noted how hard she was clasping her hands, and felt a profound surge of pride. This wasn't easy for her, but she was determined and wonderfully brave.

"The pleasure is entirely ours," James said with an uncharacteristically welcoming smile.

"Colin says you're a lady farmer." This comment was made by Olivia, whose large green eyes always seemed to absorb every detail. No conversationalist ever appeared to show more interest in the person to whom they were speaking than she. Angling her head, she leaned in Victoria's direction. "Do you have a preferred crop or do you grow a variety of things?"

“I...” Victoria sent Colin a cautious look. Only when he nodded to offer encouragement did she say, “Cabbage, which tends to be resilient, though the recent rain damaged most of what I’d planted. Aside from that, I made an attempt with lettuce and cucumbers in the spring, but the drought led to a poor harvest.”

“Those do require constant watering,” Colin said. He’d always selected hardier crops himself.

“I’ll admit I hadn’t realized that when I planted the seeds.” A shy smile led to a crease on the bridge of her nose. She bit her lip. “They’re my favorite vegetables though, which is why I picked them. Not very clever of me, I’ll admit, but it did prompt me to do some research. Not only about plants, but also irrigation.”

“She’s been digging canals,” Colin revealed while sending Victoria a smile.

“Has she indeed?” James murmured, his voice genuinely curious. “Having recently installed a pump system for water delivery in my London townhouse, I look forward to discussing this with you in greater detail, and to offering you whatever advice you may need.”

“That’s awfully kind of you,” Victoria told him. She glanced around, allowing her gaze to sweep everyone present. “Thank you. All of you. As Colin has no doubt mentioned, I’m at my wits end and in desperate need of assistance.”

“We’re ready to help,” Wilhelmina assured her.

“And to become fast friends,” Olivia said with warmth in her voice. She glanced toward the garden. “After several hours of confinement in a carriage, I’m rather eager to move.”

“As am I,” said Juliana, a touch more enthusiastically than what was ordinarily deemed proper.

Wilhelmina’s face brightened. “A walk would be ideal. Will you join us, Victoria?”

The near painful yearning that filled Victoria’s gaze conveyed the loneliness she’d been confined to for decades. It speared Colin’s heart even as a smile followed. “I’d like that.”

Chest rising and falling against controlled breaths, Colin watched the ladies stroll off. His gaze lingered on the soft expanse of skin between the nape of Victoria’s neck and the top of her gown, the perfect curve of her spine and the supple movement of pleated skirts, rippling behind her as she moved.

“She’s quite the beauty, wouldn’t you agree?”

Grayson’s hushed words dragged Colin’s gaze away from the woman upon whom his thoughts had begun to linger more than what was probably wise. Hell, when he’d arrived home, he’d spent three days tidying his messy study, preparing for her visit. He’d also made sure David Frost, his steward, would be capable of managing the upcoming harvest mostly unsupervised so Colin would be free to dedicate the majority of his time to Victoria.

“Yes,” Colin said, hoping to leave it at that.

“She’s different from her brother,” Grayson observed. “More uncertain, I suppose.”

Colin tracked Victoria as she turned onto a garden path, her movements slow and careful. “She’s unaccustomed to social interaction. From what I gather, she spent most of her marriage cloistered away.”

James gave him a studious look. “It did not escape me that she turned to you for guidance.”

“As one might expect since she already knows me.” James and Grayson glanced at each other as though in silent conversation, prompting Colin to frown. “What?”

It took a few seconds for Grayson to ask, “Have you considered romancing her?”

Colin stilled. He snorted with self-directed disgust. “Don’t be absurd.”

“There is nothing absurd about it,” James said. “You’re an unmarried man of great fortune who’s not getting any younger while she clearly—”

“Stop it. Both of you.” Colin swept a hand over his face, felt the puckered disfigurement there and released a guttural growl. “I’ve been down the marital path before and it did not go well.”

Silence followed and for a blissful series of seconds, Colin believed they were done with the subject, until Grayson said, “Stephanie Murdoch was a despicable woman. You were fortunate to escape her when you did. But it would be a mistake to judge all women poorly because of her. Take Wilhelmina and Olivia for instance. Both are strong,

independent, and loving women with wonderful characters to recommend them.”

Colin scoffed. “As I recall, the two of you were arguing against marriage five months ago. How fast your perspectives have changed.”

“Given our experiences since,” James said, “I daresay we can both admit we were wrong.”

“And now that we’ve found happiness, we want the same for you.” A cloud swept past the sun, shading Grayson’s face as he spoke. “Your run-in with Victoria was serendipitous, Colin. Surely you can see that. And given the fact that you don’t otherwise venture into Society, her being here gives you a chance you’re unlikely to have again anytime soon.”

A tight knot had formed in Colin’s stomach and for some inexplicable reason he felt the urge to grab his friend by the throat and toss him aside. He took a deep breath. Expelled it. “Victoria has suffered through an unpleasant marriage. She doesn’t want another husband. But if she did, I’d expect her to make a more suitable match.”

“If this is about the wounds you sustained in—”

“We’re done with this discussion.” A headache was starting to gnaw at his skull. “If you’ll excuse me, there’s an urgent letter I need to complete.”

A lie, but damn it all, he needed to be alone for a while.

The heat from the late morning sun directed Victoria's walking party toward a path shaded by beech and alder trees. Unlike the area near the house where nature was tamed into neat and tidy lines, in this part of the garden thistles, poppies, mayweed, and corncockle grew between untrimmed clumps of grass.

"This is the sort of garden I favor," said Wilhelmina. "It's wonderfully romantic, don't you think?"

"It is," Victoria agreed. She breathed in the warm countryside fragrance and watched a butterfly drift amidst the flowers.

"Gardening can be gratifying," said Olivia, "but it's also a lot of work if one wants to keep all the weeds out."

Victoria considered the raven-haired woman who walked a few steps in front of her with Juliana. "You speak as though from experience."

Olivia glanced over her shoulder, tossing Victoria a smile in the process. "I grew up in a vicarage with a spacious garden perfect for growing flowers, vegetables, and herbs. But there

was no gardener, or any other servants for that matter, so I was required to do the work.”

“Oh.” Victoria considered voicing her regrets but then Juliana pointed toward the right. In the next instant Olivia followed her off the path toward whatever it was the girl had spotted.

“Colin mentioned your marriage,” Wilhelmina said when they’d walked a few more paces in silence. “I would like to offer condolences on the loss of your husband.”

“Thank you.” Victoria eyed the petite blonde by her side. If she were to gain a proper friendship - the sort she longed for - she’d probably have to say something more. She hesitated briefly before daring to ask, “Did Colin mention my husband’s role in my being here? That he is the reason the creditors now demand payment and why I’ve been forced to sell off the artwork?”

“I’m sorry. Some men have no sense whatsoever. Then again, the same can be said of some women.” She sighed. “If it’s any consolation, your brother’s friends are honorable men upon whom you may depend. Even when their strictest beliefs are put into question.”

“How so?”

“I trust Colin hasn’t told you about my past?” Wilhelmina chuckled when Victoria shook her head. “I was labeled an adulteress. My first husband divorced me.”

Victoria gasped. She’d read about this case in the papers. “You’re the former Mrs. Lawson?”

“Yes.” Wilhelmina gave her a crooked smile. “James loathed me for what I’d supposedly done and who could blame him? He saw what the rest of the world saw. What I intended for them to see. But then he got to know me and...I suppose the point I’m trying to make is that James, Grayson, and Colin are all reasonable men cut from the same kind of cloth. Though they are principled and occasionally stubborn, their moral compasses are in excellent working condition. You’re fortunate to have them on your side.”

“I know. I still can’t believe Colin found me like that, after all of these years, and when I was most in need of his help.”

“Things happen for a reason. I suppose.”

No doubt about that. Had Gavin still been alive, Victoria wouldn’t have met Colin at all. She would have been told to stay out of sight until he left, with neither of them learning of the bond they shared through Richard.

She picked a poppy and twirled it between her fingers. “I hope this doesn’t sound ignorant, but it is unusual for an affluent gentleman to pass his fortieth year without getting married, is it not? I mean, from what I gather, you are all recently wed, except Colin, who remains unmarried.”

She did not bring this up because she was curious to know why Colin was unattached. To suppose such a thing was ridiculous.

“James was a widower with an unpleasant experience behind him when he and I met. As for Grayson, I don’t think he was in any hurry to marry after witnessing his friends’ failed attempts at happy unions.”

Victoria nearly stumbled. “Are you saying both James and Colin were previously married?”

The path curved back toward Woodstone Park, allowing them to glimpse Juliana and Olivia, who stood between the trees, hands on hips and with their heads tilted back while studying something overhead. James and Grayson, Victoria saw, were coming toward them at a brisk pace, chatting as they walked. She slowed her movement, hoping to get as much information as possible out of Wilhelmina before the men arrived.

“James had a son with his first wife. As incredulous as it may sound, he – Michael, that is - actually married my daughter, Cynthia.”

“You’re joking.”

Wilhelmina chuckled. “Not at all. It was in fact the source of several disputes between us, but that is thankfully in the past now.”

“So you’re happy in your marriage.” It was more of an observation than an actual question.

“Undeniably so.” Wilhelmina took Victoria’s arm. “It just goes to show that there can be a happily ever after, eventually.”

Afraid that line of thought might expand until it focused on her, Victoria hastily asked, “And Colin, did his wife bless him with children?”

It was a terribly forward question, Victoria realized in retrospect. The sort only someone completely unaccustomed

to etiquette might ask.

She winced and prepared to retract it, but Wilhelmina spoke first, barely managing to say, “As far as I know, she didn’t get the chance to,” before her husband and Grayson reached them.

“We apologize for intruding,” said James, “but Colin had an urgent matter to see to, then Grayson mentioned his wonderful news, and I simply had to share it with you at once.”

Grayson blew out a breath and shifted his gaze in his wife’s direction. It looked as though she was coming to join them, leaving Juliana to continue her explorations alone. “Convincing him not to was impossible.”

“Oh?”

“Of course it was.” James elbowed Grayson and sent him a beaming smile. “What did you think? That I’d keep your impending fatherhood from my wife?”

Wilhelmina clapped her hands together and squealed with delight while every cell in Victoria’s body went numb. She forced a smile to hide the ache filling her breast. This was joyous news for the Griers. She must not ruin it with a bleak demeanor. So she offered congratulations to Grayson as his wife drew nearer.

“Your husband has just informed us that you are increasing,” Wilhelmina said once Olivia reached them. “I am so incredibly pleased for you, Olivia.”

Olivia gave her husband a playful punch to his upper arm. “I thought we agreed to make the announcement at dinner.”

Grayson drew her against him and kissed the top of her head. “Forgive me, my love, but it just slipped out when James mentioned the preparations he and Mina are making for their baby’s arrival.”

Wonderful. Victoria could now look forward to two women chatting away about everything baby related. She glanced toward the house, or rather the castle, and began to plan her escape.

“How far along are you?” Victoria asked with the sort of excitement one might expect from a woman for whom a pregnancy equaled joy, fulfillment, and love.

Olivia’s face reddened. “We expect our child to be born in about seven months.”

James laughed and slapped Grayson’s back. “Well done, my friend.”

“You’re the last person who ought to be having fun over this.” Grayson gave James a blunt look, but there was no denying the twinkle of mirth in his dark brown eyes. “As I recall, Mina was also one month along when you married her in June.”

“What can I say?” James sent Wilhelmina a roguish grin. “Our northbound journey together was highly productive.”

“Good grief,” Wilhelmina groaned. She sent Victoria an apologetic look. “Please forgive our inappropriateness. You must think we’re all without morals.”

As stunned as she was by their openness, this wasn't what troubled Victoria. It was something else that made her steer her thoughts away from the idea of pregnancy and the damning effect it could have on a woman. "I think no such thing. If anything, I believe your lack of pretense allows you to share the sort of bond I've only ever known with my brother. I miss that. I miss him."

An appropriate moment of silence followed before Olivia said, "My sister died when I was two-and-twenty. A day doesn't pass without me mourning her loss, but Grayson's love and Juliana's acceptance of me, along with the friendship James and Wilhelmina have offered, have enriched my life more than words can express. Our hope is to do the same for you."

Victoria's throat tightened. "Thank you."

"Please consider us family," Grayson said. "You can come to us with any problem at any hour without fear of judgment."

"Colin will agree," James murmured, his gaze fixed on Victoria in a manner that made her fear she might have food stuck between her teeth. She shifted her feet. "I cannot recall the last time he was so concerned about someone's well-being."

"Because she's Richard's sister," Wilhelmina said, sending him a pointed look that only seemed to worsen Victoria's self-awareness.

Thankfully, Juliana joined them at that moment, her face bright with excitement. "That wasp's nest is truly a sight to behold. Did you tell them about it, Olivia?"

“I didn’t get the chance to with Grayson ruining our announcement.” Despite her chastising manner, her words were delivered with fondness and followed by a kiss to Grayson’s cheek.

Victoria blinked. She’d never known such public displays of affection before. Not between her parents and certainly not between herself and Gavin. It was...lovely to see, she decided, even as she acknowledged a small spike of envy. If only her marriage had been more like this.

“Once again, he ruins the fun,” Juliana said with an overdramatic sigh. Much to Victoria’s surprise, everyone grinned, including Grayson.

“I do have a talent for it,” he admitted with a wink directed at Juliana. He wound one arm around his wife and gave her a sideways hug before saying, “Perhaps we should go find Colin. It seems unfair that he should be the last to know.”

“Do you also suffer from nausea in the morning?” Wilhelmina asked Olivia as they started back toward the house.

“Not yet, thank goodness.”

“Maybe you will be lucky. I tell you, it’s gotten so bad for me I can’t think of food before ten o’clock without retching.”

Victoria kept silent as the two women continued talking, sharing hopes and expectations she’d no desire to comment upon. In truth, she’d rather avoid it altogether, so she excused herself once they returned indoors, explaining that she hadn’t slept well last night and would like to take a nap.

Which was partly true. Thoughts of Colin and what it had felt like when he'd touched her had kept her from sleep for several hours.

She chastised herself as she climbed the stairs and went in search of her room.

Silliness, that was all this was. She simply wasn't accustomed to keeping company with a man whose acquaintance was as new as his was. With Gavin it had been different. She'd known him long before they married. She'd been used to him, unaffected by his nearness. In due course, the same would no doubt be true of Colin.

But when she accepted Colin's arm to walk into dinner a few hours later, the answering flutter deep in her stomach was worse, not better, as one might expect if she simply had to get used to his presence. Her pulse quickened when she felt the flex of his muscles beneath her gloved hand. Breathlessness overtook her, leaving her slightly lightheaded.

She swayed on her feet and found herself instantly steadied as he drew her snugly against him.

"All right?" The whispered rumble of his voice right next to her ear sent a shiver across her shoulders.

She took a deep breath and was greeted by the enticing scent of sandalwood mixed with the fragrance of lavender soap and brandy.

"Yes," she managed. Realizing she leaned against him, she jerked away and gave a sharp nod.

He held her gaze for a second, the piercing intensity turning his eyes a deep shade of amber. Strained features pulled the scarred tissue taught, diminishing the unevenness even as the pink sheen grew more pronounced.

“Watch your step.”

No other words were said as he eased away and continued walking. And yet, inexplicably, Victoria’s awareness of him increased. She knew precisely how far his hands were from her shoulders while he helped her into her seat, and as the meal progressed, she could sense when his gaze was upon her because of the heat wafting through her entire being.

“Have you shown Victoria your fairytale garden yet?” Grayson asked when the topic of preferred holiday destinations had been exhausted. Apparently, Olivia and Grayson had plans to go to France and Germany in the spring.

Colin froze mid-bite. His eyebrows dipped as he set his fork down and leaned back in his seat. He cleared his throat, reached for his wine and...paused. “I don’t know why you insist upon calling it that. And no, I have not.”

Victoria watched Colin through the light spilling down from the chandelier overhead. Was it her imagination or had the color in his cheeks deepened? Was he actually blushing?

“Perhaps you can show it to us after dinner,” Olivia suggested. “I’d certainly love to see it.”

“As would I,” said Juliana.

“It’s just a hobby of mine,” Colin muttered. “Nothing worth getting excited about.”

He picked up his glass and took a long sip of his wine.

“That’s not what James tells me,” Wilhelmina said. “According to him, you have the finest collection of roses he’s ever seen.”

“I personally love roses,” Victoria said, her voice a touch weaker than she intended. She took a deep breath and forced herself to ignore the heat brushing the back of her neck as she met Colin’s gaze. “If you’re not opposed, I should like to see this fairytale garden as well.”

“It’s not...” Colin huffed a breath and closed his eyes briefly before eventually nodding. “By all means. We’ll take a look at the garden after we’ve had our dessert.”

The pleasure Victoria felt in response to his agreeability was hindered by his obvious reluctance. Plucking up her courage, she decided to address the issue as soon as dinner was over.

“I didn’t mean to pressure you,” she said as they walked side by side through the long hallway where history had been cut into each granite block. Torches extending from the walls at regular intervals added light in a medieval sort of way that made Victoria feel as though she’d traveled through time. The rest of the group followed behind, their hushed conversation adding a reverence only an ancient building like this could be worthy of.

He made a gruff sound at the back of his throat. “I take no issue with your curiosity, Victoria. I simply don’t care for having my pastime interest turned into something it’s not.”

“You do not think of it as a fairytale garden?”

“No. It’s more of a…” His thought faded as every part of his face turned into a frown. They rounded a corner. A door up ahead beckoned and as they approached, Colin reached for the handle. Dipping his head, he glanced at her, his lips drawn into what looked like an almost bashful smile. “I suppose you’ll see for yourself.”

The door swung open to reveal an interior courtyard, open toward the night sky. Graveled paths, lined by brightly lit lanterns, disappeared between the lush foliage of well-kept roses, so dense it was impossible to see beyond the first row of flowerbeds.

Awestruck by the sheer beauty, Victoria sucked in a quiet breath and entered the space. Whispered exchanges behind her confirmed that the rest of the group followed.

Moving with a gentle tread, she approached a collection of white roses, their petals glowing with near translucency as the lantern light lit them from below. The sweetest fragrance greeted her, compelling her to lean forward, close her eyes, and inhale.

Divine.

“The alba rose,” Colin said, the velvety smoothness of his voice enveloping her in an intimate hold. “One of my personal favorites due to its lovely perfume. It looks white now, but during the day you’ll see there’s a pale pink tint to the petals.”

The crunch of gravel to Victoria’s left accompanied by quiet chatter informed her that the rest of their party was

moving past them. She leaned back and opened her eyes, just in time to catch the sweeping movement of Olivia's hem as it slid out of view.

Juliana's laughter echoed from somewhere deeper within the courtyard. "Come look at this," the girl shouted with unrestrained excitement. "There's a fountain over here, with little channels leading off it."

"I was inspired by a visit to the Alhambra a few years ago, a palatial fortress in Spain that was built by the Moors. Napoleon's forces attempted to blow it up after their occupation. Thankfully their efforts were thwarted, preventing the loss of some truly magnificent architecture." Keeping his gaze trained on her, he extended his hand. "This is for you."

Victoria dropped her gaze to the gorgeous white rose he held toward her, its petals still tightly packed in the early stages of bloom. Swallowing, she took it while doing her best not to panic as unease crept under her shoulder blades. That flutter she'd felt in her stomach before returned in full force.

"Thank you. I..." She glanced around, instinctively seeking the others, only to realize that she was alone with a man whose touch made her heart race, her breath hitch, her skin prick, whose close proximity upset her nerves and threatened to make her lose her footing. It was uncomfortable and unfamiliar, unlike anything she'd ever experienced before, and it warned her to beware. So she took a step back, adding distance while he tracked her every move with those golden eyes that threatened to pierce her soul. "It's late. If I'm to

begin my lessons at a reasonable time tomorrow, I probably ought to retire.”

His eyebrows dipped. “What do you consider a reasonable time?”

“Eight, at the latest?”

“I thought we might begin at nine.”

She chose not to argue. “Very well. You are the instructor, so I’ll trust you to allocate enough time for the lessons.”

The barest hint of a smile pulled at his lips. “How gracious of you.”

She couldn’t tell if he was mocking her or trying to be amusing. Deciding to err on the side of caution, she quickly apologized. “Please understand that I cannot be gone from home for more than two or three weeks. With two days already passed since my arrival, I simply wish to ensure that I get as much out of the rest of my stay as possible.”

“Of course. We’ll meet in my study tomorrow at eight and move forward from there.”

Victoria clasped the spindly stem of the rose and gave him an awkward nod. “I’ll bid you goodnight then.”

“Good night, Victoria.”

Despite her intentions, Victoria sensed that she’d wounded him somehow.

The sinking sensation deep in her gut attested to it as she walked away. It forced her to wonder if he might have misunderstood the reason for her retreat and left her far more

troubled than ever. For how was she to explain herself to him without revealing her true concern?

He was awakening something new within her and it was terrifying.

He was a fool and there weren't enough hours between last night and this morning for him to forget that. Colin pulled books off a shelf in his study. But he'd been captivated when the dim evening light had bathed Victoria's profile in luminescent shades of gold as she bowed her head to breathe in the sweet scent of roses. He'd been transfixed and with the rest of the party moving off to other parts of the garden, their chatter receding, he'd been allowed an intimate moment of privacy with her that, in hindsight, had clearly turned him stupid.

Which explained why he'd gone and given her that bloody rose. A gesture that instantly made her retreat from him with as much speed as a rabbit would run from a fox.

The perfection of standing in that ancient space with her while stars winked down from above had, for a split second, provided him with more relief than he'd ever found in the laudanum he occasionally used. In that moment, he'd been stripped of the past, of every inhibition the war had led to. For a heartbeat he'd just been a man struck by a woman's beauty.

Then he'd seen that flicker of nervousness in her eyes, and he'd been reminded of what he actually looked like.

Expelling a sigh, he set the books on his desk in preparation for her arrival. If she were punctual, as he expected she would be, she'd walk through the door in about five minutes.

Once again, he'd barely slept. A far too common occurrence these days, he acknowledged, just as the soft tread of footsteps caused him to turn.

"Good morning." She stood in the doorway, dressed in a deep purple gown and with the sort of shy look in her eyes that one might expect if she were about to meet with a stranger.

Colin hated that look and what it represented, prompting him to respond more gruffly than he'd intended. "Good morning. I trust you've slept well and that you've eaten?"

"Yes. Thank you." She approached with hesitant steps. "I had hoped we might breakfast together."

"You would have had to rise at six in order to do so." What he failed to mention was that he'd taken his breakfast in here, expressly to avoid sitting across from her while their most recent interaction hung between them. Even now there was a hint of awkwardness he dearly wished to dispel, so he swept his arm toward his desk. "I've gathered some of my ledgers along with investment notes and farming records so you can see how I keep track of estate matters."

"Thank you."

He pulled out a chair adjacent to his own so she could sit directly to his right. “Will Mrs. Reynolds not be joining you as chaperone?”

“No.” She rounded the desk and sat. “I didn’t think it necessary as long as we keep the door open.”

“Of course.” Chest tight, he glanced toward the empty hallway before taking his own seat and opening one of his ledgers. “Income must exceed expenses. Look here, for example, there’s a clear description of every shilling spent, in this case on nails and shingles for the barn roofing repairs last spring.”

“You wrote down exactly how many nails were bought?”

“I also wrote down the number of nails used, with a small notation in a different notebook on how many nails I still have in supply, should they be needed in future.”

“Remarkable.” She read over the rest of the items on the page, following along with her index finger. Eventually she glanced at him. “The detail here is impressive. It must have taken you hours to complete.”

There was no denying the pride he felt in that instant. After all, everything else aside, he was receiving a compliment from a woman who seemed to appreciate something about him, even if that something happened to be his accounting skills. He ought not wish she would also find him handsome when that was impossible. Indeed, he ought to be grateful, and he was.

Realizing she was staring at him as though waiting for a response, he said, “All you need is to implement a system and a routine. From what I gather, it’s common for gentlemen to update their ledgers in the morning. I personally prefer to do mine at the end of the day, before I retire. Takes me a couple of hours or so.”

“Is there a particular reason why you choose to do it at that time of day instead?”

Her genuine interest was both encouraging and engaging. “Because that way everything that has happened during any given day - all the purchases made and incidents that have occurred - is fresh in my mind.”

She answered with a slow nod, her lips pursed as if in thought. “That does make a great deal of sense.”

They continued perusing the pages, stopping from time to time to discuss Colin’s reason for mentioning details Victoria seemed to think inconsequential, like the amount of time it had taken one of the maids to mend a seam on his shirt. A sum had been drawn up beside it, totaling two pence.

“Time is valuable,” Colin explained, “not only to myself but to everyone in my employ. If it takes a maid nearly two hours to mend a simple seam, it might be more prudent of me to send the garment out to an experienced seamstress who’s able to do the job faster, allowing the maid in question to focus on duties she’s better skilled at. In the end, the cost, as it turns out, would be the same, but at least I shan’t be wasting the maid’s time and she shan’t be wasting my blunt.”

“You have no valet for such a task?”

“No.” Valets were for dandies and men unable to care for themselves, neither of which described Colin, who hated flamboyant clothes and was perfectly able to mend his own shirt if he thought doing so worth his time.

“Hmm...”

“You’re not convinced?”

“Of your lack of valet? Certainly. Of turning a shirt repair into a carefully calculated financial decision?” Not answering her own question, she toyed with the corner of the page, sliding it back and forth between her fingers before quickly turning it over. A slight shrug of one shoulder followed, disturbing the lace trim edging her neckline. “I assume your maid earns a yearly income. Yes?”

“Of course. All of my servants do, with their wages paid in full every quarter.”

“Wouldn’t it then make more sense to have them do whichever tasks suitable to their station, regardless of how long it takes?” She shook her head. “I mean, you’re not paying them by the hour.”

“Of course I am.” When she turned a sharp gaze toward him, he leaned forward slightly, propping one elbow on his desk while angling his body toward her. It was imperative she understand this basic foundation of what he considered financial acumen. “I am paying them by the second, Victoria, seconds that add up to hours, days, weeks, months, and finally years. Whatever the yearly salary is, it’s imperative for any employer to break that number down into an hourly rate. Only then will they truly be able to draw proper comparisons

between their servants, determine who might deserve a raise and who might need replacing.”

She scrunched her nose as if with displeasure, her gaze flitting across the scarred side of his face before dropping away. “That’s a very rigid way of running things, don’t you think?”

Colin leaned back slightly. “I treat my servants kindly and pay them exceedingly well, but I also expect them to earn that wage. Anything less, and I’d lose their respect, which would only send the household into decline.”

“I...see.”

“Think of your home as a business, Victoria, because it is.” When she produced a panicked laugh, he hastened to say, “Everything ties together, which is why your tenants should always be kept happy and servants well cared for, because this creates loyalty - a rare commodity every employer must earn. Anything owed ought to be paid in a timely fashion in order to prove your trustworthiness. Detailed records must be kept pertaining to repairs, salaries, expenses, illnesses, travel, and taxes.”

A frown puckered her brow as she stared at the books he’d piled together. She flattened her lips, cleared her throat, and suddenly raised a determined gaze toward him. “Before we continue, I need to apologize for my behavior last night.”

Shite.

Colin clenched his teeth while restlessly tapping his fingers against his thigh. “I accept,” he said, hoping to end this

conversation as swiftly as possible. “Consider it forgotten.”

“But—”

“As you yourself have made clear, time is of the essence, so let us not waste another second.” He deliberately relaxed his posture and gave her what he hoped would look like a welcoming smile, not a grimace.

Irritation flared to life in her hazel eyes. “Please don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Prevent me from saying my piece.” She crossed her arms, hugging herself as if seeking protection from some invisible threat. “Gavin used to do so all the time and when he died, I swore I’d never again let another man bully me into silence.”

Colin opened his mouth but that word, bully, rendered him mute. He couldn’t believe it was being applied to him. He swallowed, hard, his shoulders slumping beneath the weight of such chastisement. “Forgive me. I can only blame my own self-awareness, which I realize is no excuse for being rude. Please say what you will and rest assured, I shall listen.”

The timid smile softening her features was positively enchanting, the openness in her gaze like a warm ray of sunshine bursting through an overcast sky. “I merely wished to say that I’m sorry for how I reacted last night when you gave me the rose.”

Prickly heat washed over Colin. His clothes began to itch and it took tremendous effort not to start tugging at his cravat. “You need not worry about it. I understand.”

“I don’t believe you do.” She took a deep breath before saying, “I’m not accustomed to being touched, you see.”

“Then I shall endeavor never to do so again,” he promised while doing his best to avoid sounding angry. After all, he’d seen Mrs. Reynolds touch her, had watched Victoria take Wilhelmina’s arm while they walked.

No, it was clear to him that his was the only touch that bothered her, so it surprised him when his remark made her knit her brow as if with annoyance. After all, he was only trying to accommodate her wishes.

Frustrated, he grabbed a notebook he’d filled with his own personal expenses, hoping it would help them return to their lesson. “Here. This will provide an example of just how detailed accounts can be.”

Setting the book before her, he opened it to a random page and allowed her to study his notes.

Hesitating only briefly, she gave her attention to the neat script while he watched with pride. This was something he knew he excelled at - something with which she could find no fault. His heart beat steadily. As much as he wished to deny it, her rebuff still stung. It made him feel like half a man.

He cast that thought aside even as he admired the elegant sweep of her neck, the occasional flutter of her long lashes whenever she blinked, and the small mole located right at the edge of her jaw. He wondered if she knew it was there and decided he liked the idea of her not doing so, of him being privy to something about her that she wasn’t.

A smile pulled at the edge of her lips, forming a perfect dimple. Colin stared at it, transfixed, while reminding himself that he had no right to imagine placing a kiss there or to—

“You certainly seem to have a fondness for Fry & Hunt chocolates, Floris fragrances and...” She paused before raising her gaze to his and asking, “Who is Isabella Bankroft?”

Colin blinked. “Hmm?”

“Isabella Bankroft. Her name is listed numerous times in connection with some of these purchases.”

“Ah...” He ought not discuss Isabella with her, but damn it all if she hadn’t hurt him when she’d flinched in response to his touch. So to hell with her sensibilities. He hardened his jaw. “She’s my mistress.”

Victoria’s eyes widened. She took a sharp breath. “Oh.”

Satisfied in the knowledge that she’d been properly shocked, whether by the inappropriate subject matter, the fact that a man like him could actually get a woman into his bed, or both, Colin kept his gaze fixed on Victoria’s profile. Her otherwise pale complexion had turned a distinct shade of crimson, sweeping the delicate curve of her neck and spreading across her cheeks. A rapid pulse beat at the base of her throat, and as she swallowed, the muscles there seemed to struggle with increased effort.

He’d flustered her, and the devil inside him could not bring himself to regret it. Not when she’d wounded his pride. In fact, the smug satisfaction he garnered from her response enticed him to lean a bit closer and quietly tell her, “I may not be

much to look at, but I still have the same needs as everyone else.”

Her shoulders slumped even as her blush deepened. When she looked at him next, emotion creased her brow and filled her gaze. “I never meant to imply that you’re—”

A couple of knocks cut her off. Colin turned as his butler entered the room. “Mr. Perkins is here to see you, sir.”

Colin straightened. Andrew Perkins had recently inherited the neighboring estate. Still in his early thirties, with handsome features accentuated by dark hair, and a large fortune to boot, he had without doubt become the most eligible bachelor within a hundred-mile radius since his arrival. And while Colin did wish to get to know him better, he hesitated briefly in his response.

He glanced at Victoria. It didn’t take long for him to realize he’d no desire to introduce her to Perkins. The man would only accentuate Colin’s flawed appearance. It would be like making Hephaestus stand next to Adonis.

Then again, marriage would be the best way forward for Victoria, despite her claiming a lack of interest in taking another husband. Perhaps she could be persuaded though, if she and Perkins met and took a liking to each other. Keeping her from him would be unkind and selfish. Especially since it would serve no purpose besides preventing a match that had the potential of seeing her settled and cared for. After all, it wasn’t as though she’d ever look twice at a man with his scars. Not when she could barely stomach his touch.

With this in mind he made his decision and gave his butler a nod. "Please show him in."

The precise click of footsteps preceded Perkins's arrival, and then he was there, looking much like the sort of dashing hero who graced the pages of Miss Austen's novels.

His friendly gaze met Colin's. A smile pulled at the edge of his lips. "My apologies for stopping by unannounced, Mr. West. I gather you have guests, so I shan't keep you long."

As he spoke, his attention shifted toward Victoria. Interest sharpened his eyes and that partial smile of his broadened.

Colin's chest tightened. He instinctively clenched his jaw and balled his hands into fists until he reminded himself to relax and be civil. Expelling a slow breath, he swept one hand in Victoria's direction. "Mrs. Leighton is the sister of a dearly departed friend of mine. Mrs. Leighton, please allow me to introduce my neighbor, Mr. Andrew Perkins."

Having risen while Colin spoke, Victoria dipped her head in acknowledgement of the introduction, preventing Colin from gauging her expression. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Perkins."

Perkins took a step forward while watching her with interest. "Indeed, the pleasure is entirely mine. My condolences on the loss of your brother."

"Thank you, sir, but it has been many years since his death." Victoria finally raised her chin and met Perkins's gaze. A pleasant smile softened her mouth while prompting a most

unpleasant sensation to grip Colin's gut. "My current state of mourning is due to the death of my husband."

While it looked as though Perkins did his best to conceal his enthusiastic response to this statement behind a mask of sobriety, his sparkling eyes betrayed him, even as he said, "I'm so very sorry, Mrs. Leighton."

It was all Colin could do not to roll his eyes. Good God, the young pup might as well tell her he'd like a moment with her behind closed doors. A sobering thought that instantly made Colin wonder if he might have made a mistake when he'd chosen to let the two meet.

"Thank you," Victoria murmured, her voice wrapping lightly around Colin's heart. "It's kind of you to say so."

Colin gave his cravat a gentle tug. Lord, he needed some air. It was much too stuffy here.

"Refreshments," he exclaimed, promptly drawing both Victoria's and Perkins's attention. "Let's remove ourselves to the terrace, and you can tell me your reason for coming."

"I...um...are you sure?" Perkins sent Victoria a hasty look before dragging his gaze from her once more. "I do not wish to interfere with your plans for the day."

Too late for that, Colin thought, forcing a smile. "Not a chance, Mr. Perkins. I insist."

"In that case..." Perkins turned to Victoria once more. "May I have the honor of escorting you?"

An agonized look captured Victoria's gaze for the briefest of seconds before being quickly replaced by a welcoming

warmth that made it harder for Colin to breathe. Having crossed to the door, he could only look on with helpless remorse while Perkins took Victoria's arm and drew her close to his side, taking the place Colin longed to claim as his own.

Keen to explore, Juliana avoided the afternoon tea being served on the terrace in favor of taking a walk. At seventeen years of age and not yet out, she had been limited to the Sutton Hall estate until a few months ago when Grayson had married Olivia.

To minimize any potential impact their scandalous union might have upon Juliana, she had been moved to London under the care of Grayson's mother. Being in London did have its perks like the Hunterian Museum, but it soon became monotonous.

Her lessons weren't nearly as interesting as they had been with Olivia's tutelage, and the few young ladies she'd met did not share her interests. When they'd spotted a dead bird in the park and Juliana had gathered it in her handkerchief so she could take it home for further study, the others had gawked at her and had not spoken to her since.

She'd felt out of place and her unhappiness had shown. Troubled, Grayson's mother had made a decision to send her home. Nearly a month and a half had passed since Grayson's wedding. The little gossip the situation had led to had long

since died down after being overshadowed by a scandalous elopement. And with the last ball of the Season cancelled, it made no sense to stick around without purpose.

Plans had therefore been made for her return to Sutton Hall, where she'd quickly discovered that she would soon be travelling onward. The news had thrilled her, for she'd been curious to see Mr. West's home, which Grayson referred to as 'the farm'.

She took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet scent of newly cut grass, the nutty fragrance of grain, and the earthy smell of soil. A smile tickled her lips as excitement took over. Woodstone Park, with its wooly sheep, clucking hens, and grazing cows, was everything she'd hoped for and more.

Notebook and pencil in hand, she strode along the same path she'd walked with the others the day before. Casting her gaze about, she searched for just the right subject of interest.

A copse of acorn trees distracted her for a good half hour. There, on a tree stump, she spied a fat beetle, black with a long pair of antennae. She squatted down and started to sketch it, grateful for the slow progress it made while crossing the stump.

Farther ahead was the wasp's nest she'd found with Olivia. She sketched that too, along with a few of the wasps buzzing around it. In the margin, she wrote her observations, noting the single hole entryway, which was different from the multiple holes she'd seen in beehives.

Happy with her additions, she moved on, following the path's direction until it opened up onto another path. This one

ran the length of a field where densely sown wheat formed a golden blanket that rippled like waves as the breeze blew across it.

Intent on getting a closer look at the cows, two of which were grazing in the meadow beyond, Juliana turned right and had just reached the wide expanse of gravel sitting between the fields and the barn when she spotted a man with black hair. Crouching with his back toward her, he'd been concealed by the wheat from the angle at which she'd made her approach.

She stopped, intrigued by what he might be doing. A collection of scythes was laid out before him, and he appeared to be winding cord around one of the handles.

As she moved closer, her foot scraped the ground. Alerted by her presence, he threw a glance over his shoulder, offering her a glimpse of dark eyes, a straight nose, and a smiling mouth that invited her nearer. His youthful features, accentuated by an angular jawline, suggested he might be in his mid-twenties.

“Good afternoon,” she said as she stepped toward him and noted the thick wads of fabric attached to the sickle’s handle. “May I ask what you’re doing?”

He stood, straightening until she was forced to tilt her head back in order to meet his gaze. Her heart gave a funny little hop while the most peculiar feeling began unraveling in her stomach. It almost felt like champagne bubbles had been unleashed inside her.

Puzzled, she took a deep breath while her curious gaze observed the faint hint of stubble upon his cheeks and a few

rebellious locks of hair that had chosen to fall across his brow. He actually had a rather nice brow, she mused, and quickly blinked. What a foolish thought to be having.

The edge of his mouth quirked and Juliana suddenly worried she might lose her footing. Perhaps the afternoon heat was too much? Or maybe she should have eaten more during luncheon?

“Certainly.” He chuckled lightly when she responded with a questioning stare. As if sensing her mind had gone blank, he quietly said, “You wished to know what I’m doing?”

“Right. Yes. Of course.”

Ninny.

A pleasant smile settled upon his lips. “I’ll have to seek a proper introduction later. Until then, might I presume that you are Miss Edwards?”

He’d heard about her?

She quickly chastised herself for letting that piece of information please her. It meant nothing. Except that he was aware of who Mr. West’s guests were. And given her age, her identity wasn’t hard to surmise.

“Indeed,” she said, hardening her voice a little. “And you are?”

He swept an elegant bow. “Mr. Frost. Steward to Mr. West.”

“Oh.” She wasn’t sure what she thought about that or the way he was studying her.

Before she could make up her mind whether or not she dared spend more time in his company, he gestured toward the sickle. “The hardness of the handles can often result in blisters. I’m padding them with cloth in order to make the work easier on myself and the farmhands.”

Dropping her gaze, she gave her attention to his work. It was neatly done. “You plan to help with the harvest?”

He grinned. “Of course. What else would I be doing?”

“I don’t know. Keeping an eye on things and issuing instructions?”

“I’ll do that too, but that’s only an hour’s work or so out of a full day. The rest would be wasted if I just stood about watching the men work. Besides, I believe in leading by example.” He tilted his head and jutted his chin toward her. “What do you have there?”

The swiftness with which he shifted attention to her caught Juliana off guard. It took her a second to realize what he referred to. Her fingers tightened around the notebook. She shrugged, knowing what his response would be to her curious mind. “Nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing to me. May I?” The warm sincerity in his eyes was hypnotic.

Before Juliana knew what she was doing, she’d extended her hand and allowed the notebook to slip from between her fingers as he took it.

Hugging herself, she bit her lip while he flipped through the first few pages. The urge to snatch the book back and flee

was overwhelming. She did not want to stand here while Mr. Frost realized how odd she was.

“Fascinating,” he murmured.

“What?”

He lifted his gaze, meeting hers for the second it took to send her pulse racing before returning his attention to her notes and sketches. “You drew all of these?”

Juliana swallowed. “Mmm...hmm...”

“They’re exceptional. The level of detail leaves no doubt as to where your interests lie.”

“You do not think it strange?” she dared herself to ask with no small amount of hesitation.

He puffed a breath through his nose. “Not especially.”

She stared at him. “You’re looking at a rabbit’s brain, which I drew after cutting said rabbit open for further inspection.”

“It may not be the sort of pictures you’re expected to draw. But your desire to understand life and death makes sense. Certainly, you may be considered strange because of it, but at least you’ll stand out and be remembered among the countless other young ladies.” He flipped past the rabbit while Juliana tried to adjust her brain to what he was saying. “Ah. You haven’t labeled this yet.”

“That’s because I don’t know what sort of beetle it is,” she confessed. “I’ll have to look it up.”

He snapped the book shut and returned it to her with a wide smile. “It’s a *Timarcha tenebricosa*. More commonly known as the bloody-nosed beetle.”

“I...um...thank you.” She pressed the book to her breast, uncertain and confused by the increased dizziness she seemed to be feeling. It was probably wise to get inside. An afternoon rest would be just the thing to return her to her normal self.

“It’s a hobby of mine. Insects, that it.” He swallowed and quickly knit his brow. “Forgive me, but I really ought to finish my work here although it’s been—”

“Yes. Of course. I mustn’t keep you a moment longer.” Juliana took a step back, bobbed a quick curtsy, and turned on her heel. The desire to smack herself could not be ignored. She’d curtsied to him for heaven’s sake, and in so doing, had proven herself to be an absolute dolt.

The sunshine warmed the otherwise cool September air, but Victoria was still glad to have brought her shawl out onto the terrace with her. It offered not only warmth but comfort too, which was something she dearly needed after yet another disastrous interaction with Colin.

Sipping her tea, she discreetly studied him as he conversed with Mr. Perkins, who sat directly to her right, between herself and Colin. The rest of the guests were spread around the table with Wilhelmina placed at Victoria's left. A heavy weight clung to her breast, preventing her from enjoying what ought to have been a pleasant reprieve from that morning's lesson.

But she'd failed in her attempt to explain the manner in which she responded to Colin's touch. She'd seen it in the hard set of his jaw and the grim expression about his eyes. Instead of compassionate and understanding, he'd seemed angry, as though he didn't believe her when she'd told him she wasn't used to being touched.

The problem was he wasn't entirely wrong. It wasn't so much that she was unused to being touched but rather that she was unused to being touched by him. It was *his* touch,

specifically, that unnerved her, though it had nothing to do with his scars, as he seemed inclined to believe.

Why then?

She wasn't the least bit sure, but his touch had not been unpleasant or repulsive. If anything, it had been a jolt to her senses, catching her completely off guard and leaving her not only breathless and confused but completely unsure as to what it might mean. Explaining this to him had been impossible, and then, to make matters worse, she'd been unable to hide her dismay when he'd spoken of his mistress.

Expelling a weary breath, she closed her eyes briefly and savored the heat from the cup cradled between her hands. Leaves rustled nearby in response to a gentle breeze sweeping the air. Judging from his expression, he'd thought her shock stemmed from the fact that she did not believe him capable of securing a lover. Of course that was absolute nonsense. For one thing, Gavin had been no prize for the last few years of his life. He'd been fat, balding, and had even been missing a front tooth, yet he'd had no trouble acquiring a mistress in London. All it had taken was money.

No, her reaction to Colin's revelation had been entirely based on the fact that he'd had no qualms about being blatantly honest, to the point of impropriety. Instead of brushing the matter aside as inconsequential or making up an excuse about Isabella Bancroft being a family friend who relied upon him, he'd explained himself. He'd wanted her to know he had a mistress, that there was a woman out there who did not recoil in his presence.

And to Victoria's shame, she'd been unable to stop displeasure from sliding through her veins and taking up residence in her heart.

Swallowing her tea, she unwillingly wondered what Isabella Bancroft might look like. How long had she and Colin been acquainted? Did she care for him at all?

More to the point, did *he* care for *her*?

Stop it.

If she weren't careful, she'd ruin what had the potential of being a wonderful friendship. All because of the strange effect he had on her when he was near. She'd have to overcome that somehow lest she offend him further. After all, he was just trying to help and had already done more than what was expected of him. He wasn't family, just one of her brother's friends, so there was no real obligation, which made his actions all the more kind.

"In fact," said Mr. Perkins, alerting Victoria to the conversation she'd been ignoring, "rumor has it he once fought a duel for a woman he didn't even know."

Intrigued, she wanted to ask who had done so, but didn't want anyone knowing she hadn't been paying attention. Thankfully, James enlightened her by saying, "I can confirm the rumor is true. Colin is without doubt the most honorable man among us."

"You exaggerate greatly, my friend," Colin said, his voice low as though slightly embarrassed. "The allegation against Miss Connolley couldn't have been more wrong. Everyone

knew it, but Lord Tyburn kept insisting she'd cheated during their game of whist, even though there was no doubt she won fair and square."

"So you challenged the man?" Victoria asked, impressed.

He glanced at her briefly before giving his attention to the lemon biscuits they'd been served with their tea. He selected one and set it on his plate. A careless shrug followed. "Someone had to defend her honor when her brother decided to take Tyburn's side."

"But you didn't. You fought the marquess the very next morning." Mr. Perkins said this as though Colin had the ability to walk on water.

Victoria didn't blame him. To say Colin was kind would be a severe understatement. He was noble and righteous, a champion to those who could not stand up for themselves - women, it seemed, in particular.

"You make it sound far more impressive than it actually was," Colin said, his brow creasing. "Tyburn was never a great shot or fencer, so I was fairly confident I'd survive, regardless of what he chose as his weapon."

"And what did he choose?" Olivia asked, the curiosity in her voice reflecting Victoria's.

"Swords," said Grayson. He added a smirk. "Colin wore the poor man out with his stamina alone. Neither one received so much as a scratch."

Victoria grinned into her teacup. When she looked back up, she took a sharp breath as her gaze collided with Colin's.

He was watching her with a thoughtful expression that prompted her heart to beat faster while turning her stomach into a fluttery mess.

“There’s no need for you to belittle your actions,” James said, pulling Colin’s attention away from Victoria. “You’re the fiercest protector I know. Hell, you were only wounded because—”

“I was unlucky,” Colin said bluntly.

“No,” James said, his voice thick with emotion as he stared across the table at Colin. “You put yourself in harm’s way, blocking the enemy to your left so they wouldn’t shoot Richard.”

“For all the good it did.” A muscle worked at the edge of Colin’s jaw. The biscuit he’d picked up earlier crumbled between his fingers. He leaned forward slowly, facing James with a quiet sort of rage that caused an uncomfortable knot to form in Victoria’s stomach. “Richard still died while I became the stuff of nightmares.”

“You’re not the only one who returned home with scars,” Grayson said, his voice quiet. Olivia grasped his hand before he added, “The stench of death and gunpowder still comes back to haunt me whenever I think of that long ago day.”

“Grayson...” Colin spoke his friend’s name with a hint of warning.

“I realize you sacrificed more than James or I did,” Grayson said, undaunted, “but you should know that unconsciousness saved you from the hell he and I have been

forced to endure. You weren't faced with seeing limbs scattered about, of watching your fellow soldiers burn alive, of seeing the vacant look in Richard's eyes while his blood—"

"Grayson." Olivia spoke with a firm but gentle voice. "I think that's enough."

Grayson froze. He blinked a few times as though surprised to find himself sitting on Colin's terrace. "I... Forgive me. Victoria, I didn't mean to be disrespectful. I..."

He shook his head, looking much like a lost puppy in need of saving.

"It's all right," Victoria managed while doing her best to ignore the images Grayson had brought to the front of her mind. "I understand."

"Are you certain?" Mr. Perkins asked. He leaned a bit closer and placed his hand over hers as if in a show of compassion. "You look rather pale."

