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BREE WOLF

SHIELD

*of Fire*



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Also by Bree Wolf



### **Flames of Winter Series**

*Some stories can be told in one book. Others cannot. This is one of those stories.*

In the Flames of Winter series by USA Today bestselling and award-winning author BREE WOLF, a young English miss dares to break society's strict rules as she flees from her parents' house the night before her wedding. This one decision ends up leading her from one adventure into the next...and, of course, into the arms of a fiercely protective highlander. He may not be a peer, but he is the one man she never knew she always wanted.

#1 Flames of Winter

#2 Shield of Fire

#3 Out of Smoke and Ashes

More to follow!

# Chapter One

## A SCOT AT A BALL



London, January 1804 (or a variation thereof)

If asked, Sarah Mortensen, youngest daughter of two to Baron Hartmore, would have sworn that she was dreaming. After all, life had never quite felt like this, had it? In Sarah's experience, life was hard and harsh, binding her hands and forcing her down a path she would never have chosen freely. Indeed, not too long ago, her parents had seen her betrothed in order to settle her father's gambling debts, betrothed to a man with a soul as black as the deep of night.

That was the life Sarah knew.

Not this.

This was...different because the man holding her hand and pulling her along, out of the crowded ballroom and down the darkened hallway, was not her former fiancé. He was a stranger, to be certain; yet he was a stranger Sarah had come to know. At least, in a way. After all, she did not even know his full name. All she knew was that he...made her feel.

Doing her best to keep up with his large strides, Sarah felt her heart beat loudly, wildly in her chest. Her legs felt weak, her limbs trembling, and yet the smile that had come to her face upon first seeing Keir at the Whickertons' ball remained. She could feel it upon her face. She could feel the effects of it traveling through her veins to every fiber of her being.

Yes, he did make her feel.

He made her feel wonderful and excited and hopeful.



Sarah had never truly been hopeful. At least, she could not recall. Yet everything had changed a few weeks back when she had agreed to a feigned kidnapping, orchestrated by the Dowager Countess of Whickerton, in order to break Sarah's forced engagement. And whose help had the dowager elicited to see Sarah kidnapped out of her parents' townhouse in the middle of the night?

Sarah's smile deepened as Keir looked back at her, a teasing grin upon his features. His hand tightened upon hers, warm and real, holding on, not letting go. "'Tis a beautiful night," Keir said in that Scottish lilt Sarah had come to love. "Come," he tugged her forward. "I'll show ye the stars." He chuckled as though some sort of evil plan hid behind these words; and yet Sarah had never known Keir to have any evil thoughts whatsoever.

Reaching for a heavy woolen cloak, Keir draped it upon Sarah's shoulders, bundling her up warmly. All the while, his kind blue eyes lingered upon hers, whispering something Sarah could not quite grasp. Yet her heart tripped and danced and tripped again. Having Keir here, right in front of her, so close after a week of thinking she would never lay eyes on him again, felt surreal. A part of Sarah feared he might disappear at any moment, that he was no more than a figment of her imagination, an expression of her heart's desire to see him again. "Are you truly here?" she asked him yet again.

As before on the dance floor, Keir chuckled, that mischievous gleam in his eyes. "Do ye wish for proof?" he asked, and once again something hidden seemed to rest beneath his words.

Sarah felt herself blush, heat shooting into her cheeks, and she instinctively dropped her gaze.

Amusement rumbled in Keir's throat before she felt the soft touch of his fingertips upon her chin, urging her to look back up at him. "I like ye better with a bit of color upon yer cheeks," Keir murmured, something deeply intense in his blue eyes. "When I first saw ye across the ballroom, ye looked awfully pale that for a moment I wasna quite certain 'twas really ye."

Sarah nodded. "I thought I was seeing things," she admitted, remembering the moment Keir had suddenly stood there amongst the other guests. "I thought I might have... strayed into a dream." Indeed, Sarah had dreamed of Keir before, of the two of them walking beneath the stars, of him pulling her into his arms and...

Keir chuckled. "Ye're blushing again, lass," he remarked with a raised brow. "Will ye not tell me what happened in that dream ye had? It must've been something utterly...tempting."

As always, Keir knew precisely what to say to make Sarah feel mortified, to make her cheeks burn crimson, to make her want to hide somewhere and never again meet his eyes. He had that effect on her. From the start. And yet, at the same time, Sarah liked that he knew her so well, that he always said what was on his mind, that she did not have to guess at his intentions. It somehow seemed to even the odds, for Keir was able to read her face like an open book.

Indeed, Sarah felt compelled to answer him honestly. And yet she did not quite know why he had come tonight, what his motives were. "Why are you here?" Sarah asked instead of answering him, willing her heart to calm its rapid beating and allow her mind to take the lead.

For a moment, Keir simply looked at her, his knowing gaze sweeping her face like a caress, as though he could unearth anything by simply looking at her. More often than not, in the past, that had been the truth. "Let us walk outside for a bit," he said, shrugging into his own coat and then offering her his arm. "I promised I would tell ye everything, and I meant it."

Swallowing, Sarah nodded, uncertain what awaited her. Of course, her foolish heart had hope while her mind urged her to be cautious. In her experience, few men could be trusted, and Keir had lied to her...or at least kept a lot from her. But why?

Snow still glistened wherever Sarah looked as they made their way slowly across the terrace. A crescent moon hung in the sky overhead, countless stars sparkling nearby. Indeed, the

night looked a lot like the one in her dream, and her thoughts were involuntarily drawn back to that moment.

Gritting her teeth, Sarah shook her head, trying her best to focus her thoughts. “Tell me why you’re here,” she demanded, allowing her hand to slip from his arm. “Who are you? And how do you know the Whickertons? For you clearly do.”

Keir took another two steps and then turned to look at her. To Sarah’s surprise, she saw no guilt or regret upon his face but mirth instead. “My name is Keir MacKinnear, son to the laird of Clan MacKinnear in the Scottish Highlands.” Humor gleamed in his eyes. “The rest, I’m afraid, is a rather long story.” He chuckled, running a hand through his hair. Sarah’s gaze lingered upon the little braids he always wore, running from his temples back, where he kept his long hair tied. “I suppose it all began about fifty-five years ago.”

Sarah’s jaw dropped, and she gawked at him. “Fifty-five years? Whatever do you mean?” She moved closer, a part of her remembering the many stories Keir had told her during their time together in the woods. She remembered the gentle rhythm of his voice as it had drawn images out of thin air, creating in her mind’s eye visions of times past, of people she had never known and events she had not witnessed.

“Aye, I know the Whickertons,” Keir finally admitted, his eyes looking directly into hers. “I know them because my own grandmother and the dowager have been the best of friends for decades, long before they even met their husbands and found themselves situated far apart, one near London and the other in the Highlands.”

Sarah exhaled a slow breath, trying to imagine Grandma Edie as a young woman, meeting the man of her dreams, falling in love. “If that is true,” Sarah began carefully, reminding herself that those who trusted too quickly often came to regret it, “why is it that I’ve never heard of you? Why did—?” Sarah paused, suddenly wondering why Christina, one of Grandma Edie’s granddaughters and Sarah’s oldest friend, had not told her about Keir. Surely, Christina knew of him, had in all likelihood met Keir before; and yet when the two of

them had spoken the other day, Christina had said nothing. Why?

Sarah closed her eyes, overwhelmed by the many questions that raced through her head. It seemed that quite a few plans had been afoot, and that although she had been at the center of each one of them, she had been told very little.

Keir's hands grasped hers, and Sarah lifted her eyes to look at him. "Why was I not told?" She swallowed hard. "I feel like a fool. All of you knew, and—"

Pulling her closer, Keir shook his head, his gaze urging her to abandon this line of thought. "We didna tell ye because," the right corner of his mouth quirked upward, "ye are an awful liar, lass." He chuckled. "Ye know ye are."

Feeling herself blush yet again, Sarah closed her eyes, knowing his words to be true, wishing they were not.

"Listen," Keir began, his hands clasping hers tightly, "Grandma Edie insisted ye not be informed because she worried that somehow my identity could be revealed. She said nothing to protect me." Something apologetic rested in his gaze, and Sarah felt her apprehension wane. "And perhaps she simply wanted ye to have a wee bit of an adventure." He grinned at her wickedly.

"I understand." Sarah nodded, shocked that she had not even once thought of what would happen to Keir if his involvement in her kidnapping—feigned or not—became known. "Yes, of course. Of course, you were right. I *am* a terrible liar. If any of you had told me, I might've...said something, revealed something when Lord Blackmore..." A shiver went through her at the memory of their last encounter. She remembered well the way her former fiancé had advanced upon her, the way she had retreated, terrified out of her mind. Yes, something unwise could have easily slipped past her lips, dooming Keir. The thought alone was awful, and Sarah felt tears rise to her eyes.