Victoria stared at his hand and wondered at her lack of responsiveness to him. While Mr. Perkins was flawlessly handsome, charming, and possibly wealthy, he didn't affect her in the slightest. Which instinctively made her look at Colin once more, and to swallow with distinct discomfort when she found him glaring at Mr. Perkins's hand.

Sensing his displeasure, she quickly withdrew her own hand and averted her gaze, though the heat engulfing her face and the jittery beat of her pulse left her deeply unsettled. Colin had no claim over her, and Mr. Perkins was just showing concern, wasn't he?

Unsure, she attempted a grateful smile and told him, “Thank you, Mr. Perkins. I am quite well.”

“I’m very relieved to hear it,” he soothed. “War is a violent subject and ought not be discussed when there are ladies present.”

“He’s right,” Wilhelmina said, surprising Victoria since she’d have thought the divorcée would object to Mr. Perkins’s placating tone. But the look in Wilhelmina’s eyes suggested it was the personal and more painful aspect of the discussion that she objected to, not the subject of war itself. “Let’s speak of something else instead.”

“Like marriage,” James said with a grin. “It is without doubt the most blessed state there is, do you not agree, Grayson?”

“How can I do anything but,” Grayson said with a mischievous smirk before placing a kiss on Olivia’s cheek. “My wife would murder me with her teaspoon if I dared contradict you.”

“What a slow and painful death that would be,” Olivia teased, her sweet voice eliciting laughter.

“We just need for Colin to see reason too,” James said.

Colin’s smile faded. “No.”

“As previously stated, you’re honorable, brave, protective, and—”

“Stop it,” Colin warned.

“We just want to see you happy,” Grayson told him.

“I am happy,” Colin insisted. The animosity with which he spoke astounded Victoria to no end. “I’ll never remarry.”

His voice was so cold and distant Victoria tightened her shawl around her shoulders. She’d learned from Wilhelmina that he’d been married before, and she wondered now what his wife had been like. Based on his reaction, the marriage had not been a happy one, which only made her feel closer to him since her own experience had been rather awful.

“I didn’t realize you were a widower,” Mr. Perkins said. An awkward silence followed before he cleared his throat. “Perhaps it’s time I mentioned my reason for coming. You see, I’ve decided to host a ball next week and would very much like to invite you - all of you, that is” – he caught Victoria’s gaze and held it, the edge of his mouth lifting – “to join the festivities.”

James and Grayson immediately thanked him while Wilhelmina and Olivia voiced their excitement. Victoria, intent on taking her cue from Colin, hesitated when he said nothing. Besides, she had nothing fitting to wear. When she’d packed her bags to come here, she hadn’t imagined requiring an evening gown. Not that she owned anything suitable anyway. Her best gown was ten years old, the fabric so worn she feared it would tear if she tried putting it on.

“What an excellent reason to go into town and purchase some ribbon,” Wilhelmina said.

“If there’s one thing you don’t need more of, it’s surely ribbon,” James said with a loving twinkle in his eyes.

“A lady can never have enough,” Wilhelmina told him with a wry smile that made Victoria wish she’d had more luck in marriage. Instead, she’d wasted her youth on a man who’d never truly loved her, never mind appreciated her or made her feel special.

“Then it’s settled, yes?” Mr. Perkins inquired.

Colin expelled a deep breath and finally nodded. “Indeed.”

Everyone stood to bid Mr. Perkins farewell. He moved to shake all the men’s hands and bowed to Wilhelmina and Olivia in turn before returning to where Victoria stood. “It has been a pleasure, Mrs. Leighton. I trust you’ll save a dance for me?”

“I...um...”

Before she could put her thoughts in order and figure out how to reject him without being rude and, most importantly, without ruining everyone’s chance to attend his ball, he’d captured her hand and raised it to his lips.

Victoria stared at him, unable to move. When he straightened once more and released her hand, his eyes twinkled. “Until we meet again, Mrs. Leighton.”

Victoria simply nodded as he walked away, returning inside the house and heading toward the front door.

“Well,” James said with a grin, “he’s certainly set his sights on you.”

Embarrassment swept the length of Victoria’s spine as she frantically turned seeking Colin, whose opinion suddenly mattered more than ever before. But he was gone, the only

trace he'd been there at all, an empty teacup and the pile of crumbs left behind on his plate.

Colin set a brisk pace as he headed toward the treading barn after Mr. Perkins's departure, his long strides eating up the distance with each harsh step intended to squash his agitation. His heart beat like an anxious drum while the tension twisting his shoulder muscles produced a dull ache that threatened to grip the rest of his body.

"Damn."

The sole of his boot connected roughly with the ground, scattering gravel in every direction. What the hell had he been thinking, introducing Perkins to Victoria? The man looked like the bloody personification of a Greek statue, his jaw chiseled to perfection, an annoyingly straight nose, piercing blue eyes, and a mouth most women would probably line up to kiss if the chance to do so presented itself.

Victoria's interest had certainly been piqued, Colin acknowledged, the manner in which she'd smiled and blushed in response to Perkins's flirtatious manner impossible to ignore. And she'd not recoiled when he'd placed his hand over hers either.

A bitter laugh echoed through Colin's chest. Clearly, she had no qualms about being touched, just as long as the person touching her didn't look as though part of their face had been rearranged in some ghastly attempt to undo God's creation.

Reaching the barn, Colin climbed the ramp to the upper floor and flung the door open, slamming it hard against the wall. He stepped inside and paused, then took a deep breath and allowed his nostrils to fill with an aroma of last year's crop. He expelled the breath slowly and felt his muscles begin to relax. Light filtering through the square cut windows produced an almost heavenly glow for the dust motes to dance in.

The two-story structure, built in a circular shape with sixteen sides, according to George Washington's ingenious design, allowed horses to trot over sheaves of wheat, separating the grain from the straw. Many farmers still chose to do this outdoors, but that put the crop at risk of being mixed with dirt and ruined by rain.

In Colin's treading barn, however, the grain was not only kept dry but also pushed through the gaps between the floorboards to a collection area below. This made it a great deal easier to sweep up the seed and separate it from the chaff later on.

Stepping forward, he ran a hand lightly across the railing attached to the ceiling posts in the center of the building. Frost had swept the entire space yesterday and washed the floor in preparation for the upcoming harvest. All appeared to be in

perfect order. The only thing that remained was to bring in the crop.

The sound of approaching footsteps caused him to turn.

“We’ve decided to join you,” Grayson said as he and James entered the barn, blocking some of the light as they paused in the doorway. “Thought you might want to talk.”

Colin glanced at them each in turn and considered the look of concern in their eyes. Apprehension began creeping in. “About what?”

James leaned against the barn wall, his legs crossed at the ankles, while studying Colin with an unnerving degree of scrutiny. Grayson, meanwhile, walked slowly toward him, as though approaching a bull that might charge at any second.

“You left the terrace without a word,” James said.

“And?” Colin asked, already dreading the subject he feared they would raise.

Grayson angled his head as he came to a halt before Colin. “It is unlike you not to show a guest out, or to quit a lady’s presence without excusing yourself.”

Colin stared at his friend. He had a point, although it really wasn’t one Colin cared to discuss. Nevertheless, he ought to say something. “Mr. Perkins knew the way since it was the same as when he arrived. He ought to be able to see himself out, especially when there are other guests present. As for failing to excuse myself, I should have done so, you’re right. It was terribly ill-mannered of me, a slight I hope the ladies will forgive.”

“That doesn’t explain why you did it.” James pushed away from the wall and came to stand next to Grayson.

“Suffice it to say I just needed some time to myself.”

“I probably would have too,” James murmured. “Were I in your position.”

“And what position would that be, exactly?” Colin demanded, his muscles straining once more as his hands balled into fists.

“The one in which a woman who’s finally caught your notice attracts your handsome neighbor’s attention.”

“As I’ve said before,” Colin gritted, “I have no romantic intentions where Victoria is concerned. I’m only trying to be a good friend, to give her the help she so dearly needs. That is all.”

“I suppose that does explain your grim expression during tea and the angry looks you kept sending Mr. Perkins,” Grayson said.

“I wasn’t...” Colin blew out a frustrated breath when each of his friends arched an eyebrow. “Speaking of Aboukir put me on edge. I wish I’d never gone.”

“You’re not the only one,” James said, his voice softer than before.

“We know you suffered more than we did,” Grayson added. “Your loss was far greater, there’s no denying that. But speaking about it never seemed to bother you like this before, so what’s changed?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Colin said, willing the pair to change the subject.

“Of course it does,” James countered. “We want to see you happy, so if this has something to do with Victoria, maybe—”

“She flinches at my touch,” Colin said and instantly winced. He’d not meant to share that piece of information. All it could lead to was pity and that was the very last thing he needed.

James and Grayson shared a look.

“And you have obviously drawn the worst conclusion possible,” James said, his voice pensive.

“What other conclusion is there?” Colin asked, doing his best to hide the blow Victoria had dealt to his pride. His heart ached with knowing she’d never be tempted by him, that she’d never dream of him stealing kisses from her or of forming a deeper attachment.

Not that it mattered when he had no desire to take a wife and she, no interest in gaining another husband. Still, he knew deep down that he’d always regret not being able to sweep her off her feet, however silly the fanciful notion might be.

James cleared his throat. “I think there’s a chance you might be misinterpreting her response.”

Colin shook his head. “What are you talking about?”

“I don’t think you’ve been paying proper attention,” Grayson said with a grin.

“Victoria watches you a great deal,” James said. “More than she watches anyone else.”

“Of course she does.” Colin pushed his way past his friends and strode back outside, speaking to them as they followed. “I’m a curiosity to be gawked at, no different from the Irish Giant at the Hunterian Museum or the—”

“For Christ’s sake, Colin, would you stop belittling yourself for a second and wake the hell up?” James was practically glaring at him in frustration. “You are one of the best men there is and Victoria sees that. She has no choice but to do so after all you have done for her thus far. And you are being very unfair to her when you treat her as though she’s unable to have deeper feelings for you.”

“You’re insane,” Colin said, sending James a pointed look over his shoulder while shutting the barn door.

“There’s more to love than looks alone,” Grayson said.

Colin froze, his hand on the latch. Swallowing hard, he turned to face his friends. “Of course there is. I never suggested otherwise. But being attracted to one another does help and if experience has taught me anything at all, it is that —”

“And there it is,” James said, eyes gleaming with victorious delight while he pointed at Colin. “You’re afraid because of what happened with Stephanie.”

“No,” Colin insisted even though there might be a small piece of truth to his friend’s observation. “Stephanie opened my eyes, that’s all. She made me see myself as the rest of the

world does – as a man no longer capable of instilling desire in any woman.”

“Victoria’s different,” Grayson insisted. “You’re not giving her the credit she deserves if you choose to believe she could ever be as deceitful as Stephanie was.”

“What I choose to believe,” Colin said, “is that I don’t know her well enough to consider anything other than logical reasoning where she’s concerned. Victoria is a beautiful woman, still young enough to try for a family of her own if she were inclined to do so, which she claims she’s not. It therefore stands to good reason that the only thing she might want from a man is a bit of flirtation, perhaps even a brief affair, in which case she’s far more likely to welcome attentions from Mr. Perkins.”

“Colin, you—”

“Hell and damnation,” Colin snapped, cutting James off. “One doesn’t pick a lame horse when one is looking to win a race. Just let it be.”

“My apologies,” James said, his voice low.

“You’re our closest friend,” Grayson said. “We care about you, that’s all.”

“And while I appreciate that, encouraging me to hope for the impossible isn’t helpful.” When neither man argued, Colin shoved his hands into his pockets and said, “I plan to walk the fields and check on the crop.”

“What about luncheon?” Grayson asked.

“You should go ahead and dine with the ladies. I’ll eat something later when I get back. And James, if you have the time, maybe you can show Victoria how to map out a good irrigation system? My lesson with her was cut short by Mr. Perkins’s arrival, and as much as I’d like to pick up where we left off, I really shouldn’t put off this walk.”

“Of course,” said James. “I’m happy to help.”

“Thank you.” Colin deliberately smiled at him and Grayson, hoping to assure both men that he harbored no ill feelings toward them. If anything, he appreciated knowing they had no issue with speaking their minds to him since this said a great deal about their friendship.

“If you’d care for some company while you walk,” Grayson said, “I’d be happy to come along and take my luncheon later.”

“I appreciate that, but I’d like to be alone with my thoughts for a while, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not, just as long as you remember that we’re here if you need us.”

Happy with this reminder, Colin assured James and Grayson he’d see them later before striding off toward the fields. The sun was high, but the air was comfortably cool. It was the perfect temperature for his attire, which so often felt unpleasantly hot in the summer or too cold during winter.

His fingertips drifted across the wheat as he entered the field, savoring the familiar brush of their heads as they bowed beneath the weight of his touch. Yes, he longed to be seen as

more than a wounded soldier. Rather, as the man he'd been in his youth, capable of making a woman's pulse beat faster, not out of fear, but with the thrill of acquiring his attention.

It was foolish of course. Nothing more than vanity.

Except that wasn't entirely true, was it? There was more to it than that – a desire to love and be loved in return. To know the desire he could instill had nothing to do with how much he paid. To be a husband, despite his claims to the contrary. Because the truth was, he wanted what James and Grayson had found. He wanted a woman with whom to experience life's ups and downs.

But he wasn't delusional and after what had happened with Stephanie...

It would be difficult for him to trust any woman who claimed to want him for himself alone. And with Victoria's reaction to him in mind, it would be prudent not to have expectations or even the slightest hope for that matter, despite whatever his friends might think. One thing was certain; he'd no intention of suffering heartbreak again.

His hand stilled on that thought, directing his attention back to the wheat and to something that didn't feel right to his touch. He dropped his gaze and immediately frowned in response to the blackish brown markings along the length of the head. Lowering himself to a squat for a closer look, he ran his fingers over the darkened grain, his frown deepening in response to the greasy texture. A tremor shook him, causing his heart to lurch as a putrid smell hit him, slowing time to a near crawl as reality struck him with startling force.

Something was wrong. His wheat was at risk, but of what, he wasn't quite sure. And until he figured it out, he wouldn't know if it could even be salvaged.

Straightening, he slid his gaze slowly across the field as a whole, searching for signs of additional problems. None were immediately visible, which surely meant that most of the crop was still fine. Returning his attention to the problematic plant, he considered those surrounding it and noted they too were starting to show dark spotting, albeit to a lesser extent.

Swallowing hard, Colin snapped off all their heads and carried them from the field.

"I need an empty box," he told Frost when he found him in the barn used for equipment storage.

The young steward, who was supervising the sharpening of sickles and scythes, located a medium sized one containing bundles of twine. He emptied it and handed it to Colin. "Will this do?"

"I believe so." Colin dropped the damaged wheat into the box. "There's a problem with some of the wheat, and it looks like it might be spreading."

"You believe it to be a disease?"

"I'm afraid so, though what precisely, I've no idea." Colin glanced at the farmhands. He was acutely aware of the problem this might cause, not just for himself, but for them too and the rest of the people in his employ. Everyone depended upon him making an income, most of which came from the land he farmed. If a harvest went to waste, Colin would have

to reduce his expenses. Staff would get sacked, starting with those he could manage without during winter, like his farmhands and any unnecessary servants, all of whom would suffer the loss of their wages.

He could not allow that to happen.

“Keep an eye on the crop,” he instructed Frost. “Pull the heads that don’t look quite right and keep me updated. In the meantime, I’ll try and figure out what this could be and see if I’m able to find a solution.”

“And if you’re not?” Frost asked.

“I’ve no idea,” Colin confessed, “but I’d like to keep this quiet for now.”

“Of course.” Frost glanced at the group of farmhands inspecting and sharpening tools. “Just as long as you don’t delay too long. If they need to seek work elsewhere, they’ll need to do so soon. As it is, they’ll struggle with finding a vacancy this late in the season.”

Colin was well aware, so he gave Frost a curt nod of assurance and left him to his work. Returning indoors, he went in search of James and Grayson, who’d just finished eating. He met them in the hallway and ushered them into his study.

“I can’t stay long,” he told his friends. “The crop needs my immediate attention. Turns out there’s an issue with it, so I’ll not rest easy until I’ve learned what it is or how to resolve it.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.” Grayson straightened, his gaze on heightened alert. “What can we do to help?”

“Keep the ladies entertained. Keep teaching Victoria about estate business.”

“I’ve asked her to make a diagram of her property for me,” James said with a thoughtful nod. “Once that’s done I’ll be better able to advise her on setting up an efficient irrigation system. Or simply helping her fix what’s already in place.”

“During luncheon, she mentioned an interest in truffle hunting,” Grayson said.

Colin suppressed an inward groan. “I think she believes it to be an easy form of revenue.”

“It could be,” Grayson said, “depending on her property’s location and how many beech trees there are.”

“I don’t recall,” Colin said. “The weather was awful when I visited her, so I didn’t pay much attention to the trees, though I did spot some woodland beyond one of her fields. In any case, she’d need a proper dog for the job. The one she has won’t do.”

“What type of dog is it?” James asked with interest.

“A mongrel.”

“Not the best, I’ll agree,” Grayson said, “but it could perhaps be trained, if one is patient enough.”

“I doubt it.” Colin grabbed another biscuit. He was beginning to regret missing luncheon. “Truffle dogs have to be focused, dedicated, single minded sniffers. They cannot decide to run off in the middle of rainstorms the way this one did.”

“You’re right,” Grayson said. “That won’t do at all.”

“We’ll talk to her, Colin,” James promised. “We’ll inquire about the trees on her land and the condition of the soil. Maybe truffles could be the way forward for her, provided she has the right dog.”

It would be the simplest solution since farming came with all sorts of problems.

Recalling his own dilemma, Colin thanked his friends before removing himself to the library where he collected every farming book in his collection. Expelling a weary breath, he grabbed the one at the top of the pile and began leafing through it, pouring over any text pertaining not only to wheat but to other types of grain as well.

A clock on the mantle ticked away every second, the hourly chimes a reminder of how long he’d spent on his efforts. The afternoon light grew dimmer and reading became a strain on his eyes. He stood and stretched his back, rotating his shoulders to loosen all the bunched muscles. Locating a flint box he lit an oil lamp and went back to work.

He’d no idea what hour it was when Harrington came to find him.

“Yes?” Colin inquired, looking up, bleary eyed.

Harrington set a tray on a nearby table that stood in front of a brown velvet sofa. “I’ve brought you a plate of roast chicken, potatoes, and sautéed vegetables. There’s Yorkshire pudding on the side with French crêpes for dessert.”

Colin’s stomach gave a low growl in anticipation. “Thank you, Harrington. I appreciate your thinking of me.”

“As much as I’d like to take credit, I’m afraid I cannot. This was entirely Mrs. Leighton’s doing. When you didn’t show up for dinner, she asked if you’d eaten at all, having missed luncheon too. When I informed her you’d made no request for food, she insisted a plate be brought to you forthwith. She even prepared it herself.”

Touched by the thoughtfulness, Colin dismissed the butler and went to take a closer look at the food. It looked and smelled divine, too tempting to be ignored when his stomach now ached to savor a bite.

After taking a seat on the sofa, he picked up his knife and fork and cut a piece of tender meat, watching with increasing hunger as succulent juices emerged from within. He dipped the bite in a bit of gravy, then popped it into his mouth and nearly sagged with relief. Good lord, this was good. Precisely what he needed.

And it was Victoria who’d made the effort of seeing him fed. She’d paid attention to him not eating. More than that, she’d decided to make sure he ate without interfering in what he was doing.

He was beyond grateful and, truth be told, somewhat hopeful. Whatever her response to his touch, this showed she cared, that she thought of him and worried about his wellbeing.

Against his better judgment, his heart leapt a little at that lovely thought. Silly of him, he knew, but he just couldn’t help it. So he ate some more food while thinking of her in return,

enjoying the brief reprieve the meal offered from all his concerns.

Victoria could not ignore the empty chair at the head of the table, despite the easy conversation taking place around her. When she'd inquired after Colin, James and Grayson had simply told her he was dealing with an estate matter – a matter that clearly made him forget about eating.

Troubled, she'd asked Harrington to bring her an extra plate and a tray which she'd then set about preparing. Whatever concern weighed upon Colin's mind, he'd deal with it best if he got proper sustenance.

With some weight lifted from her conscience once Harrington went to deliver the food, Victoria tried to enjoy her own meal and the company of her new friends. Grayson's ward, Juliana, was an absolute delight with her interest in scientific research. Olivia was more reserved by comparison while Wilhelmina had an impressive knack for directness that Victoria greatly admired. She wished she had the courage to be equally open and forthright.

“Instead of engaging in needlework, I recommend we play a game while we wait for the men to join us,” Juliana said once dinner was over and they'd left the men behind in the

dining room to enjoy their after-dinner drinks. “Dice could be fun.”

“I’d like to decline,” Victoria said, slowing her progress. She hoped no further explanation would be required.

Olivia stopped before reaching the parlor door and turned to face Victoria, her expression filled with concern. “Are you feeling all right?”

If there was one thing Victoria hated, it was dishonesty. She did not want to lie, but neither did she wish to explain her true motive for missing out on more social interaction with the three women.

So she gave a quick nod and decided to keep her answer brief. “I am perfectly fine. Please don’t trouble yourselves.”

Wilhelmina narrowed her gaze for the briefest of seconds, but rather than press Victoria for additional details, she seemed to accept her desire for privacy. “We’ll wish you good night then, Victoria.”

“Good night.” Victoria smiled for good measure and waited until they’d entered the parlor before retracing her steps and heading toward the library.

She paused when she reached the closed door, feeling suddenly indecisive. Sending Colin a meal was one thing but showing up – interfering in whatever he was dealing with – might be overstepping. She bit her lip, raised her hand to knock, dropped it again, and shook her head.

Lord, what a fool she was being. Her stomach was twisted tighter than Chatham rope, and her heart was beating harder

than a blacksmith's hammer. All because of a man who constantly surprised her, whether it be through his kindness, his selfless bravery, or the fact that she couldn't stop thinking about him when they were apart.

With a glance directed toward the stairs, she strengthened her resolve. Retreating from her purpose now would only make her feel even more helpless and dependent than when Gavin had lived. She had to overcome that feeling, and it started with her doing something that made her nervous.

So she gulped down a lungful of air and raised her hand once more, giving the door a quick couple of knocks and opening it before she had time to second guess her decision. Colin, who sat hunched over a book he'd laid out on the reading table, raised his gaze to hers. Although his eyes were cast in shadow, surprise was evident in the parting of his lips.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, straightening slightly as she stepped farther into the room.

"You were absent from luncheon and dinner." She caught the fabric of her skirt between her fingers and twisted it slightly. "I came to make sure all was well and to offer my help with whatever problem you may be facing, should you need it."

He kept his gaze on her, increasing her self-awareness. "Wouldn't you rather relax with the others?"

"I wouldn't have offered to help unless I meant it." When he didn't respond, seeming instead to assess her sincerity, she ignored the frantic beat of her heart and took another step

forward. “This could be an excellent lesson in how to handle estate issues.”

A slow smile was accompanied by a soft chuckle. “Very well. I accept.”

He gestured toward the empty chair to his right and watched with intense focus as she approached it and sat. Despite her best effort to the contrary, she remained tense and alert. Why, she could not say. Having gotten to know him better, she ought to find his nearness easier. Instead, it impacted her like a storm, wreaking havoc upon her nerves until it was difficult for her to function with the calm efficiency she’d always relied on.

It was unsettling.

She had to fight her way through it. But it was difficult to ignore the churning in her stomach. The room was getting too hot. It made it hard to breathe let alone think.

The scent of sandalwood, countryside air, and coffee wafting off of him didn’t help in the slightest. Instead, it called for her to lean closer, to run her fingertips over the bristly edge of his jaw and into his coppery hair, to explore the change in texture from rough to smooth.

Good lord. What was wrong with her?

“Victoria?”

She blinked. Heat rushed to her cheeks. He was staring at her, a puzzled look in his eyes. “Yes?”

His brow creased. “Are you all right?”

“Of course.” She cleared her throat. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know, but you were gazing at me as though I’d grown horns.” He glanced at the table, breaking eye contact with her. His mouth hardened. “If being close to me bothers you for some reason, there are other chairs available. I did not mean to insist you pick the one next to mine.”

Oh dear. She’d done it again – insulted him with her foolishness – made him feel less than the man he was. It had to stop.

Forcing her way past her fear of where honesty might potentially lead, she placed her hand over his, hoping to offer the reassurance he obviously needed. “We are friends, you and I, and I am perfectly content where I am. I was merely struck by how roguish you look with your unshaven jaw. It suits you.”

There. She’d done it. She’d stepped off a limb and his gaze had shot toward hers with such a degree of surprise one would think she’d just kissed him.

“It suits me?”

Increasingly uncomfortable she shrugged one shoulder. “Curious, I’ll admit, but there you have it. That doesn’t mean I don’t like your clean-shaven appearance, which makes you look rather dashing. But this has a certain carefree abandon to it that’s, well, attractive, if you truly must know.”

“You think I’m attractive?” His eyes had widened with an undeniable degree of incredulity.

Victoria tapped her foot restlessly under the table. Oh, if only she'd chosen to keep her mouth shut. Instead, she was starting to wish a hole might appear for her to disappear into. And yet, noting the deep uncertainty burning in his eyes, she deliberately slid her gaze over the left side of his face, studying the uneven tissue until she was certain the words she spoke next were heartfelt.

“In all honesty, Colin, I think you're incredibly handsome.”

His brows dipped and Victoria's heart sank. He thought she was placating him when it had taken every bit of courage in her possession to open up to him and be honest. But she'd done so for nothing. He didn't believe her.

As if to prove she was right, he gave her a halfhearted smile and withdrew his hand. “Please don't do that.”

“But I—”

“We've much to accomplish and you did offer to help, for which I'm immensely grateful. You see, there appears to be a problem with the wheat, and nothing I've found in these books so far has provided an answer.” Without pausing for breath he described the walk he'd taken earlier in the day and what he'd found. He ended by placing a glass jar before her and urging her to inspect the contents.

With no choice but to give up on convincing him he was as striking as she claimed, Victoria peered at the dark brown pieces of wheat he'd collected.

“Remove the lid and take a sniff,” he instructed.

She did so and immediately recoiled while scrunching her nose. “It smells like rotten fish.”

“Precisely. But nothing I’ve found in these books has offered a clue as to what it might be.” He leaned back in his chair and raked his fingers through his thick hair while blowing out a deep breath. “I’m at my wit’s end.”

“You’ve also been doing this all afternoon and evening. Maybe a break would do you good.”

“No. I’ll not rest until I’ve figured this out.” He stood and went to refill his coffee cup. “Would you like some?”

She shook her head while considering all the books he’d gathered. “No thank you. I’ll ring for some tea once I’ve decided on where to focus my attention. Perhaps we should start by organizing these books and discarding the least relevant ones. I mean, I doubt *A Beautiful Yorkshire Cow* by George Gerrard will be of use to us, to say nothing of John Naismyth’s *Observations On The Different Breeds Of Sheep, And The State Of Sheep Farming, In The Southern Districts Of Scotland*.”

“You’re right. All my farming books sit on two shelves over there. It was easier for me to grab them all at once rather than waste time sorting through them.” He returned to his seat. “Plus, I hoped one of the books would give me some insight, however small. Who knows, maybe there would be a mention of a cow eating bad grain or...something.”

He slumped, conveying a sense of defeat that sharpened Victoria’s determination. Here was a man who’d been to war and who’d suffered tremendously for it. But rather than drown

himself in drink or give up on living, he'd put his energy into the property he'd inherited from his father and had by all accounts made a great success of it.

A bit of trouble with some wheat was not going to bring him down. Not if she could help it.

She grabbed a book and set it aside, then did the same with the next and the one after that until she'd formed two piles. "We'll keep these on the table. The rest can go back on the shelf."

"I've not gone through this one yet," he said as he reached for a brown leather-bound volume.

Victoria brushed his hand away and stood. She gathered some books from the discard pile. "We'll get to that later, *after* we've finished reviewing the books that promise to be of some use."

"But—"

"Help me clear these away, will you?"

Colin sent her a somewhat reluctant look, but rather than argue, he picked up the rest of the pile and followed her over to the bookcase he'd retrieved them from. "I didn't know you could be bossy."

The comment, playfully spoken, produced a warm glow in the pit of her stomach. It was a lovely change from the jitteriness he so often evoked. Intent on making the most of it, of returning to the camaraderie that had been forming between them before she'd mucked it up, she answered with a grin. "Neither did I until a few moments ago."

She began returning the books she'd carried to one of the vacant shelves.

“It suits you.” He'd propped one shoulder against the book case, angling himself toward her and making her very aware that he watched her every move.

Flustered, yet more determined than ever to keep the light conversation going, she dared to tell him, “Such flattery might be dangerous, Colin, lest I decide to take charge more often.”

Rather than laugh, as she had imagined him doing, he made a choked sort of sound that instantly raised her self-awareness. Worried he thought her too radical or that she might be trying to manage him, she tried to think of a way to counterbalance the comment.

Somehow, she constantly seemed to say the wrong thing.

“I'm sorry,” she began since that seemed like a good start. “I didn't mean to imply—”

“No. You didn't. I just...er...” He cleared his throat, prompting her to look straight at him, which might have been a mistake for there was something about his eyes, an intense glow that caused her to catch her breath.

She stared at him and he stared back. It was almost as if he were waiting for something, though what, precisely, she'd no idea. Time stretched, thickening the air between them.

Until Victoria gave herself a small shake and grabbed some of the books Colin was holding. “Here, let me help you with those.”

He said nothing, which made her all the more desperate for something to do, some means by which to distract herself from the awkward atmosphere filling the room. She sent him a friendly smile as soon as she'd finished stacking the shelf and was more than a little relieved to find the enthralled look about him gone. Because when he looked at her in that way, she became slightly dizzy and breathless. It was an experience unlike any she'd ever known before, and she'd no clue what she was meant to do with it.

“Thank you.” He spoke the words warmly, putting her at immediate ease.

“You're welcome.” They returned to the table where she selected the book placed at the top of the keeper pile. “Have you checked the contents of this one yet?”

When he shook his head, she placed it in front of herself on the table and opened it to the first page while he removed a book from farther down the pile. Bowing their heads over each of their chosen books, they shared a quick glance and a smile before diving into the texts.

It wasn't until Colin rose from his chair a while later and crossed to the sideboard that Victoria glanced up from her book. She rolled her shoulders and massaged the bridge of her nose.

“It's late,” Colin remarked while pouring himself a drink. “Past two in the morning. You ought to retire.”

She pushed her book aside and stood. “Are you retiring?”

“I can't. Not until I've figured this out.”

“Then I’m staying too.”

“Victoria, you really needn’t.”

“I offered to help and help I shall.” She crossed her arms and jutted her chin toward the side table. “I won’t say no to a sherry though, if you happen to have one.”

He chuckled lightly. “Of course I do. It’s just…”

“Just what?”

“Remaining here with me all night isn’t exactly *de rigueur*.” He scowled at the doorway, which tactfully had been left ajar. “Not when you’re unchaperoned.”

“That might be an issue if I were a debutant and we were caught in a compromising position, but we’re obviously working. Surely your friends will understand that. If they didn’t, I imagine they would have said as much when they stopped by to bid us good night.”

“Hmm…”

“Unless of course you want me to leave.” She had to accept this as a possibility.

“No. Of course not.” A soft smile followed. “I merely hope to ensure that you’re not exhausting yourself.”

“You need not concern yourself, truly. I’ve often worked late at home, but I’m happy to take a small break if you like.”

Only the briefest hesitation suggested any disinclination on his part. He quickly masked it by reaching for a glass and pouring her the drink she’d requested. He handed it to her, his

fingers brushing hers despite a seeming effort to avoid any physical contact.

The effect was instant – a spark of awareness so intense it jolted her heart and left her mind reeling. She gripped her glass with increased firmness, took a hasty sip, and spun away, hoping to hide her silly response.

Legs trembling, she walked to a fawn-colored sofa. Why, oh why did this keep happening to her? Good lord, he must think her a weak-minded ninny, forever losing her composure and turning red in his presence. When all she truly wanted was to impress him.

“Growing up is a terrible fate,” she said, latching onto the first thought that did not include him. Inhaling deeply, she turned and lowered herself to the sofa. She glanced in his direction and noted he’d not moved away from his spot by the side table.

Curiously, she felt a peculiar loss over it, which was positively ridiculous. She’d crossed the room to add distance. Why on earth would she wish he’d followed?

Perplexed by her contrariness, she reached for additional words with which to fill the unbearable silence. “Being a child was so much simpler. My life was tranquil, uncomplicated, and devoid of problems. Papa made sure I had a comfortable home, that I never went hungry, and that the bills were paid. I had no worries, no concerns, no fear of facing debt collectors. Nothing prepared me for what I would deal with later on.”

“Life is filled with uncertainty,” Colin said, his voice thoughtful. He sipped his drink while watching her with

marked interest. “What’s your favorite childhood memory?”

“Oh. Um...I believe I have several, but one of my fondest is of an outing I had with Grandmama. I never knew my mother, you see, so Grandmama did what she could to fill that void. It was my thirteenth birthday and she knew my greatest wish was to visit the theatre. Papa and Richard had little interest in going, so Grandmama made arrangements for just the two of us.” Happiness filled her as she reflected on how incredibly blessed she’d been. “It was perfect. We had our hair styled together and Grandmama let me borrow her pearls.”

“And the performance?” Colin quietly coaxed. “What did you see?”

“A ballet.” She couldn’t contain her wistful sigh as she thought back on the elegant grace with which the dancers had glided across the stage. “It was *The Creatures of Prometheus*.”

“By Beethoven.”

“You’re familiar with it?” Surprise caused her voice to vibrate.

“I saw it myself when I was seventeen. Considering our difference in age which I believe to be roughly four years, I suppose—”

“There’s a chance we were at the same performance.”

He gave a soft laugh. “Exactly so.”

“How curious.” It was strange how much she liked the idea of such a possibility – of having crossed paths with him before – of their lives being intertwined not only through Richard, but through other means too. It was hard to explain, harder still to

understand. So she gave up trying in favor of asking, “How about you? What’s your favorite childhood memory?”

“Traveling with my parents. They used to take me everywhere with them.” A hint of boyish excitement entered his eyes. “On one such occasion, when we decided to stop at an inn for the night, we were told all the rooms were already full. So Papa made arrangements for us to sleep in the hayloft with the coachmen. It was such an adventure, I’ll never forget it.”

“Wasn’t it scratchy and full of spiders?” She finished her sherry and licked her lips.

His posture relaxed and a slow smile followed. “Not as far as I recall.”

A sense of harmony settled over Victoria. It was the most extraordinary experience, given the fact she was having it with a man who so often caused her to second guess herself or to feel as though she were stumbling about. Right now though, in this very moment, she felt a connection she’d not known before – a desire to know everything about another person and to share everything with them.

“I’d love to travel,” she said, voicing a dream she’d all but forgotten. “I’d love to see the world, but I would especially like to see where Richard is buried.”

“Perhaps one day,” Colin said. “Once you’ve gotten a solid grasp on estate matters, you ought to be able to hire someone to tend to the place while you go away for a while.”

“Maybe.” It was, however, unlikely, seeing as she would never take such a long journey alone. Deciding not to voice such negative thoughts, she chose instead to say, “And since my success depends on saving your crop so we can return to the lessons I came for, I recommend we get back to work.”

She watched as he drank the last of his brandy, the edge of his glass nestled snugly against his lower lip, his throat muscles working quickly as he swallowed. It was mesmerizing to see, though she could not for the life of her understand why. Gavin had enjoyed thousands of drinks and meals during the course of their marriage, yet she’d never once taken pleasure in observing him do so.

Choosing not to overthink the issue lest she drive herself mad, she returned to her chair and the book she’d been reading while Colin slid into the chair beside her. Together they resumed reading, pouring over texts until they heard the maids start to rise. Victoria glanced at the clock on the fireplace mantle. It was nearing five.

“Hold on,” Colin said, drawing her attention. His index finger slid over the text he’d been studying as though he meant to make sure he’d understood it correctly. And then the book was shoved under her nose. “Read that.”

Victoria squinted at the page, doing her best to force her sleep-deprived eyes into focus. “The brown markings and putrid smell described here are spot on. Looks like the cause behind it is something called bunt?”

“Yes.” Colin pulled the book away from her and flipped the page. “It’s listed as a calamitous sickness for wheat, but it

doesn't mention a bloody cure. I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive me. I'm just so...so..."

"Bloody frustrated?" she supplied with an exhausted laugh.

His smile was immediate and was followed by a grin that made her very glad indeed to have given up sleep in order to help him. "Precisely."

"In that case we'll just keep looking. Now that we know the cause, it should be easier to find the cure."

Whatever energy he'd just shown was gone like a flame snuffed out in an instant. He slumped in his seat. "I'm exhausted."

"Me too," Victoria admitted. She stifled a yawn. "Perhaps we should sleep a few hours. We can resume our search for answers once we've rested."

"I don't know. I hate losing valuable time."

"Agreed, but you won't be accomplishing anything if you're unable to focus on what you're reading."

"I suppose not," he agreed, but made no move to rise.

Victoria pushed back her chair and stood. "Come. Let us retire for now."

"You go ahead," Colin told her after a lengthy pause. "There's still one more text I'd like to review."

Deciding not to argue, yet knowing she wouldn't be any more use if she stayed, Victoria wished him good luck and headed upstairs to her own bedchamber. Once there, she

penned a quick note which she slipped under Mrs. Reynolds's door. Satisfied she had done all she could, she collapsed fully clothed on top of her bed.

The first thing Colin became aware of when he woke the following morning was the hard surface beneath the left side of his face. The second was a soft feminine humming, and the third, the smell of freshly baked bread.

Keeping his eyes closed, he remained where he was while trying to get his bearings. Light glowed behind his eyelids, and as he acknowledged his bent legs and sore backside, he realized he was sitting.

Which meant he must have fallen asleep while reading, face down in the pages of *The Practical Farmer* by William Ellis. He swallowed only to realize his mouth and throat felt as though they were coated in mud.

Gah! He had to get up, he had to solve his dilemma and—

No. Let it wait a little while longer. As uncomfortable as he was - hell, he'd no doubt have lines imprinted upon his face - he didn't want the humming to end. It was lovely.

She was lovely.

Rather than spend her evening relaxing, Victoria had sacrificed sleep and time in order to help him. He was beyond

grateful. Indeed, he was touched by her kindness.

So touched he'd tried to get her to stop, to leave so he would be saved from wanting her near him. God, it was ridiculous, but when she smiled, his heart expanded with pleasure. And when her fingers brushed his, it felt as though his soul caught fire.

Whether she experienced anything even remotely comparable, he couldn't say. What he did know was that she shied away, retreating as though discomforted by him.

Which made perfect sense. Despite Grayson's and Colin's remarks, he was not the sort of man to inspire desire in any woman. Damn him if this wasn't the reason he'd chosen never to marry again. Because he knew the only women who'd ever climb into his bed were the ones who had something to gain. Be it Isabella, who depended on the coin he gave her to clothe and feed her children, or Stephanie, who'd wanted a comfortable life for herself.

Sobered by this line of thinking, Colin pushed himself into an upright position.

The humming was swiftly replaced by Victoria's gentle voice saying "Oh good, you're finally awake."

"What time is it?"

"Almost one."

"In the afternoon?" he asked, aghast, while jolting to full alertness.

"You were sleeping so soundly I couldn't bear waking you even though we have much to discuss. It's so incredibly

thrilling, I can scarcely contain myself, although... Here. Have some coffee and I'll tell you what I've discovered."

Settling back into his seat, Colin stretched his arms over his head, trying to loosen his stiff joints while she poured the coffee. A slice of toast was buttered, strawberry jam spread out on top, and the piece set before him.

Bemused, Colin gave her cheerful expression his full consideration. Lord, she was stunning. More than that...

"You know how I take my coffee and that I favor butter and strawberry jam on toast for my breakfast?"

"Of course I do. It's what you've been eating here every morning since my arrival." She gave him a shy sort of smile, the kind that could fell a man at his knees. "Hard to miss."

He chose not to ask if she also knew James's and Grayson's preferences, deciding there was no sense in potentially ruining the moment.

"Thank you," he said instead as he picked up his toast and got ready to take a large bite. "Will you tell me what's got you looking as though you're a child in a toy shop?"

Her smile broadened and her eyes lit with pure excitement. "I've found the solution. Or at least I believe I have."

Colin swallowed his mouthful of food and chased it down with a quick sip of coffee while straightening in his seat. "How? I mean, when?"

Her cheeks pinkened. "I asked Mrs. Reynolds to wake me at nine so I could continue working. In case you'd not yet found the answer, which I don't believe you did. Did you?"

“No,” he admitted, a little embarrassed. “It appears I fell asleep while searching for it. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be sleeping while you work to solve my problem. It’s not right and I feel terrible for it.”

“Don’t. After everything you’ve done to help me, this is the least I can do.” She jutted her chin toward his toast. “Eat your food. It’s going to be a busy day.”

“Very well.” He took another bite and chewed the crispy bread, savoring the sweet flavor of jam blending with butter. Lord help him if she wasn’t the most incredible woman he’d ever encountered. “Tell me what you’ve found.”

She pushed a French book with a very long title toward him. “We’ll need copper sulfate, water, and hydrated lime. According to the author, Prévost, who apparently made a long and in-depth study of this disease, the infected wheat kernels will have to be steeped in a sulfate solution before getting dipped in a lime solution. It’s a lengthy and costly process, so you’ll have to accept a substantial loss, even if you do save the crop.”

“Is it possible to avoid either of these steps?”

“No. The copper sulfate will kill the bunt and prevent it from spreading, but it will have a negative impact on the grain’s germinating power unless we apply the lime. So if you intend to sow some of the grain next year, you need to complete both steps.”

As glad as he was to know the problem was fixable, he would have to accept that the answer was not without its own issues. Time and money. Expelling a sigh, he took another sip

of his coffee. “Thank you again for your help with this. I suppose the next step is to buy supplies.”

“There’s something else,” Victoria said, her gaze downcast. She bit her lip and gave him a hesitant look. “The flour milled from bunted wheat won’t be white. It also won’t taste very good.”

It felt like the rug had been pulled from under his feet. “Are you saying it can’t be used?”

“Not exactly. It can be sold to gingerbread makers since they’ll be able to mask it.”

Colin gaped at her. “What?”

“Or you can choose to use the wheat as animal feed.”

“No, that’s...” He stared at her, at her pained expression, and finally shook his head. “There’s got to be something else we can do.”

“I don’t believe so. Certainly not on short notice.” She averted her gaze from his and re-filled her teacup, allowing him a moment to think without getting distracted by her soulful eyes.

Frowning, he grabbed another piece of toast and proceeded to add both butter and jam. Victoria had mentioned that the copper sulfate would stop the bunt from spreading, which meant the disease was infectious. But it was the kernels that would be steeped. After harvesting. So maybe...

He froze in his seat. “When I went into the field yesterday, most of the crop looked fine. The bunt was there, but not

everywhere. So maybe we can remove the bad spots, treat it, and sell the flour as you suggest, while saving the rest.”

“You’d have some loss, but you’d also sell the majority of your flour at full price.” Holding her cup between both hands, she raised it to her lips and blew the hot liquid so steam wafted off it. “That could work.”

It took a second for Colin to recollect what she referred to, he’d been so damn lost in her spellbinding movements. He shifted in his seat and returned his attention to the rest of his breakfast. Watching her would only lead to additional yearning and pent-up frustration.

He couldn’t afford either as long as he had more pressing concerns to attend to. Which reminded him of just how valuable her help had been. Without her, he’d probably still be looking for the answer since Prévost’s book hadn’t been filed among the rest of his agricultural collection, but rather in the science section. The fact that she’d thought to look there and had managed to find it was downright impressive.

Her hand rose to cover her mouth as she yawned, and he suddenly noticed how tired she actually looked. The delight she’d shown in telling him of her find had initially masked it, but now that she’d quieted, her exhaustion was clear.

Moving his hand toward hers, he meant to convey his appreciation through touch, only to think better of it. He let his hand drop and quietly told her, “I want you to know I’m tremendously grateful. Your help has saved me.”

“Provided it works,” she said with a self-conscious chuckle.

He smiled at her and hoped his expression would better convey the depth of his admiration. Had he been a whole man, unblemished by war, he might have dared to reach for that stray strand of hair curling next to her cheek and tuck it back into place.

As it was, he feared she'd recoil, adding more salt to his wounds, despite her best intentions. So he respected the distance between them, refrained from being impulsive, and simply nodded. "I'm sure it shall. I intend to get started on it right away. As you said, it's going to be a busy day."

"Yes. Of course." She shifted as though preparing to rise.

"But not for you," he told her firmly. When she turned to him with a questioning glance, he added, "You are returning upstairs for some much-needed rest."

"There's really no need for concern. I've slept more than enough and am ready to—"

"You didn't get more than four hours if you woke at nine, so there will be no arguing over this. You're going to bed. End of story. If you want to help once you wake, you'll be more than welcome to do so."

The edge of her mouth pulled to one side, producing the most adorable dimple he'd ever seen. "Turns out you can be bossy too."

"Quite," he agreed. He cared for her too much to let her risk her own health on his account – more than what was wise.

"Very well. I shall comply. But only because I know you have a trying day and would hate to cause you additional

worry.”

“Your concern for my well-being is duly noted,” he said with a grin.

She answered with a warm smile that filled his heart to overflowing. Lord, if only he had the courage to reach for what he desired, if only he dared hope she’d one day return the affection blooming within his chest. An impossible dream he’d be wise to give up before it was too late.

“I’ll inform my steward, farm hands, and tenants of the situation while you rest, then set about gathering all the supplies,” he said as they parted ways. Having left the library, he’d escorted her to the foot of the stairs. Because that was what gentlemen did. It had nothing to do with a deep desire to savor every second he was able to spend in her company.

“Then I shall wish you good luck.” She remained where she was, as though waiting for something, though what precisely, he’d no idea. A rosy hue filled her cheeks and she suddenly took a step back. “You’d best be on your way.”

He nodded in response. “Sleep well.”

She paused for an additional second before she gathered her skirts and started up the stairs.

“Say what you will,” James murmured, materializing at Colin’s shoulder, “but I know mooning when I see it, and there is no doubt in my mind that—”

“Shut up,” Colin hissed, elbowing him in the ribs. He waited until Victoria disappeared from view, then turned to face his friend, who was wearing the most annoying smirk.

“Do you deny it?”

What was the point when James would know he was lying? “No. She’s incredible. Stayed up last night to help me, then got up early this morning to keep on working.”

James gave a low whistle. “I told you she’s taken a fancy to you.”

“We’re friends. I don’t think we’ll ever be more than that.”

“But—”

“Please stop. I mean it, James. Life is hard enough to get through without having pointless hopes crushed and my foolish heart broken all over again.”

“I’m sorry. I just...”

“I know.” Colin placed one hand on his shoulder. “And I appreciate it. Hell, I’ve no idea where I would be without you and Grayson to get me through the years that have passed since that god-awful war. In Bedlam, no doubt. Or worse.”

“You mustn’t think that way.” Concern had darkened James’s eyes. “There’s much for you to find joy in, like the fact that Wilhelmina and I intend to make you godfather to our child.”

Colin’s heart experienced a deep pang of pain in response to this news, despite its being most welcome. “I look forward to spoiling him or her to no end. I hope you know that.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” James mused. He glanced toward the dining room. “The others are still having luncheon. Will you join us?”

“I wish I could, but I’ve much to accomplish.” When James looked prepared to argue, Colin informed him, “No need to worry. Victoria made sure to feed me when I woke.”

“Say what you will, my friend, but she cares for you a great deal.”

“As I said—”

“Just reflect on the fact that no one else thought to provide you with such consideration. That’s all I’ll say on the matter.” He rocked back on his heels. “If you want our help, we’re here for you. All you need do is ask.”

Colin thanked him, then headed outside with every intention of getting as much done today as possible.

“We’ll carefully harvest the good wheat first,” he told Frost when they went to survey the fields together. “Setting up markers should make the process faster.”

“And then we’ll tread it and send it off to the mill?” Frost asked.

Colin nodded. “While we harvest and treat the remaining kernels.”