Keir's hand once more grasped her chin, urgency in his gaze now. "What happened?"

“I’m sorry.” Sarah blinked away her tears. “I’m sorry I put you at risk. I didn’t even realize...” She closed her eyes, remembering everything Keir had done for her, the way he had stood at her side, always, the way he had helped her stand tall again after a lifetime of cowering. And how had she repaid his devotion? His loyalty?

By doubting him.

“Sarah!” Keir’s voice felt like a slap, jarring her out of her thoughts. “Dunna do this again, lass. All of us agreed to this plan out of our own free will. Nothing that happened or could’ve happened is yer fault.” His gaze held hers imploringly. “Do ye hear me? I need ye to understand this.”

Sarah nodded; yet she could not suppress those flickers of doubt she felt deep within. So many people had risked so much to see her safe, to free her from her engagement. At the time, she had been too terrified of Grandma Edie’s *ludicrous* plan to see it.

But she did now.

And she was grateful.

So very grateful.

Keir nodded in acknowledgment. “Verra well. Then tell me,” he paused, and for a second a muscle in his jaw tightened, “what happened with Blackmore.”

Sarah’s heart and mind shied away from the memory. Still, the fierceness of Keir’s gaze told her that he would not let this go. Once again, he had become her protector, guarding her safety at all cost.

As he had before.

## Chapter Two

## SUDDEN STRANGERS



The crimson had faded from Sarah's cheeks, and in the pale moonlight she almost seemed as white as a sheet as she stood before him, her limbs trembling.

Keir disliked seeing her thus. In fact, he *hated* seeing her thus. He hated that look of fear in her large eyes. He hated the way she seemed to shrink and grow smaller, retreating into herself. He hated that she would not meet his eyes.

"What happened?" Keir asked once more, dreading to know; yet he knew his imagination would fill the blanks in a far worse manner than the truth, would it not? He prayed it was so. "Grandma Edie said ye cried off. How did Blackmore...take it?" Aye, more than once, Keir had wondered how the proud baron would react, if he would bow out gracefully or if he was one to seek revenge upon a perceived wrong done to him.

Keir guessed it was the latter.

Sarah heaved a deep sigh. "He was angry." Her voice wavered as she spoke. "Of course, he was. Who would not be?" Again, she closed her eyes, and Keir could see the memories of that day flash across her face. "I said what Grandma Edie told me to say. I told him I could no longer marry him. I hinted that," she swallowed, and her eyes opened to meet his, "I was no longer innocent."

Keir grinned, and a deep blush shot up into her face. Aye, she was no longer as innocent as she had once been. As ill-

advised as their kisses had been, Keir did not regret a single one.

Instantly, Sarah dropped her gaze. “I apologized and told him that he deserved better,” she finished quickly, clearly mortified to the tips of her hair.

Keir chuckled, loving the sight of her. As uncomfortable as she felt recounting the events of that day, the honest emotions that played across her features were riveting.

Always had been.

Yet...there was more. Keir was certain of it. “What did he say then?” He cleared his throat, gently running the pad of his thumb over Sarah’s chin. “I assume he didn’t simply wish ye well and walk away, did he?”

Swallowing hard, Sarah shook her head. “He did not. He... became angry. Furious.” Her mouth opened and closed as she searched for words. “The way he glared at me with such seething hatred...I felt as though I would burst into flames at any moment. And then he...” Her jaw began to tremble, and Keir could feel it travel all the way down his arm. “He suddenly came toward me. I...I was certain he would...slap me or...”

“Did he?” Keir demanded through gritted teeth, wishing he had been there, cursing himself for ever leaving her side. Had he not been tasked with protecting her?

Sarah shook her head, and Keir released the breath he had been holding. “Perhaps he would have but he did not have the chance.”

Keir felt his brows quirk upward, surprised to see a gentle smile tease the corners of Sarah’s mouth.

“Loki came to my rescue.”

For a moment, Keir stared at Sarah. “Loki?” Aye, he remembered the brown-gray cat with the haughty eyes he had first encountered in the cabin in the woods when preparing it for their stay. The mischievous feline had taken an instant liking to Sarah, guarding her as fiercely as Keir himself.



Sarah nodded. “He arrived with Grandma Edie.” A breezy chuckle left her lips as she shook her head in disbelief. “I thought I was dreaming when I saw him fling himself at Blackmore, hissing and spitting. I thought it couldn’t possibly be true, and I instantly turned around to—” Her lips clamped shut, and the smile vanished from her face, her blush deepening once more.

Keir nodded, understanding her perfectly. “Aye, I shoulda been there. I’m sorry, lass. I promised to protect ye, and I shoulda made certain ye were safe.”

Looking up at him, Sarah shook her head. “No, I...I simply hoped to see you again.” Keir could see that she struggled to hold his gaze, years-long instincts telling her to bow her head. But she did not, and Keir felt proud of her. “You promised to return Loki to me, and you kept that promise. Still, I had hoped...”

Keir exhaled slowly, and his fingers finally released her chin. As close as they had come to be during their fortnight in the woods, they had since spent many days apart. They were no longer the only two people in the world, cut off from everything, the small cabin in the woods their whole world.

Keir’s gaze swept over Sarah’s elaborate coiffure, tracing the perfect curls that danced down her temples. One had been picked apart by nervous fingers, the little wisps of hair twirling every which way, wild and untamed. Keir loved the sight of them, and yet he mourned the loss of the small braids he had shown her. The little braids he himself wore. The little braids that suddenly not only made him think of his sister.

But of Sarah as well.

Regret filled him, for their loss weighed far more heavily than he would have expected. It was as though the bond that had once been between them was suddenly no more. Had a fortnight apart truly changed everything? Had they lived in a dream world out in the woods, experiencing something that could never stand against the harsh light of day?

“Why...?” Sarah hesitated, her teeth gnawing upon her lower lip. “Why did you not bring him to me?” Tears

shimmered in her eyes, and Keir felt an inkling of that bond reawaken.

“I wanted to,” he told her honestly, delighting in the way her face began to glow, as though he had promised to fetch the moon from the sky for her. “I planned to.” He shrugged a bit helplessly.

“Grandma Edie,” Sarah exclaimed knowingly, rolling her eyes good-naturedly at the old dowager’s meddlesome tendencies. “Of course.”

“She asked me to run a few errands for her and insisted Loki remain with her.” He grinned at Sarah. “I knew she was planning something but as always I couldna know what.” Again, Keir remembered what the dowager countess had asked of him upon his return to London, and he wondered why she had secured his aid, yet again, should Sarah have need of him. Was the dowager simply being cautious? Or did she already know of trouble brewing upon the horizon?

Keir wanted to ask Sarah but did not wish to upset her. “I’m sorry,” he said instead. “I shoulda insisted.” *I know I wanted to.*

Pulling the cloak more tightly around her shoulders, Sarah waved his words away, as though they held little meaning. Yet the look in her eyes called her a liar.

Keir smiled at her. “Are ye cold?”

Trembling, she rubbed her arms.

“Do ye wish to return inside?”

For a moment, Sarah seemed ready to agree. Then, however, she hesitated, and her gaze moved heavenward. “Perhaps a little bit longer,” she murmured, her eyes aglow as she watched the night sky. “You promised to show me the stars.” She looked at him and smiled.

“Aye, I did.” Stepping behind Sarah, Keir wrapped his arms around her, ignoring her startled expression. “I like ye better warm, remember?” he murmured in her ear as he pulled her deeper into his embrace.

Sarah gasped as his words undoubtedly brought back memories of another night. She had been near freezing, and he had held her close, warming her and whispering those very words to her.

“Better?” Keir asked after a while when her trembling ceased, and she allowed her head to fall back and rest against his shoulder.

A contented sigh drifted from her lips, and she nodded, her gaze sweeping the night sky almost lovingly. “It’s beautiful. So very beautiful.” For a long while, neither one of them said a word before Sarah spoke up once more. “I dreamed of such a night once.”

“Once?” Keir glanced down at her, noting the rosy glow of her cheeks, and grinned. “Was it perhaps the night before that morning when ye came downstairs and suddenly couldna meet my eyes?”

Dropping her gaze, Sarah tried to squirm out of his arms. Perhaps she had not meant to speak out loud, forgetting herself in the moment. *Aye, she’s one easily embarrassed.*

Keir turned her around, his hand grasping hers as he met her reluctant gaze. “What happened in yer dream?”

Sarah’s lips parted, and yet no words fell from them. Her large eyes were wide, almost unblinking, but she did not drop her gaze. And when Keir gave her arm a gentle tug, she came.

“Tell me what happened in yer dream, little wisp,” Keir murmured as he slipped his hands around her middle, drawing her to him. *I missed calling her that.*

Sarah’s eyes were luminous, and her breath quickened as the distance between them shrank. “I think you know.”

Keir grinned, and he allowed his gaze to drop to her lips. “Perhaps I do.” He met her eyes. “Had ye told me that morning,” he murmured, “I woulda kissed ye then and there.” He leaned closer, touching his nose to hers. “I know I wanted to.”

Sarah bit her lower lip. “I wanted you to as well, but I thought—”

Before Sarah could lose herself in another complicated misconception, Keir dipped his head and kissed her. Once again, he knew it to be ill-advised, and once again, he did not care.

Pulling her deeper into his embrace, Keir kissed her as he had wanted to for the past fortnight. It seemed as though an eternity had passed since their time in the woods, since their shared kisses, their nights sleeping in each other's arm. All of a sudden, they were strangers again, meeting here in London as though for the first time.

Aye, Keir wanted that old familiarity back. He wanted to look at her and know what she was thinking. He wanted to tease her until she blushed to the roots of her hair. He wanted to be able to reach for her without fearing that someone might see. They stood worlds apart, their paths guiding them in opposite directions, and yet Keir could not shake the feeling that he was meant to remain at her side. Was that not why he had so readily agreed to guard her once again should the need arise?

Sarah's chilled fingers slid up his neck and into his hair, warming against his skin as she returned his kiss with an eagerness that matched his own. As shy and insecure as Sarah often seemed, she always grew bold and daring whenever she was in his arms. What did that mean?

Looking down into Sarah's eyes, Keir breathed in deeply. "I could kiss ye all night, little wisp," he murmured, once again touching his mouth to hers, "but we'll cause another scandal if we're found out here like this."

Sarah's breath came fast. "I don't think I care."

Keir laughed. "Ye're truly one of a kind, lass. One of a kind." Aye, he felt absolutely certain that he had never met a woman like Sarah before, and he doubted he ever would again. Perhaps it was a thought worth dwelling on.

## Chapter Three

## A FAMILY BREAKFAST



The next morning, Sarah woke with a smile upon her face, for her thoughts still lingered upon the moments she had spent with Keir beneath the stars. Yet there was a part of her that wondered if she had merely been dreaming. Was Keir truly in London? Right here in the Whickertons' townhouse? His chamber only a few doors down from her own?

The thought alone filled Sarah's heart with joy and made her pulse quicken. For the past fortnight, she had done her utmost to remind herself that Keir was lost from her life for good. That he had been hired by the dowager countess in order to ensure the successful completion of her plan.

Nothing more.

Only that was not the truth, was it? At least, not the whole truth. Keir was not merely someone the dowager had hired to fulfill a task. No, he was a friend. Family even, not unlike she was.

Sitting up in bed, Sarah found Loki curled up beside her. The brown-gray feline cracked open one eye, peered at her for a second, and then snuggled back down, purring contentedly. Sarah smiled, stroking his head and scratching him behind his ears the way he liked it. "Did you know who he truly was?" She sighed. "I wish I had known. I mean, I understand why they did not tell me, but I still wish I had known." *If only I'd known that there was a chance to see him again when we parted ways.*

Sarah paused, and Loki made a discontented sound deep in his throat when her fingers ceased their ministrations. “Eventually, he will return home, won’t he?” she murmured into the stillness of the morning. “Of course, he will.”

At the thought, Sarah’s heart instantly sank. Although Keir had told her very little the night before, their focus upon the events that had so recently transpired, she knew that he cared deeply for his family, knew that his place was with them...and that this place was far away.

Up north.

In the Highlands.

Tears pricked at the backs of Sarah’s eyes, and a heavy lump settled in her throat. Indeed, hope was a dangerous thing. It made one forget what was true and what was not. Blurred the line between attainable and impossible. Made one throw caution to the wind and rush headlong into something that would ultimately break one’s heart.

“I’m falling in love with him,” Sarah whispered as tears ran down her cheeks. She had hoped, prayed that it was not so, but she could no longer lie to herself. Even Christina had seen it, had she not? Only days earlier, her oldest friend had teased her about it. Then, Sarah had shaken her head and laughed, not allowing that thought to linger, afraid of what she might discover if she dared look at it more closely.

Yet seeing Keir last night so unexpectedly, all her defenses had come down. His mere presence had wiped them away so easily. Her heart had rejoiced at the sight of him; every feeling she had ever had growing bigger and taller and...out of control.

And now, she knew.

Now, there was no going back.

As a knock sounded on her door, Sarah quickly wiped the tears from her face, blinking her eyes rapidly to chase away those that lingered. “Come in!”

With her usual cheerfulness, Molly bustled into Sarah’s chamber. “Good morning, Miss Sarah. I trust you slept well.”

With her brown hair pulled back tightly, the young woman possessed a bit of a stern expression, but Sarah knew of Molly's kind nature as she had been her family's lady's maid for years. With her father's growing gambling debts, their finances had not allowed for more than one lady's maid, and so, she had shared Molly with her mother. Thankfully, the dowager had managed to bring Molly along after making Sarah her companion and thus removing her from her parents' house and harmful influence. *Oh, what would I do without Grandma Edie?*

"I'm well," Sarah replied, careful not to meet the other woman's gaze directly as she slipped out of bed. "But I'm famished."

Molly beamed then strode toward Sarah's armoire. "Then let's see you readied for breakfast."

Sarah nodded eagerly, for, of course, a steaming cup of tea and a buttered scone sounded heavenly. Still, it was the thought that Keir would no doubt be downstairs in the breakfast parlor alongside the Whickertons that saw Sarah rushing from her chamber with ill-concealed eagerness. *Oh, dear, my face truly is an open book.*

At the sound of the family's voices, Sarah pulled to a halt outside the parlor. She inhaled deeply, trying to calm herself, even though her feet still seemed to be dancing on the spot. As much as the thought of Keir leaving devastated her, she could not bring herself to stay away. After all, it would not lessen the pain once his departure finally came, would it? Perhaps she simply ought to consider herself fortunate to have a few more days with him and not think about tomorrow. Had she not done so before? Out there in the woods? Yes, Sarah had lived in the moment in those days, savoring Keir's company as well as the freedoms her new situation granted her. Oh, thinking back, Sarah realized how deeply she had enjoyed those days.

Inhaling one more deep breath, Sarah moved forward and stepped across the threshold and into the parlor. Of course, it was filled with people, happy faces everywhere, inquisitive voices calling out to her; and yet all Sarah saw was Keir.



Seated at the far-right side of the table, he looked up and their eyes met. Sarah felt her stomach do a little flip, and she prayed she would make it to her seat without incident. Indeed, her legs felt a little unsteady. Even more so, when a teasing grin appeared on Keir's face and he had the audacity to wink at her!

"How did you sleep?" Christina asked with a wide smile as Sarah seated herself most carefully beside her old friend. "You look a bit flushed. Was there something that...kept you awake?"

Sarah wanted to sink into a hole in the ground. Of course, none was conveniently located, and so instead, her only option was to remain where she was as heat slowly crept up her neck and into her cheeks. It felt as though her head had suddenly burst into flames; her cheeks glowing like embers in the grate. *Oh, if only my face didn't reveal every tender emotion, every embarrassing thought.*

Around the table, smiles met her when Sarah finally dared raise her eyes. After all, all the Whickertons had seen her leave the ballroom on Keir's arm the night before. Naturally, they were curious about what had happened between them. Yet, the Whickertons were not mean-spirited. They were not poking fun at her to embarrass her. No, this was the kindhearted, good-natured teasing Sarah had observed since first meeting them. The kind she had never found in her own family. The kind that came naturally to the Whickertons. It was a way of communicating which made life seem lighter, less burdened because so long as one shared a laugh, the world would eventually right itself.

Sarah managed a weak smile. "No, I slept perfectly fine. Thank you." She ignored Christina's wide grin, her eyes moving down the table, irresistibly drawn to Keir.

Yet, he, too, was grinning from ear to ear, clearly delighted, not at all embarrassed. *Of course, he is not the one being teased!* Or had the Whickertons reacted similarly to his appearance in the breakfast parlor?

Sarah wished she knew.

“How much longer do any of you intend to stay in town?” Louisa asked with a sideways smile at Sarah before she redirected her attention toward her family. “I know the Season has only just begun, but...we discussed returning to Barrington Hall.” Sharing a tender smile with her husband Phineas, Viscount Barrington, Louisa slipped her hand into his, and he held it tightly within his own. “I admit I want to be there when Anne’s baby is born.”

Although cousin to the Whickerton siblings, Anne had always felt like another sister. Sarah knew her well, for she had always been very close with Louisa and Leonora. And then, a year before Louisa had married Phineas, Viscount Barrington, Anne had married the man’s younger brother Tobias Hawke. As far as Sarah knew, both couples were close, especially after Louisa and Phineas had been blessed with a beautiful little girl not too long ago and Anne and Tobias were now expecting their own child.