“I’ll have my hands full overseeing the process, which will be much more laborious than usual. It would be helpful if you could make some inquiries in the meantime. Ask the local bakeries if they’re willing to buy the inferior flour for their gingerbread goods.”

“Leave it with me,” Colin said.

“I trust you’ll also inform the tenants, just in case their crops are affected as well.”

“Yes. I plan to ride out at once.”

Frost took a deep breath and expelled the air slowly while sweeping his gaze across the fields. “We still have a good four to five hours ’til sunset. I’ll see to it the farmhands get as much work done before then as possible.”

Colin thanked him and went to collect his horse. The news he meant to deliver to his tenant farmers would be unwelcome. All he could do was hope it would not come too late.

David finished marking the area he and the farmhands would start on and picked up a sickle. The rest of the men were already wielding theirs and with only a couple of hours left before the sun dipped behind the tree line to the west, it was time for him to pitch in. He shucked his jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves, then got straight to work with a wide swing of the sharpened blade.

Stalks fell to the ground in clumps for the bandsters to gather and tie into bundles. At his previous place of work, this had been done by the farmer's wife and their children. Here, it would be accomplished by servants.

Slightly hunched, he moved his arms back and forth while keeping a steady pace. If they could get a tenth of the area done before nightfall, he would be satisfied with the result. Between six men, it ought to be doable.

The blade snagged when he made the next cut. Time to sharpen the blade.

He straightened and turned, his heart jolting the moment he saw her. Miss Edwards. She was leaning against the fence, her attention fixed upon him with interest. No. Not just on

him, he scolded himself, but on the field as a whole – on the work that was being done.

Bathed in the fading afternoon light, with golden locks of hair framing her face, she was a vision to behold. Pretty didn't suffice and though he knew he wasn't clever with words, radiant did come to mind. He pushed out a breath and started toward her, unsure if speaking with her would be wise.

Not so much because of his sweaty appearance or the fact that he knew the labor he'd been involved in ought to require a bath before he came within smelling distance of any woman, but rather because he worried about his response to her. Since encountering her the first time, their paths had crossed on two more occasions.

Once had been in the stables when she'd arrived for the purpose of taking a ride. He had been there only because he'd been trying to find a broom with which to sweep the treading barn floor. In a rush to get the work done, he'd stupidly walked straight into Miss Edwards while on his way out. Instinct had caused him to grab her arm so she wouldn't fall, but the shock of awareness that single touch produced had rendered him speechless.

He'd muttered a quick apology and wished her a pleasant day before hurrying off. But the feel of her supple flesh beneath his palm had lingered.

The next time they'd met was that morning. He'd woken at five as usual, grabbed a bread-roll from the kitchen, and gone to the barn to check on the livestock. The chickens were

already getting restless by the time he arrived, so he'd let them out and had tossed them some corn.

Before he'd managed to do much else, he'd heard it – a soft curse of frustration. Unsure who the intruder might be or what they were up to, he'd moved toward the sound with a silent tread. Which allowed him to find Miss Edwards, sitting on a stool, attempting to milk a cow.

She'd leapt away from the animal when she'd seen him, knocking over the stool in the process. Taking pity, he'd inquired about her success with the task and had learned she'd had none. So he'd offered to help since she clearly wanted to learn. And this had of course been a massive mistake, for it had involved a great deal of physical contact, the sort he very much feared would have him staring down the barrel of Mr. Grier's pistol if he weren't careful.

Yet here she was. Again. And he could not help but thrill at her presence, however unwise it might be. Perhaps the blush in her cheeks meant she was as taken with him as he was with her. Not that it mattered. They could fall for each other as much as they liked, and it still wouldn't change the fact that she'd always remain beyond his reach.

“Should you not be getting ready for supper?” he asked, assuming such matters took hours for upper class ladies to accomplish.

She grinned and he cherished that smile, a gift of beauty he'd always hold dear. “In a bit. I thought I'd stretch my legs first.”

He raked his fingers through his damp hair and hoped he didn't look too much a mess. "You'll have to forgive my appearance. I've been working and—"

"I saw." Her eyes widened, as though the quip had surprised her. She licked her lips. "You...um...looked rather capable."

His chest expanded and for a second he thought of stepping nearer, of leaning against the fence too, so he could sidle up closer, press his shoulder against hers, and savor her sweet perfume. The thought sent a pulse of awareness through him. His stomach tightened and rather than do as he wished, he went to grab the whetstone he'd come for.

"I've spoken with Betsy," he said while he sharpened the blade of his scythe. "She's the scullery maid and the one who usually milks the cows. If you desire further instruction, she'd be very happy to help."

"Thank you."

Miss Edwards said nothing more and since he kept his attention on what he was doing, he couldn't tell by her expression if this was welcome news or not.

Determined to return to his duties, he set the whetstone aside and gave her a smile. "There's much to be done. I'd best get back to it."

"Of course. I..." She cleared her throat as though planning to say something more. Instead she just stared at him for the longest moment before eventually shaking her head. "Forgive me. I did not mean to keep you from your work."

Before he could tell her she'd done no such thing, she'd pushed away from the fence and set a course for the house. David watched as she walked away, worried the ache in his gut would soon be consuming his heart.

As much as she tried to enjoy her afternoon tea with the other ladies, Victoria could not relax as long as Colin was away attempting to procure copper sulfate and lime. She'd learned of his absence when she'd woken from her nap an hour ago, and while she was glad to know he was finally able to act in his farm's best interest, she wished she'd been able to go with him too.

At least James and Grayson had gone along – there was some solace in that. Support was paramount when faced with problems, and this was no small thing. His livelihood was at stake.

She glanced toward the parlor door, willing him to appear while taking another sip of her tea. When they'd parted, she'd had an overwhelming compulsion to rise up onto her toes and press a kiss to his cheek.

What a preposterous notion. Such a show of affection might be acceptable if he were her betrothed, not so much when he was merely her friend.

An ache gripped her heart at that thought, prompting her to wonder if she'd be open to more – a deeper attachment – a

chance at...

No. It would be best if she denied herself such fanciful thoughts. Colin had no desire to marry. He'd made that abundantly clear. And neither did she. It seemed they'd both had rotten experiences in that regard with neither wanting a repeat.

And besides, she simply couldn't risk it. Not when she feared he might tempt her to break the promise she made to herself five years ago. She'd taken measures since then. It hadn't been hard to do once Gavin's health had started to fail him.

Gulping down another mouthful of tea, she slammed the door on the past lest it ruin the rest of her day.

"I think I'll take a stroll in the garden," Juliana said. Seated next to Victoria, the young girl craned her neck to look out the window. A soft smile pulled at the edge of her lips. "Besides, it would appear the men have returned, and I'd rather avoid the coming show of affection. Honestly, I don't know why they need to kiss you and send you those longing looks after being parted from you for a few measly hours."

Wilhelmina chuckled. "You'll understand it one day."

"Unless I decide against marriage, in which case—"

"Don't you dare," Olivia chastised. "You will get married and live happily ever after, or Grayson will have my head."

Juliana chuckled. "I'm sure he wouldn't, considering how much he loves and adores you."

“Nevertheless,” Olivia said. “I expect you to try and find a man who’ll appreciate you for who you are. Once you do that, marrying him will be easy.”

“Hmmm...” Juliana glanced toward the window once more. She stood. “I’m sure you’re correct.”

Victoria, who’d been watching the men dismount, pondered Olivia’s words. There was probably some truth to her statement. Gavin had probably cared for her in his own peculiar way. Marrying him had not been a difficult choice, least of all with her father on his deathbed and no one else to protect her. But he’d treated her like a bird in a cage, discouraging her from having friends, preventing her from going out, ensuring she depended upon him for her every need.

Nevertheless, he’d insisted he loved her, had begged her forgiveness for his whoring and his gambling. He was, by his own admission, a weak-minded man, too easily tempted by the devil.

Which was probably why he’d guarded her so. For if not even he could resist temptation, then how would she, a mere woman, manage to do so? No, he had to protect her, steer her away from foolish behavior and dangerous thoughts.

So he’d been critical, demanding, and unyielding while she’d grown increasingly miserable. More so when the child she’d always dreamed of having failed to appear and Gavin had taken to blaming her for it. Her only reward in the end had been Leighton House – a drain on the few funds in her possession.

God help her, she wanted to scream.

“Good afternoon,” Colin said, pulling her out of her dismal thoughts. Victoria blinked, bringing him into focus. A frown marred his brow, further creasing the puckered side of his face as he lowered himself to the spot Juliana had vacated moments before. “Didn’t you manage to rest?”

“I did,” she said, adding a smile for good measure and hoping it didn’t look forced.

He searched her face for a second before allowing a smile of his own. “I’ve purchased barrels and earthen crocks which will be delivered later this evening. The apothecary was closed for the day, so we’ll have to return tomorrow morning for the copper sulfate and lime.”

“I’m sorry.” Victoria turned more fully toward him. “I know you were hoping to buy everything today.”

“True, but with the harvest only just begun, we wouldn’t be ready to steep the first batch before tomorrow anyway.”

“I suppose there is one upside to it.”

He tilted his head. “And what would that be?”

“I’ll be able to join you, which was something I regretted not being able to do today.”

“Is that so?” He moved, just enough for his knee to touch hers.

Victoria’s heart jumped. She swallowed a gasp as electrifying sparks raced up her thigh. Yet she managed to stop from leaping away from him this time. Instead, she took a

calming inhalation and stayed. Even though the experience shook her to her core and left her struggling to catch her breath.

Needing to busy herself with something, she raised her teacup for a sip, only to realize it was empty. “Drat.”

Colin produced a deep chuckle. A lovely sound that vibrated through her, smoothing out her riotous nerves. “May I suggest a re-fill?”

Heat flooded her cheeks and although she was too embarrassed to look directly at him, she forced herself to anyway, and was instantly reassured by the warmth of his gaze. He did not aim to mock or make her feel uncomfortable. If anything, he wished to help.

She glanced at his upturned palm, a little surprised by the idea of him serving her since this was considered a woman’s duty. Realizing no one else paid attention to what they were doing, she handed him the cup and watched in deep fascination as his long elegant fingers closed around it. His hand, so much larger than hers, handled the dainty piece of porcelain with the utmost of care.

“Here you are,” he murmured, handing it to her as soon as he’d finished the task.

She thanked him and took a careful sip, ever conscious of the fact that his knee still pressed against hers, perhaps with more insistence than before.



She'd not retreated.

Colin stared at his bedchamber ceiling and pondered this new development. He'd not bumped his knee against hers on purpose. It had just happened. And rather than jolt back as though with aversion, she'd let the contact persist.

Puzzled, he wondered what it might mean. Were James and Grayson correct? Had she withdrawn from him the first few times because she'd felt the same spark as he? Had he completely misjudged the situation?

He dared not think so. For what if he hadn't? Maybe she'd simply warmed to him a bit more – gotten used to his nearness.

But what if that wasn't the case and she actually shared his attraction?

He flung one arm over his eyes and muttered an oath. How could she when he was disfigured? When he could barely stand to look at himself?

And even if she did, what did it matter? It didn't change his position on marriage. If anything, any sign of interest on her part ought to cement it. Because that was all he was good for, wasn't it? Providing a comfortable life for a woman in need?

Damn Stephanie.

She'd not only broken his heart. She'd left him disillusioned.

Victoria was different though. His relationship with her was founded on friendship, first and foremost. And in that

regard, she'd proven herself dependable.

He sighed in confusion and discontentment. As much as he liked the bond they'd forged with each other, there was an undeniable issue with her newfound willingness to let him touch her. Parts of his body had been made aware of what she felt like when pressed up against him, and if he'd imagined this might quench his thirst where she was concerned, he'd been horribly wrong.

He wanted more.

It wasn't right. He was a beast and she was perfection. To lust after her was immoral, but it couldn't be helped. His desire for her was so fierce it took immense discipline, ordering himself into submission.

Because the truth was, he desperately wanted to kiss her. No. A kiss would not be enough. He wanted to strip her naked and slide his hands over her glorious body. He'd take his time, savor the moment, and make her whimper with pleasure.

His body responded, tightening further with each wicked thought. He had no right to such shameless imaginings any more than he had to the action they led to. But it couldn't be helped. The ache was too great. It had to be satisfied. Even if thinking of her while he did so would probably send him to hell.

Victoria accepted Colin's assistance the following day when he offered to hand her up into his carriage. She placed her hand in his without hesitation and closed her fingers around it for added contact.

His eyes widened a fraction and she responded with a soft smile.

She'd never flirted with anyone in her life and wasn't quite sure if this counted. She also wasn't sure if it was wise, since the last thing she wanted to do was give him the wrong idea. After all, she did not want courtship or marriage, but strengthening her connection with Colin also felt right. She was drawn to him in the most remarkable way. He made her feel smart and capable, something Gavin had made her believe she wasn't.

And she sensed Colin might welcome a hint of the potent effect he had upon her. Which was why she'd chosen to open up about it. If only a little.

Olivia and Grayson, who'd asked to join them on the excursion, climbed in after Victoria, with Colin entering last. Taking the backward facing seat next to James, directly across

from Olivia, he shut the door. He then knocked on the roof with his fist, setting the horses into motion. The carriage rolled down the drive, picking up speed once they reached the main road.

“Perhaps we can visit the haberdashery when we’ve finished buying the sulfate and lime,” Olivia suggested.

“Actually, my dear,” said Grayson, “I was thinking you and I could do so together while Colin visits the apothecary with Victoria.”

“But—”

“It would be the most efficient solution.”

Olivia tilted her head, allowing Victoria to see her frown. “I had hoped to visit the apothecary myself, in order to purchase a gift for Juliana. A mortar and pestle, for instance.”

“With which to crush unsuspecting insects, I imagine,” Grayson said dryly. He held his wife’s gaze. “We’ll buy her some ribbons instead.”

Victoria pressed her lips together and accidentally caught Colin’s gaze. His eyes were sparkling with just as much humor as she feared might bubble from her at any second. The carriage tumbled onward, reaching the town within fifteen minutes. Colin opened the door and the party alit.

“I have a feeling Grayson was trying to get his wife alone,” Victoria said after watching the man steer Olivia in the opposite direction of where she and Colin were headed.

“Or us,” Colin murmured.

Her gaze snapped to his. “Us?”

He regarded her in a way that caused heat to fan out across her shoulders. “My friends have the most fantastical notion of pairing us up. Romantically, that is.”

“Oh. I...um...” Good heavens, her face was suddenly burning. And she’d no idea what to say except she knew she ought to say something.

“You needn’t worry.” The smile he added was unbearably tender. “I have no intention of pressing advances upon you.”

She gaped at him, unsure if what she felt in that moment was disappointment or offense. It wasn’t relief or any other variety of that emotion. That was for sure. Which gave her pause and something to consider. Because the alternative surely meant she’d *like* for him to press his advances.

Didn’t it?

“Forgive me. I’ve clearly made you uncomfortable.” He extended his elbow. “Come. Allow me to escort you inside the shop so we can forget this conversation happened.”

Forget it? How was such a thing possible when it had made her mind whirl with possibility and doubt? She ought to say something but all she could manage was a measly, “All right.”

Nitwit.

She wanted to smack herself for being so silly, but then a vendor cried out from the opposite side of the street, and she was reminded that they still stood on the pavement. Admitting defeat for now, Victoria took Colin’s arm and allowed him to

lead her up a few steps and through the apothecary's front door. The thick smell of spice and medicinal herbs met her. There was one other customer within – a woman who held a little girl roughly four years of age by the hand, their backs toward the door while the clerk behind the counter collected their order. The bell above the door tinkled, announcing Victoria and Colin's arrival. The girl twisted to glance at them over her shoulder. And promptly screamed.

Colin muttered something beneath his breath and released Victoria's arm, then turned away, giving the room and its occupants his back as he retreated toward a corner.

Victoria felt his pained response as though it were her own. It pierced her heart and shredded her soul, knowing this was what he faced when he went out in public.

The woman, possibly the child's mother, had placed a comforting arm around her daughter. "She meant no offense."

The slight quiver in her voice, however, suggested she too was alarmed by Colin's appearance.

Despite her instinct to give him comfort – something he'd probably hate with witnesses present – Victoria firmed her jaw and moved away from him, crossing the well-worn plank flooring to where the woman stood. When the clerk sent a scowl in Colin's direction, Victoria's spine stiffened in outrage.

Ignoring him for the moment, Victoria focused her attention on the girl and applied the gentlest tone she could managed while saying, "You're shocked because of the way my friend looks?"

When the girl gave several quick nods, Victoria asked, “What if I were to tell you that he is the bravest man in the world? A true hero whose sacrifice in the name of king and country cannot be measured? His appearance may be a little... uncommon, but he makes up for that with his outstanding strength of character, honor, and kindness. Indeed, I would wish everyone in the world looked like him if it meant their hearts would be just as pure.”

“I’m sorry,” the woman whispered. She dropped some coins on the counter, grabbed the parcel the clerk had prepared, and hustled her daughter out of the shop with remarkable speed.

Victoria sighed in frustration and glanced at Colin as he slowly shifted away from the corner and faced her. Was this how she had reacted when they’d first met? Had her eyes also widened when she’d seen his scarred appearance? Had she gasped?

She couldn’t recall, but she feared she might have, which made her feel perfectly horrid inside.

“It might be wise to cover those wounds when you step out among other people,” the clerk informed Colin. “They make masks for that sort of thing, so you don’t scare the living daylights out of children.”

Colin’s jaw tightened. His eyes dimmed. “I—”

“How dare you?” Victoria snapped, rounding on the clerk in a sudden burst of fury. “Did you not hear what I told that girl? This man deserves to be applauded, not gawked at or spurned. He looks the way he does because he went to war, to

fight for the freedom of strangers and to prevent a bloody tyrant from—”

“Victoria.”

She felt Colin’s hand gripping her arm, attempting to calm her, but it was no use. She was trembling with anger and an overwhelming sense of injustice so fierce her eyes pricked with tears.

“Mr. West should not have to hide the scars he acquired in battle just so everyone else can pretend all is well – that it never happened. Because it did. Thousands of men on both sides lost their lives, my brother included.”

“Mr. West?” The clerk had visibly paled. “Forgive me, I should have realized. That is to say, I have heard of your... ahem...regrettable appearance. Not that I take issue with it, although I’d prefer for the customers not to be frightened away. Which isn’t to say that you’d necessarily scare them off. Just that...um...sorry.”

Victoria stared at the awful man. Heaven above, she’d never wanted to slap someone as much as she wanted to slap him. Her arm rose. Colin pulled her back firmly against his side.

“I understand,” he said, his voice like flint. “It shan’t happen again.”

The clerk tipped his head. “Thank you, sir. Now that that’s settled, I’m happy to take your order.”

Of course he was, Victoria seethed. He’d no quarrel with Colin’s money. She crossed her arms and glared at the clerk

while Colin informed him of what he needed. The items were jotted down with the assurance that they'd be loaded into the back of Colin's carriage directly, upon which Colin bid the man a good day and steered Victoria out of the shop.

She was fuming.

And it didn't help when they stepped back onto the pavement and two young women hastily crossed to the opposite side of the street.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves," Victoria shouted, with zero consideration for propriety. It did not matter to her that a gentleman strolling by tipped his hat in greeting. All she could see was the unjust prejudice aimed at Colin.

"Please stop," Colin urged while leading her to their awaiting carriage. "The last thing I want is more attention."

Oh dear.

"I'm so sorry," she muttered, realizing her mistake. She might be willing to make a spectacle in his defense; no one would stare at her in horror or turn away in disgust. But the same could not be said of him. Which meant he'd rather keep a low profile, slip in and out of town with as little fuss as possible.

He opened the carriage door and prepared to hand her up.

She turned to face him, bringing her body so close to his there was less than an inch between them. "Please don't be angry with me."

He took a deep breath, expanding his chest before letting the air waft over her cheek. "How can I be angry when you

rushed to my defense with such uninhibited rage?”

“I hold you in the highest regard,” she confessed, her gaze meeting his. “I’ll not stand idly by while you suffer ill-treatment.”

“In his defense, the clerk is new and has never seen me before on account of my not coming here very often.”

“That’s no defense at all for being uncivil.”

A crooked smile creased the scarred tissue next to his mouth. “You looked like you were ready to leap behind the counter and throttle him.”

“Doing so did cross my mind.”

“Bossy *and* violent.” He quirked a brow. “I’m rather enjoying uncovering all of these hidden facets.”

She wanted to tell him it was unlike her, that she’d never behaved like this before, but then he dipped his head slightly, and she became very aware of how close they stood. So she took a step sideways instead and climbed into the carriage where she prepared to wait for Olivia and Grayson.

To her surprise, Colin followed her inside and lowered himself to the seat beside her. He stretched out his legs, alerting her to the snug fit of his breeches and the well-defined shape of his thighs.

“I was just teasing, you know.”

His low voice brought her attention to his face. “Pardon?”

His head turned until his gaze locked with hers. “You got into the carriage so quickly, I worried I might have offended

you with my comment. About your being bossy and violent?”

“Oh. No.” She sagged against the squabs. “Not at all. I realize it was said in good fun.”

“Ah. So you simply wanted to get away from me then?”

The dryness with which he said this pricked at her conscience. And since the last thing she wanted was to lose the progress they’d made with their friendship these past few days, she had to convince him that he had misunderstood her. Which he had.

She licked her lips and prayed for the same sort of courage she’d known in the shop. Why was being honest with him so much harder than telling off a stranger?

“I don’t think you believed me when I told you I am unused to being touched. It was my fault, I suppose. I should have clarified.” She pulled the string from her reticule tight between her fingers. “The only man who has touched me these past twenty years was my husband, and when he would, it was only with one purpose in mind.”

“Good God. You should have explain—”

“He wasn’t rough or unkind,” she hastened to say. “In fact, I believe he cared for me deeply or he’d not have been so... Never mind. None of that matters. The point is, his touch always filled me with discomfort, for I knew where it would lead and I feared the result.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’ve nothing to apologize for.” She forced herself to look at him, to meet his gaze and to hold it even though her

pulse was leaping about like a crazed grasshopper. “Meeting you has been a blessing. Your friendship and support mean the world. They’ve given me the push I needed to try and overcome this deep-rooted anxiety – to form a stronger connection. With you, the last thing I want is added distance, but then I realized how close we were standing and you dipped your head as though meaning to kiss me and I fear I panicked.”

He was quiet for an unbearably long moment before asking, “May I take your hand?”

She swallowed, unsure of what to expect, and nodded her consent.

Moving slowly and with careful control, he took her hand in his and raised it, holding it gently between his fingers while seeming to admire its shape. His thumb brushed over her knuckles, making her start in response to the strong surge of energy the touch evoked.

He instantly froze, his gaze meeting hers in quiet inquiry, as though there were nothing of greater importance to him than to make sure she was all right with what he was doing.

“I am not without my own flaws,” he confessed. “Considering what I’ve been through and what I still have to face on a daily basis, trusting people’s sincerity has been a chore. Few will remain by my side unless they have something to gain. Since you are Richard’s sister, I would have helped you no matter what, but it pleases me to know that you genuinely care about me, that the friendship you offer is real.”

“I am honored to know you,” she whispered, forcing the words past the sudden tightness in her throat.

“The sentiment is mutual, I assure you.” His smile was warm, welcoming, full of assurance. “This being the case and given what you have told me, I feel I must reiterate that I have no intention of pressing advances upon you. You’re perfectly safe when you are with me.”

She might have believed him, had he not elected to pull back the edge of her glove as he raised her hand to his lips. Closing his eyes, he pressed the briefest of kisses against her wrist before lowering it once more and letting her go.

He was wrong. She wasn’t the least bit safe. Not when he had the power to rid her of sensible thought or to light a fire inside her with barely one touch. He brought her body alive with a new kind of longing, instilling in her a need to explore new sensations.

Gavin’s touch had never impacted her so. It hadn’t muddled her brain or made her pulse race. It hadn’t made her cast the eventual fear aside in favor of welcoming more. He’d not had the power to tempt her so. With him, she’d always kept her wits about her, even in the beginning when he’d tried to romance her.

“Thank you for understanding.” She wanted to say a lot more. She wanted to ask about his late wife and the mistress he kept in London, to inquire about his reason for going to war. She longed to know the events that had shaped his life and made him the man he was today.

But she hesitated, unsure of how to proceed, until Olivia and Grayson returned to the carriage and ruined her chance. Neither commented on Colin's new position beside her, though Victoria remained acutely aware of it all the way home. Most notably, when he settled his hand over hers and gave it a comforting squeeze.

The fields were teeming with workers when they returned to Woodstone Park. Victoria alit from the carriage with Colin's help and took a deep breath of countryside air. The dry smell of hay wafted on a light breeze, and the sun shone from a flawless sky. Despite summer being behind them, the air was temperate and perfect for a harvest.

"Wilhelmina's in the kitchen helping your cook prepare food for the men," James said when he came to greet them. "Mr. Frost is doing an exemplary job. I must say, I'm impressed. I'd not thought a man his age would have the experience required to deal with the sort of problem you face. His ability to ensure that order is kept is truly admirable. I dare say Juliana agrees. She and I have been watching him work with rapt interest."

"I'm glad to hear it," Colin said. "Especially since I've taught Mr. Frost myself."

"Ah," James said with a grin. "That does explain a great deal. I trust you were able to find what you need?"

"Yes. I'm off to the barn so I can measure out the quantities. It'll make it quicker for us to prepare the solutions

when we're ready to do so." He glanced at Victoria. "One pound of carbon sulfate to five gallons of water. Correct?"

She nodded. "I can come and assist you if you like."

"No need." Clearing his throat, he bowed ever so slightly, then straightened to his full height. "You came here so you could improve your skills with regard to estate management. And so you shall, even if I am busy attending to other matters for a while. James and Grayson, I trust you will spend the afternoon teaching Victoria how to distribute her funds between different banks, the types of accounts available to her, and the importance of property insurance."

"Of course," Grayson said, "but should we not have luncheon first?"

"You go ahead. I'll eat something later with the rest of the men." Colin went to unload his purchases with the help of his coachman and a couple of footmen who'd come to assist. He grabbed a sack of carbon sulfate and strode off, leaving Victoria with an absurd sense of abandonment.

"Shall we?" James asked as soon as bonnets and gloves had been disposed of and Harrington had gone to inform Wilhelmina of their return.

"How did it go?" Wilhelmina asked when she joined them in the dining room. "Were you able to buy the items you needed?"

"Yes," Victoria said. She frowned at her plate. It didn't seem right to sit here and eat while Colin labored away.

“Is the pie not to your liking?” Olivia asked. “I’m not very partial to leeks myself, but it’s actually very good.”

“It’s not the pie, it’s...” Victoria sighed and proceeded to cut her food into bite sized pieces. “The townsfolk were awful. I fear I lost my temper.”

“*You* lost your temper?” James asked with bemused interest. “But you’re one of the calmest people I know.”

Victoria shook her head while dicing up a tomato. She speared a piece with her fork. “You should have seen the way most of them looked at him, to say nothing of the clerk’s remarks when we visited the apothecary. I dare say remaining calm was more than I was capable of.”

She shoved the tomato into her mouth and followed it with a bit of pie.

“It’s unfortunately a common occurrence,” Grayson told her.

“I’m sure it is,” Victoria said, “but that doesn’t make it less painful, does it?”

“Did you hit anyone?” Juliana asked, leaning forward in her seat. “You look like you might have.”

“I was certainly tempted to do so,” Victoria said. Now that the moment had passed, she was rather embarrassed by the lack of restraint she’d shown. She noted everyone’s raised eyebrows and quietly added, “Colin stopped me.”

“Really?” Wilhelmina shared a quick look with Olivia and their husbands. “So he knows how angry you were on his behalf?”

“It was rather impossible for him to miss,” Victoria told her. Lord, just thinking about that awful clerk in that horrid shop made her want to spit nails. She reached for her wine and took a small sip.

“We’re glad to know you care,” James said, studying her with too much intensity for her liking. She returned her attention to her food.

“I think she does more than just—”

“Did I tell you we bought you a gift,” Olivia asked, silencing Juliana.

“Oh,” Juliana immediately straightened. “What is it?”

“You’ll see as soon as we finish eating. The box is in the parlor.”

The meal continued with Juliana making numerous guesses regarding the box’s contents while Wilhelmina spoke of the recipes Colin’s cook had been kind enough to share with her.

“Let’s begin with banking,” James suggested once he, Grayson, and Victoria had removed themselves to Colin’s study after the meal. “To understand the fundamentals and fully appreciate how far we’ve come, it’s important to know the history of trade.”

“Must I?” Victoria asked while shooting a desperate glance in Grayson’s direction. Unfortunately, he stood with his back toward her while helping himself to a drink from the sideboard.

“In ancient times, seed-grain was loaned to farmers and repaid from the harvest. Later, palaces and temples offered to store gold and silver for safe-keeping. They created laws and ___”

Good lord. Victoria swallowed a groan and surrendered herself to what proved to be the longest four hours of her existence. Not that the information provided by James or Grayson was boring or useless, for it wasn't. She actually appreciated the insight they gave her, both with regard to banking and various types of insurance, including the importance of setting additional funds aside for doctors and hospital fees.

They even touched on various ways to distribute goods and advised her never to make a business arrangement without a contract outlining the details.

They were helpful and patient with her. But she couldn't deny missing Colin. Being taught by James and Grayson just wasn't the same. James had a tendency to veer off course and get lost in details while Grayson was too intense.

Colin, on the other hand, was able to make her thirsty for more. His passion for farming and agriculture were infectious. She could listen to him describe various grain varieties and never grow weary.

“It's getting late,” Grayson said, snapping her out of her reverie. “We probably ought to prepare for supper.”

“Of course.” Victoria glanced at the clock, not the least bit surprised to see it was almost five. “Thank you both for taking the trouble to help.”

“No trouble at all,” James assured her.

“We’re happy to do our part,” Grayson added.

They left Victoria to gather her notes. If she hurried, she might have time for a quick bath.

Propelled by the lovely idea of sinking into a tub of lavender-scented hot water, she hurried out of the room.

Only to pull up short when she entered the hallway and Colin was striding toward her. Holding her notes against her breast she stared at him in dismay. His damp hair was sticking up in different directions. Worse, his jacket and waistcoat were gone and he’d even managed to lose his cravat. Without it, his shirt, which had come untucked on one side, hung open at the neck, revealing a lot more skin than what was proper.

Mouth dry, she made a squeaky sound of dismay as he too drew to a halt a few paces away.

He glanced past her shoulder, avoiding eye contact completely. “I was hoping to sneak upstairs and get changed without anyone taking notice.”

“Uh huh...” His shirt was soaked, making it slightly translucent and...

Lord have mercy, she could actually see his nipples.

Heart racing, Victoria took a sharp breath and instantly raised her gaze.

He met it full on. “If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to put myself to rights before supper.”

“Yes.” She clasped her notes harder and practically stumbled out of his path. “I plan on doing the same.”

He gave her an odd look before proceeding toward the stairs, offering her a forbidden glimpse of what promised to be a perfectly toned backside.

God help her.

Feeling feverish, she sagged against the wall and took a deep breath. What on earth was happening to her? She’d never admired a man’s physique in her life. It hadn’t occurred to her to do so. Gavin had possessed agreeable features when he was younger, but marrying him had been based on common sense, not her admiration for his body. Which had been decent back then, she supposed, but it hadn’t reduced her to a drooling mess.

The biggest problem of all was that the way she responded to Colin seemed to be getting progressively worse.

Pushing away from the wall, she told herself to be sensible and to relax. She’d done nothing wrong besides acknowledging that he was rather impressive to look at. That was all. Nothing more to it.

And yet, it was hard for her to think of anything else when she sat down to dinner with him a couple of hours later. Seeing him in an untidy state of partial undress had piqued her interest. It made her curious for more, even though she knew she’d be wise to refrain.

So rather than offer to help him again the next day, she chose to keep Wilhelmina and Olivia’s company for a change.

A decision she thought to be rather sound until they went for a walk after luncheon and Wilhelmina mentioned the preparations she and James had begun to make for their baby's arrival.

"He's already painted the room we intend to use," Wilhelmina said with a grin, "and has made sure I'm able to pump water into a basin next to the crib."

"You're lucky to have such an innovative husband," Olivia mused. They'd reached an apple tree from which they began picking fruit. "Grayson and I should hire him to install water pumps in our home as well."

"He'd be more than happy to do so, I'm sure."

"I imagine the spring is a wonderful time to welcome a child," Victoria said, attempting as best as she could to show interest, even though the subject made her feel hollow inside. Her heart hurt with the painful reminder that she wouldn't know the joy these women would soon be blessed with.

"It's rather perfect." Wilhelmina's eyes sparkled with mischief. "I'm glad James and I got a head start on things."

"Me too," Olivia confided. She bit into the apple she'd picked, her eyes dancing with mirth. "I'm also very relieved Grayson asked me to be his wife, or my story would not have been nearly as happy. Though I'd not regret the experience he and I shared before speaking our vows. It was very romantic and has given us both a wonderful memory to look back on."

Wilhelmina tilted her head and regarded Victoria. "How about you? Were you and your husband overcome by your

passion or... Forgive me. That was far too direct, even for me.”

“No,” Victoria told her, waving aside her concern. Although an awkward subject for her to broach, she wanted whatever insight the other two women might give her. So she shut down her nerves and told them both, “He was a friend of my father’s. I didn’t even know I was marrying him until three weeks before the wedding.”

“And during that time,” Olivia slowly asked while Victoria took a bite of her apple, “you didn’t consider throwing a bit of caution to the wind?”

Victoria finished chewing the crunchy fruit before giving her answer. “Never.”

“How about once you were married?” Wilhelmina gently inquired, her concern about forwardness clearly forgotten.

Victoria shrugged. “I did my duty.”

The words seemed to capture the essence of her marriage. She’d played her part and in doing so she’d failed to provide the one thing she and her husband had both desired. A child.

“You were unhappy,” Olivia observed as they resumed walking. “You still are. Aren’t you?”

Touched by the feeling in her friend’s voice, it was near impossible not to well up. She sniffed and averted her gaze, hiding her grief. “I had my chance. As it turns out, it wasn’t enough.”

Neither Wilhelmina nor Olivia pressed Victoria for additional answers, for which she was immensely grateful and

relieved. Instead, they kept walking in companionable silence, enjoying the fresh air and sunshine while following the graveled path past the lawn to a fenced pasture where several horses grazed.

A speckled grey plodded toward them and Victoria placed the last of her apple in the palm of her hand, offering it to the horse. She smiled when its soft lips brushed over her hand as it snatched up the bite. After retrieving a handkerchief from her pocket, Victoria wiped the juice from her hands and nuzzled the side of the horse's head.

“Is the information James and Grayson have provided helpful?” Wilhelmina asked as she too reached up to stroke the horse.

Victoria leaned back in order to better face her. “Most assuredly. I'm tremendously thankful to them both. And to the two of you for offering me your friendship.”

“We're glad to have made your acquaintance too,” Olivia said. She raised her hand to shield her eyes against the afternoon sun while glancing toward the right. “Is that Colin?”

Victoria followed her line of vision until she spotted a man with unmistakably broad shoulders and ginger hair. She watched as he swung his arms back and forth, using the scythe he wielded to fell the wheat. “It would appear so. In which case I doubt he's eaten. Honestly, I've no idea how he expects to keep up his strength unless he starts taking regular meals.”

“James also forgets to eat when he's busy with a plumbing project,” Wilhelmina said. “It's incredibly frustrating. Especially when the lack of food makes him irritable.”

“I’ve had similar experiences with Grayson,” Olivia told them. “He can close himself away in his workshop for one whole day without eating. Unless I specifically bring him some food.”

“That’s it then,” Victoria said. “I’ll fetch something for Colin to eat – something simple that won’t require a lengthy break.”

“Do you know,” Wilhelmina said with a smile, “I believe that to be an excellent idea.”

She exchanged an amused sort of look with Olivia before taking Victoria by the arm and steering her back toward the house.

“I’ll join you in a second,” Olivia called. “I just want to see what Juliana is up to.”

Sending her a quick backward glance, Victoria spotted Grayson’s young charge a little farther along. Her interest in farming was somewhat unusual for someone her age, but then again, Olivia had mentioned the girl’s being partial toward the sciences. So maybe the problem pertaining to the crop intrigued her?

Shrugging one shoulder, Victoria dismissed the issue as she set her mind to the more important task of preparing some food for Colin. One of the bread rolls Wilhelmina had baked the day before would serve as a marvelous option. She selected one from the cloth bag Colin’s cook handed to her, refusing her offer to make the food for her.

Instead, Victoria set the roll on the cutting board she'd been given, sliced it in half, and filled it with butter, ham, lettuce, and cheese while Wilhelmina watched.

Once done, she set her hands on her hips and considered her creation for a moment before sending Wilhelmina a questioning look. "What do you think? I confess I'm not much of a cook, so it's the best I can do."

"I believe he'll be pleased," Wilhelmina said. She handed Victoria a piece of cheesecloth to wrap the roll in and wished her luck.

"You're not coming with me?" Victoria asked, suddenly nervous. After all, it was one thing if they both brought him food, quite another if it just came from her.

"This was your idea so I think you ought to take all of the credit," Wilhelmina said. She collected a canister from a shelf and set it on the work table. "Besides, I have a few more loaves I'd like to bake today. But don't worry. It's just Colin."

Victoria nodded. "Of course."

Except there was no 'just' about it. Not when he filled her every thought. Not when she longed to be near him. Not when the way he'd looked last night, all scruffy and sweaty, had haunted her dreams. Not when she desperately wanted to move past the bounds of friendship—only to caution herself out of fear.

To suppose her relationship with him was simple would be a huge understatement. It was time for her to be honest with herself, to stop ignoring what had become patently obvious.

She could feel the tension between them right beneath the surface, increasing with every glance, with the conversations they shared, and with every brief touch. She might call it friendship because it made her feel safe, but Victoria sensed there was something more, that with Colin she could experience passion the likes of which she'd never known.

If only she dared take the risk.

It was something of a conundrum, wanting something yet not knowing whether or not it was wise to pursue it. She tried weighing the pros and cons as she left the kitchen and started toward the field. On one hand, she was a widow. There was no need for her to protect her innocence since it was gone long ago.

But being a widow didn't mean she could do as she pleased. There was still her reputation to consider. More importantly, perhaps, was the duty Colin might feel toward her. He didn't want to re-marry and neither did she. But as a close friend of Richard's, he might decide he had to. If things progressed.

Which they might not. They might simply share a kiss or two.

She bit her lip in serious contemplation. Maybe she was overthinking this entire thing. After all, he might not want to be more than friends. In fact, he had told her he wouldn't make any advances, which could mean he'd rather refrain from getting involved.

Especially since he did have a mistress.

Good lord. She'd quite forgotten.

He already had a woman with whom to enjoy a bit of bed sport. What need did he have for another?

She shook her head and chastised herself for allowing such foolish musings. It was only because she'd listened to Wilhelmina's and Olivia's accounts of their relationships with their husbands. As ashamed as she was to admit it, she'd envied their experiences. But the truth was she ought to be happy with what she had. Owning her own property should be enough. It was more than what most women had. Once she managed to clear Gavin's debt and began working to secure her future, she'd be fulfilled.

Satisfied with herself for working this out, she quickened her pace. Leaves rustled in a nearby tree as she strode past it with quick and efficient steps, not stopping until she reached the edge of the field. Sweeping her gaze from left to right, she searched for Colin, but failed to locate him.

When her second attempt yielded no result either, she prepared to walk out into the field and inquire after him. Having spotted Mr. Frost a short distance away, she started forward.

"Looking for me?" a low voice inquired from somewhere behind her.

She spun in response to Colin's familiar voice and nearly dropped the bundle she'd brought as her mouth fell open. For there he stood and—

Good lord.

If someone had offered her one thousand pounds in that moment to keep from staring, she'd have failed to win the money, because *not* staring wasn't an option. How could it be when the man was half naked?

His shirt and whatever else a man ought to be wearing to cover himself – like a waistcoat, jacket, and cravat – were all missing. Instead she was faced with a view of his well-defined chest and a stomach consisting of thick bands of muscle.

She closed her mouth and swallowed past the dryness in her throat. Her heart knocked fiercely against her breast. His breeches hung low on his narrow hips, allowing her to see the fine dusting of ginger hair beneath his naval and the toned muscle disappearing into his waistline.

His body was beautiful, despite the scars marring the left side of his neck, shoulder, upper arm, and part of his chest before showing up farther down just below his hip bone. The inclination to reach out and touch him was just as urgent as her need to breathe.

“Victoria?”

Her gaze snapped to his. “Hmm?”

He wore a slightly alarmed look. “I ought to be properly dressed when I'm in a lady's presence, but I was hot and I didn't expect you to stop by. So I left my shirt in the field when I went to...”

He waved one hand in a helpless sort of gesture that brought Victoria back to solid ground. She smiled at him. “Of

course. You needn't explain. I only came out here to bring you this."

She handed him the parcel and watched as he opened it. A baffled expression pulled at his features when the bread-roll came into view. "Thank you, but—"

"I must insist that you eat," she told him, applying the sternest voice she could muster. "After all, you're quite a large man. Heavy, I imagine. So it won't do for you to faint just because you're too stubborn to see yourself properly nourished. Getting you back to the house will be tough on those who have to carry you, Colin."

A boyish smirk pulled at his lips. "Your concern for others is heartwarming."

"Besides," she added. "I made that myself and should hate to see it go to waste."

His eyes brightened as his features softened, and for a second she imagined he might say something poetic. But then he seemed to collect himself. He shook his head as though befuddled. "Thank you. I'll eat it right away then, just to be sure it doesn't."

"Please do." She sent a hasty glance over her shoulder. "I should probably..."

He stared at her as though waiting for something, but when he said nothing further she took a step back, retreating from him with the wariness of a rabbit fleeing a slumbering fox.

Adding a stiff nod in parting, she spun on her heel and hurried away toward safety.

Every muscle in Colin's body was sore by the time he returned from the fields. His back hurt and his feet throbbed. Blisters stung the palms of his hands from wielding that bloody scythe, despite Frost's padding. But he'd be damned if he let the farmhands do all the work alone. They'd also keep at it for longer if he set a good example. And speed was of the essence if he was to harvest as much of the healthy crop as possible before the bunt could spread.

Exhausted, he stumbled into his bedroom and shut the door. The last thing he felt like right now was heading downstairs to socialize over dinner. He'd much rather sleep. Though he still required a bath before settling into his bed.

He sniffed the air and winced. Jesus, how he stank!

A critical laugh erupted somewhere in his throat. Brilliant. As though he weren't offensive enough to Victoria's eyes, her nose had been forced to suffer as well when they'd crossed paths last night. And again today when she'd brought him food.

He'd been covered in sweat on both occasions and while she'd politely tried to hide her aversion, she'd not quite

managed. It had been evident in her wide-eyed assessment of him last night and the manner in which she'd fled from his presence today.

Irritated by his bad luck, Colin went to the bell-pull and gave it a yank, then began removing his boots. What did it matter? It wasn't as though he was trying to court her.

Perhaps not, but he'd like feeling as though he had half a chance of winning her if he decided to put in the effort. And he had felt like that a few times, especially during their outing to town.

He scowled as he tossed one boot aside and began removing the other. Who was he kidding? They'd visit Perkins soon for his blasted ball. Next to him and the rest of the men who'd be present, Colin would look like a hideous goblin.

Oh yes, he terrified children and women alike with his monstrous appearance.

Pained by the reality of his bleak situation, he poured himself a glass of brandy and took a large sip in an effort to banish his demons. A maid answered his call a second later, and he ordered hot water for his bath. It was promptly delivered by two footmen, allowing him to savor the soothing quality of his bath soon after while resting his eyes and doing his best not to think of *her*.

She was everything he was not – perfection personified – an angelic beauty. He had no right to picture her in a state of undress, to imagine her joining him in the tub, to wonder what it would feel like to have her lips trailing kisses across his skin, or to long for her hands to explore every inch of his body.

With a curse, he cast aside the potent vision and stood, allowing water to pour off his body. Reaching for the towel, he wished Isabella weren't so far away.

Not that his mistress would ever be able to substitute what he believed he might find in Victoria's arms, but at least she could help him relieve his constant state of arousal. Plus, he could have her without fear of what she might think of his scars. With her, he honestly didn't care, but with Victoria it would be a different matter, one he'd be wise to refrain from exploring.

Even so, her face was the first he sought when he entered the parlor an hour later, like an eager pup ready to lick up whatever scraps she chose to toss his way.

Christ, he was pathetic.

And she wasn't present, he noted with keen disappointment.

"You look a lot better than when you hobbled upstairs earlier," Grayson remarked as he and James came to join him. "I didn't realize you were planning to head out into the fields yourself or I would have offered to join you."

"Don't be absurd," Colin said. "You're guests and thereby forbidden from overtaxing yourselves."

"The exercise could be useful." James gave him a direct look. "We're here if you need us. All you need do is ask."

"I know and I appreciate it. But your focus should be on helping Victoria."

“Speaking of which,” Grayson murmured. He followed the statement with a welcoming smile while glancing past Colin’s right shoulder.

Colin turned, his body instantly heating. Lord, she was radiant and he dearly wanted—

“Go and greet her,” James hissed near Colin’s ear, reminding him that he was the host and that he should not leave her standing near the doorway alone.

Ignoring the unpleasant shakiness deep in his gut, he pulled himself together and made his approach. Hands clasped behind his back, he halted before her, and gave a short bow. “Good evening, Victoria. I trust you’re well?”

A blush colored her cheeks. “Quite so. Why do you ask?”

“You tend to come down sooner, so I worried you might not join us.”

Was he imagining it, or did her blush deepen?

“And miss my chance to dine with you?” She added a smile. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Pleasure washed through him. “You’ve no idea how glad I am to hear you say that.”

He offered his arm one second later when Harrington came to let them know dinner was served.

She placed her hand on his forearm and he instinctively glanced at her when he noted the pressure. It conveyed a new sort of confidence that hadn’t been there before, and he wondered what it might mean.

There was an added brightness to her eyes, and as they walked, her body shifted closer until the length of her arm pressed against his. It took some effort to keep a steady pace when his pulse began beating in his throat, and he briefly forgot where they were headed.

“Did you eat the sandwich as promised?”

“I did.” He blinked, fearing he might have continued past the dining room while distracted, and exhaled the breath he’d been holding when he saw that wasn’t the case. He guided Victoria into the room and toward her spot.

Since there was no mistress of Woodstone Park, Colin had decided to forgo seats at the head of the table, choosing instead to divide the spots equally on either side so the men faced the women.

“And?” she asked, releasing him so he could help her into her seat, which stood directly opposite his.

“It was perfect,” he murmured, allowing the tips of his fingers to tangle with hers. When she sucked in a breath, he leaned in closer and lowered his voice to a whisper. “Exactly what I needed.”

With his heart hammering frantically, he straightened and took a step back, holding her chair while she slid onto the seat. Moving briskly, he claimed his own between Grayson and James, then gestured for one of the footmen to pour some wine. Anything to distract him from his own idiocy.

What the hell did he think he was doing, flirting with her when he had no intention of taking things further? When he’d

promised her he wouldn't make advances? What had possessed him?

He took a steadying breath and finally glanced at her, relieved to see she was already chatting with Wilhelmina, which hopefully meant his blunder had been forgotten. If he was lucky, she'd think nothing of his brief lapse in judgment. For if there was one thing he could not bear, it was the disgust she'd surely experience if she found out how he lusted for her.

"You look like you've just been dragged down to hell," Grayson observed, his voice low.

Colin turned slowly toward him until their gazes met. "You're very astute."

Something flashed in the depth of Grayson's eyes. He darted a quick look across the table. Understanding dawned in every aspect of his features. "Do something about it."

"I can't."

"Colin, she's—"

"Enough." Colin gave his attention to the meal, which was now being served. A plate filled with roast lamb and mixed vegetables was placed before him.

He jabbed his fork into the meat and started to cut it, only for James to interrupt as he quietly asked, "What did Grayson just tell you?"

Honestly, he loved his friends beyond reason, but his patience with them was beginning to wear a bit thin. They were acting like children instead of grown men. He sent James a dry look. "Nothing. Eat your food."

“You’re not keeping secrets from me then?”

Heaven have mercy! Colin raised his gaze to the ceiling and prayed for strength. “No.”

“Good, because judging from all the whispering taking place on the opposite side of this table, one might think there’s been a development.”

What?

Colin looked across at Victoria. Her color was high and her eyes seemed to sparkle with pleasure when her gaze caught his. She smiled and dipped her head, wreaking havoc on Colin’s restraint.

He gave his head a violent shake. The room was warm, hence her flushed appearance, and with a candelabra directly between them, it made sense for her eyes to sparkle. Making more of it than that would be stupid when everything else about her responses, comments, and actions gave no indication that she wanted more than friendship from him.

He’d do well to remember that and to stop listening to James and Grayson, whose best intentions would likely end up frightening Victoria away.

Irritated, he ate his food and chased it down with some wine before announcing, “I’m heading to the barn after dinner.”

Anything to get away for a while, even if the thought of doing more physical work today made him feel as though he were thousands of years old. He’d rather sleep for the next month.

“Colin, you can’t honestly mean to—”

“No.”

The singular word sliced through the air to cut Grayson off. Silence followed as everyone stared at Victoria, whose eyes now flashed with a dangerous sort of emotion that clearly had nothing to do with the candelabra.

Colin stared at her in morbid fascination, for he had no doubt her ire was directed at him since he was the subject of her glare. Nevertheless, he raised a challenging eyebrow. “No?”

Her hands, balled into tight little fists, landed on the table. “You will not go back to work tonight.”

Her voice shook, sending a nervous laugh through him. He gave his friends a pleading look, but they retreated, abandoning him to his fight with what looked like a woman intent on having her say. He steeled himself against the allure.

“There’s still much to do,” he explained even though he’d initially thought to leave it until the morning. “If I can get the grain we collected today ready for treading tomorrow, we’ll save a great deal of time.”

“Very well.” She gave a firm nod. “I’ll do it.”

His jaw dropped in horror. “Absolutely not.”

“You need your rest.”

“And you don’t?”

She pierced him with a hard stare that had all sorts of contradictory effects on his body. “I can do so during the day

while you continue with more strenuous tasks. In terms of efficiency, something I know you value, it makes perfect sense.”

Of course she'd use his own teachings against him. He leaned forward, prepared to make her see reason, only for her to beat him to it by saying, “I'm sure James and Grayson will help.”

“Of course we will,” James promised.

Colin glowered. It was a mutiny, with Victoria in the lead like some sort of brazen pirate princess intent on getting her way.

The hard truth was he was damn proud of her. The woman she'd been when they'd first met had been too timid to put her foot down in this way. She'd not had the courage.

There was also the fact that he honestly lacked the strength to do any more than a half-decent job at the moment.

Acknowledging this with a shaky sigh, he slowly nodded and gave his agreement. “Very well, just as long as you promise you'll let these two do all the heavy lifting.”

Dipping her head, she glanced at him from beneath her lashes while sending him a dazzling smile. “Of course.”



It was still dark outside when Colin woke in the morning. Having retired by nine the previous evening when he and his

guests had parted ways after dinner, he'd collapsed in a heap on his bed, asleep before his head hit the pillow.

He stretched and lit the oil lamp so he could check the time. It was just after four. If he got up now, he'd be dressed and fed by five, allowing him a decent amount of time to check on the progress made in the treading barn before Mr. Frost and his farmhands met for work.

After plodding across the cool floor to his washstand, he handled his toilette and dressed, then snatched up the oil lamp and headed down to the kitchen where he grabbed a few biscuits from a tin. He ate one and stuffed the rest into his jacket pocket, just so he could tell Victoria that he had eaten breakfast.

The early morning air was crisp when he exited through the service entrance and started toward the barn. Everything was perfectly still. The only sound was the crunch of gravel beneath his feet. Until a small creature of some sort, startled by his approach, scampered away and disappeared into the darkness.

Colin raised his oil lamp to add more light to the path ahead and turned onto the ramp leading to the treading barn's upper level. He was surprised to find it unlatched and immediately frowned. His friends weren't the absent-minded sort. They knew better than to leave a door open during the night.

A little disgruntled by the carelessness, Colin entered the barn and felt the cushioning softness beneath his feet before the light from his oil lamp illuminated the space. He glanced

down, impressed by the thick layer of wheat spread out on the floor. He'd expected some of the work to be done. His friends had required rest too, so he'd not expected them to work all night. This, however, would have taken at least four hours, he reckoned.

Glad to know there was nothing left for him to do here, he reminded himself to thank them later for easing his burden. Taking a turn of the space, he opened some of the windows to let in fresh morning air and was just coming back around to the door when a sound caught his attention. Stilling, he tilted his head and strained to listen.

It came from below – a dragging sort of noise, as though something were being pulled across the floor. The hour was still early but it did sound as if one of his workers was already busy, in which case Colin would like to go help.

He exited the upper level, shutting the door firmly behind him, and descended the ramp to the gathering room underneath. Upon reaching the door, he pushed it open, knocking it straight into something that blocked it from the opposite side.

Someone gasped.

Colin registered a stunned expression in the dim light and two waving arms. He instinctively reached out, grabbing hold of the woman he'd startled before she lost her footing completely. And pulled her securely against him.

Brown eyes – the very same ones that haunted his dreams – gazed up into his face. Her pink lips parted as she grabbed his lapels.

“Victoria?” He couldn’t mask his confusion. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to help. Remember?”

He blinked and his sluggish brain finally started to realize that he was holding her in his arms and that she was making no effort to pull away. Instinctively, he spread his fingers across her back and devoured every detail, from the fabric creasing beneath his touch, to the small peaks and valleys produced by her spine. She was warm and soft, so close he could feel her heart beating against his own.

“Colin?” His name, no more than a whisper, reminded him that he probably ought to release her. He’d already held her longer than what was proper when all he’d intended to do was keep her from stumbling.

Regretting the coming distance between them, he took a deep breath and inhaled her fragrance – a lingering hint of chamomile soap, the dry smell of wheat, and something floral. Rosewater, perhaps?

“Where are the others?” he asked while carefully easing them apart. “I trust they didn’t abandon you to do the work on your own.”

“Of course not.” She placed one hand against her neck. “They left about an hour ago. Before that, James and Grayson hauled the grain and their wives helped spread it in layers for the horses to tread.”

“I saw. You’ve all done a remarkable job and I’m grateful for it. I just don’t understand why you are still here instead of

in bed.”

She dropped her hand and brushed it over the front of her skirt. “I did return indoors when they left, but then I had an idea, so I came back out.”

“Victoria, you shouldn’t—”

“Look.” She gestured toward the floor where some of the oiled canvas sheets used for covering hay and keeping it dry before storage had been spread out. “When the seed falls onto the floor it needs to be collected. You said that’s done by sweeping, but I thought it might be faster if it can be gathered up in really large sachets. That way you can store the good wheat for a few days just to be sure it’s unaffected by the bunt and doesn’t need to be treated.”

Colin considered the floor and then her, noting the hesitant look about her as she awaited his answer. “It’s brilliant, Victoria. You’ve surely saved me an hour with this idea. And it’s so simple I can’t believe I didn’t think of it myself.”

She beamed. “Thank you.”

“Indeed. It is I who ought to thank you.” He held her gaze. The urge to close the distance between them and kiss her was just as fierce as it had been when they’d gone to town. She’d been right about his intention and had made it clear to him that it wasn’t welcome.

And since he had no wish to face her rejection, he clasped his hands behind his back and retreated a step. “You ought to return to your bed now. Get some rest, Victoria. I’ll see to it that the rest of the sheets are laid out.”

She seemed a little put out by his comment. “Are you certain? I’m happy to—”

“Thank you, but I must insist.” He waited, watching as she sent the floor a regrettable glance before collecting her own oil lamp.

She moved to the door, pausing briefly as she turned to face him. “I’ll see you later.”

He dipped his head. “Sleep well.”

She left and Colin’s muscles relaxed. He breathed a sigh of relief and went to collect a folded piece of canvas so he could busy his mind with something besides Victoria Leighton.

Juliana knew she was being ridiculous. Mr. Frost might be willing to chat with her, and he might even praise her scientific pursuits, but that didn't mean he had any serious interest in her.

She froze on that thought. Did wondering whether or not he might have a serious interest in her mean that she had a serious interest in him? Her stomach fluttered and her heart beat slightly harder than usual.

Possibly.

It was difficult not to when he was so pleasant to talk to. And handsome. She wrinkled her nose. It was true she had very little experience with the opposite sex. In London, she'd been introduced to a couple of gentlemen, but they'd been unable to hold her interest with their constant talk of the weather and favorite pursuits.

There was only so much one could say about a sunny day and Pall Mall before it became tiresome.

The most exciting part of her conversation with them had occurred when one had asked what her favorite book was. Her response had resulted in raised eyebrows and a very swift

retreat on their part. Apparently, *Plates of the Thoracic and Abdominal Nerves* was not the sort of thing proper young ladies ought to be reading.

Dismissing both men from her mind, she hurried outside and cut a path straight to the barn. Not because she hoped to encounter a certain gentleman there, but rather because...

Oh, very well. It was because she knew her day would be better and brighter with just one smile from Mr. Frost.

She giggled as she pondered the irony of his name. He wasn't the least bit cold or icy but rather warm and capable of heating her skin. This of course led to the very improper speculation of what it might feel like if he embraced her. Would his kiss be—

No.

No, no, no.

Stop it. You cannot afford to think in such terms. You'll drive yourself mad for no good reason.

She entered the barn with a light tread, just in time to see Mr. Frost wrestling a sheep.

At least that was what it looked like from where she stood. Both were on the ground, huffing and panting while Mr. Frost seemed to be trying to pin the beast down.

Juliana tilted her head. "Need some help?"

"If you could just...toss me the rope?"

She glanced around, spotted the rope, and picked it up. One end was tied in a loop. "Do you want me to slip this over

its head?”

“Um...” He winced as the sheep bucked against him.

Right. Juliana approached. She flinched a few times when the sheep jerked as though it might leap toward her, but when she saw Mr. Frost had gotten a firm grip on the animal, she slipped the makeshift harness over its head and pulled the loop tight.

“Thank you,” Mr. Frost gasped as soon as they’d managed to get the sheep back in its pen. “The gate wasn’t properly bolted for some absurd reason.”

Aware of the laughter forming deep in her throat, Juliana pressed her lips together and did her best to swallow it. But it was too late. The incident was too funny for words now that it was behind them, and the hilarity of it exploded through her nose.

She snorted and this made him laugh as well. Even though he seemed to make a great effort at looking serious, which only made her laugh more.

“You’re covered in dirt,” she sputtered while trying to gain control of herself.

“I hate to tell you this,” he answered dryly, “but if you were looking to find a well-dressed gentleman, you might have considered avoiding the barn.”

She grinned as the last of her mirth rippled through her. Silence followed and for some absurd reason she could not explain, she grabbed a handkerchief from her pocket and used

it to wipe at his jacket. Not that there was a chance of it making a difference.

But it did allow her to touch him, to feel the hard planes beneath the soft wool. Her hands flittered across him, dabbing here and there until she realized he'd frozen.

“That should do it,” she said, attempting to hide the sudden rush of awareness stretching the air around them. Young ladies did not behave in this way. It was highly improper.

When he simply stood there, not saying a word, she raised her gaze. He wasn't smiling or frowning but rather observing, as she so often did. His gaze was steady but intense and there was a certain alertness to his stance that suggested he might be poised to flee.

“Please stop.” The gruffness of his voice halted her movements.

She stared at his chest, watching it rise and fall with the same unsteadiness as her breast.

“I'm sorry. I...” She tried to think of something clever to say, anything to dispel the awkwardness of her actions, but her mind had gone blank.

“You should probably go,” he said, sounding far more sensible than she felt.

“Of course.” She turned and was glad when she managed to walk away without tripping. Honestly, she would not blame him one bit if he thought her an absolute cretin.

Pleased with the letter Mr. Reynolds had sent assuring her all was well at Leighton House, Victoria set the missive aside on the breakfast table so she could address James and Grayson. Colin had asked them to teach her about estate costs today. He wanted her to know what constituted a reasonable wage and how much to spend on farm animals and various repairs so she wouldn't be cheated.

“As useful as I'm sure your lesson will be, I'd like to decline.” She removed her napkin from her lap and placed it beside her plate. “At least until the harvest is over. Until then, I'd prefer to help Colin.”

“As would we,” James confessed.

An entire day had passed since she'd seen him last. According to Harrington, who'd gone to check on him yesterday evening when dinner was served, Colin had fallen asleep. He'd been back in the field again this morning before anyone else had risen. An update from Mr. Frost had informed her that all the good wheat had been harvested, trodden, and stored. The infected wheat would be gathered today.

“From what I understand,” Victoria said, “less than a third of the wheat was affected. I can’t imagine it would take too long to harvest if you were to grab a scythe each.”

Grayson nodded. “The wheat field is roughly ten acres in size, so there’s probably three acres left.”

“And a good reaper can clear about an acre a day, if he’s helped by gatherers and bandsters,” James said.

“What’s a bandster?” Victoria asked.

“Someone who ties up the swath – the felled wheat – with a braided band of wheat created by the gatherers. It’s often a job carried out by women and children, but Colin has the farmhands take turns with the help of some servants.” James stood and glanced toward the window. “If Grayson and I lend a hand, I reckon the harvest will be completed by noon.”

“At which time we’ll still have several hours left in the day to start steeping the grain in the copper sulfate solution.” Excited by the prospect of helping Colin finish more quickly so he could relax, Victoria pushed back her chair and prepared to rise. “I’ll start mixing the solutions right away so they’re ready for when the bunt wheat arrives.”

Just to be sure she got the process right, she collected Prévost’s book from the library before making her way to the storage barn where massive oak barrels already stood waiting. Although Colin had measured out several batches of copper sulphate, water still had to be gathered and this would take time.

Undeterred by the effort required, Victoria searched for a bucket. Several were stacked in a corner, all with remnants of dirt on the bottom. She selected one, collected a wiry brush that hung on a peg, and took the items outside to the pump.

A thorough scrubbing got the bucket clean, after which Victoria filled it and carried the water inside. She dumped it into one of the barrels and went to refill the bucket.

Keeping a steady pace, she moved back and forth between the barn and the pump, gradually filling the barrel while keeping count of how many buckets she'd used. Her arm was beginning to ache, and she started wishing James had installed a system to bring the water directly into the barrel.

“Victoria!” She turned in response to Colin’s voice. He was jogging toward her, looking much as he’d done when she’d brought him the bread roll. At least he wore a shirt this time, though part of her wished she’d be granted another glimpse of his bare-chested perfection.

He came to a halt and reached for the bucket. “Let me carry that for you.”

“There’s really no need. I can manage.”

“I’m sure you can, but I’d like to help. And if you would like to keep helping me, you’ll allow me the honor.” Something playful danced in his eyes. The edge of his mouth lifted. “Don’t think I don’t know of the mischief you’re causing.”

She raised her chin. “I can’t imagine what you’re referring to.”

“Can’t you?” He shook his head and took the bucket then fell into step beside her as they started toward the barn. “You’ve gotten James and Grayson working my field. Meanwhile, you’re hauling water I meant for two of my men to take care of.”

“None of us likes being idle while you slave away,” Victoria told him. “We had a talk over breakfast and decided to pitch in so we can expedite the process.”

“And by *talk*,” Colin murmured, “I’m guessing you mean a strong suggestion made by you.”

Victoria pursed her lips. “The sooner the work is finished, the sooner we can relax together.”

“I would enjoy nothing more, believe me, but your meddling is proving to be a distraction.”

“Meddling?” She stopped walking and so did he. “I’m trying to help, Colin.”

“And I’m grateful for it, but you came here to learn. Not to be denied your sleep or to endure grueling tasks.” He was frowning now, looking much too serious for her liking. “Lord knows you’ve had your fair share of problems this past year since your husband died. My hope was to offer you some relief along with the knowledge to—”

She dipped her fingers in the bucket and flicked water into his face.

“What the?”

Her lips twitched. His flummoxed expression was too adorable for words. So she did it again and grinned with

delight as he swiped the water from his eyes. Until his attention focused on her, his gaze darkening just enough to spike her pulse.

He dipped his own fingers into the bucket.

Victoria leapt back, squealing as the spray of water he sent in her direction narrowly missed her, and darted into the barn.

“Why you little...”

She ducked behind one of the barrels, using it as a shield between herself and a man clearly bent on revenge.

“I’m smaller than you.” She laughed. “Not so easy a target.”

“But a target no less,” he said, echoing her humor.

Victoria bit her lip and remained where she was, utterly still, until the silence dragged on too long. She wrinkled her nose. “Colin? Are you still there?”

No answer.

She huffed a breath. Well. So much for trying to have some fun with the man. She peered out from behind the barrel and, seeing he must have left, she stood.

Which was when the water hit her, soaking her head so it dripped from her brow. She sputtered while he hooted with an annoying amount of glee. When she opened her eyes to glare at him, he was holding an empty cup which he’d obviously used to toss the water with better aim and efficiency.

She dropped her gaze and it fell on the bucket. He’d set it aside, slightly closer to him than to her, but if she could reach

it...

“Well done. You got me.” She edged forward a little. “We probably ought to return to work though.”

“Agreed. There’s still much to be done.” He seemed to relax his posture, which was good. “I’d like to finish before attending the ball.”

“Oh. Of course.” The ball next door was an excellent subject for distraction. “Do you know if the town has a decent modiste?”

“A modiste?”

She inched her way closer to the bucket while saying, “I don’t have a gown to wear to such an event, but I do have one that might be modified slightly.”

“Hmm...”

“Well?” She gave him the most doe-eyed look she could muster while adding a sweet smile to boot.

“I believe there is a modiste.” He scratched the back of his neck. “I’ve no idea how good she is though.”

“She’s probably good enough for what I require. I’ll ask Wilhelmina and Olivia if they’d like to visit her with me tomorrow – save you from additional meddling.”

“Victoria, I—”

She made her move but he was quicker, snatching the bucket out of her reach before she could grab the handle. Water sloshed from side to side. She saw him scoop more into the cup and chose to make her escape.

Weaving her way between farm equipment she ran toward the far end of the barn. Something clattered behind her. A curse followed, but then she heard the heavy beat of his boots hitting the floor. He was in pursuit and she had every intention of avoiding whatever he meant to do if he caught her.

Enjoying the chase, she knocked a crate over to block his path.

“Victoria,” he growled, making her laugh.

She darted between some storage shelves, intent on circling back toward the front of the barn where freedom awaited. Sensing his absence, she halted her progress and paused to listen. He was probably lurking somewhere nearby. She could not afford to let down her guard.

Wary of letting him trick her again, she continued onward at a slower pace. Easing her way along, she paused every now and again to listen. The stillness around her was almost eerie. Careful not to knock something over, she made her way to the end of the shelving.

When she peered around the corner and saw that the coast was clear, she took a deep breath to bolster her courage, then sprinted toward the front of the barn, aiming directly for the wide open door.

Victory! She finally stopped to catch her breath.

Which was when a strong hand grabbed her wrist and hauled her around.

Her back connected with the barn door and Colin leaned in. A satisfied smirk tugged at his lips as he caged her in, his

hands planted firmly on either side of her shoulders. “Got you.”

He was panting as hard as she, his chest rising and falling with each ragged breath.

She licked her lips and his gaze tracked the movement. He swallowed, the muscles in his throat working with strenuous movements. His body shifted closer to hers, so close she could feel his breath on her cheek and see the dazzling flecks of amber near the centers of his eyes.

Her breath caught when his fingertips brushed her temple, sweeping aside a stray strand of hair. A shiver fanned out across her shoulders as he tucked the strand behind her ear. The gesture was so achingly tender her eyes stung with emotion.

The only intimate touch she’d known these past twenty years had been her husband’s, and he’d shown no compassion. He hadn’t wrapped his arms around her when she’d had a difficult day or held her hand to show that he cared. He’d only sought her out when he wanted something from her, had only touched her when doing so fulfilled his purpose.

So it hadn’t occurred to her she was starved for human affection. Until this moment when Colin’s touch shook her, igniting a dormant need she’d buried the day she and Gavin were married.

Weakened by this awareness, she abandoned all resistance and lowered her eyelids in anticipation of his kiss.

“I ought to get back to the others.”

His voice had the same effect as the water he'd tossed at her earlier. She opened her eyes as he straightened. There was an overall sheepishness about him that was far too attractive for her to feel any annoyance over his choice to withdraw.

Still, it was hard not to sigh with a small sense of loss. She forced a smile. "Right."

"I just meant to offer a hand for a bit."

"Of course."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and paused before saying, "The distraction was welcome. I'd forgotten how good it can feel to humor the child within."

"Me too," she confessed.

He rocked on his heels, glanced at the door, and cleared his throat. "I'll, um...see you later then."

"Yes."

Adding a nod, he started striding away. "Don't push yourself too hard."

"The same goes for you," she called after him.

He raised his arm over his head and sent her a wave without looking back, leaving her in the barn doorway with the most inexplicable urge to weep.

The maudlin feeling stayed with her for the rest of the day, increasing whenever Colin was near. It was like she mourned something that had never been hers. Perhaps brought on by too little sleep?

It was true that she was more tired than usual, but given how active she'd been of late this was to be expected. Except, she'd no desire to rise the following morning. So she claimed a headache and took her breakfast in bed. Which was where Wilhelmina found her around midday.

Her friend entered Victoria's bedchamber with a soft tread and perched herself on the edge of the bed.

She pressed her palm to Victoria's forehead and slowly removed it once more. "You're not feverish but Mrs. Reynolds did mention a headache. Does it persist?"

How could she meet Wilhelmina's gaze and lie when her friend appeared so concerned.

She sighed. "There is no headache. I'm just not feeling myself."

"Oh." Wilhelmina bit her lip. "I'm sure we can rectify that with an outing. Colin said you'd voiced a desire to have a gown altered?"

Victoria groaned. What was the point? "There's really no need. It's fine the way it is."

"Hmm..." Wilhelmina picked at the twill from which her gown had been fashioned. "I was actually planning to order a new gown myself for the occasion."

"Really?" Victoria's heart sank. She'd love a new gown but couldn't afford the expense.

"Olivia intends to do the same." Wilhelmina clasped Victoria's hand. "She and I have spoken with our husbands. We've all agreed that you must have one too."

“But the ball is in just four days.” Victoria stared at her. “Surely there’s not enough time for the modiste to fashion three gowns by then.”

“You’re probably right, which is why we’ll make yours a priority.”

“Never mind the cost.” Best mention it now before she got too carried away. “Wilhelmina, I’m very grateful to you for thinking of me, but I can’t afford to order an evening gown right now.”

“We’ll cover the purchase.”

Humiliation flooded Victoria until she was forced to avert her gaze. “I... No... I couldn’t possibly accept.”

“Richard was like a brother to James and Grayson. As his sister, that makes you family too.” Wilhelmina drew Victoria into her arms when she choked on a sob, and hugged her as she’d not been hugged since her father had lived. “And please don’t worry. Olivia and I have other gowns we can wear, while you do not. This will be our gift to you, Victoria. And to Colin, I should think.”

Victoria sniffed, swiping at tears as Wilhelmina released her. “I wish that were true.”

“So you finally admit to having a tendre for him?” When Victoria gave a quick nod, Wilhelmina produced a soft chuckle. “Well there’s a start.”

Victoria snorted. “He doesn’t feel the same way. Or maybe he does and is stronger than I. In any event, he’s determined to fight it.”

“So you’ve been encouraging him to form a deeper attachment?”

“I...” Victoria paused, unsure of what she’d been doing exactly. With no concrete plan for the future and little experience regarding matters of the heart, she’d allowed instinct to guide her. She met Wilhelmina’s gaze directly. “Possibly.”

Wilhelmina studied her for a second before saying, “When it comes to Colin, you must be certain. He’s had his heart broken, his soul crushed.”

“As have I.”

“I know, but...” She shook her head. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

Her words gave Victoria pause. She considered them for a moment before slowly saying, “Neither of us wants to remarry. But I can’t deny being drawn to him. So I thought perhaps, at least while we’re here... It might be my only chance to be with a man of my choosing.”

“I see.”

“Forgive me.” Heat burned Victoria’s cheeks. “You must think me horribly wanton.”

“Not in the slightest. I actually think you incredibly brave.” She squeezed Victoria’s hand. “And worthy of affection.”

It was as if she knew what governed her fears the most. Victoria stared at her. “You’re ever so kind.”

“As are you.” She smiled at her with warmth in her eyes. “Your consideration for others has not gone unnoticed, I assure you.”

Wilhelmina stood. “Since time is of the essence, we’ll need to place our order at once. Can you be ready to leave in about one hour?”

Victoria agreed, her spirits lifting with the prospect of a shopping trip. She still felt terrible letting her friends pay but couldn’t help looking forward to picking out fabric and choosing a fashion plate. And with the sun shining from a clear sky, Victoria felt more herself as they headed to town.

“This color will look exquisite on you,” Olivia told her as they perused the modiste’s collection of silk sateen. She gestured toward a bolt of emerald green.

“Oh yes,” Wilhelmina agreed. “What do you think, Victoria? Do you like it?”

“It’s stunning,” Victoria whispered while sliding her fingers along the slippery fabric. She reached for the price tag only to have her hand slapped away by Olivia.

“You’re not to worry,” Olivia chided. She gestured for the modiste to assist and before Victoria had a chance to protest she’d been placed in a comfortable chair with a pile of potential designs in her lap.

She leafed through them slowly until she found a sketch too perfect for words. Her pulse leapt and she instantly wondered what Colin would think if he saw her in such a daring creation.

Was she brave enough? Did she have what it took to pull it off? Would he even care? And if he didn't, did it really matter?

She frowned at that thought.

Yes, she decided. It mattered more than she dared to admit. She'd no idea how it had happened or when, but his opinion of her was very important. She wanted to impress him, to tempt him, to take a chance at something more than friendship. She wanted his kisses so much it physically hurt to imagine she might never know the press of his lips against hers.

"There's a gleam in your eyes," Wilhelmina said. "I suspect you've found a design to your liking?"

"Yes." Heart hammering with apprehension, she showed her friends the dress she'd picked and was bolstered by their immediate nods of approval.

Five days had passed since the incident in the barn. Colin straightened his jacket and took a deep breath. He'd barely seen Victoria since. She'd kept her distance, which was what he'd wanted. Wasn't it?

He set his jaw. Of course it was. He'd had enough worries without her confusing the hell out of him all the time.

As far as he was concerned, she'd made her position clear, and yet for a moment there, he'd believed she wanted more than what she claimed.

It muddled his head and filled him with dreams and desires he couldn't afford having. So he'd been glad when she'd started spending more time with Wilhelmina and Olivia. Because he'd finally had a chance to regain his balance without her constantly there to disturb his equilibrium.

He glanced at the mirror he'd used for his shave in preparation for the ball. It lay face down on top of his dresser. He reached for the handle, considered making sure he looked his best. Only to be reminded of Stephanie's pointed remark to her mother.

Knowing he's rich will make it bearable.

He yanked open the dresser's top drawer and tossed the mirror inside before slamming the drawer shut. What was he thinking? That his appearance might have improved within the last half hour?

Impossible, though the painful reminder of his wife's true character did make him wonder. Was it possible for Victoria to be an equally skilled actress? As she was Richard's sister, he'd made certain assumptions about her from the beginning. He'd expected her to be as loyal and honorable as her brother. But there was no guarantee this was the case. Siblings could be vastly different. He only need look to his own sisters for verification of this fact.

What he did know was that Victoria found herself in a bind and that he had told her the simplest way out of it was to remarry, to find a man willing and able to manage her late husband's debt. And while she'd claimed to have no wish for another husband, perhaps she'd changed her mind? Perhaps in coming here and getting a taste for what her life might be like as mistress of Woodstone Park, she'd decided it could be worth her while to put up with his appearance.

It was no different from what Stephanie had done. And it would certainly explain Victoria's sudden agreeability.

Unwilling to think her capable of such deceit, yet knowing he must if he were to keep his heart safe from harm, Colin headed downstairs. He paused briefly outside the parlor door before entering the room where his friends had assembled with their wives. The only person absent was Victoria.

“Care for a glass of wine?” James inquired. He held up a bottle. “Your butler produced this when I requested an apéritif. It’s awfully good.”

Colin selected a glass and held it for James to pour. “Just a small one, while we wait.”

“I’m sure she’ll be down soon,” Wilhelmina said in reference to Victoria. “Mrs. Reynolds was adding the final touches to her hair when I checked ten minutes ago.”

“It’s fine,” Colin said. He sipped his drink. “We don’t have to be the first to arrive.”

“Seems a bit strange if we’re late though,” Grayson murmured, “seeing as we’ve such a short way to travel.”

“We’ll blame it on traffic,” Olivia told him brightly.

“You may be jesting now,” Colin said with a laugh. “But depending on how many guests Mr. Perkins expects, there might be a long line of carriages slowing us down.”

“Ah, Victoria,” Wilhelmina said with a glance toward the door. “You’ve arrived.”

Colin turned and it was as though the entire world fell away, save *her*. Wrapped in shimmering lengths of emerald green that clung to her shapely figure, she drifted into the room like a celestial vision.

Heaven have mercy, he’d not realized how voluptuous she was until now. The dresses she’d previously worn had been modest, intended for mourning, while this creation was made to entice.

Hot awareness pulsed through him as she stepped closer. His mouth went dry and he realized he was gripping his glass for dear life. The décolletage was cut so low and fashioned so snugly, it looked like her breasts might overflow without much effort.

Christ!

Reminding himself to breathe, he gulped down a breath and bowed in greeting while trying to figure out how to convince her to cover herself. He sent Wilhelmina and Olivia quick assessing glances and realized their gowns were equally daring. Funny how he'd not thought much about their need to bring a shawl.

Forcing a smile, he returned his attention to the woman who'd started affecting his state of wellbeing. "Good evening, Victoria. You look stunning."

It was the truth, even if he wished he had the right to hide her away from the world. Lord, he reckoned it would be a long evening with him spending most of it in a glower because of all the attention he knew she'd get. Unhappy with the idea, yet unwilling to ruin her or anyone else's evening, he kept his possessive thoughts to himself while offering her some wine.

"Are you all right?" Wilhelmina asked Victoria once they were sitting inside Colin's carriage. James and his wife had taken the backward facing bench while Colin sat opposite next to Victoria. Grayson and Olivia followed behind in their own carriage

"My stomach is twisting itself into knots," Victoria confessed, her voice slightly anxious. "I've never attended a

ball before. What if I say the wrong thing or step on someone's foot while dancing?"

"I trust it's been a while since the last time you danced," James said.

Victoria wriggled slightly in her seat, shifting her thigh against Colin's until he was tempted to place a staying hand on her leg. "I've not danced since I took lessons in anticipation of my coming out."

"Ah," James murmured.

Colin gave a swift shake of his head to warn him against pursuing the issue. The last thing Victoria needed right now was to think of her father's death and the unhappy life that had led to.

"We'll help you through it," he told her. "If you have concerns about etiquette, you need only ask. And as long as you keep close to one of us, we'll save you from difficult conversations and even from unwanted—"

The carriage bumped as it hit a hole in the road, throwing Victoria against Colin. Her hand landed upon his knee, her fingers gripping him as she attempted to keep herself steady. His muscles tightened beneath her touch, and he took a deep breath, inhaling the loveliest scent of honey and lemons as she leaned against him.

"Thank goodness we came in a well-sprung carriage," Wilhelmina said, reminding Colin that he and Victoria weren't alone and that their proximity ought to end. So he gently

peeled Victoria's fingers away from his knee and returned her hand to her lap.

"Forgive me," she murmured.

"No need," he replied, his tone more even than he felt. The truth was he mourned the loss of her touch

"I wonder if there will be other acquaintances of ours in attendance this evening," James said as the carriage turned onto the driveway leading to Perkins's estate.

"If so, I'm sure they'll avoid me," Wilhelmina muttered.

James took her hand and it occurred to Colin that he and Victoria weren't the only ones in need of assurance. The ostracism Wilhelmina had suffered after her divorce two years earlier had clearly left a mark. Her outward show of confidence was actually quite remarkable, all things considered.

The carriage eventually came to a halt and the door was opened by an attending footman. James alit, followed by Wilhelmina and then Colin, who turned to help Victoria.

Her gloved hand settled neatly within the confines of his own, the sizzling sensation the touch provoked searing him to the bone. As he caught her gaze, he experienced a distinct tug at his heart. Whether or not she attempted to take advantage, he couldn't escape the need to be near her. So he steadied his breaths and placed her hand more securely upon his arm.

The door to the carriage behind theirs opened and Grayson stepped down. He quickly straightened his jacket and smoothed his hair before helping his wife alight.

Colin bit back a snort of humor when he saw how ruffled her skirts appeared. A pang of regret came next in response to the sharp realization that such indiscretions would always be reserved for others. Not for him.

Pushing aside the unpleasant thought, he reminded himself to enjoy what he could. Right now, he had the world's loveliest lady upon his arm. He glanced at Victoria as he led her forward, following the others. She was watching Olivia and Grayson with marked interest.

Colin grinned and dipped his head closer to hers. "To satisfy your curiosity, the answer is yes, they most certainly did."

Victoria stiffened on a sharp breath. "I can't imagine what you're referring to."

"Can't you?" He waggled his eyebrows and she blushed profusely. Moved by her innocence, he chuckled lightly and drew her closer to his side.

They entered Perkins's home and were instantly besieged by the smell of beeswax, scented oils, perfumes, and tobacco. Chatter and laughter mixed with the music played by an out-of-sight orchestra.

"Welcome to my humble abode," Perkins exclaimed with cheerful exuberance, his voice a touch louder than necessary. Flamboyantly garbed in pearly silk breeches, a jacket to match, and a gold jacquard waistcoat, he seemed determined to look like the chief peacock this evening. With a glass of champagne in his hand, he nodded to each of the men before bowing toward the ladies.

Colin arched a brow while glancing around. He'd been here before, while Perkins's grandfather lived. Back then, the house had shared the same minimalist approach to décor Colin favored. Now it reeked of wealth, more so this evening with all the candlelight bouncing off crystal. His new neighbor clearly loved the extravagant.

Perkins gave a barely-there smile to acknowledge Colin's presence before turning his full attention toward Victoria. His smile broadened, producing a pair of dimples that somehow improved his looks, though Colin would not have believed such a thing to be possible.

Blue eyes sparkling with undeniable appreciation, he took Victoria's free hand and raised it to his lips for a kiss that made Colin want to smack him. Especially when Perkins's gaze aligned with Victoria's breasts and the edge of his mouth quirked.

Unsettled by the sheer audacity given that she was still on his arm, Colin tightened his hold while coming to terms with what was transpiring. The handsome prince had clearly swept in to stake a claim, knowing full well there was no real contest.

Just in case there might be any doubt of this being the case, Perkins straightened, his hand still holding Victoria's. "I do hope you'll honor me with a dance."

"Oh. Yes. I mean, thank you. That would be lovely. I'll just..." She tried to draw her arm away from Colin, tugging a couple of times and finally frowning at him. When he

reluctantly released her, she reached inside her reticule and produced a pencil. “I trust there’s a dance card for me to use?”

Perkins chuckled and downed his champagne. “They’re just over there on that table. You can fetch one later, but I see no need for one now since the last dance just ended. Come, let’s hurry before the next set begins.”

He pulled Victoria out of Colin’s reach and linked his arm with hers while telling the rest of the group, “Grab a drink for yourselves and enjoy the festivities.”

Before Colin could think of a quick rejoinder, Perkins had led Victoria off. It did not escape his notice that Perkins stumbled, or that he used it as an excuse to pull Victoria closer.

Colin gnashed his teeth and clenched his fists, tracking their movements until they vanished from view.

Frowning, he met the shocked expressions of a few unfamiliar gentlemen standing nearby. Their eyes widened when he turned his left side more fully toward them, and quickly gave him their backs. The locals would not be too surprised when they saw his scars, but those who’d never met him were obviously just as shocked as one would expect.

He now recalled why he chose to avoid social affairs.

If he’d been wise, he’d have stayed home this evening.

Except he’d not liked the way Perkins had looked at Victoria when they’d last met and hadn’t wanted her mingling with him unless Colin was able to keep an eye on them both. He started forward, intent on doing precisely that, no matter

how unappealing the rest of the guests might find his appearance.

A heavy hand settled upon his shoulder, halting his stride.

“It’s only a dance,” James told him. “Why don’t you claim the next one?”

Colin scowled at his friend and shook off his hand. “I recommend you dance with your wife and leave me be.”

It bothered him that James and Grayson were able to see him as he’d once been, before the war. To their minds there was no reason why he couldn’t charm any woman he wished. They did not live with the constant awareness of drawing attention wherever they went, of what it felt like to frighten children or make people turn away in disgust.

He snatched a drink from a footman’s tray and proceeded toward the dance floor. Weaving his way through the crowd, he managed to catch the occasional glimpse of Victoria’s laughing eyes and wide smile. She looked like she was enjoying the reel without any hint of concern for the few missteps she occasionally made.

It pleased him to know she’d managed to put aside her concerns for proper decorum and just have some fun. Colin watched and was glad to see Perkins helping her when she turned the wrong way, though his own lack of elegance on the dance floor was somewhat surprising. He sent her a charming smile, and the clawing pain in Colin’s gut worsened.

God, they looked perfect together. Next to Colin, Victoria would always look flawed, whereas Perkins’s handsome

features complimented her beauty. And who the hell was Colin to let the attention of other men grate? Nobody, besides her friend. A friend with complicated feelings that probably clouded his judgment.

He reflected on that for a moment while watching Perkins guide her into what would have been an elegant turn, had Perkins not taken extra steps as though in an effort to keep his balance.

Colin narrowed his gaze. Was the man foxed or was he truly as bad a dancer as he appeared? A careful study suggested it must be the latter, which might have given Colin some satisfaction, were it not for the awful reminder that he was not the man holding Victoria. Perkins was.

He winced. Insecurity and jealousy were not admirable traits in any man.

What a detestable state of being this was, to be flawed both inside and out. Until now, he'd prided himself on at least possessing a character beyond reproach.

He was still struggling with this idea when two pretty young ladies approached from the right, blushing and giggling while sending him furtive glances. He considered them both and decided he must be a good twenty years their senior.

The fairest of the pair raised her fan, hiding behind it while giggling softly.

The other produced a flirtatious smile before saying, "We were just admiring all the guests when you caught our notice."

Keeping his left side averted, he sent her a sidelong glance.
“Oh?”

“Why aren’t you dancing?” she pressed, the question so bold there was no doubt of where it was heading.

Against his better judgment, Colin chose to indulge in the interest these ladies showed – in the feeling of being admired.
“I have no partner.”

The lady with the fan whispered something Colin didn’t quite catch and her friend quickly nodded. “We’d both be delighted to dance with you, sir. You only need ask our parents to make introductions.”

Colin sighed. “I doubt they’d approve.”

“Nonsense. You’re the handsomest man we’ve seen all evening.”

Turning more fully toward them, he watched as their pleasant demeanors transformed into stricken expressions. “Do you still think so?”

As expected, they backed away slowly. “If you’ll excuse us, we just remembered that we were supposed to...um...ah... forgive us.”

Had their path been free and clear of other guests, Colin reckoned they would have picked up their skirts and run as though chased by demons. He snorted with disgust, directed not only at them but at himself too. What the hell had he expected?

Sending a final glance toward the dance floor, he spotted his friends and decided they could keep an eye on Victoria

while he went and drowned himself in a much-needed glass of brandy.

Coming here had been a colossal mistake.

I ntent on understanding the disease that attacked the wheat so he could help prevent future occurrences, David Frost had gone to the library in search of the books Mr. West had mentioned. They were stacked on one of the tables, making them easy to find. And since Mr. West and his guests had gone out for the evening, David would have the room to himself, offering him the peace and quiet he needed for his studies.

He took a seat, selected the book at the top of the pile, and proceeded to read.

““The ravages of bunt are known.””

David stared at those words for a moment. As steward, he should have been aware of this before it happened. At the very least, he should have been able to tell Mr. West what was affecting the wheat. Instead, Mr. West had figured it out on his own with no help from him.

David muttered a curse. He'd let his master down. He returned to the words of the book.

““I have seen fields in which there were twice as many bunted as healthy heads; and it is not very unusual to find the latter in the proportion of only two or three to one.””

Attempts made to control the outbreaks were mentioned, but the author referred to these as either ineffective or much too costly. He flipped the page.

“Bunt, which in some countries is called smut, attacks the interior of the kernels, without changing the nature of the glumes...”

David stilled. A prickly sensation at the nape of his neck alerted him to her presence. He knew before he glanced at the door that it would be she. Miss Edwards was in the room with him. His heart thudded and his chest tightened with very acute awareness.

Not thinking about her had been impossible since their previous run-in. The touch of her hands to his chest had stirred his imagination in ways that could prove dangerous to them both. It had to stop. He knew this. And he'd tried. Only to fail.

Despite his best efforts, Miss Edwards had made him crave the forbidden.

“Good evening, Mr. Frost.” The quietly spoken words sent frissons down his spine. Slowly, half dreading the effect of looking directly at her, he raised his gaze.

And felt his stomach clench in response to the interest with which she watched him.

Damn.

She was standing just inside the doorway, dressed in blue gossamer layers that drifted around her with each move she made. An evening gown, intended to showcase perfection, it offered a glimpse of the splendor one might find beneath.

Dazed by the vision, it took him a second to recall his manners.

He scrambled to his feet and prayed his body would not reveal the intense desire he felt in that moment. Perhaps if he spoke, the distraction would help him ignore the voluptuous swell of her breasts.

Good God, man. Look at her face!

He cleared his throat and gave a curt nod. “Good evening.”

She approached at a leisurely pace and he gripped the back of the chair on which he’d been sitting. Her gaze fell to the table. “What are you reading?”

“Prévost’s *Memoir on the Immediate Cause of Bunt...* I don’t recall the rest of the title.” Leaning forward, he slid the book across the table, toward her. “Why aren’t you at the ball?”

“Because I have yet to make my debut.”

Of course. He winced at the reminder of her age. Seventeen. Five years younger than he. An uncomfortable itch formed beneath his cravat. He probably ought to leave.

She picked up the book and turned it over, examining it before taking a look at its contents. “Interesting. You’re trying to understand how the outbreak happened?”

“Yes.” Guilt of an entirely different nature scratched at his throat. “I should have seen it coming. As steward, I was responsible for preventing it. My lack of knowledge pertaining to plant diseases will be disastrous to Mr. West’s income. Especially if the tenants suffer similar losses and won’t be able

to pay their rents. My ignorance in this matter ought to see me sacked.”

“The fact that you think so will likely be the reason why he doesn’t sack you,” Miss Edwards said. She slid the book back toward him. “I’ve seen how hard you work, Mr. Frost, and I have heard Mr. West praise you for your diligence. He thinks most highly of you.”

“In some way, that only makes me feel worse.” He shook his head. “If only I’d noticed the blackened tint on the affected plants sooner. I’ve wracked my brain but I can’t figure out why I didn’t.”

“It’s possible it wasn’t there before Mr. West walked the field.” The mantelpiece clock chimed and a log snapped in the fireplace. “Would you like me to keep you company? We could review the information together.”

David squeezed the back of his chair and fought the temptation.

Don't be stupid. She's Mr. West's guest. Ward to one of his closest friends. Too young to know what she's doing. It's up to you to avoid a calamitous situation. Protect her.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way,” he said, choosing his words with the utmost of care, “but I need to do this alone.”

“Oh.” The crestfallen look in her eyes crushed him. Clutching her elbows, she tilted her chin down and frowned at the floor. A blonde lock fell over her brow. “Is it because I touched you?”

“Yes.”

There was a sheen to her eyes when she looked at him next. Her lower lip quivered a little. “I overstepped and made you uncomfortable.”

“Yes,” he repeated, willing himself to push her away even though her distress broke his heart.

She swallowed hard and gave a stiff nod. A weak attempt at a smile followed. “I’ll wish you good night then, Mr. Frost.”

“Good night, Miss Edwards.”

She withdrew, slinking away like a wounded puppy. Once she slipped out of sight, David sank to his chair with a heavy sigh and buried his head in his hands.

Victoria couldn't wait for her dance with Mr. Perkins to end. She wanted to escape him and his thinly veiled innuendoes. Nervous and uncomfortable, she'd laughed to hide her rising panic. Unlike Colin, this was not the sort of man she was comfortable spending time with. Especially since his over-bright eyes and stiff movements made her believe he'd had more than one glass of champagne before her arrival.

"I'm so glad you're here," he murmured, the words slightly slurred, while leading her between two other couples. "Hopefully, you'll come more often in future."

The sly smile he added left no doubt in her mind about what the devilish scoundrel referred to. She craned her neck and took comfort in spotting Colin, but his attention was diverted in that exact second, so he missed her imploring glance entirely.

To Mr. Perkins she said, "My days are very busy. I doubt I'll find the time."

Instead of being put off, as she'd hoped, he ran his fingertips down the length of her arm before grabbing her hand and spinning her so close they almost collided. Taking

advantage, she pretended to lose her footing once more and stepped down hard on his toes.

He showed no hint of discomfort but grinned instead as though vastly amused. A satisfied smile followed as he glanced toward the spot where she'd last seen Colin. She looked in the same direction and blinked, noting that he was no longer there.

"Fear not," Mr. Perkins informed her as the music began to fade, "You're in excellent hands with me, Mrs. Leighton."

The dance ended, bows and curtsies followed, and Victoria took a step back. "I probably ought to find my friends."

She turned, eager to make a quick escape but Mr. Perkins caught her hand and pulled her against his side. "They're about to dance the next set. Come, I'll keep you company in the meantime so you're not left unattended."

The liquor fumes on his breath made her veer back in search of fresh air. Suppressing a groan, she searched the room once more for Colin. If she could only locate him he'd surely come to her rescue. But he'd vanished, leaving her little choice but to accept her host's offer. Resigned, she allowed him to lead her toward the refreshment table.

"Poor Mr. West," someone whispered nearby.

"He frightened Miss Harper," someone else murmured.

"Really? I can't imagine why."

A snort followed. "He's handsome on one side, hideous on the other."

Victoria's shoulders strained with the effort it took to ward off an angry outburst. These people were no better than the apothecary clerk. She was tempted to round on them all and give them a piece of her mind, only to lose the chance as Mr. Perkins dragged her onward.

Still, she had to do something. "You ought not allow your guests to say such things."

They'd reached the refreshment table and he glanced at her while pouring them each a glass of punch. "I cannot deny them the right to their opinion."

"There's a difference between an opinion and vicious remarks. Mr. West is my friend. I hope you'll remember that."

He handed her a glass and promptly emptied half of his own. "Of course."

When she gave him an expectant look, he sighed as though she were demanding he swim across the Channel. He finally gestured toward a footman. When the man arrived, Mr. Perkins said, "Please inform the Hayworths, the...um... Irvines, and...er...the Daltons that gossiping about their... um... fellow guests will not be tolerated. If I'm made aware of additional occurrences, they will be asked to leave."

"Very good, sir." The footman strode off and Victoria watched as he carried out the order.

"Better?" Mr. Perkins inquired while leaning toward her. He swayed slightly before returning to a more upright position.

Victoria nodded. "Thank you."

He smiled in a way that made the fine hair at the nape of her neck stand on end. “I’m more than happy to serve you.”

She gulped and her palms grew sweaty. “Your actions just now are much appreciated.”

He grinned, downed the last of his punch and set the empty glass aside. “Here, try something sweet.”

A fluffy cake was pressed to her lips, leaving her with no choice but to open her mouth and eat while hating every second. She wasn’t prepared to have her personal space violated by a man she did not feel able to turn away. Certainly not when he’d just done as she’d requested.

Besides, he wasn’t behaving too badly, even if he had indulged in a bit too much drink. He was simply being overly forward. As a widow, it ought not surprise her. Men were free to flirt with her and tell her things they’d never dare tell a debutante. If she’d wished to avoid it, she ought to have stayed away.