“I agree,” Harriet exclaimed, her unruly, red curls dancing about her head untamed. “As you all know, I never cared much for Town.” She grinned at her husband, the Duke of Clement, a rather stern and proper man. Still, every once in a while, Sarah thought to see Harriet’s exuberance and zest for life rub off on him. In these moments, his eyes would sparkle with mischief and Sarah thought him a changed man.

The Duke of Clement—or Sweet Jack, as Harriet insisted on calling him—nodded in agreement, a matching grin upon his face. “How could any of us forget, *my dear*?”

Harriet narrowed her eyes at him. “Call me *my dear* one more time and I shall—!”

Jack laughed, suddenly not seeming all that proper anymore. “I shall not dare,” he promised her solemnly, then added, “Sweeting.”

Harriet’s eyes narrowed in feigned outrage before she shook her head, tossing her curls about, and leaned into her husband, who did not hesitate to drape an arm about her shoulders. “We could ride across our meadow again,” she murmured quietly, looking up into his eyes.

Something still and utterly mesmerizing fell over Jack's face before he nodded. "I'd like that."

One by one, everyone chimed in, voicing their delight to leave the city behind and return to the country. Juliet and Leonora, the two quieter Whickerton sisters, had always preferred the solitude of nature to the bustling vitality of the city.

Christina's husband Thorne chuckled. "Correct me if I'm wrong," he began, looking around the table, "but did we not just all rush to Town barely a month past?"

Christina eyed her husband with a chiding look. "You know that was because of Sarah." She smiled at her. "But now that she is safe and sound and back with us, there is no reason to linger, is there?" She looked over to Juliet and Christopher. "I think the children do like it better in the country. It is so much more exciting."

Juliet nodded, exchanging a look with her husband. "Yes, Bash keeps asking when we'll return. Apparently, he and Samantha have plans to fortify the fort." She shared a look with Christina that was unique to mothers, Sarah found. It was something she could not quite grasp, like a fleeting breeze brushing by her. No matter how hard she tried to reach for it, keep it from slipping away, her hands only ever closed over thin air.

Lord and Lady Whickerton voiced no objection to the plans being made around the breakfast table. Only Grandma Edie sighed a rather exasperated sigh. "More traveling? Keep in mind that I'm an old woman, and my rather brittle bones do prefer to stay in one place."

Sarah grinned—as did the Whickertons—for while Grandma Edie continued to lament her old age, the woman seemed like a force of nature, all but invincible. Sarah wondered if perhaps it was merely a disguise she put on in order to appear unobtrusive, free to meddle to her heart's delight without anyone the wiser.

"If you wish to remain in Town, Grandmother," Troy, only son to Lord and Lady Whickerton, remarked with an ill-

concealed smirk upon his face, “we would be happy to keep you company. Is that not so, Darling?”

Nora, Troy’s new wife of only a few weeks, nodded. “Of course. Whatever you need.” She smiled at the old lady, that same knowing spark in her eyes. Clearly, no one truly expected Grandma Edie to remain behind.

Still, Sarah reminded herself that as Grandma Edie’s companion, it now fell to her to keep the dowager company. “Is that not what I am here for?” she remarked, offering the dowager a grateful smile. “Am I not your companion now?”

The dowager chuckled. “Oh, sweet girl, I only said that for your father’s benefit,” her expression darkened, “and to pry you from Blackmore’s grip.” She scoffed. “That man could do with a sound lashing if you don’t mind me saying so.” The family chuckled, their heads nodding up and down in agreement. “You’re as free as a bird, my dear, to go where the wind carries you.”

Caught off guard, Sarah blinked her eyes. Did Grandma Edie truly mean that? But why? Perhaps she did not want Sarah to remain with them after all. Had she perhaps been a fool to believe that the Whickertons thought of her as fam—?

“Dear, I can see what you’re thinking,” the dowager interrupted Sarah’s thoughts, “and you’re wrong. You’re family, and you’ll always be welcome here. However,” she held Sarah’s gaze, “we want you to be here because it is your wish, not because you think you do not have a choice.”

Tears came to Sarah’s eyes as the dowager looked at her, the expression in her pale blue eyes heartwarming and yet unwavering. If only Sarah’s own parents had ever looked at her or her sister that way. If only they had ever cared about their daughters’ happiness. *How different my life would have been! And Kate’s!*

The dowager rapped her cane on the floor. “Well, I suppose we’re off to the country again.” She turned to look down the table at Keir. “Will you join us, dear boy? Or return home?” She smiled at him warmly. “Your family must be missing you fiercely...not that we would not love to keep you

here a little while longer.” She chuckled. “After all, they already had you for the first thirty years of your life. Perhaps the next thirty should be ours.”

The Whickertons laughed while Sarah felt her heart pause in her chest. Her gaze remained fixed upon Keir as her mind pictured the moment of their final farewell. Deep cracks appeared in her heart, and she almost started weeping right there at the breakfast table.

“Or is there another kidnapping that requires your attention?” Harriet asked laughing.

Juliet put a quick finger to her lips. “Shhh!” She glanced around the room with caution in her eyes. “Don’t say that. Someone might overhear.”

Harriet shrugged. “Who? A spy?”

“Well...”

Sarah closed her eyes and inhaled a deep breath, her mind no longer focused on the conversation. Indeed, considering anything that might take Keir away was painful and heartbreaking...and Sarah wished it were not so. *Oh, why did I have to be such a fool? Why did I not guard my heart better?*

Inevitably, Sarah’s eyes opened, seeking Keir’s, and her breath shuddered past her lips when she found his gaze directed at her.

More than anyone Sarah had ever known, Keir possessed laughing eyes. Eyes that teased and smiled. In fact, he often seemed to smile with his whole body; he had a light-heartedness about him that made her own heart feel like dancing on the spot. He had such an effect on people, or at least on her, and perhaps it had been that which had made her trust him so quickly.

Now, however, there was something tense and serious in his gaze. Sadness even. And for a moment, Sarah allowed herself to believe that he was as devastated by the thought of his impending departure as she was. *Will he miss me?* she wondered. *Will he think of me every once in a while?*

“Oh, I shall never forget it!” Christina exclaimed rather loudly, and Sarah flinched. “I thought my heart would stop. I was so terrified.”

Sarah blinked, uncertain what topic was being discussed.

Christina pointed a stern finger at Sarah, yet her eyes remained kind. “Don’t you ever allow yourself to be kidnapped again, do you hear?” The corners of her mouth quirked upward, and she smiled. “Or at least not without telling me so beforehand.”

Sarah managed a weak smile. “I promise.” She paused. “But I thought your grandmother would inform you.” Her gaze moved to Grandma Edie, who conveniently ignored her.

Harriet laughed. “She only told us once you had already been taken. We were beside ourselves, and then in the middle of our panicked discussion of what to do, how to help, she remarked rather *casually* that we were not to worry, that you were all right.” She scoffed, trying her best to glare at her grandmother.

Despite the ache in her heart, Sarah smiled. Yes, that sounded like Grandma Edie. “And she didn’t tell me that—” Sarah broke off when she realized what she was about to say. Her eyes snapped around and once again locked onto Keir’s.

“She did not tell you what?” Christina inquired, that knowing spark in her blue eyes yet again. Then she, too, glanced at Keir.

Sarah swallowed, afraid to speak, afraid not to speak. Afraid that either way, all would know how deeply she had come to feel for Keir. Yet, perhaps they already knew. Perhaps they, too, could read it upon her face.

A knock upon the door saved Sarah from a response, and every head turned as a footman entered. “A letter for Miss Mortensen,” he intoned, then walked down the table toward her, holding out a silver platter.

Sarah’s fingers began to tremble the moment she recognized Kate’s handwriting.

“Who is it from?” Harriet inquired with her usual boldness.

Pushing to her feet without another thought, Sarah clutched the letter to her chest. “From my sister,” she mumbled as she stepped away. “Pardon me, but I...I...”

“Of course.” Christina cast her a warm smile. “Go and read it in peace.”

Sarah nodded and rushed toward the door. There, though, she paused momentarily, her gaze darting to Keir, his own tense and full of concern. Yes, he knew what this letter meant. Knew that she worried about her sister. And for one fleeting moment, Sarah thought he would rise and follow her out. Of course, he could not. After all, he was not...

Truly, he was no one to her.

And yet he had come to mean everything.

With trembling fingers, Sarah broke the seal as her feet carried her from the breakfast parlor. She prayed that this day would not bring more heartache.

# Chapter Four



## THE CALL OF FAMILY



Quickening his steps, Keir turned down another hallway, his gaze darting left and right. Ever since Sarah had received her sister's letter, she seemed to have disappeared.