“Forgive me.” Mr. Perkins slurred, his fingers brushing her lips at the same exact moment she licked at the sticky mess left by the cake. His eyes flashed. “I see you’re ready for your next treat.”

She gave her head a violent shake and retreated a step. “No. I’m sorry. I was just—”

“I jest, Mrs. Leighton.” He offered a handkerchief for her to use.

Not wanting to cause offense, Victoria hesitantly took it and dabbed at her mouth while he watched with interest.

Increasingly apprehensive, she surveyed the rest of the room and saw that the dance was finally ending. But where was Colin?

His absence disappointed her. Especially after he'd promised to lend his support. Instead, he'd made her feel rejected and alone.

She glanced to the left, relieved when she saw Wilhelmina coming toward her.

The lady arrived within the next second and looped her arm with Victoria's in a show of solidarity that bolstered her confidence tenfold.

"Thank you for watching over her while I danced," Wilhelmina said, "but I fear I must steal her away now, Mr. Perkins."

He looked visibly annoyed but rather than argue, he gave an unsteady bow. "Until we meet again, Mrs. Leighton. Mrs. Dale."

Victoria thanked him again for the dance and walked away with Wilhelmina, not daring to speak until she knew they were well out of earshot. "I dislike him intensely."

"So it would seem," Wilhelmina remarked. "When I looked across the room to check if you were all right, the need for escape was painted all over your face."

"Oh no. I hope he didn't notice."

"And what if he did?" Wilhelmina drew Victoria into a quiet corner and faced her with a sympathetic gaze. "He's

obviously keen on pursuing you, so it's important for you to be more assertive if you don't want that."

Victoria bit her lip. "I didn't want to be rude."

"Just be firm." She gave her a pointed look. "Your niceness and politeness will land you in trouble otherwise, just like it did me."

"What?"

"I was also too afraid to insult a man once, too frightened of what the repercussion might be for myself and my family. That fear resulted in a child, Victoria. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Numbed by the fire in Wilhelmina's eyes, Victoria slowly nodded. It seemed inconceivable to her that the strong woman she'd come to know had been taken advantage of once in such a despicable way.

"Make no mistake," Wilhelmina added, "I love my daughter with every fiber of my being. But I wouldn't wish for you or any other woman to have a man force himself on her the way I was. It's degrading and ruinous in every conceivable way."

"Does..." Victoria wrung her hands and instinctively sought out James. He was laughing at something Grayson had told him. "Does your husband know about this?"

"Of course. We keep no secrets from each other."

Apparently, despite what she'd been through, Wilhelmina had managed to acquire the sort of marriage Victoria had so

often longed for with Gavin. Even so, it couldn't have been easy, getting to where she was today. "I'm so sorry."

Wilhelmina's eyes crinkled at the edges as she smiled. "We'll have none of that. Everything turned out fine in the end for me and my daughter. But do have a care with Mr. Perkins or any other men showing unwanted interest. The last thing you want to do is encourage them. Now come, let's go join the others."

They moved away from the corner and crossed to where James and Grayson stood with Olivia. Seeing their approach, Olivia broke away from the group and came toward them.

"We were wondering if either of you have seen Colin," Olivia said when she reached them. "He seems to have vanished."

"I saw him last while I danced with Mr. Perkins," Victoria told her when Wilhelmina said she'd no idea where he might be. "I had hoped to dance with him after, but I fear he may be hiding."

"Whatever for?" Olivia asked with the sort of look on her face that suggested she'd not taken note of the scarring.

Victoria loved her for being so blind to the flaws of others. "When I left the dance floor I heard people talking about him. Apparently he frightened a woman with his appearance."

"Well. We can't all be saints, I suppose." Wilhelmina pursed her lips. She shifted her gaze to Victoria. "Decent people are few and far between, I find. You are one of them."

As is Colin. It would be lovely if you could find happiness with each other.”

“He wouldn’t have left me to fend for myself if he truly cared,” Victoria said, the self-doubt she’d been inclined to for so many years rearing its ugly head. “He would have stayed and asked me to dance.”

“After having the reason for his insecurities thrust in his face by heartless strangers?” Wilhelmina touched Victoria’s elbow. “You cannot blame him for fleeing.”

“Of course not. I don’t.”

“You ought to consider his pride,” Olivia told her. “Ordinarily, he’s the most affluent landowner in the area, but he can’t even claim to be that at the moment. He suffered a terrible blow to his crop and will have to accept a loss this year. Add to that the fact that you were beaming at Mr. Perkins during your dance and I’ll wager Colin’s spirits have plummeted all the way to hell.”

“I wasn’t beaming at Mr. Perkins,” Victoria argued.

“You were grinning,” Wilhelmina said.

“Only because the alternative was to scream in frustration.” Victoria knit her brow and considered her friends. “Do you honestly think Colin might have wanted to pursue a deeper attachment with me only to give up because of one dance?”

“What I think,” Olivia said, “is that you should show your interest in him so he won’t feel as though he’s not good enough. But only if you truly want to win him.”

“I always disliked my husband’s touch,” Victoria quietly confessed, “but with Colin it’s different. I rather wish he would touch me more.”

Wilhelmina shared a warm look with Olivia. “We know you care for him, Victoria. It’s clear as day to anyone who has seen the two of you interact. Your concern for him is added proof.”

“He guides my every decision.” Victoria shook her head, baffled by the realization. “I only ordered this gown for his sake and he’s barely taken notice.”

“He took notice,” Olivia said with a grin. “Believe me.”

Wilhelmina grabbed Victoria’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “If you want him to pay more attention, why not seek him out and make him do so?”

Victoria hesitated. Doing so would be a bold move. Then again, if neither one of them acted, they would accomplish nothing. And she’d already made her decision earlier. She wanted more than friendship with Colin. He was a good man, a dear friend, and she couldn’t bear for him to feel unworthy.

So she tried not to think of her riotous nerves as she parted ways with her friends and ignored the way her stomach fluttered with each step she took. Dreading his potential rejection, she left the ballroom and prayed she wasn’t making a horrid mistake.

Comfortably alone in the parlor to which he'd retreated, Colin reclined in a black leather armchair. As he surveyed the room, he absently ran his thumb over the grooves cut into his glass. He took a sip of the brandy inside and relished the burn, his gaze landing upon a tiger skin stretched out upon the floor, its head still attached.

Hunting rifles hung on the opposite wall while swords were displayed on another. The vases and paintings appeared to be Asian in style with motifs depicting wildlife scenes while the piece above the fireplace showed a warrior fighting a dragon. On the mantelpiece below the painting stood a series of bone carvings. One was an elephant, another what looked like a scene from a village, and the third an old man with a boy.

A log snapped in the fireplace, causing a few sparks to fly. The gentle crackling from earlier resumed. It helped drown out the music and chatter, which had been reduced to a low drone.

He took another sip of his drink and tried not to think of Victoria.

Impossible.

She tortured him with her very existence. He was in hell. More so now after seeing her paired with a man who was just as perfect as she. How could he ever compete? Did he even want to?

His heart gave a distinct knock of determination.

Yes. He wanted Victoria for himself, however selfish, but he knew that could never be. It was just wishful thinking.

Depressed, he downed the last of his drink and went to re-fill his glass.

The approaching tread of gentle footsteps made him glance at the door. As if summoned by all of his musings, there she stood, the green silk falling in elegant folds around her legs, a beguiling look of innocent apprehension in her eyes.

Unwilling to put his faults on further display this evening, he turned away to hide his left side.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you. What are you doing in here by yourself?” Her voice was low and slightly fragmented.

Choosing not to dwell on his reasoning or face the pity he knew it would lead to, Colin kept silent.

A pause followed before she moved closer. She cleared her throat. “I missed your company.”

He grunted and raised his glass to his lips once more. “I doubt you found the time with Mr. Perkins paying attention to you.”

“Unfortunately, his attention is the kind I’d rather do without.”

Alertness raced through his veins and he faced her fully, without further thought. “Did he behave inappropriately?”

“I think he may be foxed.” She shrugged one shoulder but failed to keep his gaze. “He made me feel cheap. I got the sense he expected more than a dance. It was as though he knew he could take advantage because I’m a widow.”

Colin stared at her while fighting the urge to smash his glass against the wall. How dare Perkins treat her thus? The man had everything in his favor, and yet he chose to upset a woman as lovely as Victoria.

“I’ll speak with him.” Colin set his glass aside and prepared to follow through on his promise at once. An altercation was exactly what he needed, some means by which to banish all of this bloody tension.

“Please don’t. I’d rather enjoy the rest of the evening instead.” When Colin stopped to stare at her, she quietly asked, “Why didn’t you invite me to dance earlier?”

“I didn’t have the chance to before my charming neighbor stepped in.”

“That’s not true. You could have claimed a dance before we even arrived, but you didn’t. Why?”

Pushed by her quest for answers, he hardened his gaze. “Because I didn’t want to put you in the position of having to accept for the sake of politeness.”

If he'd expected her to retreat, he'd severely underestimated her response. She straightened with steely resolve, squared her shoulders and faced him, eyes blazing.



“Is that how you see me? As someone who would reject you because of the scars you received while fighting for king and country? While at my brother’s side?” Lord, she was angry. She was practically shaking with it. “And here I thought we were friends, but you clearly think very little of me.”

As little as what Gavin had thought. God help her, she'd believed Colin was different.

“You know that’s not true,” he said, the words falling hard between them.

“Isn’t it?”

“I think the world of you, Victoria. You’ve endured so much, suffered and struggled, yet you manage somehow to stay positive and persevere.”

“No more than you,” she countered. “Less, in fact. Yet you fail to see yourself in the same heroic light.”

He drew back, angling away. “It’s not so simple in my case.”

“Why not?”

Rounding, he spread his arms wide and leaned toward her, presenting his wounds. “Because of the way I look.”

Undeterred by his anger, she crossed her arms and speared him with a sharp gaze of her own. “You’d rather hide and give the heartless people out there the power to ruin what ought to have been a lovely evening for all of us?”

He scoffed. “You’ve no idea what it’s like being treated as if I’m a leper.”

“True,” she agreed, “but have I ever treated you thus?”

“No.”

She hoped he’d say something more. When he didn’t she lost her patience and asked, “What reason do you have then to believe I’d not want to dance with you?”

He hesitated just enough to convey his discomfort before confessing, “No one has ever wished to before.”

“Not even your wife?” It didn’t make sense but the aching raw admission clutched at her heart and softened her stance.

“Don’t you dare pity me,” he gritted.

“I don’t.”

He glared at her with an undeniable touch of suspicion, and it suddenly dawned on her that he was just as scared as she. More so, perhaps.

“Then what?”

Deciding it might be unwise to voice her observation, she shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Of course. I understand,” he scoffed and directed his attention to the flames in the fireplace.

Irritated by his response, she raised her chin and stayed where she was. “It’s just interesting, that’s all.”

“What is?”

She smiled at his back. “Despite your experience with women, you’ve severely misjudged me if you don’t think I’d like to dance with the most impressive man I know.”

Colin's gaze snapped toward hers. His lips parted and for a second he forgot how to breathe.

Had he heard her correctly?

Did she truly think him impressive?

Not merely impressive, he reflected with a sudden surge of confidence, but *the most* impressive man she knew.

It was shocking to him that she'd hold him in such high regard when he'd done so little to earn it.

You did save her during the storm. Her dog too. And you have lent assistance. You've introduced her to your friends.

And yet he still felt as though she'd done more for him than he for her. She'd found the solution to his wheat problem. Had it not been for her, the entire crop might have gone to waste. She'd also stood up for him during their visit to town and had forced him to get some much-needed rest while she worked.

Between the two, *she* was the impressive one.

Should he tell her as much? He flexed his fingers. Complimenting her in return did seem like the fitting response.

It might even clarify her position, let him know once and for all if there might be a chance of more than friendship between them.

But would he be prepared for where that might lead? Was he ready to risk heartache again? He studied her expression. She seemed sincere, but then again, so had Stephanie.

He frowned. Maybe he was reading too much into Victoria's comment and overthinking the issue. Maybe she was simply being kind.

With this in mind, he abandoned the idea of praising her in return and chose instead to be frank. "What do you want from me, Victoria?"

She blinked and hesitated just enough to inform him that his question caught her off guard. Good. She'd had the same effect on him for a while now. It was about time he returned the favor.

"A dance," she replied.

"Is that all?"

Her gaze flittered sideways before returning to his. "Of course."

"Then I would advise you return to the ballroom and find another partner." He was done with the pretense, through with hoping she shared his desire, finished with letting her work him into a state of discomfort and doubt.

"Why?" Incomprehension clung to her question.

Was she truly so naïve she did not understand? Her owl-like gaze suggested she might be.

Very well, he'd make himself clear.

He no longer cared what she might think or how she'd react. It was suddenly more important to him that they banish the rules. Forget about being polite, safeguarding their friendship, and sparing each other's feelings. Doing so was leading them nowhere.

"Because I want more than a dance from you." In for a penny, in for a pound. He took a step forward. "I want heated kisses and intimate caresses."

She grabbed the back of a chair as though needing the extra support. "You do?"

"My hunger for you is unrelenting. It puts me in a constant state of physical discomfort." He moved closer to her and she let go of the chair, stepping back, away from his reach.

Irritation bloomed, stoking his need to assert himself. So he tracked her movements, stalking her as she continued backing away. Her cheeks were flushed, her breathing labored. Oh, she might have been ready to let him believe she wanted him too, until faced with the cold hard truth of what that entailed.

Angered by her scheming and with himself for letting it happen, he backed her into a corner and framed her with his arms. Leaning in, he noted the flare of green in her eyes and the way her pupils dilated. "Not so eager to be near me now, are you?"

When she failed to respond, he set his fingertips to her cheek, a little surprised when she didn't flinch as expected. He slid his thumb over her skin and waited for her to push him away – to reveal how she truly felt.

Instead, she defiantly held his gaze, even as her lips quivered with fearful foreboding. He ought to relent. If he were a gentleman he'd back away and let her escape. But the gentleman within had long since bidden *adieu*. In his place was a scoundrel born from a mixture of anger, self-loathing, uncertainty, and pain.

Closing the remaining distance between them, he gripped her firmly while pressing his hips against hers. She gasped, confirming his fears.

“Horrible, isn't it?” he snarled, “to be wanted by a monster.”

“I...I...”

He stepped away with a snort and returned to the sideboard, leaving her to compose herself – to flee, if she wished – while he re-filled his glass.

“You're not a monster,” she said, her voice unexpectedly calm after what he'd just done.

It would be foolish of him to fall for the trick. “Your response just now says otherwise.”

“You're wrong. I'm just not used to being told such things or to being subjected to such...um....elemental eagerness.”

He scoffed. “You needn't worry, Victoria. I can assure you it won't happen again. Return to the ballroom and dance with

the handsome men there. They'll give you the pretty words you deserve as well as something more pleasant to look at."

"Stop it." Her sharp voice sliced the air. He arched a brow in return and watched as she balled her hands into fists. She added a glare. "Stop treating me like a superficial ninny obsessed with looks. I don't care about the scars, Colin. I care about who you are as a person."

"If that were true, you would not have reacted as you did when we first met. Need I remind you that you were barely able to stand my touch? Hell, you were barely able to stand it just now, yet you showed no aversion of any kind when Mr. Perkins grabbed your hand and led you away to the dance floor."

"Mr. Perkins didn't press me against a wall. And would you please stop suggesting I might be interested in him when nothing could be further from the truth." She hardened her gaze. "If you must know, the only man I'm interested in is you."

However much he wanted that to be the case, he dared not believe it. "And yet, you don't want me near you."

"That's not true." Moving slowly, she walked toward him. "You make me feel things I've never felt before."

"Revulsion and disgust?"

"Quite the opposite." Having reached him, she raised her hand and placed her palm over his scarred cheek. The gentlest caress followed, a barely there touch that threatened his fragile

control. “You make me want things I’ve never wanted before and it terrifies me.”

“As it should.” He forced strength into his voice to conceal his weakening state. “Because I wasn’t lying to you before. I think of you day and night. In my mind, I’ve already had you a dozen times, but that doesn’t mean I’ll make you my wife. In case that’s what you were hoping. As you know, I’ve already got a mistress, a woman I’m hardly about to toss aside just because there’s an itch I’d like to scratch.”

He’d be damned if he told her he was afraid of falling in love with her only to realize she’d never love him in return.

Victoria stared at the man whose friendship she'd valued these past few weeks. She'd thought she knew him, that she understood him, but she barely recognized him at the moment. Initially, she'd thought him afraid, so she'd tried to match his honesty in an attempt to figure out where they stood with each other.

The things he'd said, while shocking, had not repulsed her in any way. It had heated her skin, sent her pulse racing, and left her more than a little breathless. But it seemed he hadn't seen it that way, for rather than yielding to the desire he claimed she instilled, he'd seemed to grow increasingly angry.

And then he'd suggested she might want to trap him, only to follow the insult with a deliberate mention of his mistress. To make things worse, he'd debased Victoria's hope for what they might share with a crass remark.

Hurt and confused, she withdrew her hand and backed away. Her stomach burned and her jaw began to ache from clenching her teeth. She swallowed, made an effort to slow her breaths. It was silly of her to be jealous of Mrs. Bankroft when she and Colin had not even kissed.

The burning in her stomach expanded until it settled behind her breastbone. Lord forgive her, but it couldn't be helped. She hated the notion of sharing him with another woman. Which was positively ridiculous since she had no claim to him whatsoever.

A brittle smile was the best she could do as the weight of his words sank in. Whatever she might have hoped for, longed for, dared to explore, it would not be. And since she very much feared she might burst into tears because of the loss this awareness led to, she retreated.

“Forgive me for intruding upon your privacy, Colin.”

“Victoria, I—”

She raised a staying hand and left the room, blindly walking she knew not to where. All she knew in that moment was that she had to escape. So she could calm herself and think, figure out how to proceed from here. At present, instinct told her to pack her things as soon as she got back to Woodstone Park and leave by morning.

Despite her misplaced belief that she and Colin might have enjoyed a liaison free from complication, she'd counted him a friend. But a true friend wouldn't say the things he'd said. He wouldn't accuse her of having ulterior motives without proper cause. And there was none.

For some reason, however, he'd aimed to wound.

Why? She'd no idea.

Fear of rejection made no sense when she'd told him she shared the same yearning he did. Doing so hadn't been easy,

but she'd been intent on helping him past his concerns because she knew they were likely greater than hers. She'd made herself vulnerable and in so doing she had confessed things she never would have dared to share with another soul.

Only to have her effort tossed in her face.

Blast him!

She quickened her pace. What she needed right now was fresh air. Surely there must be a door leading outside here somewhere. The hallway split in two directions up ahead. Music from the ballroom wafted toward her from the right so she chose to turn left.

Moving quickly, she practically skidded around the corner, yelping as her body collided with someone coming the opposite way. Amusement rang in her ears as the man she'd bumped into laughed, his arm snaking around her to halt her movements.

“What a serendipitous encounter,” Mr. Perkins murmured. “I was just thinking of you.”

A cloying smell of fumes hung on his breath as he spoke, and his voice was even more slurred than earlier. Victoria shivered in apprehension and set her palm against his chest so she could push him away.

Laughing at her futile attempt, he tightened his hold and lowered his mouth. She barely managed averting her face before his lips found her cheek.

“Let me go.” When he simply gripped her harder and started to lick at her earlobe, she stomped on his foot. “I’ll

scream if you don't release me.”

“Don't be absurd, my dear Mrs. Leighton. You wouldn't have led me on as you did unless you were eager for my attention.”

“You're wrong.” She tried pulling free of his grasp once more but he was much stronger than she.

“Shall we see?” he asked with a chuckle.

Before she was able to follow through on her threat and give his shin a hard kick for good measure, he gave her a push, forcing her sideways, into an alcove, and onto a bench.

Whatever threat she'd felt to her safety before was instantly multiplied by a factor of ten as ice slithered over her skin. Her heart raced and her limbs shook. She couldn't breathe. The air stuck in her throat until suddenly, blessedly, she fought her way past the panic.

“Help! Can someone plea—”

She choked as Mr. Perkins closed his fingers around her throat.

“You're quite the tease, Mrs. Leighton.” He pushed her down and pinned her in place with his body. His palm pressed so hard on her throat she feared he might crush it. Something wet slid over her cheeks but Mr. Perkins just smirked. “No need to weep. I'll make sure you find pleasure as well.”

His other hand reached beneath her skirt, freeing her arm just long enough for her to act. Without second-guessing herself, she balled her hand into a fist and punched him straight in the jaw.

He jerked backward, loosening his hold on her throat and letting her scream.

“You little bitch.” Something soft was shoved into her mouth. She clawed at his face and kicked at his body only for him to pin her arms over her head and position himself between her thighs. His liquor-scented breath landed hot against her chin as he pushed her skirts upward. “I’ll teach you to value my touch. When we’re through, you’ll be begging for more.”

Silenced and rendered immobile, Victoria closed her eyes and shifted her thoughts to happier things. She’d done so with Gavin as well, every time he’d come to her bed. And while this was different since Gavin had never used physical force, it was not more unpleasant than being used as a broodmare over and over again.

So she pictured a beautiful garden filled with sunshine. A butterfly drifted upon the breeze and a bee buzzed between a collection of yellow flowers. In a corner near the hedge stood a fruit tree. Beneath it, an inviting spot to sit and enjoy a cool beverage.

Strolling toward it, she crossed the grass, increasing the distance between mind and body. Footsteps sounded somewhere behind. An angry utterance disturbed her peace, and then she came crashing back into the alcove as Mr. Perkins’s weight was removed from her person.

She opened her eyes just in time to see Colin deliver a blow to his face. Mr. Perkins dropped to the floor and Colin followed him down. Victoria spat out the handkerchief she’d

had in her mouth and pushed herself upright. Colin now straddled the man and pummeled him without mercy.

“You bloody bastard,” he growled as he punched Mr. Perkins’s reddening face. Blood and spittle flew from his mouth, spraying the floor with crimson droplets.

Gathering her skirts, Victoria stumbled to her feet and placed a calming hand on Colin’s shoulder. “That’s enough.”

“No. It will never be enough. Not after what he’s just done.” He drew his fist back again, bringing Victoria’s attention to the blood on his knuckles. Mr. Perkins groaned. His face was already bruised and swollen.

Fearing Colin might kill him, she grabbed his arm and held on tight. “I know, but I’ll not let you hang for his murder.”

His muscles relaxed and he raised his gaze to her, then rushed to his feet and pulled her into a warm embrace. “Please tell me you are unharmed, that he didn’t have time to hurt you. Jesus, Victoria, I’ll—”

“I am well, Colin. You came just in time.”

“Thank God.” He hugged her to him and kissed the top of her head. His heart beat faster than hers, drumming against her cheek as she held on to his solid frame.

Voices echoed through the hallway and footsteps clattered upon the marble floor as those who’d overhead the ruckus came to see what had happened. Victoria stepped out of Colin’s arms and turned to face what sounded like an approaching army.

Several guests, consisting of ladies and gentlemen alike, arrived on the scene. They were accompanied by a couple of footman and Mr. Perkins's butler. Victoria surveyed the group, disheartened when she spotted the couples Mr. Perkins had issued warnings to earlier.

They looked at their host, who was presently being hauled to his feet by his footmen, then at Colin, and again at their host. Victoria opened her mouth, prepared to leap to Colin's defense, when one of the ladies spoke in a shrill voice. "I'm hardly surprised this happened. It's what one ought to expect from a beast."

Rage stormed through Victoria until she feared her head might explode. "Mr. West was attempting to save me from unwanted advances pressed upon me by that deranged lunatic."

She pointed sharply at Mr. Perkins, but rather than find the solidarity she was after, she was met by disbelief.

"No woman in her right mind would deny the attentions of such a handsome gentleman," one of the other women remarked.

"He's extremely eligible," a man pointed out. "You're lucky you gained his notice."

"How dare you suggest such a thing," Colin seethed.

"My daughter's been aiming to do so for years, which is why we came all the way from Plymouth when we received our invitation to this evening's event," another man said,

ignoring Colin completely. “Will you insult her efforts by spitting upon your good fortune?”

“There is nothing fortunate about any man forcing himself on a woman,” Victoria said.

A young lady dabbing at Mr. Perkins’s forehead with a handkerchief she’d produced sent Victoria a withering look. “A woman your age should be honored by a younger man’s notice.”

Victoria’s mouth fell open. She glanced at Colin who looked like he might be ready for his next fight. She placed a staying hand on his arm and told the assembled onlookers, “Your impression of Mr. Perkins is wrong. The man is a scoundrel.”

“No more so than the one who saved you,” the man from Plymouth insisted. “A man who carries such hideous scars must have an ugly story to tell.”

“He was wounded in war,” someone muttered in Colin’s defense.

Not that it made an ounce of difference.

Victoria did not need to look at Colin to know the initial remark was equal to one thousand lashes across his back. He wore his pain so well, tolerated more than what was reasonable. She hated the world for making him do it, for failing to accept him for who he was, for denying him the admiration he deserved.

Angry and frustrated, she said the first thing that came to mind. “In any event, I would rather welcome his attentions

than those of Mr. Perkins.”

“Surely you jest,” an older matron remarked.

Laughter ensued and Victoria lost her patience. Perhaps a bit of common sense too, she reflected later. For now, all she could do was follow her instinct. Her purpose was clear. She cared for Colin and she would be damned if the world didn't see him the way she did.

Without second guessing herself, she turned toward him, placed her hands on either side of his face, and pulled his mouth toward hers for a kiss that had been too long in the making.

Time froze. Colin's heart lurched. Silence infused the air for one glorious second of sweet relief as Victoria's lips met his. He didn't care how it had happened or why. Only that it had. She'd kissed him. In front of the whole bloody world.

Bollocks!

Reluctant to let her go, he clutched her until someone gasped and time resumed its forward march. The magnitude of her impulsive decision had sealed both their fates. There was only one choice for her now – marriage or ruination – and it wasn't even up to her. She'd placed her fate in his hands.

Or trapped him.

His chest contracted on that thought. Was it possible for her to be so calculating and ruthless? No. He'd told her he did not want to marry, so she must have been prepared for rejection, which surely meant she cared for him a great deal.

One thing was certain, he could not leave her stranded. Whatever the repercussion, they'd deal with it later. Together. For now, it was vital they avoid harmful gossip. So he put his arm around her shoulders and held her close in a show of support.

She shifted closer and pressed her fingertips to her lips. However surprised he'd been by her actions, she seemed to be just as perplexed. It was certainly out of character for her, he mused. The timid woman who used to flinch in response to his touch would never have been so bold.

"I'll see you at dawn," Perkins growled, reminding Colin of his presence.

Alarmed by the hatred burning behind his eyes, Colin pushed Victoria behind him for added protection. "You're lucky you're still in one piece. How dare you assault a woman?"

"I did no such thing," Perkins lied. He spread his arms wide, staggering slightly as he shrugged his footmen away. "But even if I did, she's hardly an innocent debutante. I posed no risk to her virtue."

"He's got a point there," one of the onlookers said.

Colin's blood began to boil all over again. He clenched his teeth. "You threatened her peace of mind and her reputation. I'll gladly meet you at dawn if that is what you desire."

"No," Victoria muttered.

"I didn't think duels were legal," one of the women exclaimed.

"Perhaps not," an older man said, "but it may be necessary. Mr. Perkins deserves a chance to defend his honor."

"It looks like you've caused quite a stir," James said, arriving at Colin's side. Colin glanced at him and saw that

he'd brought Grayson with him, as well as Wilhelmina and Olivia. "Care to fill us in?"

Colin briefed his friends and watched their expressions darken. The women moved closer to where Victoria stood while James straightened his posture. "I'll happily serve as your second."

"Name your weapon," Perkins told him.

"Will you not talk him out of this?" Victoria asked, her question directed at James and Grayson.

Instead of responding, both men looked to Colin. He answered with a small shake of his head before turning his full attention on Perkins. "Swords it is."



Victoria sucked in a breath. This couldn't be happening. It was too much after everything else that had just transpired. She had to do something. One way or another she must put an end to this madness.

She shuddered. There had to be a better way to resolve this, a way where neither risked being run through with a blade. She began stepping forward with every intention of having these men see reason, only to have her progress halted by two firm hands.

"Whatever it is you're planning," Wilhelmina whispered, "don't."

"But—"

“The situation is bad enough as it is without Colin having his honor called into question as well,” Olivia said. “There will be time to discuss this later in private.”

Not nearly enough, Victoria feared. But she decided to heed her friends’ advice and relent for the time being.

“Will five o’ clock suit?” Colin asked.

Mr. Perkins gave a sloppy nod, reminding Victoria of his inebriated state. “On the property line. Next to the elm?”

“Agreed.” Colin held himself perfectly still and asked with a calm Victoria did not feel, “Until first blood or death?”

“First blood will do,” Mr. Perkins informed him.

Victoria breathed a sigh of relief.

“I can see to the physician’s presence,” Grayson offered.

Victoria stared at the men in horrified silence as they shook hands, sealing the deal as though it were no more than a business transaction. Unable to speak, she looked on while the rest of her party took their leave and then followed them to the front of the house. Her thoughts were in turmoil over Mr. Perkins’s attack, the kiss, the challenge that followed.

Someone squeezed her hand – Colin, perhaps? She was too distracted to notice. And then their conveyances were brought round, the doors opened, and the steps set down. A guiding touch ushered her into the lead carriage.

She entered and slid across the bench to the opposite side. Wilhelmina and James climbed in next, claiming the same

spots as before, with Colin entering last. He took the vacant seat beside Victoria and wrapped a protective arm around her.

Too emotionally exhausted to care what his friends might think of the intimate gesture, she leaned against him and tried to ignore the awkward silence. There was so much to say, she just didn't know where to begin.

“Shall we adjourn to your study?” James asked when they entered Woodstone Park's foyer. “Despite the late hour there are matters we ought to discuss in preparation for tomorrow.”

“Agreed,” Colin said. He removed his hat and handed it to his butler. “If you don't mind, I'd like a private word with Victoria first.”

Everyone looked at Victoria in anticipation of her response.

When she pressed her lips together and nodded, Colin swept his arm toward the parlor, gesturing for her to enter. Rubbing her arms to ward off a sudden chill, she preceded him into the room and crossed to the fireplace. Holding her hands out, she let the heat from the flames banish the cold.

“Harrington, please have some tea brought to my study,” Colin spoke from the foyer. “I'll see the rest of you shortly.”

The soft tread of his footsteps alerted her to his careful approach. He came to a standstill beside her and waited a moment before gently asking, “Are you all right?”

“I must confess to being shaken by what transpired.” She raised her gaze to his. “Besides that, I am well.”

Colin answered with a pained smile before reaching up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry for my behavior toward you earlier this evening and for what I said and for putting you in danger.”

“It wasn’t your fault. I should have returned to the ballroom instead of wandering off alone. It was stupid.” When he frowned instead of countering her point, she turned her attention back to the flames. “I see you agree.”

Instead of commenting, he quietly asked, “Why did you kiss me?”

A shiver raced down her spine. Her stomach lurched and her heart began pounding with uncontrollable agitation. Swallowing, she took a step closer to the fire. “Because I wanted you to understand how deeply I care for you.”

“So it wasn’t just for show – an attempt at making a point in public?”

Hearing the doubt in his voice, Victoria closed her eyes briefly and took a deep breath. She could not afford to hesitate now. Pushing aside her own apprehensions, she turned to face him. “No.”

When he simply stared at her as though trying to figure out if she were being sincere, she stepped toward him, rose up onto her toes, and pressed a tender kiss to his mouth.

“You need not worry,” she whispered against his lips. Gently, she set her palm to his scarred cheek and caressed it with her thumb. “I have no expectations and you mustn’t either. We do not need to marry because of one kiss.”

“Your reputation,” he murmured, nipping her upper lip. “There will be talk. People will think I’ve taken you as my mistress unless we announce our engagement.”

“I won’t be your mistress.” She kissed the corner of his mouth.

“You probably ought to stop kissing me then.” His voice was strained and slightly uneven.

She paused and slowly withdrew. He did have a point.

He caught her wrist, forcing her gaze to his. “What if I were to end things with Mrs. Bankroft and get down on bended knee?”

She stared at him. “You told me you have no wish to re-marry.”

“So did you, but you must have been prepared to wed when you kissed me in front of all those people.”

“To be honest, I didn’t really think. I just acted on how I felt in the moment.”

“That kiss changed everything for me, Victoria. It’s made me reconsider and I think perhaps—”

“You should know that I can’t give you children.”

Clutching her hands in anticipation of his response, she watched his face to gauge his reaction. To her surprise, he barely changed his expression.

Instead, he took her hand and laced his fingers with hers. “As someone who gave up on parenthood long ago, I find that’s hardly enough to deter me.”

“Colin...”

He drew her into his arms and pressed his forehead to hers. “Tell me you’ll have me if I ask.”

Despite his earlier words of warning, his mouth found hers once more, this time with an urgency destined to be her undoing. She gasped as the heat it produced engulfed her and desperation took over. Her arms came around his neck and the kiss transformed, deepening with the need for increased contact, to capture the pleasure that tempted upon the horizon.

Beware of where this might lead. Think of the repercussion.

Her mind struggled against the sweet sensations he stirred with his mouth, the wicked sweep of his tongue, and a touch that threatened to light her on fire. As much as she wanted to let him continue, she knew she had to stop.

He kissed his way down the side of her neck, murmuring softly against her skin while pulling her closer. His mouth swept over the swell of her breasts. “You’ve no idea how long I’ve wanted to do this.”

The fabric of her décolletage crept a bit lower, and Victoria realized Colin’s intention. She blinked rapidly, forcing herself out of her lustful haze. Her hand caught his arm.

“Please stop.”

He instantly stilled and raised his hooded gaze to hers. A question burned in his eyes, the lingering doubt there filling her with regret. When she set her fingertips to his chin and nudged him away, he straightened and took a step back.

“Forgive me.” He gave her a bashful smile that made him look younger than she knew him to be. “It’s hard to control myself around you. More so now that you’ve kissed me.”

Oh, how she wished she could give in to what they both wanted. Her heart ached with the knowledge of what she must tell him. But he deserved the truth, no matter how hard it was to deliver.

Needing to move, she turned and paced a few steps, adding distance before admitting. “You affect me too, Colin. There’s a craving inside me that can’t be ignored.”

“I feel the same way,” he told her and took a step forward.

She held up her hand and he stopped his approach. “There’s more for me to say and I fear I shan’t be able to if you come any closer.”

“Very well.” He tilted his head and waited for her to proceed.

She fiddled with the fabric of her gown, swept a hand over her brow, and finally slumped beneath the fear she carried. “It’s not just that I can’t give you children. It’s that I won’t subject myself to the act that produces them.”

He stared at her for a long and difficult moment. Her face burned with the shame of confessing such a thing. Lord, it was uncomfortable.

“Will you explain your reasoning to me?” he finally asked, his voice low and soothing.

Her throat tightened on the emotion his question wrought in her breast, making it impossible for her to speak. She shook

her head, afraid she might burst into tears if she spoke. The look of concern in his eyes only made matters worse.

“If I were to hazard a guess,” he continued when she said nothing, “it would be that your past experience hasn’t been pleasant. Correct?”

She nodded. He wasn’t wrong, but it wasn’t as simple as that either.

“Do you trust me?”

How could he ask such a thing? “Of course I do. Without question.”

“Then please believe me when I tell you that bedding me will be different from your experience with your husband. I’ll never make demands of you, and I’ll always ensure that I have your consent.”

“What if I never give it?” She had to present him with that possibility.

He tilted his head. “There are many ways to find pleasure with a partner – ways that wouldn’t involve the act you mentioned.”

She knew this. It was in fact what she’d hoped for with him. For them to enjoy themselves a little without the risk of pregnancy. Doing so for a brief time was one thing, though. Insisting it last forever was quite another.

And because she cared for him deeply, she had to make him realize what marrying her entailed, even if it meant losing him forever. So she let herself savor the moment preceding the heartache.

If only she'd kissed him sooner. If only he hadn't changed his position on marriage. Maybe then there could have been more between them. But making a spectacle of it had made him think in honorable terms.

She loved that about him. She...

Oh God.

She stared at him while the broken pieces of her heart pierced her breast.

Pull yourself together and end this. For his sake.

Squaring her shoulders, she firmed her posture and managed to ask, "Would you be happy with a wife who refuses to share you with another while she denies you your husbandly right?"

"I..." He dropped his head and scratched the back of his neck.

His answer, or lack thereof, was all she needed.

She gulped down a breath and clasped her hands together to keep them from shaking. "The others are waiting to speak with you, Colin."

"I'll meet with them as soon as you tell me you'll give me a chance. We can overcome anything as long as we face it together. I'm certain of it."

She shook her head and told herself to be strong. "I'm sorry, but I'll only make you miserable, and I refuse to do so, Colin. Please understand."

The despair in his eyes was crushing. "Victoria, I—"

“Forgive me,” she muttered, bowing her head to hide her tears as she picked up her skirts and ran from the room.

A thin sheen of frost clung to the ground the next morning when Colin set off to meet Perkins. Troubled by the conversation he'd had with Victoria and by the duel, he'd been too restless for sleep. Eventually he'd given up trying, choosing instead to grab some strong coffee to counteract the exhaustion.

He blew out a breath and watched it swirl through the air like smoke. Tightening his hold on the reins, he glanced at James, who rode alongside him. Grayson, who'd gone to fetch the doctor from town, intended to meet them at the duel's designated location.

"Second thoughts?" James asked, catching Colin's gaze.

"No, though I do hope Mr. Perkins has come to his senses. He was deep in his cups last night. I'm sure he would have behaved better otherwise."

"*In vino veritas*," James pointed out.

Colin directed his gaze toward the black silhouette of the elm that stood on the property line. "You have my will in case all of this goes to hell."

“A formality,” James pointed out. He’d helped Colin update it before they’d retired.

“Let’s hope so.” Colin gave his friend a bleak look. Duels could be unpredictable. One wrong move could end a man’s life.

Which was why he’d hoped to see Victoria one more time before he and James left. He’d delayed as long as he could, which was why he was late now by nearly five minutes.

“I was beginning to think you wouldn’t show,” Perkins called as Colin and James rode up.

Leaning against the elm, he smoked a cheroot while keeping company with several more men. Colin recognized some from the ball. They still wore their evening attire. The sound of an approaching carriage drew his attention and he turned in his saddle. It was Grayson and he appeared to have brought the doctor with him.

“May I remind you that you have the option to renege,” James told Perkins once those directly involved in the coming proceedings had gathered on the field. “Will you use it?”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that,” he said and directed a nod at the onlookers. “Expectations must be met and I must defend my honor.”

“Or lack thereof,” Colin muttered. He tightened his hold on the sword he’d selected and glared at his neighbor. “A gentleman doesn’t mistreat a lady.”

“What’s done is done,” Perkins said. “Do you still agree to first blood?”

Colin nodded. He removed his jacket while Perkins did the same, and went to take his position. He hated that it had come to this, but he could not let Perkins's actions go unpunished. For Victoria's sake, he had to put the cad in his place.

He raised his sword, lowered his stance, and faced his opponent. They circled each other briefly before Perkins lunged, producing a clang as their blades collided. Colin blocked the attack and sidestepped the next. He circled around and a series of swift exchanges followed.

Keeping his footing light, Colin danced away from another lunge. He'd warmed up with the exertion, and sweat dampened his shirt despite the cool weather. "You're meant to scratch me, not stab me, Mr. Perkins. Unless you've changed your mind regarding the rules."

"Don't worry," Perkins replied, his sword clashing with Colin's while urging him backward. "I'll get the deed done, despite my blistering headache."

Colin pushed back against his opponent, increasing the speed of their swordplay until Perkins's back met a tree. Their swords rose between them as Colin leaned in. His muscles flexed as the tension in his posture increased.

Knowing he had Perkins at a clear disadvantage, he sprang back and slashed his blade across the younger man's left upper arm.

Perkins's expression darkened. "You bastard."

"Fair is fair," Colin told him. "Accept your defeat."

"No."

Colin tilted his head. “We agreed the duel would be to first blood. The cut I gave you may be slight but it’s there nonetheless. I can see it.”

“Really? Because I can’t.”

Dismayed, Colin took a step back. “Have you no honor?”

Not answering, Perkins lunged at Colin once more, this time with added aggression.

Colin dodged the attack and rounded on his opponent. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Instead of responding, Perkins attempted another strike that forced Colin into retreat. They moved toward the spectators with agile movement, and as they drew nearer, Colin spotted the face that was dearest to him.

Victoria.

She’d come after all.

His heart gave a happy beat even as Perkins forced him back farther. Colin shifted his stance. It was time to end this once and for all. He prepared to deliver another strike when something connected with his right heel.

Propelled by inertia, he lost his footing and fell, landing in a sprawl on the ground. His sword flew from his hand and before he was able to grab it, a booted foot settled upon his chest.

Gasps sounded along with a heartfelt, “No.”

Colin stared up at Perkins, a hint of dread curling through him when he saw the arrogant look in his eyes.

He smirked. “Just so we’re clear, I win.”

The comment was punctuated with a quick stab to Colin’s right upper arm.

Cheers followed and Perkins removed his foot, tossed his sword, and strolled away. Colin took a staggering breath and stared at the sky. The wound he’d been dealt might not be that deep but it hurt like the devil. Cautiously, he flexed his fingers and counted his blessings when all of them moved.

He pushed himself into a sitting position. His palm pressed into the ground as he started to rise, but then Victoria landed beside him and her hands skimmed his chest.

She tugged at his shirt and he winced when the fabric slid over his wound.

“Sorry.” Her brow creased. “He could have been gentler, but it doesn’t look too bad. I think you’ll survive.”

She added a smile that filled Colin’s heart with warmth. If only she’d kiss him again. The fanciful thought was cut short by James’s arrival. He brought Grayson and the doctor with him. Another assessment of his wound followed with the doctor reaching the same conclusion as Victoria.

All would be well, though it might take at least two weeks for him to fully recover.

Colin groaned at that thought. He couldn’t afford to lounge about for that long when the wheat from the harvest still had to be milled, the field ploughed, and fresh seed sown for next year’s crop.

He brought up the fact later after returning to Woodstone Park and having his wound bandaged. He'd changed clothes, then returned downstairs for breakfast with the others.

“Waiting is risky,” he said when Grayson protested Colin’s plan to ignore the doctor’s advice. “If the frost comes early and the ground hardens, I’ll lose my chance.”

“Be that as it may, the crop is not more important than your health, Colin.” Grayson glanced at his wife. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Of course,” Olivia said. “If the doctor insists you rest, then I would suggest you heed his advice.”

Colin rotated his shoulder and instantly gritted his teeth. “It’s not that bad. And there’s nothing wrong with my legs, so I don’t see why I can’t tend to my work.”

“If all you intend to do is stand about watching, that’s probably fine,” James said. “But we all know you’ll want to grab a pitch fork and help.”

“Damn that dishonorable bastard.” Colin tossed his knife aside and glared at his plate where his egg looked like a shredded mess. He couldn’t even manage his cutlery properly.

“You mustn’t worry yourself,” Victoria said. “James and Grayson will speak with Mr. Frost. Won’t you, gentlemen?”

“Of course,” James answered.

“Absolutely,” Grayson said.

“We’ll find a solution.” Victoria raised her hand and hesitated briefly before letting it come to rest on top of

Colin's. "Even if I have to plough the field myself."

Not caring what his friends thought, Colin turned his hand over and clasped hers tightly. "Thank you."

She blushed. A smile followed. And then she returned her attention to her food.

"I think I'll head upstairs for a bit," Colin said once the meal was over. He yawned. "Apparently the lack of sleep is catching up with me."

He left the dining room shortly after. When he arrived in his bedchamber, he shucked his shoes and began undressing. A tight pain speared his shoulder, and he eventually had to give up on removing his shirt.

Disgruntled, he settled into his comfortable bed and pulled the blankets all the way up to his chin. His eyes closed to the sound of birds chirping beyond the window, their chatter sending him into a deep sleep.

When he woke, his senses pricked with the sort of alertness that told him he wasn't alone. Not moving, he opened his eyes to the dim afternoon light and shifted his gaze until he found her.

She was sitting in the armchair next to his bed, her head slightly angled to one side and with her mouth ajar in slumber.

Colin smiled as he studied Victoria's sleeping form. Her stance last night had confused him. Her unwillingness to meet him halfway had wounded him more than he cared to admit. But despite what she'd said, she was here now. In his bedchamber of all places.

It wasn't the least bit proper, but who was he to complain?

He admired her lashes, resting peacefully against her high cheekbones. Until last night, not even a team of wild horses would have been able to drag him back to the altar.

But then she'd kissed him. Again. And his world had shifted.

He wanted her more desperately than he'd ever wanted anything else in his life. She was his goal now – a new purpose guiding him toward a better future than he'd thought possible.

And now that he knew of her reservations, he just had to change her mind.

Perhaps one kiss at a time?

He chuckled on that thought and promptly groaned in response to the sharp pain the movement led to. A cough came next and he winced as the pain worsened. "Agh..."

"Oh dear." Victoria's gentle voice softened the air around him. "Here, let me help you."

Her hands eased him into a sitting position. She held a glass of water to his lips and helped him drink. The cool water slid down his throat, soothing his insides. He'd not even realized how thirsty he was until now.

"Thank you." He was a little surprised by how strained his voice sounded. She moved the glass away and placed it on the table next to the bed. Their eyes met as he sank against his pillows. "I'm glad you're here."

She glanced at the door which stood slightly ajar. “It’s not really proper.”

“No,” he agreed, “but it’s a comfort.”

Her hand found his. “How does your shoulder feel?”

“As though it’s been filled with hot coals.” He squeezed her hand when he saw her concern. “Don’t worry. The wound is still fresh. I’m sure it will feel a lot better tomorrow.”

Despite the creases on her brow, she nodded. “Can I get you anything else? A tea perhaps?”

“No. Just—”

The door swung open and James entered. He halted when he spotted Victoria. “Sorry to intrude. I just wanted to see how you’re doing.”

Regrettably, Victoria stood, her hand slipping away as she did so. “I should go. I’ll see you both later.”

She left, her absence evident in the small indentation she’d left on the chair cushion.

“Forgive me,” said James. “I didn’t realize...”

“It’s fine.”

James closed the door and approached the bed. “Have you made peace with her then?”

The question had Colin raising an eyebrow. “What makes you think we argued?”

“For one thing, she didn’t accompany you to your study last night. And for another, you looked as though you’d just

been denied the love of your life when you arrived.” James sank to the chair and stretched out his legs.

“She told me she can’t give me children.”

“I see.”

“That’s not the problem.” James gave him a curious look and Colin relented. He could use whatever advice he could get. “The problem is she doesn’t want to engage in the sort of activity that might produce them.”

“Ah.” James appeared to mull this over. “There’s probably a bad experience to blame. It was similar with Mina.”

“Really?” Colin shifted as hope settled under his breastbone. “What did you do?”

“I suppose I convinced her to trust me and to not be afraid when she and I were together.” He added a small grin. “Passion took care of the rest, and one thing eventually led to another.”

“As evidenced by the child you’re expecting.” An unfamiliar longing wound its way around Colin’s heart. He pushed it aside and looked at his friend. “I’ve long since given up on having children of my own, but a life without Victoria would be unbearable.”

“Have you told her that?”

“I asked what her answer would be if I proposed.”

James gave a low whistle. “You’ve changed your stance on marriage?”

“Without question. But she won’t accept.”

“I must confess I’m surprised.” James frowned. “What was her reason? Did she say?”

“What I mentioned before. She asked if I would be happy to give up my mistress and live with a wife who refused to engage in sexual congress. When I failed to give an immediate answer, she ended the discussion and left.”

“Her concern for you, the fact that she cares, is patently obvious, and yet she’s clearly afraid of intimacy. So my advice would be to figure out what the source of her fear is and help her find a way past it. If you like, I can ask Mina to approach the subject with her. It might be easier coming from a woman, especially from one who may have been through the same ordeal as Victoria.”

Colin considered the offer. “Thank you. I would appreciate that. As long as your wife is able to be discreet. I don’t want Victoria to think I’ve betrayed her confidence.”

“Of course. I understand.” James stood. “I’ll speak with Mina right away, and then I’ll do as Victoria wishes and have a word with your steward so we can finish this harvest.”

“There’s something else I’d like your help with, if it’s not too much to ask.”

James took a step closer. “Name it.”

“Mr. Perkins must be dealt with. Had the duel ended fairly, I might have been content with simply avoiding him in future, but he has proven himself a scoundrel of the worst possible caliber. I cannot allow that to stand.”

“I completely agree,” James said. He tilted his head. “What do you have in mind?”

“Instinct compels me to act swiftly, before he does additional damage. I believe it’s time to involve the authorities, but since I’m confined to my bed, I’d appreciate your doing so on my behalf.”

“You wish for me to involve the local magistrate?” When Colin nodded, James said, “That might result in you facing charges as a participant in a duel.”

“If the end result is justice, I can accept that.”

“Very well then. I’ll prepare a written account of what happened and have it delivered. Will I see you downstairs later?”

“Yes, but I think I might rest a while longer after all. As the doctor ordered.” If he were lucky, Victoria would grace him with her company again. But only, he believed, if he were too weak to leave his bed.

He gave James a parting smile and sent him on his way.

After leaving Colin and James to their conversation, Victoria went to the barn to check on the wheat she'd treated with the sulfate solution. It had been laid out to dry and since it appeared to be in good order, she made arrangements to have the grain bagged for milling.

Wilhelmina met her as she returned to the house.

"I hoped I might convince you to take a stroll with me in the garden," Wilhelmina said. She'd brought some shortbread biscuits wrapped in a checkered napkin and offered one to Victoria.

Victoria glanced at the house. "I actually planned to check on Colin."

"He'll be all right for a little while, but you could probably do with a bit of exercise after sleeping in a chair."

Victoria accepted one of the treats and took a bite as they started walking. She gave her friend a hesitant look. "How did you find out?"

Wilhelmina chuckled. "I saw you when I looked in on him early this morning."

“I see.” Victoria smiled, her cheeks heating with the knowledge that there was no hiding the contents of her heart.

“We’ve not had much time to talk since the ball.” Wilhelmina gestured toward an avenue lined with laurel trees and they proceeded toward it. “On the way home, you and Colin seemed particularly close, so I was wondering if your relationship with him might have progressed.”

Victoria ate the rest of her biscuit, chewing slowly to buy herself time. It would be so wonderful to confide her concerns, to discuss them with someone instead of continuously turning them over in her own head.

She sighed. “I kissed him at the ball. In front of everyone. It happened before you arrived on the scene, shortly after the crowd had gathered to see what was going on. They said the most hurtful things. I couldn’t bear it, so I did the only thing that made sense in that moment.”

“Goodness.” Wilhelmina grinned. “That’s quite a declaration.”

“I know. It was meant as such. But I didn’t anticipate Colin’s reaction.”

“Oh?”

Victoria bit her lip. She accepted another biscuit from Wilhelmina. They started along the avenue where the thick evergreen foliage shielded them from view. “He’s been adamantly opposed to marriage, insisting he’d never take another wife, so I thought we might have a brief affair with each other. That’s all.”

“But he doesn’t want that?”

“No.” She came to a halt and turned to her friend. “When we returned here after the ball, he asked me why I’d kissed him, and because I know he’s uneasy about his appearance, I thought it best to be honest. So I confessed to being incredibly fond of him. Then I kissed him again as proof of my affection.”

“Oh my.” Wilhelmina smirked. “You’re clearly not as timid as I imagined.

Victoria groaned. “I was trying to steer things in a certain direction.”

“Toward the affair you wanted?”

“Precisely. But then he asked me the most incredible thing.” Victoria’s shoulders slumped. “He asked if I would consider marrying him.”

“And?”

“I can’t.” How could she explain longing for something while fearing it in equal measure? “I won’t.”

“Why not?” Wilhelmina asked. “He clearly cares for you deeply if you have been able to change his opinion on marrying again. As far as I know, it’s been a firmly held position of his for many years.”

Victoria swung away and continued walking while eating her second biscuit. When she’d swallowed the last of it and gained some courage, she told Wilhelmina, “My marriage was a terrible experience for any number of reasons. I’ve never been made to feel so helpless or inadequate.”

“Your husband was unkind?”

“Not exactly, but he made no secret of my shortcomings.”

“And what do these include?” Wilhelmina asked, her voice slightly harder than before.

Victoria plucked a leaf from one of the trees and fidgeted with it between her fingers. “My eyes are too far apart and my chin is too wide. Those weren’t things I thought of before I met him, but now they are all I see when I look at my reflection.”

Wilhelmina frowned. “Was he especially handsome himself?”

“He was nine and twenty years older than I.”

“I’ll take that as a no then.” Wilhelmina linked her arm with Victoria’s. “He shouldn’t have criticized your appearance. Least of all with regard to something you cannot change. It was unkind of him and untrue. Your eyes are perfectly spaced and your chin has a lovely shape to it.”

Victoria wasn’t sure she believed her. “Truly?”

“In my experience, those who are most flawed will often find fault with those who are not. It is the reason why women who are long past their prime sometimes criticize those who are making debuts. Jealousy can be a terrible thing. Especially in a marriage.”

They exited the avenue while Victoria gave this opinion some thought. Could it be true? Was it possible Gavin had envied her youth? Perhaps he’d feared she might stray, and

this was why he'd been sure to make her feel undesirable. In doing so he'd kept her bound to the home and to him.

She glanced at Wilhelmina. "I'm starting to think you might be correct."

"Colin will be different," Wilhelmina said. "I'm certain of it."

"As am I."

"Does that mean you'll reconsider the answer you'll give if he asks for your hand?"

A knot tightened behind Victoria's breast. She shook her head. "I can't. The very idea of where marriage would lead, of what it will surely involve... I won't subject myself to that ever again."

"How do you mean?" Wilhelmina asked, her voice casual. They turned to the right and proceeded toward a group of flowerbeds that had been arranged in a grid fashion with paths crisscrossing between them.

Victoria let the leaf she'd been twiddling with fall. "Gavin married me for one reason and one reason alone – I was young and should have been able to give him a child."

Wilhelmina was silent a moment before she gently told her, "The problem may have been with your husband."

"It wasn't." Bitter regret enveloped Victoria. "Our marriage was not unproductive. I conceived five times."

"Oh, Victoria." Wilhelmina drew her into a warm embrace. "I'm so very sorry."

Accepting the sympathy her friend offered, Victoria returned the hug before stepping back. She met Wilhelmina's concerned gaze. "Four were miscarriages, but the fifth..." She shook her head while forcing back tears. "I swore I would never go through that again."

"And your husband agreed?"

"His health began failing shortly after and his efforts thankfully ceased." The relief she'd experienced at the time only made her feel worse. Guilt had consumed her. She set one hand to her cheek. "It would be selfish of me to force Colin into a marriage where he'd be denied the one thing a wife is meant to provide."

"First of all, there ought to be more to a marriage than ensuring one's progeny. It can be based on companionship and respect. Second, as I understand it, Colin gave up on fathering children a long time ago, so I don't think he'd have expectations."

"Perhaps not, but I do believe he'd want to visit my bed."

"Well yes, but..." Wilhelmina fell silent and then her eyes widened. "How old were you when your mother died?"

"I barely knew her," Victoria said, unsure of how this might relate to their conversation. "She died when I was an infant."

"Dear me." Wilhelmina looped her arm with Victoria's once more and drew her along the path. "I fear your knowledge may be lacking. Allow me to explain."



It shocked Victoria to learn how little she knew of the world and of relations between men and women. She'd thought herself experienced, but she could not have been more mistaken.

However embarrassing and awkward she'd found the rest of her conversation with Wilhelmina, she was grateful for her friend's directness and for the knowledge she had imparted. It gave her hope and much upon which to reflect before returning to Colin's bedchamber.

She told herself she merely wished to check on him, but this was only a partial truth. There was so much more to it than that. Still, she ordered some tea from the kitchen. It was delivered to the parlor by a maid, who set it on a table and departed.

Victoria picked up the tray as soon as the maid left and carried it upstairs. She gave the hallway a quick sweep to ensure it was empty before moving quickly toward Colin's door. There she paused, instantly nervous.

The teacup sitting beside the pot rattled against its saucer. She took a calming breath and knocked.

"Come in," Colin said, his voice distant.

Balancing the tray on one arm, Victoria pressed the door handle down and entered the room. She nudged the door shut with her foot and directed her gaze toward the bed where

Colin rested, propped against a stack of pillows in a half-seated position.

Eyes sparkling, he gave her the widest smile she'd ever seen. "You're back. And I see you want us to be alone. Might I hope for additional kisses?"

She grinned. His good cheer was infectious. "Who knows? It all depends on whether or not you drink your tea."

"Then I would suggest you pour me a cup straight away."

She set the tray on his dresser and did as he suggested. Then she crossed the floor, handed it to him, and watched as he tested the steaming liquid with a small sip. This was good. With his attention on the tea and with the brief bit of banter they'd shared, her nerves had untangled a little.

"I spoke with Wilhelmina a short while ago," she said, deciding she'd best proceed before she lost her courage.

"It pleases me to know you're getting along with her and Olivia."

"They're both rather lovely." She crossed to the window and peered at the fields stretching all the way to the distant tree-line where the forest began. Getting to the point might be harder than she'd thought.

"What did you speak of?" Colin asked.

Or not.

Victoria worried her lip, abandoned the view, and turned. "Have you ever heard of a French letter?"

The sputtering that ensued was answer enough. Victoria cursed herself for her silliness. The man had a mistress for God's sake. Of course he knew what a French letter was.

She hastened across the floor, relieved him of the cup, and proceeded to pat him on the back. He wheezed and coughed before catching his breath.

“Ow!”

“Sorry,” she muttered and carefully eased him back against the cushions.

“If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were trying to kill me.”

Gavin was right. She really was an imbecile at times.

She started to retreat but Colin caught her hand. “Your question was unexpected, that's all. I'd like to know why you asked it.”

The earnestness in his eyes had a soothing effect that helped her proceed. “I didn't realize children could be prevented except through abstinence.”

“Am I to understand that you want to avoid getting pregnant?” When she nodded, he tilted his head. “So it's not the act itself that puts you off, but rather where it might lead?”

“I've mourned the loss of five children, Colin.” As much as she tried, she could not stop her voice from shaking. “Please don't make me go through that again.”

Understanding softened his features. His fingers closed more firmly around her hand, and a gentle tug pulled her down

so she perched on the edge of the bed. A fierce emotion burned behind his eyes.

He raised their joined hands to his lips and pressed a kiss to her fingers. “I swear to you upon my honor that I will respect this wish, Victoria.”

She didn’t doubt him for a second. “And you will be satisfied?”

“Very much so.”

“You won’t resent me?”

“How can I? Before I met you I had no intention of marrying again, which also meant I had no intention of having children. With you as my wife, I’ll gain so much more than I dreamed, and that is enough. I promise.”

The allusion to his previous marriage gave Victoria something new to consider. If they were to do this, it was important that they do it properly. They’d begun as friends and she wanted that to continue. She wanted him to be her closest confidant and for her to be his.

With this in mind, she dared to ask, “Will you tell me about your first wife?”

A shadow settled over his brow and the light in his eyes dimmed. He clenched his jaw. “Stephanie Murdoch was her name.”

When he said nothing further, Victoria drew a shuddering breath. “When did she die?”

He stared at her, then blinked a few times. “She didn’t. Stephanie Murdoch is still alive.”

“I don’t understand. I thought you wanted to marry me but I don’t see how we can...” She suddenly froze. “Are you divorced?”

“No.” He ran his thumb over her fingers. “Stephanie was a friend of my sister’s. A few years after my return from the war, they came to visit me together. My confidence at the time was in the gutter, so when Stephanie started showing an interest, I wanted to believe she was being sincere.”

“But she wasn’t?”

He gave a brittle laugh. “She was very convincing. So much so I agreed to a hasty wedding. It was my own damn fault. I didn’t think myself worthy so I wanted to seal the deal before she changed her mind.”

Victoria’s heart shattered as anger and the need to protect this wonderful man pulsed at the base of her skull. “No one is more worthy than you.”

“I know you think so but...” He broke eye-contact with her. A troubled look filled his gaze. “The wedding breakfast was held here, and it was then that I realized her true nature. When I went upstairs to change my jacket after a guest bumped into me, spilling their wine, I overheard a conversation. Stephanie’s mother was telling her daughter to close her eyes and pretend she was with someone else. There was no mistaking the meaning, and as furious as it made me, it helped knowing Stephanie would defend what we had. I

believed in her that strongly. Until I heard her say, ‘Don’t worry, Mama. Knowing he’s rich will make it bearable.’”

Victoria’s stomach clenched in fury.

“Everything fell apart in an instant.” Colin’s gaze found Victoria’s again. “I had to get out of it. So I broke into the solicitor’s office that very same night, replaced the contract with a forged copy in which the dowry promised to me was substantially larger, then accused the Murdochs of fraud when they refused to pay it.”

“Good lord. I can’t believe that was enough, though I’m happy on your behalf that it worked.”

“Thankfully, James was there. He advised me that fraud as a cause for annulment isn’t limited to the use of fictitious names, but that it also pertains to a breach of the promises made in the marriage contract.” Colin produced a weary sigh. “Unfortunately, an annulment is not without its own problems. A hearing had to be held at the ecclesiastical court, but at least it took place in this county, far away from London. Influence, both mine and that of Stephanie’s father, was able to keep the incident quiet and avoid a scandal.”

“What an ordeal.” She shook her head, a touch overwhelmed by what he had been through.

“I’m not proud of it,” he muttered, “and I understand if you no longer wish to—”

She silenced him with a kiss, infusing the tender caress with as much assurance as she could muster. The torture he’d

faced both abroad and at home would have broken most men. Yet, Colin had not only persevered, he'd rallied.

"Nothing you say can push me away." She pressed her lips to the edge of his mouth before adding additional kisses across his scarred cheek.

"Do you mean that?"

Leaning back, she gazed into his golden eyes. "Stephanie didn't deserve you. I'm glad you acted the way you did. Had you not, the situation between you and me would have been entirely different."

"And what exactly is the situation between you and me, Victoria?"

Her cheeks warmed in response to the mischievous look he gave her. She chuckled and ran her fingers through his ginger hair. "How are you feeling?"

"Much improved after that kiss." A wicked grin lifted the edge of his mouth. "Kiss me again and I'm sure I'll be fully healed before supper."

She ought to resist, but how could she when she was just as eager as he to share more kisses? She glanced at the door.

"You can lock it if it makes you more comfortable," he suggested.

It would, she decided, and went to turn the key.

When Victoria faced Colin, her jaw dropped. He'd pulled back the covers, allowing a glimpse of his legs which revealed that he wore no trousers. "What are you doing?"

He patted the spot beside him. "Climb in."

She gasped. "I can't possibly. You're wounded."

"It's barely a scratch." He patted the mattress again. "Come on. I had a horrendous morning. Holding you in my arms and having you kiss me would be a wonderful improvement."

"I don't know." She wanted to, but wouldn't it make him think less of her if she agreed? Uncertain, she moved toward the bed with hesitant steps. "It's really not the done thing."

"Maybe not." His voice was graver than she'd ever heard it. "But it feels right to me."

Stopping beside the bed, she realized she agreed. Being with him in any capacity was as natural to her as breathing. So she toed off her slippers and scooted in beside him, then helped arrange the covers over both of them.

She chuckled when his foot nudged hers, and she snuggled closer to his side. The scent of him – of sandalwood and black China tea – was intoxicating. He was wonderfully warm too, his solid presence an undeniable comfort that made her feel safer than ever before.

His hand found hers beneath the blanket, his fingers playfully toying with hers.

“About that kiss,” he murmured.

She raised her gaze and her breath hitched in response to the bright look in his eyes. Shifting onto her side, she pushed up onto her forearm and pressed her mouth to his.

His arm came around her, drawing her closer until she was flush against him. Her lips moved softly over his, and she took great care not to touch his opposite shoulder where he’d been wounded.

He chuckled lightly against her mouth. “I’m not as fragile as all that.”

“I know, I just—”

He caught her lower lip with his teeth, dragging it down while his fingers fanned out across her spine. She took a sharp breath. The man was supposed to be injured and weak, yet he deepened the kiss and scattered her thoughts while stoking a fire deep in her soul.

Flashes of heat skittered across her skin. Her body tingled and ached with urgency. Curling her fingers into his hair, she gripped the back of his head, holding him to her and tasting him with as much fervor as he tasted her.

A groan at the back of his throat made her pause.

She drew back, panting softly. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"Not in the least." He dipped his head to one side and skimmed his lips over the edge of her jaw. His teeth grazed her skin and she shuddered. More so when he kissed a hot path down the side of her neck.

She dug her fingertips into his scalp and arched up against him. "What are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" he whispered, his breath teasing across the swell of her breasts. "I'm trying to make you surrender."

"You shouldn't," she gasped when the hand at her back slid lower. "You ought to stop."

He stilled his movements and raised his gaze to hers. "Is that what you want?"

She squirmed with the lack of his touch. "Not really."

"Good. I'm relieved." He expelled a shaky breath. "Tell me if you change your mind though. Or if I touch you somewhere you'd rather I didn't. No matter what, my first concern is for your comfort. Understand?"

How could she not love him when he was everything she'd ever dreamed of?

"Yes," she whispered.

He smiled at her while holding her gaze. A second or two ticked by. Anticipation slid through Victoria's veins. Colin lifted his head, his eyes darkened, and then he lunged, seizing her mouth in a smoldering kiss that made her crave more.

His hand squeezed her thigh before skimming across one knee.

Emboldened by his daring, Victoria slipped her hand beneath the blanket and pressed her palm to his taut stomach. It quivered beneath her touch. He made a hoarse sound and kissed her harder while thrusting the blanket aside.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he stared at her with the sort of hunger that ought to have made her cower. Instead, it only increased her craving.

“Straddle my hips.”

She blinked. “What?”

“I can only twist so much before my shoulder starts burning.” His breaths came hard, as though he’d been sprinting.

“Maybe we should—”

“No. Please don’t end this. Not now. Not yet.”

He looked so adorably anxious she couldn’t help but give in. “Very well. How do you want me?”

“In every conceivable way,” he muttered, “but for now, just bring your right leg over this way.”

Victoria swallowed as she considered his half-prone form. Although his shirt covered him to mid-thigh, there was no avoiding the rather impressive effect she’d had upon him. She stared at the spot where he’d told her to sit.

“I’m not really sure...um...”

“Hitch up your skirts. Just past your knees.”

Taking care not to touch his left shoulder, Victoria moved herself into position and settled against him. He shifted and she sighed in response to the welcome relief she found in the movement.

“Better?” Colin gazed at her. One hand gripped her waist while the other held onto her thigh.

“Very much so.”

He trailed his fingers up the length of her arm. “You’re so incredibly beautiful.”

“I never thought so before, but I feel different when I’m with you.”

Incredulity widened his eyes. His fingers skimmed over her shoulder to toy with her sleeve. She set her hand to his cheek. “Do you realize how handsome you are?”

“I used to be. A long time ago.”

“You still are. You just need to see yourself through my eyes.” Her palms settled over his chest, lightly exploring the solid lines beneath his shirt.

His fingers moved to the edge of her bodice. “I want to see you. Will you let me?”

“If you agree to return the favor.” When he nodded, she rose onto her knees, just enough to push his shirt upward. He hissed when she lowered herself once more and again when her fingertips drifted across his naked stomach.

A deliberate tug lowered her bodice, baring her to his gaze.

Slowly, as though he feared he might break her with his touch, he placed his hands upon either side of her waist and slid them upward, tormenting her in ways she'd never before thought possible. It was the sweetest agony, but it wasn't enough. She needed more – something she couldn't define.

She arched, pressing more urgently into his hands. Her hips rocked forward, and Colin muttered a curse.

“Victoria,” he rasped. His hands grabbed her waist, stilling her movements. She dropped her gaze and saw only raw, uninhibited hunger. “There's an envelope in my bedside drawer. Inside it, you'll find a French letter. Just in case this escalates further, it would be prudent to use it.”

She understood. He was leaving the decision as to whether or not they joined entirely up to her. The option was there and the necessary precaution made available. Leaning forward, she pressed her mouth to his and kissed him with thorough abandon, opening her heart and letting him see how deep her love for him ran. In barely any time at all, he had become the most vital part of her life. Her very existence hinged on having him near. He was everything and so much more.

So she didn't stop his questing hands from slipping under her skirts or from travelling up the back of her thighs. Instead, she welcomed each touch and the bright new sensations they wrought. Her body trembled with each teasing stroke – so soft, so gentle, so incredibly good. He took his time, guiding her toward something new – a place she'd not even known existed.

Heaven above, she'd been a wife for twenty years, and yet she'd been wholly unaware of this kind of pleasure.

“Colin?” She moved her mouth to the edge of his and pressed an affectionate kiss there. He muttered something in response, his hips bucking just enough to remind her that he sought fulfillment as well. Placing her hand on his arm, she stilled his movements and nuzzled his cheek. “I feel as though you're coaxing me toward something not only wonderful but intense and I...I realize this will sound silly but...”

“I highly doubt I would find anything you might say to me right now the least bit silly,” he said, his voice hoarse.

Taking courage, she asked, “If we use the French letter, would that give you the same kind of pleasure?”

“Yes, but I didn't mention it for that reason. My intention was never to suggest we use it now, but rather to let you know I would heed your wishes no matter what. So you would feel more at ease.”

“I know.” Without adding anything further, she reached for the nightstand drawer and retrieved the envelope he'd mentioned.

She handed it over to Colin, then scooted backward and watched in fascination as he prepared himself for their joining. And when she lowered herself over him moments later, bringing their bodies together as one, she almost wept with the utter perfection the moment instilled in her breast.

With Gavin, she'd always felt lost and uncomfortable. Whenever he'd made his need known, she'd lain on her back

as he'd instructed, staring at the ceiling, her attention on the plaster molding until he was through.

With Colin, she felt complete. The way he looked at her and touched her while guiding her into a steady rhythm was so incredibly lovely, she lacked the words to describe it. But it filled her with joy and a sense of belonging with him.

"I feel like I'm dreaming," he murmured, gazing up at her. A thin sheen of moisture glistened upon his brow. His hands gripped her hips, aiding her movements. "You've no idea how much I've yearned and imagined. Since the very first moment we met."

"You're not alone," Victoria whispered.

The intense sensations he'd stoked in her earlier started coming together again. And because it felt so incredibly right and because she wanted the moment to mean even more than it already did, she held his gaze while running her fingertips over his scarred flesh.

Free from all inhibition, she let down her guard completely and shared the emotions he'd planted within her when he'd saved her during the storm. They had since taken root and flourished.

"I love you."

The words were barely uttered before she was swept into a powerful maelstrom. It burst through her body, enveloping her in its shuddering grasp.

Tossing her head back she cried out his name and heard an answering moan as he stiffened beneath her. His fingers dug

into her thighs, holding her to him, and when she lowered her gaze, she saw that his features had tightened. Lips slightly parted, he arched so the tendons stood out on his neck as he too found his bliss.

It was the most compelling sight she'd ever beheld.

A sigh of immense satisfaction followed. His body relaxed and his gaze found hers, focusing on her in wonder.

“You’ve undone me,” he breathed. Raising his hand, he trailed it along the length of her arm, leaving gooseflesh in its wake. “I’ve never experienced anything so exquisite. It’s like I’ve been living with cloudy skies my whole life and the sun just broke through.”

She smiled, unable to contain her pleasure. “I feel precisely the same. I didn’t know it could be so...”

“Enjoyable?” A soft glow warmed his eyes. When she nodded, he caught her behind her neck and drew her down for a kiss. “I’m honored to be the man who shows you what lovemaking ought to be like. And I’m sorry I didn’t respond before when you told me you love me, but I’m afraid I was quite beyond speech at that moment.”

“Colin, you don’t have to say it just because—”

“Hush, my darling.” His breath whispered over her lips. A gentle kiss followed. “I love you with all that I am, Victoria. What we just shared was more than a need to satisfy lust. It was a joining of heart and soul.”

Tears welled in her eyes. She’d never felt so cherished before. So when she snuggled against his side a while later and

laced her fingers with his, she enjoyed the peace she found in the aftermath of their coupling. There was contentment and deep satisfaction, as well as the thrill of knowing they'd just embarked on what promised to be a dazzling future.

Even so, she probably ought to leave his bedchamber. Except, she was so snug and warm. The languor she experienced made it difficult for her to move. Besides, it couldn't be more than three in the afternoon. She could close her eyes a little, for just a few minutes.

A knock brought her back from oblivion. Her eyes flew open and she realized she must have fallen asleep, because the light was dimmer now. She could barely make out the time on the clock as she squinted toward it.

The bedchamber door shook as someone tried the handle.

"Colin?" It was Grayson, his voice slightly muffled by the wood.

Victoria bolted upright. She stared at the door, then at herself. Good heavens, her bodice still hung around her waist and her stays were gone.

A weak groan drew her attention. She glanced at Colin who shifted his head as though in restless slumber.

"Are you all right in there?" Grayson called. He tried the door again.

Ignoring him for a second, Victoria set her palm to Colin's brow and drew a sharp breath. "No."

He was hot to the touch and his hairline was damp.

She scrambled from the bed.

Crossing the floor, she pulled up her bodice and pushed her arms through the sleeves, then unlocked the door and pulled it open.

Grayson's mouth fell open. "I...um...so sorry."

"Never mind that," Victoria said. There would be time to address her disheveled presence in Colin's room later. "Send for the doctor. He's got a fever."

Victoria dipped the washcloth a maid had produced into the white china basin, wrung it, and placed it on Colin's brow. She glanced at the door. Where was the blasted doctor? Why wasn't he here yet? Didn't he realize how urgent this was?

She paced to the window and looked out, biting her nails while watching the road. Her throat was tight and her stomach hurt while a stabbing sensation pierced her heart. This couldn't be happening. He'd seemed well enough when they'd—

A flash of movement alerted her to a vehicle. It was a carriage and it was coming toward Woodstone Park. She sagged with relief. The doctor would soon arrive and all would be well. He'd give her a recipe for a poultice, prescribe some medicine for the fever, and Colin would quickly recover.

Because he had to.

He could not worsen. He could not leave her when their life together had barely begun. She refused to believe God would be so cruel.

The carriage rolled up the driveway and came to a halt. Victoria watched Grayson alight. She held her breath and expelled it when the doctor followed him. Spinning away from

the window, she went to check on the compress. It was warm again, heated by Colin's fever.

Steeling herself against the pain of seeing him like this, she soaked the washcloth again.

"I brought the broth as promised," Wilhelmina said, entering the room.

She was in the process of setting it down when Grayson arrived with the doctor. They were followed by James, whose expression was grave, and by Olivia, who pushed her way past everyone so she could be by Victoria's side.

The doctor set his leather bag on a chair and swept the room with a stony expression. "I believe the ladies would be more comfortable waiting outside."

"No." Victoria clenched her jaw and narrowed her gaze on the older man. "I'm not leaving Mr. West's side."

"It isn't generally considered proper."

"Please proceed with your examination," Victoria told him.

It bothered her that he would glance toward Grayson and James for support. Thankfully, Grayson raised his chin and said, "Mrs. Leighton and her friends will remain, if that is their wish."

The doctor frowned with what appeared to be great unhappiness. He puffed out his chest and finally sighed. "Very well, but if any of them interferes with my work, I shall have to insist."

Victoria glared at him. It was clear he did not care for the fairer sex.

James answered with a noncommittal grunt and gestured toward the bed.

The doctor approached. He felt Colin's forehead first, then placed his hands on either side of Colin's neck. "Hmm..."

Victoria waited for him to elaborate on what she considered a most unhelpful response. Instead, he drew back the covers, revealing the wound Victoria had uncovered earlier when she'd realized Colin's condition had worsened. It made sense to her that she check it, just to be sure it wasn't infected. Her fear in this regard had worsened as soon as she'd seen the angry red color surrounding the puncture wound.

The doctor shook his head and touched the swollen tissue. Colin groaned and shifted as though in pain. Appearing not to care, the doctor prodded some more, until Colin opened his eyes with a grimace.

"Please stop," Victoria said. "You're obviously hurting him."

The doctor sent her a hard look, but relented. "I've brought some leeches. We'll place those on the wound to suck out the poison."

"Is that all?" Victoria dared not believe it could be so simple.

"No," said the doctor. He retrieved a jar with some black slug-like creatures inside. Two were placed on Colin's wound. "These will detach on their own when they're ready. Here's an

empty jar for you to collect them in. You'll also need to apply a poultice every five hours. I'm leaving you with the recipe."

He grabbed a small notebook and a pencil and proceeded to scribble instructions.

"I'll make sure the cook receives this," Grayson said when the doctor handed him the note he'd prepared.

"Good. I'll return to check on him tomorrow. Fetch me at once if his condition worsens."

The doctor departed, leaving Victoria with a numb feeling. She clutched her hands and glanced at her friends, willing them to reassure her.

"Food will help," Wilhelmina said. She picked up the bowl of broth she'd brought. "I can try to feed him while you get some rest."

"No." Victoria shook her head. "I should—"

"We know you want to take care of him," Olivia said. "But to do so, you must take care of yourself too. Come have some food to gather your strength."

Victoria's stomach rumbled and she realized she was actually quite hungry. "Perhaps I can have a tray brought up?"

Olivia shared a look with Wilhelmina, who'd taken a seat on the chair by the bed. "We know your relationship with Colin has taken a positive turn today and that this must be terribly difficult for you. That said, you are an unmarried woman whose reputation and its preservation have always been of the utmost importance to Colin. It's one of the reasons

he invited us here, so no one would have cause to gossip about you.”

“I know, but—”

“I really must insist,” Olivia said. “As it is, you’ve spent too much time in this room without a chaperone. There’s a risk the servants will make assumptions.”

Loath as she was to agree, Victoria knew her friend had a point. She looked at Wilhelmina, who was trying to slip a small spoonful of broth between Colin’s lips. His eyelids fluttered in response and he opened his mouth to accept the food.

Victoria watched with relief. Surely this was a positive sign.

“Please call me if there is the slightest change.” She repeated the request to the attending maid who’d been brought in to relieve Wilhelmina later.

“Of course,” the maid replied and went to change the washcloth on Colin’s brow.

Victoria left with a final backward glance. Her insides were tied in a painful knot, and it took tremendous force to get her legs moving. But Olivia had been correct. She needed to eat and felt a great deal better after enjoying a hearty meal.

When she returned to Colin’s bedchamber later, his condition appeared unchanged. Despite Wilhelmina’s best efforts, he’d managed to eat only a few spoonfuls of the broth before slipping back into sleep.

“I returned the leeches to the jar,” Wilhelmina said, “and applied the poultice the cook prepared.”

The wound had been carefully bandaged, Victoria noted. Grateful, she thanked her friend for her efforts and sent her away so she could get something to eat as well.

“Will you not go to bed?” Mrs. Reynolds asked when she stopped by the room around ten.

“Not yet,” Victoria said. Having realized Colin’s sheets were soaked, she was in the middle of helping a maid change his bedding. “You should go. I’ll be along shortly.”

Mrs. Reynolds lingered in the doorway as though uncertain she could permit herself to rest while her mistress worked. When Victoria sent her a firm nod of insistence, she quietly slipped from the room.

“The dressing will have to be changed in three hours,” Victoria told the maid. “Would you mind fetching a novel for me to pass the time with?”

“Do you have a particular one in mind?”

“No. Any will do.”

She settled into the armchair beside Colin’s bed. When the maid returned with a copy of *Rob Roy*, she attempted to lose herself in the story, but it was impossible. Every time Colin murmured, her attention was drawn away from the pages. And when he was silent, she kept waiting for him to make a sound.

At one o’clock, she removed the bandage and cleaned the wound. In her estimation, it looked the same as before. Perhaps even slightly redder, though she tried to dismiss this

possibility as a result of her own tired state. But when she began applying a fresh poultice, he jolted in response to her touch and she jerked back in shock.

Swallowing, she approached with greater care, though he still made restless movements as though attempting to flee her attentions.

“Too hot,” he slurred and she instantly grabbed a glass of water, hoping to make him drink. But when she set the glass to his chapped lips, he gave his head a violent shake, spilling the liquid. “No. Stop. Richard. No.”

Victoria pressed a fist to her mouth and choked down the sob in her throat as Colin expelled a ragged breath and fell silent once more. She remained by his bedside the rest of the night together with one of the maids, ensuring his forehead was kept cool and that water was dripped between his dry lips at regular intervals. At six o’clock, she redressed his wound with trembling fingers and prayed for the millionth time that his fever would break and that he would recover.

Despite the curtains still being drawn, the room seemed brighter when footsteps startled her later, and she realized she’d fallen asleep in the chair. Awkwardly positioned, she opened her eyes and straightened her posture. A blanket had been tucked around her, and a tea tray stood on the nightstand closest to where she sat. The maid who’d kept her company through the night had been replaced by Mrs. Reynolds, who was filling the wash bowl with fresh water.

Victoria stood and placed one hand on Colin’s cheek. Her heart sank. “He’s still burning.”

“Mr. Grier has gone to inform the doctor. They should be arriving shortly.”

“What time is it?”

“Almost noon.” Mrs. Reynolds padded across the floor. Having retrieved the compress from Colin’s brow, she replaced it with a fresh one. She gestured toward a folded and sealed piece of parchment next to the teapot. “A letter arrived for you this morning. It’s from my husband.”

Concerned, since he’d no cause to write again so soon unless something had happened, Victoria tore the seal and unfolded the paper. She blinked a few times to bring the untidy script into focus, despair encasing her as the message sank in.

The debt collector had returned, demanding she pay the final installment of one thousand pounds. According to Mr. Reynolds, the man did not recall agreeing to several smaller payments. He wanted the debt settled now and intended to bring the magistrate with him on his next visit. If she was unable to provide the funds, the property would be foreclosed and sold so the money she owed could be recovered. She had until the end of the month to respond before facing eviction.

Victoria closed her eyes and the magnitude of her dilemma hit her full force. If she and Colin married, she would be financially secure. Despite the loss he expected this year because of the bunt and the resulting need to limit unnecessary spending for a while, he was hardly on his way to the poor house. But now that she knew of Stephanie’s conniving, the last thing Victoria wanted was for Colin to ever suspect she too might be taking advantage.

Somehow, she had to retain her property, so she could turn it into a source of income. It was the only way for Colin to know her love was true and that she had no designs on his fortune.

She considered her options. Only two would provide the necessary funds required to settle the last of the debt. When she'd started selling off her belongings, she'd kept these for last since they were the hardest to part with.

The first was her prized collection of books. But selling that off would take time, and with less than two weeks until the deadline, doing so would be impossible. It would involve returning to Leighton House straight away and preparing a list, which she'd then have to forward to interested buyers. Of which she knew none. She'd first have to find them. And this was without considering that she would have to leave Colin's side, which she refused to do.

Her second option was to part with the diamond jewelry she'd inherited from her mother. Purchased by Victoria's grandfather as a coming out gift for his only child, it consisted of earrings, a pendant, and a brooch, with an estimated value of eleven hundred pounds.

Victoria's heart shattered at the prospect of letting it go, but what choice did she have?

Decision made, she wrote her response to Mr. Reynolds, informing him of the jewelry and of where he could find it. It was a great deal of faith to place in a servant, she realized, but she was prepared to take that risk. One thing was certain – she would not leave Colin's side until he'd recovered.

“Please make sure this is sent out today,” she told Mrs. Reynolds. “Leighton House is at stake.”

Mrs. Reynolds’s eyes widened. “Has that slimy fellow returned to demand more money?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“I hope you told my husband to send him to the devil.”

Victoria gave a weak smile. “I’ve given him the means by which to resolve the issue.”

Mrs. Reynolds gave a swift nod and departed. She’d not been gone five minutes before James arrived. He was accompanied by the doctor. Wilhelmina and Olivia followed them into the room.

The doctor dropped his bag on the chair Victoria had been using and began his examination. The compress was removed from Colin’s brow so the doctor could check his temperature. He studied Colin’s eyes next, pushing the lids back and leaning in close. Colin rasped and Victoria almost protested, but then the doctor moved on, his attention shifting to the source of Colin’s illness.

When he poked and prodded without remarking on his patient’s condition, Grayson stepped forward. “What’s your assessment?”

“He’s still feverish and the wound looks worse than before.”

Victoria gnashed her teeth. Even she could have pointed that out. Exasperated and terrified, she asked, “What would you recommend we do next?”

Surely there had to be something they'd not yet tried.

The doctor straightened. His expression was grave and Victoria instantly knew she'd dislike his prognosis.

"His situation is dire," he murmured. "I see no other option than for him to lose the arm."

"What?" Victoria couldn't move. She couldn't even blink. She glanced at Colin, then back at the doctor. "You're wrong. It's just a small cut."

"A small cut with a deadly infection that may soon spread," the doctor informed her. He turned to James and Grayson. "If he hasn't improved within the next hour, it will be my duty to do what I must in order to save his life. Please show me to the dining room so I can prepare for surgery."

Victoria gaped at him as he grabbed his bag. He gave a curt nod and left together with James.

The man had to be mad to suggest such a drastic measure.

Oblivious to anyone else still left in the room, she approached the bed and took Colin's hand as carefully as she could. He'd fallen into a restful sleep for now and looked as though he was at peace. She gulped down a breath as her gaze drifted over the twisted side of his face. He'd suffered so much ill-treatment because of those scars. How much more was this poor man supposed to endure?

"Victoria..."

"No," Victoria said, her voice firm when she felt a hand on her shoulder. "I won't let him do it. I won't let that horrid man cut away more of Colin's dignity."

“I agree.”

Victoria turned. She could barely identify Wilhelmina’s blurry figure. She sniffed and a handkerchief was pressed into her hand, the tears wiped away. “Really?”

“Doctors can be wrong. I’ve known them to make mistakes. So if I were you, I’d get a second opinion.”

A second opinion. Yes, of course.

How simple that would be if they weren’t in the country with only one doctor available to them. There was no guarantee the next they found would be any better.

“Who?” she asked, losing all hope as quickly as she had found it.

“I would recommend the Duke of Redding,” Grayson said. “Despite the title, he’s a well-respected London surgeon affiliated with St. Agatha’s Hospital. His methods are progressive and have been questioned by some, but according to what I’ve heard, his patients have the highest recovery rate in the country.”

As wonderful as that sounded, Grayson’s suggestion involved a six-hour journey by carriage. Victoria bit her lip. “What if Colin’s condition worsens while we’re trying to get there? What if he...”

She dared not utter the thought.

“If I were in his position, I’d want you to do all you can to save my arm,” Grayson said. “No matter the risk.”

“But what if the doctor’s right? What if this is his only chance of survival?”

“Then Redding will let you know.”

Provided Colin survived the trip. Oh God! She wanted to ask him what he wished to do, but it would be impossible for her to have such a serious discussion with him when he kept slipping in and out of consciousness.

Even so, she still grabbed his hand when she saw his eyes open a smidgen. “Colin, my love. Can you hear me?”

He murmured something incoherent and she gestured for Grayson to bring some water. The liquid was carefully dribbled into Colin’s mouth and the glass set aside.

“The doctor fears you might die,” Victoria said, deciding to make the most of the limited time she’d been given. “Unless he takes your arm.”

“You’re so pretty,” Colin muttered.

“And you are very handsome,” Victoria croaked, “but I need to know...Colin?”

His head lolled to one side, and his breathing grew heavier as he slipped back to sleep.

Expelling a weary breath, Victoria squeezed his hand before facing her friends. “This is too great a decision.”

“You’re not making it alone,” Olivia said. “We’re here to give our support.”

“Considering his weakened state,” Wilhelmina added, “I believe there’s a chance he won’t survive the amputation –

something you may wish to take into account.”

Victoria hugged herself while trying to figure out what to do. If she stayed, Colin would either lose his arm and recover, or he might die. If she dragged him to London, there was a slim chance he'd keep his arm, as long as he didn't die on the way.

Both options had death stacked against them, but only one was worth considering.

She made her decision. “London it is.”

“I believe it to be the right choice,” Grayson said.

“Let's hope so.” Victoria took a second to gather her thoughts. A plan was required. “Can you and James please make sure the last of the farm work is taken care of while we're away?”

“One of us ought to come with you,” Grayson said.

“Thank you, but there's really no need,” Victoria told him. “I'll take Mrs. Reynolds.”

“You'll take Mrs. Reynolds where?” James asked, returning to the room. Grayson filled him in and James frowned. “I'm not at all keen on what the doctor has planned, so I agree with taking Colin to London. But Grayson is right, Victoria. You shouldn't be going alone.”

Victoria faced him with every intention of winning this argument. “I won't be alone. I'll be accompanied by Mrs. Reynolds and the coachman. We'll be fine.”

James shared an uncertain look with Grayson who quietly told her, “It’s not very gentlemanly of us to leave you without escort.”

“Perhaps not, if the situation were different. However, I firmly believe you’ll be more help to Colin if you make sure the work he’s done thus far does not go to waste. There’s still a lot to be done.”

“She does have a point,” Wilhelmina remarked.

James sent his wife a chastising look before returning his attention to Victoria. “You’re sure you’ll be all right?”

“Yes.” She could do this. Whether to convince the men or herself, she gave a firm nod.

“Very well,” Grayson said, “but I really must insist you at least take a groom or a footman with you for added protection. He can ride outside with the coachman.”

“Agreed,” Victoria said since this was indeed sound advice.

James took a deep breath and expelled it, his expression grave. “How do you wish to proceed?”

“I’d like to leave as soon as possible,” Victoria told them. “If you can help pack a few things for Colin while I inform Mrs. Reynolds of our departure, I’d appreciate it.”

“We’ll see to it right away,” Grayson said. “I’ll give you some money to take along.”

“I really can’t—”

“We’re not debating this,” Grayson told her. He located a bag.

“He’s right,” James said. “You’ll have expenses. We have to make sure you’re able to cover them all.”

“Go ready yourself, Victoria. We’ll finish here and then help get Colin downstairs.” Grayson sent his friend an assessing look. “I wager he’ll have to be carried.”

Victoria relented and headed toward the door. Pausing briefly on her way out, she said, “If either of you should see Mr. Perkins while we’re away, please let him know that if Colin does not get through this, I’ll charge him with murder.”

Colin was caught between heaven and hell. Visions of having Victoria in his bed flooded his mind one second. In the next, he was on the beach in Egypt. The first scene was filled with sighs of pleasure, the second by anguished screams. Ecstasy and pain were twisted together. Displaced voices spoke from the periphery, just beyond his view.

Someone's arm was mentioned in connection with London.

It didn't make sense. Then again, it was hard to think when the desert sun scorched his flesh.

He forced his eyes open and parted his lips. His throat was raw, his mouth and tongue as dry as dust. Something wet and wonderfully cool slid past his lips. An angel appeared and spoke to him, but her words were jumbled together.

Exhausted, he sank against the pliant sand and welcomed the rest that followed.

"Where's Richard?" he asked when strong hands hauled him upright.

"Easy does it," a familiar voice spoke.

Colin knew he must move but his body resisted. “Must get to England. Too hot. Arm hurts.”

His vision blurred and when it sharpened again, he was propped against a hard surface. Something soothing was pressed to his forehead. He sighed with relief. The hard surface jolted. “Are we on a ship?”

“No,” a sweet voice whispered. “We’re in a carriage.”

“A carriage?” He managed to open his eyes a little and instantly felt at ease when he saw the same angel he’d seen before. She smiled at him, but her eyes were like infinite pools of sadness.

Colin’s heart clenched. He wanted to ease her concerns, to let her know there was no need for regret. If she was here to bring him home, he would join her. But they should have taken a ship instead of a carriage. His eyes closed and he found himself thrust back into the midst of battle.

“No. Richard!”

“Shh...”

Colin swayed. A sharp pain pierced his arm, worsening as something tightened around it. He jerked away, removing himself from the vicious touch.

“Help me,” a woman demanded.

She sounded like his angel but Colin knew he must be mistaken. This was surely a demon, intent on seeing him punished. Her weight held him down as she tore at his arm, ravaging it. Perhaps she was a vulture, feasting on his remains in the hot desert heat.

His awareness of her shrank to a pinpoint, then vanished completely.



Taking Colin to London was without question the most torturous experience of Victoria's life. His agony and discomfort could not be denied. She dearly wished there were more she could do to help. But she very much feared they wouldn't arrive at the hospital before it was too late.

His condition had clearly worsened during the course of the last few hours, but it was too late to head back now with London just an hour away. Lord help her, she prayed they arrived before the fever won.

"I can see more lights in the distance," Mrs. Reynolds said as she peered out the window. "It looks like we're approaching."

Victoria nodded. They'd only stopped for as long as it took to change the horses before pressing onward. The driver had been as determined as Victoria. He'd known speed made the difference between life and death, for which she was grateful.

But the speed had also made cleaning Colin's wound and re-bandaging it on schedule a tough undertaking. Despite being half unconscious, he'd done his best to fight her off. The bumps in the road hadn't helped, and it had taken at least an hour to see the job done.

Colin uttered some indistinct words, drawing her attention. She checked his compress. It had been changed no more than

five minutes ago but was already warm again. Her fingers shook as she snatched it away and soaked it in the small tub of water she'd brought along. A solitary tear slipped past her stubborn lashes and rolled down her cheek as she returned the cool cloth to his brow.

She swiped at her eyes and stomped on her every concern. Colin would live. He had to. She could not afford to fall apart now. There was just a little more way to go.

Her hand caught his and although it was limp, she held on tight. The road surface changed and the drive became smoother. She heard the horses' hooves clip-clop across stone. The glow from gas-lit street lights fell through the carriage window. A sigh of relief washed through her even as the vehicle slowed on account of the extra traffic.

They'd made it to London and Colin was still alive, but how much longer would it take for them to reach St. Agatha's? She'd no idea. She'd never been to London before, and the sheer enormity of her undertaking began to sink in.

Goodness. She'd not even had the courage to leave her own house until last month when she'd met Colin. Yet here she was, heading into a bustling city where she'd be confronted by any number of strangers.

It mattered not. Her fear for Colin's well-being trumped the nervousness she might have known had the circumstances been different. And in those brief moments between, when doubt crept in and she questioned her own capabilities, she forced herself to be strong because that was what was required.

She could not, for any reason, allow her insecurities to guide her in this instance.

So she leapt from the carriage as soon as it pulled up in front of the hospital and turned to address Mrs. Reynolds. “Wait here with him while I fetch help.”

She took the front stairs two at a time and rushed inside the building.

A large open space with tall ceilings greeted her. It was brightly lit by numerous oil lamps strategically placed at even intervals. Two rows of benches stood to the right while a desk was placed to the left for a nurse to use. Straight ahead, a flight of stairs led upward, and to the far left and far right, double doors opened onto hallways extending to other parts of the building.

Victoria approached the desk and addressed the nurse, a younger woman with light blonde hair and kind features. “I’m in urgent need of assistance. Please, I must see the—the Duke of Redding—at once.”

She swallowed hard as her stomach began to quiver. During her journey she’d been too distracted to ponder the man whose help she required. Goodness. He was a duke, for heaven’s sake. Why on earth would she presume he’d have time for the likes of her? But he might for Colin. He was a man – wealthy too. Yes, if she mentioned money then—

“Take a deep breath,” the nurse advised. She stood and came around the desk. The smile of reassurance she offered was heartening. “I need you to tell me as calmly as you can why you have come and how we may help.”

Victoria did as the woman suggested and forced herself to slow her voice when she spoke again. “I have brought Mr. West all the way from Aimsbury. He was wounded in a duel the day before last, and while he initially seemed to be fine, he has since become quite ill. The local doctor was set on taking his arm, but Mr. West’s friends and I agreed that it would be wise to get a second opinion. One of them recommended Redding, so here we are. We’ve travelled all day and I very much fear—”

Her voice broke and the nurse immediately pulled her into her arms for a quick embrace.

“What is your name?” the nurse asked Victoria once she’d released her.

“Mrs. Leighton.” She swallowed past a lump in her throat and did her best to regain her composure.