Keir knew how deeply Sarah worried about her sister. During their time together in the woods, they had spoken at length about their families. He had told her of his own sister, Yvaine, of how she had vanished one day, of how he wished he could speak to her again, see her again. And Sarah had reciprocated in kind. She had shared moments of her own childhood with her sister, Katherine, with him. She had confided in him, spoken of a sense of unease, something deep down in her being that made her doubt her sister's well-being despite reassuring letters that arrived almost like clockwork.

The moment this letter had arrived, Sarah's eyes had darkened, the blue in them intensifying in a way that had quickened Keir's pulse. He knew her well. He knew how to read her. Aye, Sarah's expression easily betrayed her emotions, her thoughts, her fears. It had always been thus...at least, as far as Keir knew. After all, he had only known her for a matter of weeks.

And yet somehow it felt as though...he had known her forever.

Rounding a corner, Keir stepped into a small parlor in the very back of the house, not truly expecting to find Sarah, utterly surprised to see her standing by the window. How she had found her way here, he did not know. Perhaps she, too,

had rushed along these corridors almost blindly, simply seeking a place of refuge.

Now, she stood completely still, her back to him and one hand resting upon the cool windowpane. Loki wound around her feet, brushing up against her legs, his amber gaze darting upward in concern.

Keir paused in the doorway then stepped inside and closed the door behind himself. He knew he ought not, but, at the same time, he wanted to be alone with her. “Are ye all right?” He moved closer, watching her carefully, seeing her shoulders rise and fall with a deep breath. “Is yer sister all right?”

Another deep breath followed before Sarah turned from the window. Her cheeks were pale and her eyes wide, yet a frown began to crease her forehead. She met his gaze and then shrugged. “I do not know.” Her eyes darted down to the letter in her hands. “She writes...as she always does.” Their eyes met, Sarah’s need for comfort evident. “She writes that she’s well, that her family is well.” Sarah shook her head, the frown upon her face deepening.

“Ye dunna believe her,” Keir stated, knowing it to be true. “Why?” He stopped an arm’s length away from her, his gaze trailing over her features.

With a helpless expression upon her face, Sarah shrugged. “I do not know. I cannot explain it. I simply...” Again, she shrugged. Then she looked at the letter in her hands, her eyes returning to the words written there. “She writes that she’s looking forward to the birth of her child, that she cannot wait to hold all her children in her arms again.” She looked up and met Keir’s eyes. “It sounds...odd. I don’t know what exactly it is, but something about the way she writes feels...wrong somehow. As though she is not herself.”

Keir nodded. “What is it that ye fear?”

“I don’t know.” She threw up her arms in frustration, a spark of anger lighting up her eyes. “I simply don’t know!” She took a step toward him, her eyes seeking his. “What am I to do? Is this madness? Why can I not trust her words?”

Keir remembered well how Sarah had spoken to him of her sister, about how Katherine had married young and was now already a mother of two little girls. Her husband was a young earl, good-looking and polite, and their parents were quite in raptures about their daughter's most advantageous match. Yet...

"Trust yer instincts," Keir told Sarah, reaching out a hand and grasping hers. He could feel it tremble, and he held it tighter. "There doesna have to be a reason. Ye dunna have to be able to explain why ye're worried. If ye are, ye are. Trust that. Trust yerself."

Heaving a deep sigh, Sarah nodded. "I have to go see her. I'll never be able to let this go if I don't see for myself that she is well. Truly well."

"Ye should go and speak to the dowager." Keir could not help but wonder if this was the trouble the dowager had foreseen, if this was the reason why she had asked him, only a few days ago, if he would be willing to come to Sarah's aid yet again.

"I already spoke to her," Sarah replied, and he could feel her hand shifting beneath his, moving so that her palm slid against his, her fingers tightening around his hand as much as he held hers. "She told me to go and visit Kate. She said as long as I'm not convinced of her well-being, I need to go." Sadness lingered in her eyes, and Keir was surprised to see sudden tears well up.

Without thinking, he moved closer, his other hand reaching to cup her cheek. "What is it?" Her skin felt warm against his own, and he felt her shuddering breath tease his lips.

Sarah closed her eyes and for a moment leaned into his touch before she lowered her head, as though she could not bear to look at him. Then she suddenly stepped back, brushing away his hands. Quick steps carried her to the door; yet once there, she paused as she had before in the breakfast parlor and looked back at him. "Have you decided yet how much longer you will be staying in England," she swallowed hard, "before you return home?"

As understanding dawned, Keir felt every muscle in his body tense up and then relax, like a breath drawn in and then let out. "I'm not sure," he told her with a shrug, burning to see how she would react. "Truth be told, I never planned on staying this long."

Sarah's lower lip quivered, and she pressed them both together before nodding in acknowledgment of his words. In the next instant, she spun around and hurried away, Loki following upon her heel.

In a rush, Keir exhaled the breath he had been holding. Indeed, he ought not have spoken to her the way he had. Yet her reaction had been quite telling. She feared their separation, the loss of whatever it was that had so suddenly developed between them. Keir felt it, too. He had felt it almost from the very beginning, for within a matter of days of meeting her, the thought of bidding her farewell had become painful. It was odd, was it not? To feel about another so deeply after so short a time? Still, Keir did. There was no denying that. He did not wish to leave her. He was, in fact, determined to stay, to stay by her side once more as she embarked on this new endeavor. After all, she would need help. As capable as Sarah had proven herself to be in many ways, she was almost shockingly inexperienced when it came to handling interactions with the world around her. Aye, she would need his help and Keir knew he was glad to offer it.

A sudden sound drew Keir's attention back to the door, and he was surprised to find none other than the dowager countess standing there, leaning heavily upon her walking cane. How she had managed to sneak up on him was beyond Keir. After all, an elderly lady with a walking stick ought not be able to approach a trained hunter without him noticing her long before she reached his side.

Keir smiled. *Aye, Sarah is a distraction to be sure.* "Ye move quite silently, my lady, if ye so choose."

The dowager chuckled, stepping farther into the room on rather loud feet. "We all are capable of a great many things...if we so choose." Her pale blue eyes met his, and once again Keir could not shake the feeling that she was sizing him up,

looking for something very specific. “How much longer are we to continue playing this game?” Her eyebrows rose challengingly as she regarded him with great care.

Keir grinned. “I must say I’m surprised by yer question since it was *ye* who started this game. Is that not so? Did ye not withhold information in order to satisfy yer curiosity?”

The dowager did not look offended in the least. Quite on the contrary, Keir thought to detect a spark of pride, of approval in her gaze. “I assure you it was not done out of curiosity...which, of course, does not mean I was not curious.”

Keir stepped toward her; his gaze trained upon her face. “Then why?” he inquired, wondering if this time around he would actually receive an answer. “Why the secrecy? Why the half-truths?”

The dowager sighed deeply, her watchful eyes never leaving his face. “Do you truly not know?”

Keir felt his gaze narrow and his patience run out. He huffed out a rather exasperated breath, fighting hard to contain a grin that fought to break free. As much as the dowager aggravated him, he had come to love the old lady dearly. “Tell me honestly then,” he demanded, his own brows now rising in challenge, “are ye matchmaking again? Are ye trying to... match me with Sarah?”

The faint stutter in his voice did not escape Keir. Nor did it escape the dowager. It betrayed him. It betrayed how deeply he had come to feel for Sarah, for a lass he had known no more than a few weeks. Indeed, the thought of the dowager scheming and meddling to see Sarah and him matched was one far from unappealing.

“Ultimately,” the dowager began, “my plans and intentions hold no meaning, do they? All that matters is what you choose.” She held his gaze. “You and Sarah, of course.”

Keir cleared his throat. “Sarah’s thoughts are elsewhere at present.” *But what if they were not?* A part of him wondered. *What if there were no distractions? Nothing to draw her attention away from what lingers in the air between us as soon*

*as we step into the same room?* Never before had the thought of marriage entered Keir's mind, and he was rather shocked to find it lingering now. Still, it felt...odd, almost terribly out of place as though he had no right to it.

The dowager nodded. "What will you do? How far are you willing to go to help her?"

*To the ends of the earth* echoed through Keir's head.

The dowager chuckled. "I assume you will not return home to Scotland just yet."

Keir shook his head at the old lady. "So, this is what ye want? For me to accompany Sarah?"

The dowager's eyes narrowed, gazing at him shrewdly. It sent a chill down Keir's back, his skin prickly as though he could sense danger nearby. "If you would rather not," the dowager said slowly, emphasizing each word, "I can find another." Her gaze held his, issuing a challenge, one that Keir could not afford to ignore.

"No," he said with determination, not wanting there to be any doubt. "There is no need. I will accompany her and ensure her safety. Ye have my word."

A pleased smile came to the dowager's face, and she reached out to pat his arm. "Good," was her reply, the certainty in her voice suggesting that she had never for a second had doubts as to the outcome of their conversation. "I shall make all the arrangements." She turned back toward the door, then she looked at him over her shoulder. "And keep me informed, will you?"