“Very good. If you’ll please have a seat for just one moment, I’ll ring for the porters to fetch Mr. West while I locate the duke.”

Victoria could have dropped to her knees and kissed the floor, she was so relieved. The duke was not only here, despite the late hour, but the nurse was proving to be remarkably helpful. Having lowered herself to one of the benches, Victoria watched the woman tug on a bell-pull that instantly summoned two men who were dressed in white jackets and trousers.

She issued instructions and the pair departed through the front door, upon which she turned to Victoria. “Please don’t worry. I’ll be back in a moment.”

The porters soon returned, carrying Colin between them. One of the porters must have realized the effect the scene had on Victoria, for he immediately hastened to reassure her. “Mr. West is still alive, but making him walk would have been an arduous task.”

“I understand,” Victoria told him. She sent a desperate look toward Mrs. Reynolds as she too entered the building.

The sharp click of heels against the stone floor drew her attention. She turned and saw the nurse approaching. At her side was a youthful man whose ginger hair was darker than Colin’s. With a quick nod directed at Victoria in acknowledgement of her presence, Redding went straight to Colin. If he or any of the others were shocked by Colin’s appearance, they showed no sign of it.

Instead, the duke noted Colin’s condition with the kind of efficient professionalism that gave Victoria hope.

“Operation room three,” Redding instructed. He gestured for Victoria to fall into step beside him as they followed the porters. The nurse walked behind them with Mrs. Reynolds. “He was wounded in a duel, yes?”

“That’s correct,” Victoria said. “On his arm.”

“Pistols?”

She shook her head. “Swords.”

“And how has he been treated thus far?”

“With leeches and a poultice.”

Redding stopped outside the door through which the porters had carried Colin. His brow furrowed. "I'll inspect the wound and do what I can to save him and his arm, but I offer no guarantee. If the infection has spread, he probably won't survive the week. Do you understand?"

Victoria pressed her lips together and nodded.

Redding shifted his gaze to the nurse. "I'll need your help."

The nurse placed a comforting hand on Victoria's arm, then followed Redding into the operating room. The door closed and Victoria sagged against Mrs. Reynolds with an undignified sob.

"There, there," Mrs. Reynolds crooned. "Mr. West is a strong man and I do believe he's in good hands with the duke. Have faith, Mrs. Leighton. There's no sense in thinking the worst before it happens."

She was right, but that didn't make the next hour any easier for Victoria to bear. She paced the hallway, chewed on her nails, and wrung her hands. Despair clung to her very essence until the nurse returned.

"We believe we found the cause of his ailment," she said while wiping her hands on a towel. "When Mr. West's opponent stabbed him, he pushed a piece of Mr. West's shirt into his arm. The body has been fighting against this foreign substance."

"And you've removed it?"

“Yes.” The nurse smiled. “The wound has been cleaned and closed.”

“So Mr. West will not lose his arm?” Joy rippled through Victoria’s veins.

It was a fleeting sensation, swiftly numbed by the nurse’s next words. “No, but the next twelve hours or so will be critical. I’m afraid we won’t know until morning whether or not he’ll survive this. It will depend on his body’s ability to fight the infection. What I can tell you is that he has a chance now, whereas there was none before.”

“Thank you.” Although there was still much cause for concern, there was some consolation in knowing that risking the trip had been the right choice. “I’m indebted to you, Miss...”

“Mrs. Henry Lowell,” the woman supplied.

The name was familiar, but Victoria couldn’t for the life of her figure out why. She tried to think of where she’d heard it, but then Mrs. Lowell asked Victoria if she would like to see Colin, and she accepted defeat.

“The porters will help him upstairs to a bed so he can rest,” Redding said when Victoria entered the room together with Mrs. Reynolds. “I’ll check in with him later. If you’ll excuse me now, I’ve just been informed of a new patient.”

Victoria thanked him and waited until he was gone before dropping a kiss on Colin’s brow, not caring if Mrs. Reynolds happened to see. He was still hot to the touch and just as unconscious as when she’d last seen him.

“Someone’s coming,” Mrs. Reynolds hissed.

Victoria straightened and stepped away from Colin right before the porters arrived. They transferred Colin to a stretcher and led the way out of the room. Victoria followed them back toward the front entrance and up the wide flight of stairs, pausing when she reached the upstairs landing.

She glanced down into the foyer where Mrs. Lowell assisted Redding with the new patient. Her lips parted in surprise as she suddenly remembered who the woman was. The papers had written about the legal battle she’d been involved in a few months ago.

Good heavens.

Mrs. Lowell was more than the nurse she appeared to be.

She was also the former Duchess of Tremaine.

Mystified, Victoria followed Colin as he was carried into a modest room with a bed, washstand, side table, and chair. She thanked the porters before they left and turned to Mrs. Reynolds, who remained by her side, loyal as ever.

“I wonder if you might be able to get us something to eat,” Victoria said. “I’m absolutely famished.”

“I’ll check with the staff at once.” Mrs. Reynolds marched out the door, leaving Victoria with Colin, who, she realized, was quietly watching her.

She sucked in a breath and rushed to his side. “You’re awake.”

He grimaced. “Where?”

“At a hospital in London. A surgeon has operated on you. He removed a fragment of cloth from your arm, so you should recover now.”

His eyes closed and for a second she thought he'd gone back to sleep. But then he swallowed as though with difficulty and his lips parted.

“Water.”

She swung around and located a jug and a glass on a nearby table. After filling the glass, she helped Colin into a partially seated position so he could drink.

Although she did her best to lower him gently once he was finished, he still landed more heavily than she'd intended and yelped in response.

“Sorry.” She checked his forehead. Still hot.

“Don't...apologize.” He closed his eyes and drew a raspy breath. “Grateful.”

It was awful seeing him like this - a strong man, who'd carried her to safety during a storm, incapacitated. She firmed her jaw and reminded herself that there was no point in looking back. Only forward. “You need to eat so you can fight this, Colin. Do you hear me? I am not ready to lose you.”

“So bossy,” he murmured and her throat immediately started to ache. “Love you.”

“I love you too, Colin.”

She said the words, not caring that Mrs. Reynolds had just re-entered the room. It was what Colin needed to hear, and at

this point Victoria couldn't care less if the whole world heard her say it. There were, she decided, more important things than propriety.

“Food will arrive soon,” Mrs. Reynolds informed her. “For Mr. West too. And since you need rest as much as anyone else, I thought you and I might work in shifts throughout the night. There's a bench just outside the door where we can each get a few hours of sleep.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Reynolds. That's very thoughtful and kind of you.”

A new nurse arrived at that moment. She brought some food for Colin, which she proceeded to feed to him in tiny bites, despite Victoria's offer to do it herself.

“Meals are waiting for you in the common room,” the nurse told her. “It's just down the hall. Please go eat and I'll see to the patient.”

Unwilling to let Colin out of her sight, Victoria hesitated until Mrs. Reynolds caught her by the arm and steered her toward the door. She left the room with a quick backward glance and went to enjoy her own food, which consisted of roast beef, boiled potatoes drizzled in parsley sauce, and steamed vegetables. It tasted incredible and was, as it turned out, precisely what she needed in order to get through the night.

Sleeping in two-hour increments, Victoria and Mrs. Reynolds kept watch over Colin. Although his fever persisted, he seemed to be having more conscious moments than before. Redding, who'd arrived to check on him at eleven, instructed the attending nurse to make sure Colin received plenty of fluids, and to send for him at his home if Colin's condition worsened.

"Keep changing his compress as well," he added right before leaving. "If he complains about the pain, you can administer one small dose of laudanum."

When Victoria woke at four to take over from Mrs. Reynolds, Colin was sleeping.

"He had some water to drink around three," Mrs. Reynolds informed her. "The nurse even managed to get him to eat a bit more."

"How long was he awake?"

"Ten minutes or so."

More than on any previous occasion. "And his fever?"

“It’s still there, but he hasn’t had the same restless slumber he had in the carriage. There’s a peacefulness about him now.”

Victoria glanced across the room at him, unsure if this was a positive turn or not. “Thank you, Mrs. Reynolds. I’ll wake you in a couple of hours.”

Mrs. Reynolds left and Victoria went to check Colin’s compress. It was still slightly cool to the touch, and she wished she’d thought to ask when Mrs. Reynolds had last changed it. Was it possible his fever was lowering? Could it be that he was recovering?

She dearly hoped so.

“Victoria?”

His voice sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine when she heard it about an hour later. She’d been slicing an apple for herself to eat as a snack. She dropped the knife and went to clasp his outstretched hand. “Yes?”

“Are James or Grayson here?”

“I’m afraid not. They stayed behind to make sure your estate was taken care of. Without you able to issue instructions to the staff, I feared for the handling of your land.”

He stared at her from behind red-rimmed eyes. Exhaustion marred his features. “I’ll need the doctor then.”

Victoria’s pulse leapt. “Why? What’s the matter? Do you feel worse?”

His eyes closed and he swallowed hard, as though it took tremendous effort to speak. “I just need to...relieve myself.”

“Ah.” Victoria searched the room for an answer to this problem and, spotting the chamber pot under the bed, briefly considered helping him use it. No. He obviously wanted a man’s assistance, and besides, she wouldn’t be strong enough to get him in and out of bed. What if he fell? She gave his hand a quick squeeze. “I’ll be right back.”

The matter was brought to the nurse’s attention and a couple of porters were called in to help.

“His complexion appears to be improving,” the nurse remarked later, when Colin was back in his bed. She held an oil lamp over him so the light fell on his face. “He’s not as pale as he was a few hours ago.”

Increasingly hopeful, Victoria made sure Colin was given more water to drink. She then held his hand and whispered all sorts of affectionate things to him as he drifted back to sleep.

Little changed over the course of the next day and night. Colin’s wakeful moments were brief, but at least his appetite seemed to be increasing. When Redding came to check on the wound, he sounded hopeful. The lingering fever, however, was still cause for concern. Whether or not Colin would be all right, remained uncertain.

A soft light filtered through the curtains when Victoria opened her eyes later. Curled into the chair at Colin’s bedside, she realized she must have fallen asleep.

Oh no!

Jolting upright, she rubbed her eyes. The bed was empty and neatly made.

Colin was gone.

She searched the space as incomprehension and dread settled heavily in her stomach. Where was he? And what was the time? Her attention went to the clock on the table. Almost four in the afternoon? How on earth was that possible?"

Fearing the worst, she ran from the room. The bench outside the door was empty too. No sign of Mrs. Reynolds either. Victoria's heart pounded wildly against her breast. Surely the woman would have woken her in the event Colin—

No.

She rushed toward the first nurse she spotted. "Pardon me, but do you know where Mr. West might be?"

"In the courtyard, I believe."

"What?"

The nurse pointed toward an open window and Victoria blinked. Dazed, she crossed to it and looked out on a peaceful spot below where a central fountain surrounded by plants and benches offered a lovely retreat. Despite the cooling September weather, sunshine warmed the air while the walls protected the patients against chilly breezes.

Victoria slid her gaze sideways and finally spotted the man she sought. He was sitting at a small table with Redding and Mrs. Reynolds and appeared to be having tea. A cane, she noted, was propped against his chair.

Her heart tumbled over with utter delight as relief washed through her. He almost looked all right. Better than she could

have hoped considering he'd been at death's door yesterday evening.

Eager to be by his side, she hurried downstairs and made her way to him. It wasn't until she stood before him that she realized he wasn't as well as she'd initially thought. His eyes were sunken, his skin a shade lighter than normal, and there was an overall sense of fatigue about him that instantly pierced her heart.

Redding stood when he saw her and Colin attempted to do the same, but she quickly placed her hand on his shoulder to stop him. "No need to follow protocol until you've fully recovered. Just rest for now."

He reached up and placed his hand over hers. A weak smile tugged at his lips. "Thank you, Victoria. For everything. From what I gather, you've been my guardian angel through this horrendous ordeal."

Emotion got the better of her and her eyes began burning. Try as she might, she could not stop a few tears from falling as she wound her arms around his chest and leaned over him for a much-needed hug. "I cannot begin to tell you how happy I am to see you like this."

"The wound appears to be healing nicely," Redding said once she'd taken a seat beside Colin. Needing to touch him, she clasped his hand, heedless of those who might frown at the public display of intimacy between an unmarried man and woman. "And now that the fever has broken, you should improve quickly, Mr. West. Eat well, make sure you drink

enough fluids, and I believe you'll be ready to leave in three to four days."

"Thank you." Colin stroked his thumb over Victoria's hand, and her heart delighted in the affectionate touch. Lord, how she'd missed this.

Redding finished his tea and excused himself, leaving Victoria with Colin and Mrs. Reynolds, who, bless her, decided to take a turn of the courtyard so she could admire the plants.

"You gave me a horrible fright," Victoria told Colin as soon as they were alone. "I must have aged fifty years in the last two days."

"I'm sorry, but I'm grateful to you for taking excellent care of me and for making some tough decisions." Concern furrowed his brow as he raised her hand to his lips for a gentle kiss. "As I understand it, I owe you my life. Hell, I owe you a lot more than that for choosing to stay by my side."

"Leaving you wasn't an option," she told him seriously. "I love you too much."

"And that makes me the luckiest man in the world." He leaned toward her and she didn't hesitate meeting him for a kiss so poignant it felt like her soul melded with his.

Later, after returning to his room and getting into bed for an afternoon nap, he addressed her problem with Leighton House. "Mrs. Reynolds mentioned it to me, which just makes me all the more grateful. I know you must have wanted to go home and handle the matter."

“I made arrangements for Mr. Reynolds to do so on my behalf. Of course, there’s no guarantee he’ll succeed, though I did give him the means.” When Colin gave her a questioning look, she confessed, “The diamonds I inherited from my mother should cover the last of what’s owed.”

Colin gaped at her. “My dearest Victoria. You must let me help.”

“I can’t.”

“And why is that?”

Worried he’d try to dissuade her as soon as he knew her reason, she paused to think. But in the end there was only one option – the truth. “Because the last thing I want is for you to doubt me, to wonder if I truly love you or if I’m just taking advantage like Stephanie did.”



Despite being on the mend, Colin felt wretched – as though he’d been beaten within an inch of his life. His head hurt, his arm ached, and his skin prickled as though unaccustomed to being cool. But Victoria’s words stabbed at his heart. He wished he’d never mentioned Stephanie to her. Maybe then she’d agree to let him support her as she’d supported him.

Hell, she’d done more than support him. Ever since his problem with the grain, she’d been a stalwart ally. She’d worked on finding solutions and on implementing them. She’d stood up to those who retreated from him, and she’d questioned the doctor who’d wanted to cut off his arm.

Victoria was everything to him. She was the woman he wanted by his side for the rest of his life. He did not question her for a second. The proof of her love and loyalty were evident in her actions. But he understood her need to know that he had no reason to doubt her.

With this in mind, he drew her down so she perched on the edge of the bed. “You are nothing like Stephanie. I trust you implicitly, but I will respect your decision, though I do hope to think of a better solution.”

She wove her fingers with his and smiled at him with love in her eyes. “Thank you, but—”

“For instance, instead of giving you costly jewels, I could pay off your debt as a wedding gift?”

“Are we...” Her mouth formed a delightful ‘O’ as the words he’d just spoken sank in. “Are you..? Does that mean..?”

His smile widened. She was too adorable for words. “You’ll have to forgive me for not getting down on one knee, but yes. Victoria, you are the light in my life, a dependable friend, kind spirit, and the best companion I could ever hope for. You see me for who I am without fear or judgment, and I love you for that. You are without doubt the most incredible woman I’ve ever encountered. Having you for my wife would be the greatest honor – a wish come true. So please, tell me you’ll have me. Let me spend the rest of my life by your side and in so doing, make me the happiest man there is.”

Tears were streaming down her cheeks, and he realized she struggled to speak when she made a strangled sound in her

throat. He pulled her closer and kissed her, tasting the salt and chuckling lightly against her lips when she managed to say the one word he longed to hear.

“Yes.” She straightened and swiped the tears away with the back of her hand. “I will marry you, Colin, but I will only let you cover the debt on one condition, and that’s if we make it a loan for me to pay back with interest.”

“No interest and you have yourself a deal,” Colin countered.

“Very well,” she agreed and kissed him again, offering every assurance that from this moment, nothing would tear them apart. They were bound to each other with just as much strength as the grass was bound to the soil, the leaves to the trees, and the moon to the earth.

“My brother would be incredibly happy for me,” Victoria said when they left the hospital three days later and set off for Leighton House. “He always spoke highly of you. It would please him to know that we found each other.”

Her words touched Colin’s heart. Apparently, Victoria had sat beside him and cared for him during the journey to London, while Mrs. Reynolds sat opposite, because the women exchanged a knowing look before climbing into the carriage and resuming their previous seats. This allowed him to hold Victoria’s hand.

“I saw Richard in my feverish dreams,” he said. “The events of that day kept repeating.”

“I know. You spoke his name quite often.”

He saw the sympathy with which she watched him. “He worried about you – about your future. It’s why he insisted Grayson, James, and I find you if anything were to happen to him. We failed in that regard. Had we not been delayed by my wounds, we might have—”

“No. I won’t let you think like that, Colin. You did your duty in every way you could. It’s time to stop blaming yourself as I know you still do. Richard’s death wasn’t your fault. Neither was my marrying Gavin.”

For the very first time since returning from Egypt some twenty years ago, Colin felt lighter, as though a tremendous weight had been lifted from his shoulders. His throat tightened and his vision was briefly interrupted as he blinked in rapid succession. He swallowed, fought the effect the emotion wrought, and won.

When he was able to speak without his voice cracking, he told Victoria sincerely, “He would be so incredibly proud of the woman you have become.”

She pressed her lips together and tightened her hold on his hand. The carriage rolled onward, leaving the city behind and picking up speed as they headed toward their next destination.

Juliana could not sit still. She was restless and needed to move. A week had passed since her encounter with Mr. Frost in the library. A lot had transpired since then, the worst of it being the awful wound Mr. West had suffered because of a duel.

Olivia and Grayson had tried to keep the truth of it from her. After all, duels were highly illegal. But there had been no stopping the whispers between the servants, so she had finally learned a few of the details – enough to know Mr. West had a cad for a neighbor.

Concern for Mr. West's wellbeing left her in a state of agitation. Her studies had taught her that even the tiniest cut could kill the strongest of men, and she very much feared it might take Mr. West. His feverish state had been severe, but what could she do besides pray?

She'd done so every night but what she'd really needed was someone to talk to. Not Olivia, Grayson, or the Dales, but someone willing to step out from under the cloud of doom that hung over Woodstone Park. The atmosphere had been stifling

since Mrs. Leighton had left for London with Mr. West and only increased her fear.

Her thoughts had drifted to Mr. Frost. She'd been eager to seek him out, if only to see his handsome face. But the words he'd spoken the last time they'd met had stopped her. And then, blessedly, a letter from Mrs. Leighton had eased her concerns.

Mr. West would be well.

And yet, Juliana struggled to sleep. Her appetite shrank. She couldn't focus on the books she attempted to read. Worst was the hollow sensation within her breast. Loneliness consumed her.

Which was why she found herself strolling the Woodstone Park grounds one late afternoon. She'd needed to get away from the good cheer echoing through the halls. Grayson had even suggested they celebrate Mr. West's recovery with some champagne.

Juliana couldn't bear it when she consistently felt close to tears.

She took a shuddering breath. Some of the trees were beginning to change colors, brightening the scenery with vibrant displays of red and yellow. A cool breeze rustled the leaves, causing a few to fall onto the ground.

Choosing a path that would take her away from the house and remove any chance she might have of encountering Mr. Frost, Juliana slipped between some shrub roses marking the

southern edge of the garden, and approached the peaceful solitude of the woods.

No sooner had she reached the first tree when she saw him coming toward her at a brisk pace. Her heart gave a jolt and started to race. She cast a glance over her shoulder, wondering if she might hide before he saw her. Considering all their previous meetings, he'd probably think she was following him, even though she was doing the opposite.

“Miss Edwards.”

Too late. He'd already spotted her.

She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed she'd be turned invisible.

“Lovely day for a walk.” His voice carried toward her.

Drat.

Opening her eyes, she decided to face whatever humiliation this unexpected encounter would lead to with her chin held high. She smiled. “Indeed it is, Mr. Frost.”

He reached her and she saw that there was a sheepish look about him. Pushing his hands inside his pockets, he stared at her as though trying to figure out what to say next.

“There's a hedgehog nest beneath those shrubs.” He jutted his chin toward the direction from which she'd come.

“I've always wanted to find one,” she said, hoping he'd offer to show her.

“Would—” he began.

“I—” she said at the exact same time.

His features relaxed with a smile, putting her more at ease. It didn't look as though he were unhappy to see her or as if he were eager for them to part ways.

“Go ahead,” he murmured, fixing her with his dark gaze.

Heat flooded her cheeks and she very much feared she looked like a bright red tomato. She bit her lip and then, without even thinking, she said the first thing that came to mind – the only thing she'd been feeling since they'd last spoken.

“I've missed you, Mr. Frost.” The confession jarred her, and her hand instinctively flew to her mouth. “Sorry. I didn't mean to—”

“I've missed you too.” He broke eye contact with her for a brief second, allowing her to enjoy the happy sensations bouncing inside her before he spoke next. “It was wrong of me to suggest I did not care for your company.”

He swallowed as though with tremendous difficulty, and then his hand caught hers and their fingers twined together, producing a flutter in the pit of her stomach.

Juliana sucked in a breath, mesmerized by the rush of emotion pouring through her. Neither wore gloves and the feel of his coarser skin against hers had the most startling effect. It was almost as if sparks danced at each point of contact.

His other hand settled against the side of her jaw and his thumb stroked over her cheek. Something new and exciting began simmering in her veins. Unsteady, she grabbed his

upper arm for support and watched in dismay as he hissed a breath.

“I’ll beg your forgiveness later,” he whispered, “but for now, after everything that has happened, I have to let you know that you’ve shaken my world.”

“I—”

“Time is fleeting,” he pressed, “and you will soon leave, I should think. You’ll travel to London for your debut, meet a respectable gentleman there, and marry. But not before I’ve told you how perfect I think you are and how much I wish I were good enough for you. Certainly not before this...”

He dipped his head and brushed his lips against hers in a barely-there kiss that made her toes curl in her slippers.

“Forgive me,” he whispered as he pulled away.

“No.” Forgetting the hedgehog, she clasped both sides of Mr. Frost’s head to stop any further retreat. “Not until you kiss me again.”

His eyes darkened, and the flicker of doubt she saw there proved that he struggled to follow his conscience. She licked her lips and wound her arms around his neck, felt his labored breaths on her face as he fought for control.

“I shouldn’t,” he tried even as he dragged her body flush against his.

“You don’t understand,” she whispered. “Everyone thinks me abnormal. A suitable gentleman will not want a wife with my interests. And I don’t want a husband whose goal is to force me into a box where I do not fit. But you. You seem to

accept me the way I am, and I love that about you. Indeed, I wish you were an upper-class gentleman so we might meet in London next year and that you'd be able to court me with Mr. Grier's approval."

"Miss Edwards..."

"You have all the qualities I hope to find in my future husband, Mr. Frost, so please, just kiss me and let us pretend that we have a future together and that we—"

His mouth captured hers with increased firmness.

Her fingers dug into his shoulder.

He tightened his hold on her waist until their embrace could not be described as anything but indecent. It made her want to wrap herself around him and never let go.

"Mr. Frost..."

"David," he murmured.

She opened her mouth to give him her name, but before she was able to speak, he parted his lips over hers. Their breaths mingled, everything inside her stilled, and then pleasure collided as his tongue found hers.

Her answering gasp encouraged him to advance. His hands roamed her body, exploring her curves in the best way possible. Strong fingers gripped and squeezed in a manner she'd have thought unpleasant before this moment. Now, she hoped he'd never stop. In fact, she was ready to beg him to move one hand lower. Perhaps if he—

A twig snapped. David froze for a second before spinning her sideways. She stumbled and when she opened her eyes, an icy sensation slid through her.

“Grayson,” she muttered. “Please—”

“Not. Another. Word.” Her guardian wasn’t alone. He was accompanied by his wife and the Dales. Two other people, whom Juliana did not know, stood nearby with three young children.

Understanding dawned. No matter what she might say, there was no denying the truth of what had transpired. Or the fact that Grayson looked like he wanted to kill the man Juliana had fallen in love with.

The presence of an unmarked carriage in the Leighton House driveway put Victoria on alert when she and Colin arrived on the property with Mrs. Reynolds some five hours after departing London. In his letter, Mr. Reynolds had told Victoria she would have until the end of the month, which wasn't until tomorrow. She had, she'd believed, managed to set off just in time to prevent the loss of her mother's diamonds.

Her heart fluttered nervously in her breast as Colin handed her down from the carriage. He'd eaten well from the basket of food Mrs. Lowell had given them when they'd departed and was visibly gaining in strength. Anyone who saw him now would be shocked to know how frail he'd been five days earlier.

He offered his arm. "Don't worry. You're not alone."

His words, accompanied by an encouraging nod from Mrs. Reynolds, were actually a tremendous comfort. So was Jasper's bark as the large dog bounded out of the house and came to rub up against her legs. She patted his head and he pressed his wet nose into her hand before licking her fingers.

For over a year now, she'd faced Mr. Blunt's difficult visits by herself. He hadn't cared for her excuses. It mattered not to him that the debt was incurred by her late husband. His purpose was not to console but to ensure that his clients received the funds owed to them.

Victoria understood that his patience with her had long since run out. He had to deliver so he could get paid.

She took a deep breath to bolster her spirits. Maybe the carriage belonged to someone else?

Victoria and Colin entered the house through the unlocked front door and followed the sound of voices to her study while Mrs. Reynolds went to prepare some tea.

When Victoria arrived in the doorway, her heart sank and her stomach tightened. She hadn't been wrong. Mr. Blunt occupied her chair while another, older and unfamiliar, man sat across from him on the opposite side of her desk. Mr. Reynolds stood in the corner, looking very uncomfortable in his own skin.

He spotted her first and expelled a deep breath that banished the tension from his features. "Mrs. Leighton. Thank God."

Mr. Blunt lifted his gaze and stood as Victoria entered the room. So did the other man.

"Forgive us for making ourselves comfortable," Mr. Blunt said, his voice dry. "We needed a place in which to discuss your situation and the parlor didn't quite suit."

It wouldn't. She'd sold all the furniture in it so she could pay her taxes.

"Allow me to present Mr. Finch," Mr. Blunt continued. "He is the chief magistrate in these parts. I thought it best to bring him along as witness, to avoid any misunderstandings later."

Victoria raised her chin. Misunderstandings? She almost laughed. The man had obviously been brought in order to help Mr. Blunt take possession of her home. The threat had been clear since his previous visit. If she resisted, she would be arrested and sent off to debtor's prison.

She glanced at Colin, who remained in the hallway, partially hidden from the occupants in the room. He'd not said a word, apparently choosing to follow her lead.

"I returned as soon as I could." She stepped into the room, giving way to Colin. "This is my fiancé, Mr. West."

Mr. Reynolds's eyes widened with surprise, but he quickly recovered and produced a wide grin. "Congratulations."

"Thank you, Mr. Reynolds. We're both tremendously pleased by this wonderful turn of events."

Mr. Blunt, who'd visibly recoiled and squeezed his eyes shut for a second when he'd seen Colin's scars, snorted. "I'd say. Must be nice being able to charm a man into marriage. If I were you, Mr. West, I'd reconsider. She's obviously after your money."

Victoria stiffened. She glanced at Colin, fearing he might retreat as he'd done so often before. Instead, he tilted his head

and regarded Mr. Blunt with an exaggerated degree of incomprehension. “Forgive me, sir, but I don’t understand your meaning. What exactly are you implying?”

Mr. Finch, who’d said nothing thus far, remained silent, looking very much like he wished himself a thousand miles away. Victoria bit her lip, doing her best to appear as serious as the situation called for while forcing back a chuckle. Colin had certainly put Mr. Blunt in an awkward position, accentuated by the fact that he continued staring him down while waiting for a reply.

Mr. Blunt’s gaze flittered around the room. He shifted and finally cleared his throat. “I...um...” He tugged at his cravat. “Perhaps we should move on to the business at hand?”

“An excellent idea,” Colin murmured. He took a step forward. “If you would be so kind as to let Mrs. Leighton sit.”

“Right. Of course.”

Mr. Blunt moved and Victoria went to claim her chair. Mr. Finch sat as well, leaving Mr. Blunt standing between Mr. Reynolds and Colin. He did not look the least bit pleased or comfortable, which suited her enormously.

“From what I gather,” Mr. Finch said, “You owe a substantial sum of money, Mrs. Leighton.”

“My husband acquired a large debt which I inherited when he died.”

“As sorry as I am to hear this,” Mr. Finch said, “a debt is a debt and must be paid. Mr. Blunt has given you fair warning.

He has even broken the debt down into smaller payments to make it easier for you to find the funds when needed.”

“Why didn’t he...” She shook her head and decided to ask the question of the man himself. “Why didn’t *you* come to call while my husband lived? Some of the money owed was borrowed more than ten years ago.”

Mr. Finch turned in his seat and gave Mr. Blunt a questioning look.

“In case you’ve forgotten,” Mr. Blunt said, “I didn’t issue the loans or win a wager. The men who did probably forgot about the funds owed to them until they saw the obituary in the paper. It happens more often than you know.”

“I see.” Victoria sighed. She glanced at Colin who seemed to await her cue.

“It’s really quite simple,” Mr. Blunt said. “You have an outstanding debt. Pay it now and I shall disappear from your life forever. Refuse, and I’ll have no choice but to use the court-ordered judgment I’ve acquired. This will lead to your removal from the property and the subsequent sale of it. The income gained will be used to free you from obligation.”

“Very well,” Victoria muttered. “I’ll pay the remainder right now.”

Mr. Blunt’s lips parted. He’d clearly not expected this. “From what I gathered, you do not have the funds.”

“Correct, but my situation has changed since the last time we met.”

“Of course.” He sent Colin a pitying look and reached inside his jacket pocket to retrieve some folded papers which he held toward him. “I trust you’re paying?”

Colin nodded and took the papers. He studied their content with thorough attention, then handed them to Victoria. She leafed through them quickly but froze when she reached the last one.

“This can’t be right. The final sum is too great. It almost doubles the amount I have left.” She went back through the pages where each man her husband had owed money to was listed, along with the sum he expected to receive. Attached were the promise notes written and signed in her husband’s hand, including one with a wine stain smudging the ink.

She’d seen them all before as evidence, of course, but the final sum had been different.

“As it turns out, I made a mistake,” Mr. Blunt said, looking slightly embarrassed for the first time. “The note you see there – the one addressed to Mr. Elliot Hurst – was initially marked in my notes as referencing one hundred pounds. But when the light from my oil lamp fell on the paper during my latest review, I spotted a ghostly outline of an additional zero. So I checked up on it with Mr. Hurst, who confirmed the sum he won from your husband in May of 1816, to be one thousand pounds instead of one hundred.”

Victoria sucked in a breath. “No.”

“I’m afraid the wine spill smudged the numbers and... well, there’s a written explanation attached along with a list of

witnesses who were there that night. They've all agreed to testify to the correct amount.”

“Victoria?” Colin gently pressed when she didn't respond to this devastating news.

She shifted her gaze to his and saw that he was prepared to do whatever she asked. He'd cover the cost, but how on earth would she ever repay him as she had planned? One thousand pounds alone would take her forever, but two? It made no difference whether he lent her the money or gave it to her outright, unless she was able to gather the funds and return what she owed.

Her thoughts returned to her mother's diamonds. She had no choice. They would have to make up the difference. With this thought in mind, she stood. “If you would please excuse me a moment, I'll be right back.”

When she returned, Colin had crossed to the window and stood looking out across the field, toward the canal from which he'd rescued Jasper. It seemed like forever ago. So much had happened since then, but it had only been a month.

Determined, she handed the velvet box she'd brought with her to Mr. Blunt. He opened it and stared. “Are these genuine?”

“Yes.”

Colin turned from the window, glanced at the box, and frowned. “Victoria, I thought we agreed not to use those.”

“That was before, when I had a chance of repaying the loan.”

“You’ll turn this place around,” Colin pressed, his voice firm. “With my help it shouldn’t take more than two years before you profit from the land. After which you’ll save until you’ve acquired enough. I’m in no hurry. I’ll wait as long as it takes. But please don’t do this.”

“I have to.” How could he not see that? “It would be wrong of me to borrow the full sum from you when I have the means by which to cover half.”

“I thought I’d convinced you of my faith in you.” He sounded slightly affronted, almost angry.

“You have, but this has more to do with my own personal feelings on the matter. I’m not comfortable letting you save me while I sit back and do nothing.” She went to him and whispered so no one else would hear. “I love you, Colin, and these are just diamonds. Let me use them to do my part.”

When Colin finally sighed and quietly nodded, Victoria turned back to Mr. Blunt. “The appraisal is pinned to the inside of the lid. They’re worth eleven hundred pounds.”

Mr. Blunt checked the appraisal and nodded. “If Mr. West provides the remainder, I’ll consider your payment completed.”

Colin didn’t hesitate. He produced a thin slip of paper. “Will a cheque from Barclay and Tritton do?”

“Certainly,” Mr. Blunt agreed.

“May I?” Colin asked, gesturing toward Victoria’s desk.

“Of course.”

He slipped into her chair behind the desk, and she moved a bit closer so she could watch as he dipped her quill in the ink well. With bold strokes, he filled out the blank spots on the note, located above and below the bank's name. He included the date and the amount, before finishing off with his signature.

The note was presented to Mr. Blunt who gave it a swift once over before producing a tiny booklet. He tore a page from within and asked for permission to use the quill.

“Your receipt,” said Mr. Blunt when he was done writing. He gathered the slim box of jewelry and tucked it into his pocket along with the cheque. “Thank you, sir. Mrs. Leighton, I wish you well.”

Mr. Blunt and Mr. Finch were promptly shown out by Colin, who'd insisted on seeing them off together with Mr. Reynolds.

“I didn't want to interrupt, so I waited until they were gone,” Mrs. Reynolds said, arriving with a tray. “The tea's ready. Would you like some?”

“Absolutely,” Victoria answered. Mrs. Reynolds set the tray down and poured the tea.

Colin returned and Victoria went to meet him.

“Thank you for helping me with this,” she said. “You've removed a tremendous source of anxiety from my life.”

“I would have done more,” he murmured and brushed a stray lock from her brow.

“I know.” She lifted onto her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his mouth. “You’re the best man there is. I’ll never forget your kindness.”

He smiled at her with adoration. “I’m simply trying to keep up with all your good deeds.”

“I didn’t realize we were competing.”

“We’re not, but it’s good to know we want the same thing and that we’re both willing to give each other the love and support we deserve.”

She heartily agreed, but paying off the debt didn’t resolve everything. “We’ll need a plan. If I’m going to make a proper go at farming this land, supervision will be required. I’ll either have to move in or hire a steward.”

“Agreed,” Colin said. He sipped the tea Mrs. Reynolds had handed to him. “You’ll also need some farmhands to do the hard labor. Any chance I can convince you to wait until spring? It will give me time to get my own crops under control and for us to marry without the added pressure.”

Victoria considered this idea and decided it made the most sense. It would also give her time to improve the irrigation system and figure out what the right crop for her would be.

With this decision made, she and Colin set off for Woodstone Park while Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds remained at Leighton House. It had been concluded after a brief discussion that there was no need for Mrs. Reynolds to chaperone them for the two-hour journey. They were after all betrothed, so the risk to Victoria’s reputation at this point was small in light of

her age and her being a widow. Plus, Colin had sworn to the older couple that he would make arrangements with the vicar no later than the following morning *and* that he would remain on the opposite bench for the entirety of the ride.

So Victoria was very relieved when she and Colin arrived at their destination.

“Finally,” she muttered, to which he responded with a knowing look and a roguish grin.

“Eager for more stolen kisses?” he asked, leaning forward and placing a hand on her knee as he opened the carriage door. He squeezed her slightly. “Perhaps something more?”

She shivered as heat stole over her shoulders. “Without any doubt.”

His nostrils flared and his eyes darkened. “Then I would suggest we hurry inside so I can help you freshen up.”

Her skin tightened in response to the wicked suggestion and where it might lead. She placed her hand in his so he could help her alight. The oversensitive touch of him flooded her body with sparks of awareness. She sucked in a breath and allowed him to lead her up the front steps.

They entered the foyer and Harrington appeared.

“Welcome home, sir. I’m relieved to see you looking so well.” He took Colin’s hat and set it aside so he could help Victoria with her bonnet. “Mrs. Leighton. Thank you for writing to let us know he was out of danger.”

“You’re most welcome.” She’d posted two letters from the hospital. One addressed to James and the other to ‘The

Woodstone Park Servants’.

“I trust my friends are here somewhere?” Colin asked.

“In the parlor,” Harrington said. His eyebrows dipped with an unexpected show of concern. “I should warn you, sir. There’s been a development this afternoon.”

Colin raised an eyebrow while Victoria glanced at the closed parlor door. She’d been so distracted by the prospect of another lovemaking session, she’d not noticed the muffled voices coming from the opposite side.

She did so now. It sounded as though a heated debate was underway.

“Thank you, Harrington.” Colin gave his butler a nod and swept his arm toward the parlor. “Shall we?”

She took a deep breath. Whatever had happened, it couldn’t be worse than smelly bunt, the loss of her mother’s diamonds, or a deadly infection. Goodness, they’d been through a lot together already, and they’d get through this too.

Suddenly eager to deal with the matter and put it behind them so they could move on, she preceded Colin into the parlor and gave the room a quick sweep with her gaze.

Colin’s friends were all present. She considered them each in turn, from Wilhelmina, who sat on the sofa frowning, to James whose mouth was set in a grim line, to Olivia’s worried expression as she looked at Grayson, who appeared as though he was ready to do bloody murder.

“I’ll—” He cut himself short when he spotted Victoria and Colin.

An uncomfortable silence followed before Wilhelmina stood and came toward them. “We’re extremely relieved to see you again, Colin.” She turned to the others. “Isn’t that right?”

“Without question,” Olivia said. She managed a smile. “Thank you for your letter, Victoria. It eased our minds tremendously.”

“Absolutely,” James said. “It’s good to have you back. Don’t you agree, Grayson?”

Jaw clenched, Grayson stared at Colin. He finally nodded. “I’m glad you’re alive.”

“But?” Colin asked, his voice low and measured.

Grayson planted his feet wide apart. A vein pulsed beside his left eye. “I’ll have Mr. Frost’s head for what he’s done – yours too if you dare to stand in my way.”

Victoria gasped.

Colin held Grayson’s gaze with an impressive degree of calm. “What’s happened?”

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed, accentuating the tense atmosphere filling the room.

“He’s ruined her,” Grayson seethed. “Your steward has ruined Juliana.”

“**S** hit.” The hair at the nape of Colin’s neck shifted. He stared at his friend while trying to come to grips with the enormity of his accusation. He would not insult him by asking if there was a chance he might be mistaken. Still, Colin knew Frost to be a good man: honest, well-mannered, and dependable. “Where is Frost now?”

“In your study,” James said when Grayson just stood there, clenching and unclenching his fists. “I asked him to wait while we tried to determine the best course of action.”

“And Juliana?” Colin asked, noting the young woman’s absence.

“In her bedchamber,” Olivia supplied.

“It was wrong to encourage her scientific pursuits,” Grayson muttered. “But you insisted it would benefit her, and I foolishly wanted to make you both happy. Well—”

“I beg your pardon,” Olivia said, her voice uncharacteristically tight as she rose from the sofa and faced her husband. “Are you implying that this might be my fault?”

“Her interest in the reproduction of mice ought to have served as a warning.”

“That is akin to suggesting that teaching a boy to shoot might lead to murder,” Olivia shot back. “Juliana has a bright mind. Denying her the ability to reach her potential would be a crime.”

“She was supposed to have her debut in the spring. *That* was my reason for hiring you. So you could polish her social skills and improve upon her accomplishments.”

Colin glanced at Victoria who looked as uncomfortable as he felt. Even James and Wilhelmina appeared to be shocked by Grayson’s indelicate reference to his wife’s being a former servant.

“And so I did,” Olivia said. “Or need I remind you that she is now fluent in French and able to converse in both German and Latin? But go ahead and blame me for having poor judgment. I am after all from a far inferior background than you.”

“I didn’t mean...” A deflated look came over Grayson. He blinked as he looked around the room, as if only now becoming aware of his audience. “Forgive me. Olivia, you’re everything to me. You know that. I’m just so bloody angry and worried right now.”

Olivia went to him and pulled him into a hug. “I know, but we will get through this by sticking together. Not by turning upon each other.”

“Can someone please tell me about the extent of the... um...?” Colin waved one hand and prayed he would not be asked to elaborate.

“The four of us were taking a walk when we happened upon them,” Wilhelmina said after sharing a quick look with her husband. “They were kissing between a cluster of trees.”

“Just kissing?” Colin asked.

“A kiss is enough,” Grayson growled. “You know that as well as the rest of us.”

He did, but there was a great deal of relief to be had in knowing Frost hadn’t claimed Juliana’s innocence as he’d initially feared.

“The problem,” James said as though reading his mind, “is that we were not the only ones who saw them. One of your tenants was coming along the path from the opposite direction when we arrived on the scene. He was with his wife and children.”

Colin raked his hand through his hair and muttered a curse. Containing the scandal was no longer possible. There would be consequences now. Juliana’s reputation – hell, her entire debut – were at risk. For although it might take months for word to spread as far as London, he had no doubt it eventually would.

“She’s only just turned seventeen,” Grayson lamented.

“I will speak with Frost,” Colin said. He turned to Victoria. “Perhaps you can call for some tea in the meantime? I think we can all do with a cup.”

He entered his study a few moments later to find the young man who managed his estate with unequivocal precision standing by the window, his posture tense.

Frost turned at the sound of the door closing, allowing Colin to see his grim expression. Lines creased his forehead and there was a hollow look in his eyes.

“It is a relief to see you looking well again after what happened,” Mr. Frost said. “I was incredibly worried.”

“Thank you, Frost. You—”

“I know you’re disappointed in me,” Frost said in a rush. “I can only pray you will one day forgive me for what I have done. Please know that I am prepared to face the repercussions of my actions.”

Colin expelled a deep breath. “You do not strike me as a scoundrel or a fool. So please, walk me through your reasoning. What in God’s name possessed you to press your advances upon Miss Edwards?”

Frost raised his chin and met Colin’s gaze directly. “Contrary to what Mr. Grier no doubt believes, I didn’t plan it. That being said, Miss Edwards is the most remarkable woman I’ve ever met. Her interests are unique, her knowledge beyond compare.”

“She is but seventeen years of age and she is my friend’s ward.” The magnitude of what Frost had done was finally taking hold. “Do you have any idea what it means for her to be compromised by a member of my staff? Good God, man, she was supposed to be safe here.”

“My intention was merely to show her a hedgehog’s nest I’d stumbled upon the day before.”

“And what? Your mouth somehow connected with hers in the process?”

Frost’s gaze darkened and Colin saw that he clenched his fists. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Then by all means enlighten me, because all I’m seeing is a reckless young man who encouraged an upper-class lady to walk with him unchaperoned. And kiss her.”

“It just happened. I...” He took a few breaths and unclenched his fists, then rubbed his jaw. “Miss Edwards has the most incredible effect upon me. Her presence is energizing, her views on life so compelling and...she’s simply divine. I know I made a terrible error in judgment, but the truth of it is I couldn’t resist. She is perfection and I realize I’ll never be worthy of her, but just for a moment, I could pretend we might have a chance.”

Colin blinked. “A chance?”

“Of a future together.” Frost gave Colin the saddest smile he’d ever seen. “I love her, Mr. West. Beyond all reason – much more than what is wise, I’m sure.”

“Do you know if she feels the same about you?” Colin slowly asked while trying to figure out how to proceed. Grayson would likely expect Colin to sack Frost and frankly, Colin wouldn’t blame him.

“She told me she wished I were a gentleman of means, that she might meet me in London next year and that I might court

her with Mr. Grier's approval." He winced. "I kissed her when she said I had all the qualities she hoped to find in a future husband."

Damnation.

Colin's mind raced. It was true that he did not know Juliana well, but he knew Grayson and believed that despite his present anger, he wanted his ward to marry for love. Plus, Colin had no desire for additional duels to be fought, as he very much feared might happen if he didn't find a better solution.

He pinned Frost with his most severe gaze. "Do you wish to marry her?"

"Of course, but Mr. Grier will never permit it."

Frost was likely correct. Grayson would want to find what he believed to be a suitable match for Juliana. And he'd want to do so at once, before any whispers about the kiss the young couple had shared could evolve. Waiting for her come out was no longer an option.

"Wait here and I'll see what I can do," Colin said.

He strode back to the parlor. Despite the five people sitting about drinking tea, silence filled the air. Victoria set her cup aside when she saw him and approached.

"The atmosphere is horribly tense," she whispered. "No one has spoken since you left."

"Well?" Grayson asked while adding a splash of brandy to his cup. "What does he have to say for himself?"

“He appeared remorseful,” Colin said.

Grayson snorted. “He should be terrified.”

“While I can understand your wish to challenge him, Grayson, I would ask—”

“Challenge him?” Grayson abandoned his cup and stood. “No, Colin. I’ll not do that when I have a child on the way. But I do expect you to help me with his transportation.”

All the women gasped. James’s jaw dropped, conveying the same degree of astonishment Colin felt. None of them had expected this. “Transportation requires criminal charges, Grayson.”

“I’m sure we can come up with something.” Grayson glared at Colin. “I want that man out of the country and as far away from Juliana as possible. Is that clear?”

“You’re not thinking rationally,” Colin said. “I certainly shan’t press false charges against a man whose only offense is falling in love with a woman above his station.”

“What?” This from Olivia who stared at Colin in wide-eyed dismay.

“Impossible,” Grayson growled. “The only thing on a young man’s mind when he’s with a woman he fancies is how fast he can get beneath her skirts.”

Colin crossed the floor in two swift strides while the lingering shock of Grayson’s words vibrated through the room. Without pausing, Colin’s hand closed around the knot in Grayson’s cravat and hauled him close. “There are ladies present.”

“You know it’s true,” Grayson gritted.

For some, Colin silently admitted, while staring back into his friend’s dark eyes. “I’ll not deign that with a response. But just so you know, I believe Frost to be sincere in his affections and that Juliana might feel strongly for him as well. If that is true, would you honestly wish to quash her happiness? To have her hate you forever for denying her the man she loves?”

Incomprehension rose to Grayson’s eyes and Colin slowly released him. “How can she be in love with someone she barely knows?”

“Perhaps she’s spent more time with him than you realize,” Colin suggested. “In any case, I have an idea of how to resolve this problem, but I need to discuss it with my fiancée first.”

It wasn’t how he’d intended to make the announcement. During the ride back from Leighton House he’d envisioned a quick outline of his recovery after which he’d imagined requesting champagne and kissing his bride-to-be before secretly whisking her off to the privacy of his bedchamber.

Unfortunately, Frost’s indiscretion with Juliana had put a halt to any immediate plans of that nature.

“You’re engaged?” Grayson asked, the wide grin that followed transforming his stern expression into a joyous one.

“Yes.” Colin sent his friends a sheepish grin and reached for Victoria’s hand. “It would be remarkably foolish of me to let her get away.”

He’d barely caught Victoria’s fingers before strong arms wrapped around him with such force the air was squeezed

from his lungs. He choked in response to Grayson's fierce hug and coughed as soon as his hold loosened.

"I am so incredibly happy for you," Grayson said as he pulled Victoria into his arms next. "Why the hell did you not say a word of this sooner?"

Colin gave him an incredulous look. "I think you know the reason."

"Forgive me," Grayson said, briefly dropping his gaze before saying, "We must celebrate this fantastic news at once."

Additional hugs followed as the rest of Colin's friends wished him and Victoria well, their excitement a pleasant contrast from the despair he'd been met with when he'd arrived.

"Thank you, but I'd like to resolve the matter between Juliana and Frost first."

"May I fetch her?" Olivia asked Grayson.