Keir chuckled. "I wouldna dream of disappointing ye, my lady." He offered a mock bow, and the dowager laughed.

"Sometimes you remind me of my old friend," she remarked thoughtfully, her gaze distant as she undoubtedly remembered his grandmother and the youth they had spent side by side. "She, too, possessed a whimsical side every once in a while. It usually caught me off guard." A wistful chuckle fell from her lips before she hobbled out of the room, the walking cane thumping loudly on the marble floor.

Keir smiled. He smiled at the dowager's meddlesome ways. He smiled at the prospect of accompanying Sarah, of having more time with her. He smiled because somehow everything was turning out the way he wanted it to...without him ever knowing it. Was that the dowager's gift? To see what others wanted before they themselves even knew?

"Sarah," Keir murmured softly, remembering the many moments they had spent together. "It would seem, little wisp, that our time together is not to end just yet." He smiled deeply. "Perhaps not ever. After all, the dowager isna known to be wrong. Ever."

# Chapter Five



## A FAIRY TALE?



Birchwell, January 1804

That same day

Seated comfortably by the fire, Katherine Dunley, Countess of Birchwell, looked down at the book in her hands. Yet the words seemed to blur, her gaze unfocused, her mind elsewhere. She could not recall what she had read this past hour as her thoughts had strayed from the page again and again and turned back to her sister's letter.

Sighing deeply, Kate set the book aside, her right hand coming to rest upon her rounded belly. "Oh, what I wouldn't give to see her again," she murmured to her unborn child. "But it is not to be. Perhaps it is better this way. After all, I doubt she would underst—"

"What are you mumbling about?" Kate's mother-in-law, the Dowager Countess of Birchwell, demanded in a raspy voice. Seated in the other armchair on the opposite side of the large fireplace, Kate had thought her asleep.

"It is nothing." Kate offered her a smile, waving her mother-in-law's concerns away.

Only the dowager countess did not have any concerns. At least not with regard to Kate. "It is not a good sign to be speaking to oneself," her husband's mother remarked with a stern look. Then, slowly, she shook her head from side to side, and Kate thought any moment now she would click her tongue in disappointment. "I knew Birchwell should never have

married you,” she scoffed. “But he would not listen. He saw a pretty face and thought he knew better.”

With trembling fingers, Kate retrieved her book, settling her gaze back on the page. She did not reply nor make any attempt to do so. Experience had taught her that there was no need or benefit. Her mother-in-law’s opinion was what it was, and so long as Kate failed to provide an heir, it would not change.

With Kate’s attention focused back on the book in her hands, the dowager seemed to slip back into sleep, her eyes closing and her breath evening. It had become a routine, something that repeated itself day after day after day.

Moments passed, slowly, dragging on one by one, and Kate’s attention once more drifted from the words before her eyes to the sister she had not seen in too long.

Long ago, they used to speak about everything, share all their secrets, and yet lately not a word passed between them. Kate regularly sent letters home, assuring her family that she was well. However, it had been a long time since she had received one from Sarah. Usually, their mother answered, urging Kate to take care and do all she could to provide her husband with the heir he so longed for.

Kate placed a hand upon her belly, feeling her child move within. *Please be a boy*, she begged it silently, knowing how dearly her husband wished for a son. After two daughters and two heartbreaking losses, Kate hoped with all her heart that this child would be the answer to all their prayers.

As her eyes misted with tears, Kate once more set aside the book. She swept her gaze across the large, exquisitely furnished drawing room and remembered what it had been like when her daughters had still been here, at Birchwell. *Oh, how they used to play. Tea parties and dolls. Delighted giggles and inquisitive questions.*

Kate’s heart squeezed painfully at the memories, and more tears fell, quickly replaced by new ones. Most days, she found it hard to stem their flow; though, she was uncertain what it was that brought them forth. Yet the tears came, relentlessly.

Perhaps it is the quiet that weighed so heavily upon her mind and heart. Yes, without her daughters, the house was too quiet. Of course, Kate understood her husband's concern, his concern for this new child after the losses they had suffered. But did he have to send her two precious daughters away? Could a mother's well-being ever be enhanced by the absence of her children? Of course, she could no longer play with them as she had before. Of course, she needed rest now more than ever. Yet could he not see that without her children her spirits were subdued to the point of melancholy? Was this truly beneficial to her pregnancy?

"More tears?" her mother-in-law demanded all of a sudden, making Kate flinch. The dowager's tone was reproachful, for it held not even a hint of compassion or concern, and to Kate, it felt like a slap in the face. "Every day, you shed countless tears when you should delight in your good fortune," she scoffed. "Truthfully, I have never seen a husband dote on his wife as Birchwell dotes on you. And yet, there is no gratitude in you, is there?"

Kate pressed her lips together against the sob that threatened to rise in her throat. She knew by now that her mother-in-law did not possess a compassionate bone in her body. In the beginning, upon first meeting her, Kate had felt herself reminded of another grandmother she knew. While her own grandmothers had passed away when she had still been a child, her family had always been close with their neighbors, the Whickertons.

At the memory of Grandma Edie, a wistful smile came to Kate's face. The old woman had always seemed frail, leaning heavily upon her walking cane, her steps slow and hobbled. Yet she had never been weak of character, her blue eyes rockhard if need be. At the same time, Kate had never met a kinder person. Always did Grandma Edie offer a helping hand to those who needed it, no matter who they were, family, friend, acquaintance or even stranger. Always had she possessed a way with words, a way to see what was needed, where another ached, and she had never hesitated to help.

Kate heaved a deep sigh, her gaze darting to her mother-in-law. Though younger than Grandma Edie by at least two decades, the Dowager Countess of Birchwell seemed far older. Both possessed a frail appearance and graying hair, but where Grandma Edie shone with kindness and compassion, Kate's mother-in-law knew only reproach and criticism. They were like day and night, and all of a sudden, Kate's heart ached for the only grandmother she had ever known. How many years had passed since they had last seen one another?

Too many.

Far too many.

Only dim memories remained. The glow and warmth of Grandma Edie's presence had long since dimmed beneath the icy cold her mother-in-law spread through the manor. Kate often wondered how the woman had become such a coldhearted person. No one was born like that, were they? Had something happened in her past to make her so unfeeling? Kate did not know, and she doubted she ever would.

Sadness engulfed Kate at the thought that Augusta, Dorothea and this new child would never know such a grandmother. After all, Kate's own mother as well as her husband's were both the same, caring for nothing but reputation and societal standing, constantly reciting rules and criticizing their children, pushing them to be better, to be perfect, as society demanded. They knew not how to laugh and smile, how to be kind and encouraging, how to live...truly live.

Kate's thoughts drifted back to her own childhood. Despite her mother's cold heart, she had had her sister. She had had Sarah. They had stood together against the rest of the world, even their parents. They had shared love and joy and laughter, and it had sustained Kate for a long time. It had made her brave and daring and hopeful, and she had walked into her future without hesitation, without fear. Indeed, perhaps it had made her too brave, after all. Perhaps she ought to have been a bit more cautious, a bit more doubting. If she had, would she have seen this coming?

This life?

It was a question Kate often found herself entertaining. Not because she chose to, but simply because it continued to return to the forefront of her mind, circling there, settling there, barely absent.

What if...

Kate burned to know how Sarah fared. Since they no longer spoke, no longer exchanged letters, Kate only knew what everyone knew. Sarah was yet unmarried. Although Kate had heard whispers that her parents had planned several unions for her sister over the past year, none had come to fruition. She wished she knew what had prevented them and whether she ought to be relieved that they had. Had these men been good men? Would they have made good husbands for her sister?

Kate did not know, and yet she wished she did. How was Sarah? And why had she written to her now? Indeed, the words Sarah had written had been carefully chosen. Kate had been able to tell easily. They had sounded odd in a way, as though Sarah had tried her best to write unobtrusively, to not let her true motivation for this letter show through. But what was her true motivation? Was she truly worried for Kate? Was it possible that somehow...Sarah...could sense the pain in Kate's heart?

A smile teased Kate's lips. It had been a long time since anyone had been worried for her. Not for the child she was carrying. But for *her*.

Kate wished she could have told her sister more. She wished she could have told her anything at all. Yet what good was there in worrying Sarah? After all, as soon as her child was born, everything would be fine, would it not?

Sighing deeply, Kate wrapped her arms around her belly, whispering to her unborn child. Yes, soon, everything would be all right. Her daughters would return, and they would all be a family.

They would be happy.

# Chapter Six

## SECRETS & FAREWELLS



Now still lingered in the air when Keir stepped into the stable. He breathed in deeply, savoring the warmth as well as the smell of hay mingling with the scent of the horses. Scout tossed his head, greeting him eagerly, while Autumn merely glanced at him curiously, clearly hoping for another visitor.

Keir smiled, patting Scout's neck. "'Tis a different place, isna it? I suppose the two of ye prefer the outdoors." He sighed, longing tugging upon his heart. "I canna fault ye for that."

Snatching up a brush, Keir began to work on Scout's reddish-brown coat, the gelding's black tail and mane a stark contrast. "Have a little patience. Before long, we shall be on the road again. I promise ye." The thought made him smile.

From down the path, footsteps echoed closer, and Keir looked up, glad to see that it was Sarah who stepped into the stable. Her cheeks shone rosy from the cold, and yet her blue eyes did not sparkle as he had hoped. Indeed, they looked overshadowed, full of sadness, as though she had received awful news. Had something happened to her sister?

"Harriet told me you were here," Sarah said softly, brushing a few snowflakes from her cloak. She moved toward him, and yet her gaze continued to stray from his, as though not daring to linger. "I came to speak with you because..." Her voice trailed off, and then she suddenly stilled, the expression upon her face frozen as though time had suddenly stopped.

Keir was about to step toward her when the expression upon her face suddenly changed. A heartwarming smile teased the corners of her mouth upward and her lips parted on a delighted sigh. "Autumn!"

In answer, the mare tossed her head, neighing softly.

Quick steps carried Sarah forward and she wrapped her arms around her trusted mare, running her hands down her neck and scratching behind her ears. "I thought I'd never see you again." She hugged the mare once more, then she pulled back, stroking down the front of Autumn's face. "You look well, dear girl. How are you?"

Keir smiled, remembering how terrified Sarah had been of horses not too long ago. Yet she had overcome her fears, had dared place her trust in Autumn and been rewarded. "Ye didna know she was here?" Keir asked in a murmur, then he nodded, sighing a bit of an exasperated sigh. "Of course." He briefly closed his eyes and shook his head. "I wonder why she didna tell ye. Though I suppose we shall never find out." He met Sarah's gaze. "The woman keeps secrets better than anyone I've ever met."

Sarah's arm remained wrapped around Autumn's neck. "Perhaps she simply didn't know how much I've come to care for...Autumn." The last word slipped from Sarah's lips in a bit of a sigh, and her eyes instantly darted away from Keir's face. "Perhaps it was simply a mistake."

Keir chuckled. "Do ye truly believe the woman makes mistakes?" He shook his head, doubtful. "I've never known her to. Granted, I've known her for less than a year, and yet I canna help but feel that nothing she does happens by accident."

Sarah chuckled, her features softening. "I suppose you're right." Again, she stroked Autumn's neck before resting her forehead against the young mare's. "Still, I'm very happy to see you again."

For a moment, neither one of them spoke. Keir felt as though something was on Sarah's mind, something she wished



to speak of but did not dare. She seemed uncertain, tense even, and he wondered what had brought her here today.

“Have ye decided what ye will do?” Setting aside the brush, Keir moved over to Sarah. Although Grandma Edie had assured him that she would see to all the necessary preparations for Sarah’s journey to her sister’s estate, he could not shake the feeling that for some reason the dowager had yet to share the details with Sarah. What was the old dowager planning now?

Exhaling slowly, Sarah finally lifted her head and turned to look at him. “I have, yes.” She swallowed hard, that odd look in her eyes once more, as though speaking yet another word almost broke her heart. “I need to see Kate. There simply is no other way for me to know for sure how she is.” She exhaled a slow breath, her gaze fleeting once more, lingering one moment and then gone the next. “I discussed it with Grandma Edie, and she said she would arrange everything.” Her lips thinned, and her hands clamped together. “She said if I am truly concerned, I ought not hesitate.” The ghost of a smile touched her face. “She said what you said.”

Keir nodded. “’Tis good news then. How soon do ye wish to leave?” Of course, Keir had few belongings. He could be ready to depart within the hour. Still, he liked knowing ahead of time.

A shuddering breath left Sarah’s lips. “She said I am to depart on the morrow.” Her eyes blinked rapidly, as though to discourage tears.

Keir frowned. “Are ye all right? Ye seem out of sorts. Has something happened?”

Forcing a smile, Sarah shook her head, her eyes blinking even more rapidly than before. “And what of you?” she asked instead of answering his question. “When will you return home? I’m certain your family misses you dearly. Harriet said you received a letter from them only this morning.” Her voice almost broke on the last word.

Keir nodded, absentmindedly patting his coat above his chest where he kept the letter in an inside pocket. “Aye, they

urged me to return home. I admit I've never been away for quite so long. It does feel strange."

Sarah offered him a weak smile. "The Highlands must be a beautiful place." A tremble seized her jaw, and she bit down hard to hide it.

"Aye, 'tis endless and the epitome of freedom for me." His frown deepened as he watched her shiver. "I love the rolling hills as much as the rolling sea." He paused then reached out a hand toward her.

Sarah, though, stepped back, moving out of reach. "Do you already know when you shall return to see it again?"

Keir stilled, realizing in that moment—rather belatedly!—that Sarah thought he would be leaving for home soon. Again, he heaved a deep sigh, wondering about the dowager's intentions. When discussing her travel arrangements with Sarah, had the old lady failed to mention that *he* would be accompanying Sarah? Clearly, it was so.

"Sarah, listen, I dunna know why she didna tell ye, but—"

In the blink of an eye, Sarah flung herself into his arms, her hands reaching for him as she pushed herself up onto her toes and then planted a kiss upon his lips.

Startled, Keir stilled...then instinctively, he closed his arms around her, pulling her against him. His hands slipped beneath her cloak and curled into her woolen dress, molding her body to his in a shockingly intimate way. The feel of her reminded Keir of the night he had found her ice-cold and shivering in bed after the fire had gone out, and his kiss grew bolder. One hand slipped into her hair, cupping the back of her head, and urging her closer still.

And Sarah came.

She did not hesitate, did not reconsider or retreat. As timid and insecure as Sarah often appeared, his little wisp had never been anything but daring and bold in his arms. Keir felt the tips of her fingers beneath his collar where his pulse thundered like a stampeding herd of Highland cattle. He felt her heart

beat as wildly as his own, her breath warm and mingling with his as she kissed him with a passion he had not expected.

The sound of approaching footsteps quickly shattered the moment, and Sarah surged out of his arms with alarming speed. Her blue eyes were wide and unblinking as she stared up at him, and her breath came as fast as his own.

“Sarah,” Keir began, stepping toward her.

Again, though, she withdrew, almost flinching away as tears filled her eyes. “I shall miss you,” she whispered as the sound of footsteps drew closer. “I shall miss you terribly, and I hope that perhaps one day...we shall see each other again.” A lone tear rolled down her cheek as she pressed her lips into a tight line to keep them from quivering.

Keir moved quickly, not wanting her to escape again. His hand closed over her upper arm, and he pulled her closer while his other reached to brush away the tear upon her cheek. “Sarah, listen, I—”

With an audible *creak*, the door to the stable was pulled open and the voices of Phineas and Drake drifted to their ears.

“Tables seem to have turned,” Phineas, Louisa’s husband, remarked with a chuckle. “Now, we’re the ones being sent out on errands. What do you suppose Grandma Edie has in mind now?”

Drake, Leonora’s husband, made a noncommittal sound. “I don’t know.”

“But you trust her?”

“Do you not?”

Quick as a mouse, Sarah used this moment of distraction to slip from Keir’s grasp. “Goodbye,” she whispered, then she spun around and hurried out the back door.

Stunned, Keir remained behind; Sarah’s warmth still lingering in every fiber of his being. He did not quite know how he felt, but he knew that he had made the right choice. Leaving Sarah and returning home became more and more unthinkable each day.

Clearly, Sarah felt the same way.

Aye, the thought of their separation seemed unbearable to her. Just as it was to him, so much so that he had decided to remain by her side. Only Sarah did not know that.

Yet.

Keir smiled, wondering what her face would tell him on the morrow when she came to realize that he would not return home to Scotland after all. Would it light up like the morning sky, every thought, every emotion written clearly upon it?

Keir did not doubt it. Aye, he liked that about her. In fact, he loved that about her.

“I oughta speak to her now though,” Keir murmured, and he made to hasten after her. However, in that moment, Drake and Phineas spotted him, their calls of greeting urging him to turn back.

“Let me ask you something,” Phineas said with a grin as he and Drake stepped up to Keir. “All this time when Grandma Edie sent you out on errands, did she tell you what they were about?”

Keir chuckled. “No, not a word.”

Phineas cast a knowing grin at Drake, whose face did not betray any emotion at all. “See? I told you. We’ll go to our graves without ever knowing why she sent us off to—” He broke off, frowning. “Where are we off to again?”