He hesitated briefly before allowing a slight nod. "I suppose she ought to be part of this discussion, seeing as it pertains to her future."

Olivia left the room and Colin turned to Victoria. "A word, if you will?"

She dipped her head. "Of course. If you'll please excuse us?"

They slipped out into the hallway where Colin wasted no time in pulling her into his arms and seeking her mouth. He needed her warmth, her softness, the love she conveyed as she

wound her arms tightly around his neck and answered his tender caress.

“Leighton House requires management,” he murmured while pressing his forehead to hers. His heart beat with leaps and bounds of hopeful excitement as he relayed his plan to her. He paused only briefly when Olivia returned with Juliana, passing him and Victoria in the hallway on their way to the parlor.

“We’ll see you shortly,” Colin told them.

He added a few more thoughts as soon as the two were out of earshot. Victoria listened without interruption and kissed him soundly when he’d finished. “An excellent idea. Shall we make the suggestion together?”



It was impossible for any woman to love a man more than she loved Colin, Victoria decided while watching Grayson’s stony demeanor crumble a few minutes later. His eyes had widened and his mouth had fallen open. He gaped at them both while Victoria pressed her lips together, fighting the giggle she felt in her throat.

“You want to reward Mr. Frost?” Grayson asked, his incomprehension clear. “By giving him a house?”

“Not exactly.” Victoria smiled with the knowledge that she would be marrying a man who was not only generous, thoughtful, and hardworking, but very possibly the greatest romantic in all the world. She glanced at Juliana, who

followed the conversation with an increasingly hopeful expression. “Colin and I cannot reside in two places at once, and since we have chosen to make Woodstone Park our priority, the Leighton House estate will need someone else’s attention. My aim, therefore, is to sell the house to Mr. Frost along with a small parcel of land. The rest of the land will remain mine, though the sale will be dependent upon Mr. Frost agreeing to oversee it and make sure it prospers.”

“Should he do so,” Colin said, “he’ll have a respectable home with land attached to it, along with a decent living. He will, in effect, be landed gentry and a suitable match for a woman of Juliana’s status.”

“You’re making him upper class.” Juliana stared at Victoria and Colin in amazement.

“That is the goal,” Victoria said.

“It’s brilliant,” James said, to which Wilhelmina nodded.

“Colin has spoken with Mr. Frost,” Olivia told Juliana when no one else said anything further. “He says you claimed a desire for him to court you.”

“Is that true?” Grayson asked.

“It is,” Juliana confessed. “Mr. Frost is a wonderful man. He appreciates me for who I am rather than mocking my curious interests. We’ve had some wonderful conversations together and while I do realize our acquaintance has been brief, I cannot imagine marrying anyone else.”

“Why didn’t you say so before?” Olivia asked.

“I hardly had the chance,” Juliana complained. “And even if I had, I didn’t dare speak when I knew I’d disappointed you both. I still feel awful.”

“As you should.”

“Grayson,” Olivia reprimanded with a hard glare. “That’s hardly very helpful.”

“Neither is undoing all the hard work put toward her debut.” He sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets, then took a deep breath before asking, “Would marrying Mr. Frost make you happy, Juliana?”

The girl answered without hesitation. “Yes.”

“You’re certain you wouldn’t prefer me to find someone else?”

“Positively so.”

“I might even manage to get you a title if there’s a young peer in need of an impressive dowry.”

“Thank you, but if I’m able to wed Mr. Frost, then he is the man I choose,” Juliana informed Grayson firmly. “He may not be titled or especially wealthy, but that doesn’t matter. What does is the fact that I love him.”

“Well?” Olivia asked when silence followed this heartfelt remark. “What say you, Grayson?”

Grayson looked as though he might scratch his head in bemusement. “I suppose a change in Mr. Frost’s status would simplify the situation. Are you certain you’re willing to do

this, Victoria? I mean, you came here with the intention of saving Leighton House and now you're giving it up?"

"Only the part I don't need." She detailed the meeting with Mr. Blunt and explained the agreement she and Colin had made. "Having Mr. Frost there would be easier for me."

"But don't you need him here?" Grayson asked, his attention shifting to Colin.

"Another steward would be required regardless. The only difference is where the new man will be working."

"In that case, you may have Mr. Frost with my blessing," Grayson informed Juliana who promptly leapt across the room and flung her arms around his neck.

She kissed his cheek. "Thank you ever so much, Grayson."

He produced a nervous laugh while looking slightly embarrassed over the fierce display of affection.

Olivia chuckled. "You might want to tell Mr. Frost that you won't be running him through with your sword, shooting him dead, or sending him off to a penal colony anytime soon, Grayson. I'm sure he'll be very relieved to hear it."

"And in the meantime," Colin said, "Victoria and I will start planning our wedding. Beginning with a much-needed afternoon nap. Together."

Heat flooded Victoria's face. She sucked in a breath, but Colin simply took her hand and urged her to stand. She did so on wobbly legs.

"Colin," James chastised. "You cannot mean to—"

“I almost died, James. For the second time in my life. Only this time, I’ll not waste a precious second of the time I have left.” Colin drew Victoria close to his side and set his palm firmly against her waist. “So yes, I do mean to escape upstairs for a while with the woman I plan to marry. And since I know I’m not surrounded by saints, I don’t expect any of you to try and stop me.”

“I’ve certainly no desire to be hypocritical,” Wilhelmina said, her eyes dancing with humor.

“Neither have I,” said James, “though there is one more thing I probably ought to mention before you go. Mr. Perkins has been detained.”

“On what grounds?” Colin asked, his hold on Victoria tightening slightly.

“The magistrate in these parts is efficient. He began an immediate inquiry in response to the account I sent him. Turns out you and Mrs. Leighton are not the only people the man’s wronged. Apparently there was another duel in which his opponent died. Mr. Perkins paid a handsome sum to cover it up, but with all the questions being asked, someone eventually chose to speak up.”

“He’ll face severe repercussions if it turns out to be true,” Colin said.

Grayson grunted. He looked at Victoria. “Nothing less than what he deserves.”

The reference to what had happened to her at the ball made her uneasy. Thankfully, when no one else spoke, Colin led her

from the room and escorted her up the stairs. He ushered her into his bedroom where memories of the intimacies they'd previously shared were quick to swarm her head. He closed the door and she drew a ragged breath as heat washed over her skin, awakening her nerves.

A strong arm came around her, pulling her spine flush with his solid chest. His breath tickled her ear as he murmured, "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you a little before, but it was the most expeditious way I could think of getting you alone. Or would you rather have waited another six hours for me to do this?"

He dipped his head and placed an open-mouthed kiss against her neck while pressing her into his hips.

Victoria gasped. "No."

"How about this?" he asked while nipping her shoulder and letting his hands slide over her curves.

Her gown was swiftly unbuttoned, the fabric loosened, and his teasing fingers soon found the bare skin underneath.

Victoria sagged against him with uninhibited need. "Colin."

"Yes?" he queried while dragging her gown down over her hips.

"Yes," she breathed. "But can you manage all right with your injury?"

"You needn't worry. I'll be fine." He made quick work of her undergarments then led her to the bed.

Impatient for his touch and the sensations she knew he could stir with his mouth, Victoria settled against the pillows. She needed his body pressing down against hers and willed him to join her as soon as possible. Infuriatingly, the man appeared to have all the time in the world, but the hunger burning in his eyes was raw and unapologetic. She shivered in response.

“When I had you last,” he said, his gaze roaming over her body as he untied his cravat, “you were required to do a large part of the work.”

She licked her lips as he shucked his jacket. His waistcoat followed and then his shirt. Desire flooded her veins at the sight of the muscles rippling over his stomach, and the light dusting of hair disappearing beneath his waistband. Curiously, the uneven scarring upon his face, shoulder, and torso, only added to his appeal as they reminded her of his courage.

“I did not mind.”

“Neither did I.” His fingers went to work on the buttons holding his placket. “It was an extraordinary experience – the best I’ve ever had. But this time, I mean to do a great deal more than lie back and let you ride me.”

Her mouth went dry and her heart began pounding as he pushed his breeches and smalls down over his hips. He discarded both along with his shoes and hose, then straightened with unrepentant masculine power.

A wicked gleam lit his eyes and the edge of his mouth curled with the promise of sin. Victoria bit her lip as he settled between her thighs and wondered if she ought to remind him

of the promise he'd made. She trusted him, but one could easily get carried away while caught up in the moment and...

“Don't worry.” He dropped a kiss between her breasts. “I haven't forgotten, but we're not there yet.”

“We're not?” she asked, her voice unsteady as he kissed his way over her ribs and across her stomach. He scooted down farther, holding her legs apart with the breadth of his shoulders. “Colin, what are you—”

“I believe I'll begin right here,” he murmured and, dipping his head, he proceeded to rob her of all sensible thought.

Back straight and with his gaze fixed on the opposite end of the laurel alley, Colin waited for Victoria to appear. Anticipation sizzled in his veins and his heart beat with a steady degree of rightness.

It leapt the second he saw her. Dressed in lavender silk and froths of creamy lace, she stepped onto the path that would bring her to him. Choosing to host the wedding outdoors in late October had been a gamble. It helped having only a few select guests and a house they could all escape into in case of rain.

But they'd been lucky. The sun shone from an azure sky, bouncing off the diamond-tipped pins tucked into Victoria's hair. Her eyes twinkled like gems as well and her lips were curved into a tender smile that encompassed the fullness of Colin's heart.

His chest expanded and his eyes misted. It was hard to believe this wasn't a dream but that this beautiful woman would soon be his – that she had picked him – that she loved him despite his appearance. Throat tight, he forced down a

breath while tears of love and gratitude threatened to slide down his cheeks.

In the weeks that had passed since their return from London, Victoria had visited Leighton House to help Juliana and David get settled. Grayson and Olivia had also left Woodstone Park along with James and Wilhelmina, who'd all had estate matters to attend to after their lengthy visit with Colin.

Their absence, most notably Victoria's, had sucked the life out of Woodstone Park and made it unbearably lonely. But it had helped that there had been lots of work to attend to. Hiring a new steward had taken time, but he was happy with the man he'd eventually settled on. Together, they'd managed to sell off the last of the grain at a decent price. They'd also made plans to raise livestock next year. Between this, the crop, and his investments, Colin hoped he'd be better prepared for any problems the future might hold.

He'd also put a lot of thought and time into writing to Isabella. The letter was perhaps longer than what was needed, but after five years together, he'd felt he owed her a detailed explanation so she would understand his reason for severing ties. The compensation he'd offered would, he hoped, help her get by until she found a new protector. Much to Colin's relief, the response he'd received from her had offered congratulations and wished him happy.

"You don't have to be so stoic," James murmured. He stood at Colin's right shoulder, between Colin and Grayson. Wilhelmina and Olivia had positioned themselves opposite,

alongside the recently married Mr. and Mrs. Frost. Behind them stood Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds and the Woodstone Park servants. “Hell, I think I might need a handkerchief myself.”

The words loosened the emotions bearing down on Colin and helped him relax. He chuckled and gave his damp eyes a quick swipe with the back of his hand. “I never thought this would be me – that I would be standing here, about to marry the most spectacular woman I’ve ever encountered.”

“You’re a fortunate man,” James said.

Colin could not have agreed with him more. Unable to wait for her to reach him, he stepped toward Victoria and spoke so only she could hear. “You are the loveliest bride in the world. I realize this isn’t quite proper, but will you allow me the honor of escorting you the rest of the way?”

She beamed at him while blinking in rapid succession, and he saw that her eyes were as wet as his. “Yes. My legs are so shaky, I can barely walk.”

He took her hand and set it upon his arm. “Don’t worry. I’ll lend whatever support you need. Always.”

They walked the remaining distance together until they reached the awaiting vicar. Colin took a deep breath and the cool autumn air, infused with the floral scent of Victoria, wafted up his nose. He was aware of words being spoken and that the vicar awaited his answer.

“I will,” he replied, though he might have agreed to all manner of things in that moment. He scarcely knew what was

asked of him. All he knew was the woman who stood by his side.

Her voice was the only one that mattered.

“I will,” she finally said, agreeing to love, honor, and to keep him, in sickness and in health, as long as they both shall live.

The rings materialized and additional vows were made as the simple gold bands were slipped onto each of their fingers. A prayer followed and finally, blessedly, the vicar gave Colin permission to kiss his bride, barely getting the final words out before Colin scooped Victoria into his arms and crushed her mouth with his.

“I love you,” he whispered against her lips while claps and cheers erupted around them. Although he’d considered acquiring a special license for himself when he’d helped David get his, he’d eventually decided against it, choosing instead to give Victoria time to plan the wedding she wanted.

“As I love you,” she said, the words feathering over his lips as she kissed him again.

“I’ve a couple of gifts for you,” he told her when the wedding breakfast was over. It had been served in the dining room and would now be followed by cake in the interior courtyard. “Come with me for a moment.”

“Where on earth are we going?” she asked when he led her downstairs to the kitchen where servants busily readied the glasses for the champagne toast Colin intended to make.

“Forgive us, everyone,” Colin called while pulling Victoria with him, “but I simply can’t wait.”

The cook, who was in the process of sprinkling the last chocolate shavings on the cake, grinned. “It’s all right, Mr. West. We’ll wait until you’re ready.”

He led Victoria into the corridor just off the kitchen where an exterior door led out to the herb garden. A crate containing two horizontal slats and wrapped in a bright red bow, had been placed on the floor against the wall.

Colin glanced at Victoria, who stared at the crate with wide-eyed interest, and tugged on her hand. “Open it.”

She sent him a startled look and bent to pick at the bow. “What is it?”

“You’ll see.”

He held his breath and watched as she undid the ribbon. There was a pause as she tipped up the lid, and then the sort of gasp that sent his heart soaring. The look she gave him over her shoulder reminded him of sunny afternoons, a soothing cup of tea, and the welcoming warmth from a fireplace on a cold winter’s eve.

“This is...” She shook her head and reached inside the crate to retrieve the brown spaniel puppy he’d purchased.

“A proper truffle dog,” he explained. “David walked your land at my request and has determined that with a dog such as this, you’ll soon be turning a hefty profit.”

She gaped at him while smoothing her hand over the spaniel’s head. “Truly?”

“Truly.”

“Oh, Colin.” She let the puppy lick at her fingers and grinned when its tongue caught her nose. “I scarcely know what to say. Thank you ever so much.”

“There’s one more thing.” The most important of all, he believed, in terms of what mattered to her.

“But...” She sent the puppy a longing glance.

“Don’t worry. One of the servants will see to...?” He raised an eyebrow and tilted his head while quietly waiting.

“Bella,” Victoria murmured and scratched the puppy behind one ear.

Colin popped back into the kitchen for a moment and made arrangements for one of the footmen to take care of Bella before sweeping his wife away to the privacy of the upstairs parlor. There, he guided her to the sofa and took a seat beside her.



Curious and speechless, Victoria waited to see what Colin would say or do next. The puppy had taken her completely by surprise. Her only regret was that it would be a working dog attached to Leighton House and that she would not spend much time with it.

Colin took her hand in his and stroked the back of it with his thumb. “Happy and lucky do not begin to describe how you’ve made me feel today, Victoria. It’s as though you’ve

turned my difficult life and pained existence into a fairytale where I'm the victor who gets the princess. Instead of the monster no one will look at."

"You were never the monster, Colin, and anyone foolish enough to think so is ignorant and undeserving of our attention." Determined to press this point home once and for all, she leaned toward him and did her best to brush away all the lingering hurt with a kiss intended to soothe and to heal.

"And just so you know," she whispered while planting additional kisses upon his scarred cheek, "I am equally blessed to have found a man who lifts me up instead of pushing me down."

"Victoria, you—"

"Forgive me for interrupting," Wilhelmina spoke from the doorway, "but the cake and champagne are ready to be served."

"We'll be right there," Colin assured her. He smiled at Victoria, his eyes like endless pools of devotion. "We should join them. I just wanted to give you another gift first."

Her heart contracted. "I didn't realize you'd get me not only one gift but two. You should have said something sooner so I could prepare. I have nothing for you."

"Not true." A devilish glint lit his eyes for a second. "You are my gift, Victoria, and I look forward to unwrapping you later."

"Oh." This man and his ability to make her flush would certainly keep her warm in winter.

His expression softened and she watched him retrieve a familiar box from inside his jacket pocket. Victoria stared at it as he handed it to her, her breath catching when she flipped the lid and spotted the diamonds. With fluttering heart and stinging eyes, she tried to find the right words, only to realize she couldn't speak.

Instead, she shook as emotion won and swept her into its grasp. A sob was all she could manage, and then Colin pulled her roughly against him, hugging her tightly while she struggled to gather her ruined composure. She gulped down a breath and when she leaned back, he was watching her with so much love in his eyes it nearly wrecked her again.

“How?” she croaked.

He smoothed away her tears with his fingers and tucked a loose strand behind her ear. “When you and I met with Mr. Blunt and Mr. Finch, I helped Mr. Reynolds escort them to their carriage. Before they left, I offered to purchase the diamonds from Mr. Blunt, for the amount at which you had them appraised.”

“Eleven hundred pounds?” It was hard to grasp.

“The look on your face just now, when you realized your mother's jewelry had been returned, is worth every penny.”

“But the expense is—”

“Nothing I cannot afford. I assure you.”

She clasped the box to her breast and gazed into his adoring eyes. “Honestly, Colin, you are without question the

kindest, most thoughtful, and utterly wonderful man there is. Thank you, for this. It truly means the world.”

The answering smile he gave her and the kiss that followed promised her this would not be a one-time occurrence, but that he would strive to give her this kind of joy every day for the rest of her life.

EPILOGUE

March, 1826

Colin stood on the deck of the merchant ship, gripping the railing while sliding his gaze across the familiar coastline in the distance. Rippling waves of blue separated him from the sandy beach, the water a shimmery source of calm in the afternoon sun. The deafening blasts of cannon fire from so long ago had since been replaced by squawking seagulls, and the soldiers swarming toward the enemy lines, by children at play.

Time was a curious thing. Twenty-five years had come and gone since he and his friends, Richard included, had readied themselves for battle. Bolstered by the invincibility of youth, they'd cheered each other on as they'd boarded the boat that would take them to shore. It had all been a grand adventure—until they'd come face to face with the truth; war was a greedy beast with no regard for age, rank, or creed.

“It’s strange to be back,” James said, his voice drifting upon the gentle breeze as he came to stand beside Colin.

Grayson joined them, his hard gaze fixed on the land none of them had believed they'd return to. "Feels like yesterday and yet, like a lifetime ago."

Colin nodded and abandoned the view so he could look at his friends. "Do you regret coming with us?"

"Not yet," James muttered. "I'll let you know how I feel about it later when we're standing over there."

Arrangements for the journey had begun years ago as nothing more than a wish, voiced by Victoria long before they were married. They'd discussed it since, but had chosen to put off travel the first year in favor of tending to their estates. Going away for any amount of time seemed reckless when there was so much for each of them to keep an eye on despite having excellent stewards to help.

And then, much to their surprise and delight, their plans had been further disrupted by an unexpected occurrence.

Colin turned at the sound of small footsteps scampering over the hardwood planking and grinned at the sight of the redheaded imp bounding toward him. Kneeling, he scooped her into his arms and stood so she could enjoy the view too.

"Look, Papa." Her voice was sweet and filled with innocent wonder. "Fishies!"

He grinned at her. "Yes, my pet. If you like, you can help me catch some later for supper."

She scrunched her nose and gave her head a vigorous shake. "No."

“I think we’re ready,” Victoria said, drawing his attention to the woman who’d given him more than he’d ever dreamed possible. She wrapped her arms around him and Clara, hugging them both with surprising strength. A kiss was dropped on Clara’s nose. “You will stay here with your cousins.”

Contentment curled around Colin’s heart as it always did when Victoria spoke of the Dales and the Griers as though they were family. He knew James and Grayson shared his sentiment since neither of them had large families. And since they’d always regarded each other as brothers, it pleased them immensely that their wives had become like sisters.

“Can’t I come with you?” Clara asked with a tiny edge of disappointment.

“Not this time,” Victoria said, “but Mama and Papa won’t be gone long. We will return within a couple of hours. In the meantime, Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds have a special treat prepared that I’m sure you won’t want to miss.”

“Pancakes?” Clara asked, her eyes brimming with hope.

“Possibly,” Victoria said with a grin.

As expected, Clara wrestled herself free of Colin’s grasp and hurried off to discover what the older couple had planned.



It was an odd sensation, dreading the moments ahead while simultaneously looking forward to them. Perched on a bench

in the rowboat, Victoria leaned against Colin while two of the ship's crewmembers brought them to shore.

His arm was wound securely around her shoulders, bolstering her as they made their approach. On two other benches sat James and Wilhelmina, Grayson and Olivia, their expressions as somber as Victoria's mood.

It was hard to tell if they were glad they'd agreed to come or if they regretted it. As for Victoria, she'd been compelled by the knowledge that Richard was out there somewhere, abandoned in a foreign land and ignored for too long.

"I wish we could bring him home," she said when she and Colin strolled along the beach together a short while later. Resting her head against Colin's shoulder, she breathed him in, allowing his familiar scent to ground her. "Is it very difficult for you to be here?"

"It is without doubt an emotional challenge." They stopped and he glanced toward the others who stood much as they did some distance away. "But I do believe it will help put the past to rest. We've all been haunted by what took place here for far too long."

"Will you show me?" she asked, her throat tightening.

His eyebrows dipped. "What?"

"Walk me through it. Describe what happened. Let me see what you see when you stand here."

He was quiet a moment and she could feel every muscle within him straining with resistance. But then he began. "The beach is almost empty now. Back then, it was flooded by men

pouring out of their boats. Some stumbled and fell while others were shot down by enemy snipers before they'd taken two steps.

“Smoke filled the air and our lungs. The heat...It was hotter than now, the sweat quickly blurring our vision and making our uniforms stick to our bodies. Loading rifles with clammy hands was a skill we each had to master.

“Richard was at my side, James and Colin at our back. We moved this way, pushing our way forward with our bayonets, slaying anyone on the attack.” He shuddered. “Blood was everywhere. On our clothes, our hands, and smeared across our faces. It was grotesque, but there was no time to think in those terms when we were fighting for our lives.

“A brief reprieve came when we got past the first line of defense. Horses were charging in from the left. Richard and I sprinted forward. This way.” He led her toward a group of buildings. “Thirsty and exhausted, we needed rest – a moment to collect ourselves and come to terms with what we faced. But as we were running he suddenly fell. Just there. I dropped to the ground in disbelief. Perhaps he'd tripped and needed my help?”

He swallowed hard and tears welled in Victoria's eyes. “I'd only just realized he'd taken a shot to the back of the head when Grayson and James called out, warning me to take cover, but I was too dazed to move. The fact that one of us had been killed was incomprehensible to me.

“And then the canon blast knocked me out – a carcass shot that exploded on impact, tossing me sideways before raining

down on my body.”

Not knowing what else to do, Victoria wound her arms around him and hugged him with all her might. “I am so incredibly sorry you had to go through that.”

“In some ways I count myself lucky. There are those who lost their limbs and then there are those, like your brother, who never made it back home.”

He was right. Richard would have been eight and forty today had he lived, perhaps with a wife and children of his own. Her heart ached, not from loss this time, but because of the senseless sacrifice he had made. His young and spirited life in exchange for what?

“It could have been you,” she said, tears running down her cheeks. “Or Grayson and James. All of you might have perished. So many others did.”

“Yes,” he whispered. “I often wished I had.”

“Don’t say that. I can’t bear to hear it.” Wrecked by the visions he’d painted with words, she dropped to her knees and fell forward, right where he said her brother had died. There, in the afternoon heat, she pressed her right cheek to the sand and allowed her tears to join the land where her brother had found his eternal rest.

“Are you certain you’re well?” Colin asked that evening after supper when they were alone in their cabin with Clara asleep next door.

Sitting in bed with her back against the headboard, Victoria tucked her knees up under her chin and sighed. “I am

depleted and possibly slightly broken, but I don't regret coming or asking you to recount the events. It was helpful. Until today I've not been able to picture it clearly and that has always made me feel as though I was missing a vital piece of his life, an understanding of what he went through in the end. Which may not make sense but—”

“I think I understand.” Dressed only in his shirt and breeches, he settled into the spot beside her and lifted her onto his lap. His fingers toyed with her hair, weaving through the unpinned locks before slipping beneath her chin, caressing her so tenderly and with such concern for her comfort, it melted her heart. “Would you like a distraction?”

She smiled with the eagerness of a woman who desperately longed for the peace she would find in the arms of the man she loved. “Very much so.”

Adoration chased away all the evidence of his concern. His mouth met hers with the familiarity rooted in nearly six years of marriage. Strong hands slid to her thighs and waist, bunching her nightgown with unhurried movements until he gained the access he sought.

“I love you,” he murmured, his voice slightly raw as she undid the fall of his breeches.

Stilling, she slid her fingertips down his left cheek. “You are my guiding light, Colin. Whatever the storm, I know you will help me find my way home.”

Her words echoed heartache, loss, and despair, filling the cabin until Colin banished them with a fierce kiss that wove past, present, and future together.

The connection they shared wasn't new. It spanned more than two decades. And although the road to a shared destination had not been easy, finding each other had healed their hearts and restored their souls. It had blessed them with love and had made them complete.



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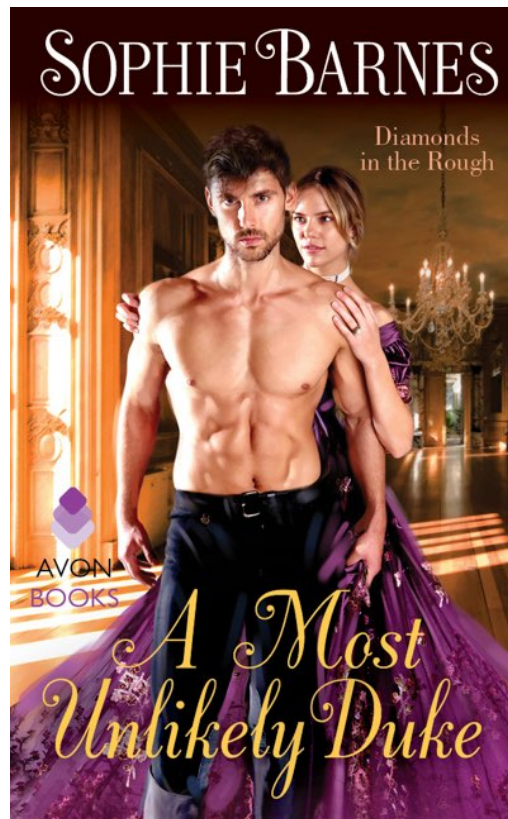
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SNEAK PEEK!

Keep reading for an excerpt from

A Most Unlikely Duke

A Diamonds in the Rough novel



CHAPTER 1

London, 1818

Thick clouds darkened to shades of grey as they rolled across the London sky. Beneath them, standing in the middle of the Black Swan courtyard, Raphe Matthews drew back his fist, his muscles bunching tightly together—just long enough for him to assess the angle and speed with which to release all that power. Instinct made it a brief calculation. Less than a second, and then he sent his fist flying.

The punch snapped his opponent's face sideways, producing a spray of spit and blood that painted the air with specks of crimson. A cheer erupted from those who'd come to witness the fight—a motley selection of hardened individuals. This place was not for the weak or the wealthy. It reeked of filth and the daily struggle to survive. This was St. Giles, but it might as well have been the bowels of hell for all the difference it made.

“Come on!” someone shouted.

Raphe's other fist met a hard chest with a *crunch*. His knuckles ached, the force of the punch vibrating through him.

“Matthews, Matthews, Matthews...” The chant shook the air while Raphe shifted his footing, regaining his balance just in time to accept the blows that followed. He didn’t mind, for it only revealed his opponent’s sudden desperation.

Raising his fists to block the attack, Raphe bobbed to the side, turning away, just out of reach. And yet, he was close—so close he could smell the sweat on the other man’s skin, see the fear that shone in his eyes, the beads of moisture clinging to his hair that dripped onto his brow.

More shouts flooded the air, drowning him in a cacophony of unintelligible noise. The wave of encouragement shifted, alerting him that support had changed—no longer in his favor.

Forcing it into the background, Raphe focused on the man he was meant to beat. Today his name was Calvin Butler. Raphe launched himself forward, surrendering to the rage and let the punches fly, beating back pain and anger until Calvin Butler lay stretched out on the ground, hands covering his face in surrender. A fleeting second of silence passed, just long enough to be sure of the outcome, and then the spectators sent up a roar in response to Raphe’s victory.

Exhausted, he stumbled back, a light drizzle dampening his skin. A coat was draped over his shoulders while Butler was helped to his feet—a sorry sight, with his blackened eye and swollen lip distorting an otherwise handsome face.

Turning away, Raphe pushed his way in the direction of the taproom. All he wanted right now was a drink.

Fast.

“Butler ain’t lookin’ too good,” Raphe’s friend, Benjamin Thompson, said as he came up beside him. A couple of inches shorter than Raphe, his green eyes were a handsome compliment to his ginger hair and freckles. He was without a doubt the kindest and most dependable person Raphe knew, besides his own sisters. Together, they made their way to the bar, where Ben promptly called for a server. “Give us a couple o’ pints.”

Resting his elbows on the counter, Raphe grunted his response to Ben’s question. “He knew what ‘e was in fer.”

Ben nodded. The beer arrived, and both men took a healthy swig. “Ye could ‘ave been gentler, though. The man was done. No need to keep beatin’ at him like that.”

Stilling, Raphe slid his gaze toward his friend. “I couldn’t ‘elp it.” The rage had burned its way through him, driving him forward and filling his mind with one singular purpose: The need to win. “I don’t know ‘ow to fight any other way.”

“I know,” Ben said softly.

No, you don’t. You have no bloody idea.

In this, he’d never been completely honest, not even with Ben. “In any case, the blunt’s pretty good—lets me keep a roof over me sisters’ heads.”

“Aye, an’ a decent one at that.”

Raphe couldn’t argue. He’d visited Ben’s home once—an overcrowded single room that he shared with his parents and five siblings. By comparison, Raphe and his sisters lived like

royalty. “Have ye ever thought of gettin’ out of this place? Out of St. Giles?”

Ben shrugged his shoulders. “An’ go where?”

“Somewhere better. Christ, Ben, anywhere’s better than this. Ye’re a likeable man. Ye could probably snatch up a job at one of ‘em fancy ‘ouses in Mayfair.”

His friend snorted. “An’ ‘ave some nob lookin’ down on me, demandin’ I polish ‘is boots—or worse, empty ‘is chamber pot? I’d rather stay by the docks, thank ye very much. At least there I can take some pride in me work.”

“Understood. But the pay there’s never goin’ to afford ye with yer own home. Don’t ye wish to marry one day?”

“Sure. But there’s a limit to what I’m willing to do for a bit of blunt, Raphe.” He took another sip of his beer. “I’ll not lose me dignity by workin’ for a class o’ people I can’t abide, ‘nor by lowerin’ meself to doin’ demeanin’ work.”

The words speared Raphe to his soul, filling him with shame. “I know,” he muttered with admiration. If only he could be more like him, not wanting anything beyond what life had tossed his way. Perhaps, if he didn’t have his sisters to consider, he wouldn’t care so much.

“Ye fought well today, lad,” a man’s voice suddenly spoke from directly behind him.

Bristling, Raphe set down his beer on the counter and turned to face his handler, whose attire—a purple velvet jacket and matching top hat—lent an air of flamboyance unmatched by anyone else. And yet, in spite of the fine attire, there was

nothing cultured about this man, a scoundrel who'd gained his wealth through illicit deals and by taking advantage of others. His origins were questionable, but rumor had it he'd killed more than once in pursuit of power. Raphe didn't know what to believe. All he knew was that in spite of his own prejudices, crime in St. Giles had decreased since Carlton Guthrie's arrival eighteen years earlier. Or so he'd been told.

"Mr. Guthrie. Good to see ye." A blatant lie, if ever there was one.

Guthrie's moustache twitched. "Likewise." He sounded jovial, but only a fool would mistake that for kindness. Least of all when his henchman, a scarred boulder of a Scotsman by the name of McNeil, stood at his right shoulder. Guthrie nodded toward Ben, who returned the salutation.

"Come. Share a drink with me," Guthrie said, addressing Raphe. "We've much to discuss, you 'n I."

"And Thompson?" Raphe asked, not wanting to abandon his friend.

"I'm sure he'll be willin' to wait for ye till ye get back." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a gold coin and dropped it in front of Ben. "For yer trouble. What I 'ave to say to Matthews 'ere doesn't concern ye. Understand?"

Raphe glared at Guthrie for a moment before looking at Ben. "I'm sorry. I—"

"No worries," Ben said, pocketing the coin that would keep his family fed for the next few days. "I'll see ye tomorrow at work, aye?"

Nodding, Raphe watched him go.

“Well?” Guthrie’s voice drew Raphe’s attention back to him. “Ow about that drink then?”

Eyeing first Guthrie and then McNeil, Raphe gave a curt nod. “By all means.”

Guthrie’s eyes sparkled. “Excellent.” His lips stretched into a smile. “Follow me.” Turning away, he led Raphe through the taproom, where tobacco smoke mingled with the smell of roasting meat and beer. Dice rolled across one table in a game of Hazard. A hand touched his thigh, inappropriately stroking upward until he pushed it away.

“No’ in the mood, Luv?” the woman to whom it belonged asked. She was sitting down, her legs spread across the lap of a man who was busily burying his face between her half-exposed breasts.

Pitying the life she’d been dealt, he told her gently, “I’ve not the time.”

“La’er then?” she called as he strode away, not answering her question. Blessedly, his sisters had managed to avoid such a fate.

“Ave a seat,” Guthrie said moments later as they stepped inside a private room at the end of a hallway. It was sparsely furnished, with just a plain wooden table and four chairs. On top of the table stood a pitcher and a couple of mugs. “Some ale for me champion?” Guthrie asked, indicating the pitcher.

Grabbing a chair, Raphe dropped down onto it and poured himself a drink, while Guthrie claimed the other chair with

more finesse. “Will ye ‘ave some?” Raphe asked, indicating the same pitcher.

Guthrie beamed. “Don’t mind if I do.” He waited for Raphe to pour before reaching for the mug and raising it. “To yer victory today.”

“To me victory,” Raphe muttered, downing the bitter resentment he felt with a brew to match.

“I’ve ‘igh ‘opes for ye,” Guthrie said, tapping a finger against his nose. “Unbeaten for the fifteenth time. That’s unprecedented, tha’ is.”

Raphe saw the spark that lit his eyes, like the promise of treasure or some such thing. “Wha’ do ye want, Guthrie?”

“So cynical, Matthews.” Guthrie’s upper lip drew up, revealing an uneven row of yellow-stained teeth. “Must a man always want some’in? Can’t ‘e simply enjoy a drink wi’ an old friend?”

Old friend?

Hardly.

“Not when ‘e’s got ‘im by the bollocks.”

Guthrie’s mouth tightened, his eyes darkening just enough to offer a glimpse of his true nature. “Is tha’ ‘ow ye see our relationship, laddy?”

His demeaning tone made Raphe’s muscles flex. He glanced at McNeil, who stood by the door, running his thumb along the edge of a wicked blade, and was instantly reminded

of the punishment he'd suffered the one time when he'd been foolish enough to try and thwart Guthrie's wishes.

Shoulders tensing, Raphe returned his gaze to the man who owned him. "Ow else should I see it? I'm yer puppet, ain't I?"

Guthrie nodded. "Aye, but ye're me favorite one. Which is why I'd like to offer ye a deal."

Raphe stiffened. "What sor' of deal?"

"The sor' that could set ye free, laddy."

A tempting notion, but surely too good to be true. Still, he couldn't help but ask. "What do ye have in mind?"

Leaning forward, Guthrie placed his elbows on the table, the fingers of his right hand reaching up to stroke his chin. "Ye see, there's goin' to be an opportunity soon—a grand one, at that."

Raphe crossed his arms. "Ye don't say."

The corner of Guthrie's eye flinched. "No need to get cocky, now." Snapping his fingers, he drew McNeil closer. "Give the laddy 'is earnin's." There was a pause, and then a pouch dropped onto the table with a jangling *thump*. "Naturally, we've kept our share."

A fat ninety-percent.

"Naturally," Raphe echoed. He didn't bother to hide his displeasure.

"But..." Guthrie took another sip of his ale. "Word 'as it, The Bull will be comin' to town in a month or so." Raphe

straightened in his chair, while Guthrie swiped his mouth with the back of his hand, removing a line of foam. “If ye figh’ ‘im and ye win, ye’ll be debt-free. The winnings are gonna be that huge.”

Raphe didn’t doubt it. The Bull was, after all, the bare-knuckle boxing world champion—undefeated since beating Tobias Flannigan several years earlier. Since then, he’d crippled several of his opponents. The man was a legend. “I’ll do it,” Raphe said without blinking.

“But if ye lose...”

“I won’t,” Raphe assured him.

“But if ye do...”

Grabbing the pouch that still sat on the table, Raphe pocketed his money. “I know the risk, Guthrie, an’ I’m willin’ to take it.”

It was past eleven o’clock in the evening by the time Raphe returned home, his knuckles tender and his body still sore from the fight. Glad to get out of the cold, he closed the door on the rain that now poured from a thunderous sky, shrugged out of his coat, and hung it on a hook behind the door just as his sister, Amelia, entered from an adjoining room that served as a small parlor.

“Good evenin’,” she yawned, leaning against the doorframe.

Squinting through the darkness, Raphe echoed her salutation. “I thought ye would be asleep by now.” Stepping

past her, he entered their tiny kitchen and snatched up the tinder box.

“I was,” Amelia said, following him into the chilly room.

A threadbare shawl was draped across her shoulders, and as she pulled it tighter with pale and trembling fingers, Raphe felt his heart lurch. This wasn't right. His sister did not deserve to live like this. None of them did.

Pushing aside such fruitless ponderings, he found a candle, struck a flint and held it to the wick until a flame began to bloom, driving the darkness toward the walls where it struggled against the light.

“If it makes any difference, Juliette's safely tucked into bed.” Amelia said, referring to their younger sister, whose weaker disposition was a constant cause for unease. When Raphe lifted the lid of a nearby pot and peered inside, Amelia added, “I made soup for dinner.”

“Smells delicious,” he dutifully told her.

“We both know 'ow untrue that is, bu' I appreciate yer optimism.”

Meeting her gaze, Raphe made a deliberate effort to smile. “Per'aps I can manage some meat for us tomorrow.” It would certainly be a welcome change from the potatoes and turnips they'd been eating for what seemed like forever. Christ, he was so tired of having a sore belly all the time, and his sisters...they never complained, but he knew they needed better nourishment than what they were getting.

“That’d be nice,” Amelia said. Her tone, however, suggested that she doubted his ability to manage such a feat.

Bothered by her lack of faith in him, he grabbed a chunk of bread and tore off a large piece. “A chicken ought to be possible. If we make it last a few days.”

Amelia simply nodded. Grabbing a cup, she filled it with water and placed it before him. “I miss the smell of a bustlin’ kitchen.”

The comment threw him for a second. “Wha’?”

“Meat roasin’ on the fire, bread bakin’ in the oven.” She shook her head wistfully. “It’s funny. I can’t picture Mama, but I remember Cook—plump cheeks an’ a kind smile. I remember bein’ ‘appy in the kitchen back ‘ome.”

The sentimental thought made Raphe weary. He didn’t bother to point out that she’d only been six when they’d lost their parents and there’d been nothing left for Raphe to do but turn his back on the house in which they’d spent the early years of their childhoods and walk away, taking his siblings with him. He’d been no more than eight years old and with a mighty burden weighing on his shoulders. “I know this isn’t the sor’ of life that any of us ever imagined.” Feeling his temper begin to rise at the memory of what their parents had done to them all, he added, “Hopefully, in time, things’ll get better.”

“I’m sure ye’re right.” *Could she possibly sound any more unconvinced?*

He ate a spoonful of soup, the bland flavor just a touch better than plain hot water. Amelia took a step forward. “The reason I didn’t retire with Juliette earlier, is ‘cause of this letter.” She waved a piece of paper in his direction. “It arrived for ye today while ye were out.”

Frowning, Raphe stared at her. “Do ye know who sent it?” He couldn’t even recall the last time he’d received a letter. Nobody ever wrote to him or his sisters.

“The sender’s name’s smudged. So’s the address. It’s a miracle it arrived here at all.” Handing the letter to Raphe, she watched as he turned it over and studied the penmanship. Sure enough, the only legible part of the address, which even appeared to have been altered once or twice, was his name: Mister Raphael Matthews.

Curious, he set down his spoon and tore open the seal.

“What’s it say?” Amelia eagerly asked.

Reading it slowly to ensure he understood it correctly, Raphe sucked in a breath. He looked up at his sister, blinked, then bowed his head and read the letter again. Silence settled. Amelia’s feet shifted, conveying her impatience. It seemed impossible, yet there it was—an extraordinary pronouncement staring him right in the face.

Raising his gaze, he leaned back in his seat, the letter rustling between his fingers. “According to this...” He shook his head, unable to fathom the absurdity of it. “I’m the new Duke of Huntley.”

The silence that followed was acute. Amelia stared at him, eyes wide with a strange blend of surprise, uncertainty, and hope. She wanted to believe him, and yet... “Really?”

“If this is to be believed, then yes.”

“But as far as I know. Papa ‘ad no title, so I don’t—I don’t understand.”

“I know. It seems inconceivable. Preposterous. But...” He handed her the letter. “Do ye think it might be a hoax?”

Amelia shook her head. “I daren’t suppose such a thing. It looks authentic enough with this seal right ‘ere and a stamp at the bottom.” Squinting, she read the small print that Raphe had missed in his surprise. “Mr. Rupert Etheridge, Solicitor to the Duke of Huntley.” Amelia drew a deep breath. Expelled it again. “Bloody Hell!”

Raphe quietly nodded. “It’s the damndest thing, don’t ye think?” He stared up at Amelia, still trying to process the news.

“Yes. It is. In fact, I wouldn’t ‘ave thought it possible at all. Not ever.”

“Me neither.” Raphe set the letter on the table next to his bowl of soup and jabbed it with his finger. “But our great grandfather *was* the Sixth Duke of Huntley.”

“I’m aware of that. But when ‘e died, the title passed to our great uncle an’ split off from our side of the family.” She hesitated, as if trying to understand. “I thought succession ‘ad to be lineal—that it ‘ad to go from son to son. So ‘ow can it possibly jump to ye?”

“That’s just it. Says ‘ere that—” leaning forward, he carefully read what had to be the most significant part, “the letters patent generally include a limitation pertainin’ to the heirs of the body, but in this instance it ‘as been left out. With this taken into consideration, we’ve looked fer the late duke’s nearest kin, and ye, Mr. Matthews, appear to be it.”

“Ye’re *it*?” Amelie’s eyebrows were raised, her lips parted with dumbfounded surprise.

“Apparently so.”

“Bloody hell,” she said again as she slumped down onto another chair with a dazed expression. “I can’t believe ‘e ‘ad no sons. Don’t aristocrats always ‘ave an heir an’ a spare for these situations?”

“Yes, but accordin’ to this, the Eighth Duke of Huntley’s sons perished at sea a couple o’ months ago. The shock of it was apparently too much for their father. It killed ‘im.”

“God.” Amelia paused for a moment before saying, “So there’s nobody else but ye to fill ‘is shoes.”

“No. Only problem is, I ain’t so sure I’ll be able to manage it. It’s been fifteen years since...” His shoulders stiffened and his chest tightened. He couldn’t speak of the event that had plunged them all into destitution. Refused to do so—refused to open the door to the darkness.

Thankfully, Amelia spoke, filling the silence. “Ye can ignore the letter if the thought of being a duke disagrees with ye.”

“True.” He considered the ramifications of showing up at Huntley House. And then the door to the darkness creaked open, quite unexpectedly, and he was faced with the faith that Bethany had placed in him. She’d believed in his ability to save her. He’d been her older brother, and she’d looked to him for help. Except he’d failed her, and now she was dead.

He slammed the door to the darkness and stared at Amelia. This was it. The chance to do what he wished he could have done for Bethany—a chance to get his surviving sisters out of St. Giles and back to the world where they belonged.

“I can’t ignore this opportunity. I can’t deny ye the things ye deserve.” *I can’t take the risk of losing you because of my own apprehensions and prejudices.* “Think of it, Amelia. No more ‘ungry bellies, or worryin’ about money. No more scrapin’ to get by.”

“No more Mr. Guthrie,” she murmured.

The uplifting thought spilled through him, immediately halted by another. “Ye know, we’ll never fit in.” They’d spent too long amidst the lower classes – could barely recall what it meant to live in a fine house and to have servants. Fox Grove Manor where they’d grown up had not been overly large, and most of the servants had been gone at the end, but he a vague recollection of tin soldiers and the sound of piano music playing while Molly dusted the china. It seemed so peculiar now, the thought of hiring someone to do the simplest task.

He shook his head at the absurdity of it all and wondered if he would be capable of becoming such a person after growing accustomed to the working-class ways. And that was just the

beginning. It did not take into account the ridicule they were bound to face with every misstep they made. Because if there was one thing he knew about the aristocracy, it was their cold, hard censure of those who didn't belong.

“Here at least we ‘ave friends.” He thought of what Ben had told him earlier. Of Ben, in general. He’d never understand the decision Raphe now considered making. Worse than that, Raphe knew in his gut that claiming the Huntley title would destroy that friendship—that in order for him and his sisters to stand any chance at all of making a life for themselves in Mayfair, they’d have to sever all ties to St. Giles.

“True. There are surely people I’ll miss – people who’ve been kind to us over the years, like Mary-Allen’s family an’ the ‘aroldsons.” She reached for Raphe’s hand and squeezed it tight. “But we also ‘ave no future ‘ere. At least none that I can see.”

“I know. It’s me greatest regret.”

“It’s not yer fault.”

“No, but I ‘ave the chance to change things now.” Mind made up, he said, “I’ll claim the title an’ make things right fer both of ye.”

She pressed her lips together and nodded agreement. “It’ll be an easier life than the one we ‘ave now.”

Even though he knew she underestimated the task that stood before them, he didn’t argue, happy with the knowledge that his sisters would soon be living the lives to which they’d

both been born. But the truth of it was that they faced a daunting struggle – one in which their pride and dignity would be tested at every turn. Steeling himself for the battle ahead, Raphe bid his sister a good night, aware that the dawn would bring turbulence with it.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for embarking on this Brazen Beauties journey with me. Completing a series is always a little bittersweet, for I know I'll miss 'living' with the characters I've gotten to know so well while writing their stories. Writing this one was an absolute joy. It allowed me to delve into 19th Century farming practices, during which I discovered a lot of interesting information. As you probably know if you're familiar with my books, I love finding something unique I can add to my stories. In this case, it was bunt, and George Washington's innovative treading barn.

Including the heroes and heroines from the previous books and giving them all pronounced roles was such fun. And since each book in the series has a secondary romance, I decided from the get go that Juliana had to have hers since many readers had fallen in love with her character in *Mr. Grier and the Governess*.

I also couldn't resist giving cameo appearances to Florian Lowell, the Duke of Redding (*The Illegitimate Duke*) and his sister-in-law, Viola (*The Infamous Duchess*), who goes by

Mrs. Henry Lowell. Their stories are part of my *Diamonds in the Rough* series, so when Colin needed surgery, I decided the best man for the job was the skilled surgeon who has already saved a few of my other characters' lives.

My hope in concluding this series is that this final Brazen Beauties novel leaves you as satisfied as it did me. I look forward to sharing more adventures with you in the future.

Sophie

Xoxo

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA TODAY bestselling author, Sophie Barnes, has spent her youth traveling with her parents to wonderful places around the world. She's lived in five different countries, on three different continents, has studied design in Paris and New York, and speaks Danish, English, French, Spanish, and Romanian with varying degrees of fluency. But most impressive of all – she's been married to the same man three times, in three different countries and in three different dresses.

While living in Africa, Sophie turned to her lifelong passion – writing.

You can contact her through her website at www.sophiebarnes.com

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