Amused, Keir listened as Phineas and Drake shared the details of their *errand* with him. While Phineas loudly objected to being kept in the dark, Drake seemed perfectly fine following the dowager’s orders. Indeed, Leonora’s husband was a deeply loyal man, and Grandma Edie had clearly earned his trust. In Keir’s opinion, the man would ride to the ends of the earth if asked without ever knowing why. Not that Phineas was less dedicated; however, he tended to express himself more loudly—especially in comparison to his rather taciturn friend.

“Why would she want to know about Blackmore’s business affairs?” Phineas grumbled, shaking his head. “After

all, Sarah is safe here now.” He looked at Keir. “Isn’t she?”

Keir felt his insides tighten. “I certainly hope so. Though, Blackmore doesn’t strike me as a man who simply accepts a blow dealt him.” Drake nodded in agreement. “Perhaps she simply means to keep an eye on him.”

The expression on Phineas’ face grew serious, all humor now gone, and he nodded. “Don’t worry,” he said to Keir, grasping his shoulder in reassurance. “We’ll go dig a little. Hopefully, we’ll find nothing to worry about.”

Keir hoped that, too. Still, he was glad to hear that the dowager was keeping an eye on Blackmore. Indeed, it was good to have her in one’s corner.

Very good, indeed.

# Chapter Seven

## CONSEQUENCES



**B**lindly, Sarah rushed back inside, hastily brushing away her tears. Her heart ached, and every instinct she had ever possessed told her to turn around, head back the path she had come and fling herself back into Keir's arms.

Only she could not.

No matter how she had come to feel for him, come tomorrow he would no longer be a part of her life. In a matter of days, he would return home.

To the Highlands.

To his family.

To a life that did not include her.

As much as Sarah had thought herself fortunate to be reunited with Keir here in the Whickertons' townhouse, she now wondered if perhaps the last few days had made her heart ache even worse. Would it have been easier for her to erase him from her mind had they not seen each other again? Sarah did not know. All she did know was that she hurt all over. She told herself not to mourn his departure but to consider herself fortunate instead. Every moment with him had been precious, and she had been able to collect wonderful memories that would forever stay with her and never leave.

Yet her own words felt hollow, did nothing to ease that ache in her heart. The feel of their kiss still lingered, reminding her with each step she took how much he had come to mean to her. *How did this happen?* Never in all her years

had Sarah truly lost her heart to another. *Why now? Why now when it is so utterly inconvenient?*

Wiping her sleeve across her eyes, Sarah willed her tears to retreat. After all, there was no use in crying over what was. Indeed, she ought to remember the good moments instead.

A disbelieving chuckle left Sarah's lips as she hastened along the corridor toward her chamber. "I kissed him," she whispered to herself, wondering where she had found the courage to do so, wondering how he had felt about it. After all, he had returned her kiss, had he not?

Sinking into this most recent memory, Sarah closed the door behind her, leaning back against the sturdy wood. She closed her eyes for but a moment, determined to allow her thoughts to linger on something good, when a sudden knock upon her door jarred her from her thoughts. "Sarah!" called Christina's voice. "Open up! It's me!"

Sarah flinched, then she quickly ensured that her cheeks were free of tears before reluctantly opening the door and allowing Christina inside.

Her friend looked at her through narrowed eyes, confusion marking her features. "I've been calling out to you. Did you not hear me?" Her frown lessened, and the hint of a smile touched her face. "Where were your thoughts? You must've been utterly distracted." She took a step closer, and her frown deepened once more. "You've been crying." She grasped Sarah's hands. "What happened? Tell me this instant!"

Overwhelmed, Sarah stared at her oldest friend. As much as they had always shared with one another, in that moment Sarah did not have the strength to confide in Christina and tell her of all that had happened, all that she had come to feel. "Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded instead.

Christina frowned. "Tell you what?"

"Who Keir truly was!" Sarah snapped, jerking her hands back. Then she strode across the room, needing some distance. Indeed, anger felt less crippling than sorrow. "You all knew. And you did not tell me. You let me think he was some...some



common criminal hired to abduct me. When I first saw him that night, I was terrified of him!” *Oh, perhaps it would have been better if he had remained a stranger! Even a stranger I feared.*

Christina sighed. “I’m sorry. Believe me, I wanted to, but there was the matter of Keir’s safety to consider should—”

“No!” Sarah interrupted, spinning around and fixing her friend with a hard look. “Later.” She exhaled a deep breath, trying to calm her thoughts. “I mean, when all of this was over, and your grandmother brought me here. We walked through the garden down there,” Sarah snapped, pointing an accusing finger out the window, “and I told you that I did not even know who he truly was, that I did not even know his full name.” She shook her head, suddenly remembering that day so clearly. “You told me to see him again. You told me not to give up on him, and yet...you never said a word about who he was. Why?”

With an apologetic look in her blue eyes, Christina stepped toward Sarah. “I’m sorry. I wanted to but Grandma asked me to keep silent.”

“But why?”

Christina shrugged. “I don’t know. You know how she is. She rarely explains anything. But,” she paused, and a slow smile spread across her face, “I think...we think that she might be playing matchmaker again.” A wicked twinkle rested in Christina’s eyes as she seemed to bounce upon her feet, eagerness only too obvious in her inability to remain still.

“Matchmaking?” Sarah frowned. “That makes no sense. You truly think that your grandmother is trying to match me... with...?” All of a sudden, the world began to spin, and Sarah clutched her friend’s hands tightly.

“We can’t be certain,” Christina said, urging Sarah to seat herself on the foot of the bed. “When Keir first came here, we thought Grandma meant him for Juliet.” She laughed. “We were quite certain and, as you know, wrong.” She seated herself beside Sarah, holding her hands within her own. “Still, I think she wanted us to believe so—especially Christopher.

Oh, he was so jealous, and it made him realize how much he loved Juliet.” She shook her head, chuckling. “Then later, we found out that she had asked him to come to help you, that all along, each and every errand she had sent him on over the past half a year had been in preparation for your kidnapping.” Christina grinned, bumping her shoulder playfully against Sarah’s. “Honestly, I never thought beyond that. But then you returned and...I saw that look in your eyes and I thought... perhaps.”

Sarah exhaled a shuddering breath, her emotions raw and painful. “He’s returning home,” she whispered, fighting down the tears that threatened.

Christina frowned. “Are you certain?”

Sarah nodded, pulling Loki onto her lap. The feline purred softly, rubbing his head against her hand. “He told me so. His family wants him to return home, and he misses them. I know he does.”

Disappointment fell over Christina’s face. “I’m so sorry. I truly thought...”

Sarah shrugged. “Perhaps you were right. Perhaps it was your grandmother’s intention to see us...matched.” A tremor gripped her jaw, and she tightened her hold on Loki until he began to squirm. “Sometimes, though, good intentions aren’t enough.”

“But you love him,” Christina protested, her wide blue eyes staring at Sarah. “Will you truly do nothing? Will you truly let him ride away?”

Sarah felt like sinking to the floor and weeping uncontrollably, but what would that accomplish? The truth was that she knew nothing of Keir’s world. Perhaps there was someone waiting for him back home. And even if there was not. How did the Scots conduct marriage business? Would Keir’s parents arrange his union as Sarah’s had sought to do for her? Was he free to choose? Of course, even if he was that did not mean he ever would dream of choosing *her*. Perhaps the sparks between them were nothing more than an infatuation for him. Perhaps he had felt this way before.

Perhaps more than once. “We’re from different worlds,” she repeated as she had before. “That has not changed. Even should he...care for me...” The sentence remained unfinished, for the thought that Keir could truly care for her the way she cared for him overwhelmed Sarah’s heart instantly, making her want to weep and dance with joy at the same time. After all, sometimes good intentions and wishful thinking and hope were simply not enough.

Sometimes, not even love was.

Christina clearly disagreed. Sarah could see it in the determined twinkle that came to her friend’s eyes. A twinkle that always meant she was getting ready to argue her point. And so, Sarah quickly said, “Will you look after Loki while I’m gone?”

Christina’s mouth stilled halfway open, and she looked down at the purring feline. “Truly? You’re asking me? Have you forgotten that Harriet is the lost creature enthusiast?”

“He is not lost,” Sarah corrected, scratching Loki’s belly, his soft paws resting gently against her skin. “He belongs with me, and I intend to keep him. But I don’t know what will await me at Birchwell, and so I don’t believe it would be a good idea to take him along. So, will you look after him?”

Huffing out a rather displeased-sounding breath, Christina nodded. “Very well if you insist.” She lifted a finger in warning. “But if he scratches me, I’ll hand him over to Harry.” She lowered her gaze to Loki. “No scratching, understood?”

Loki eyed her with such a haughty expression, suggesting that such behavior was beneath him, that Sarah could not help but laugh.

Christina grinned. “He’s a rather unusual cat, isn’t he?”

“Keir thinks he used to be a king in a past life,” Sarah said before she could stop herself, for the mere mention of Keir instantly brought a fresh pang of disappointed longing to her heart.

“He might be right,” Christina replied, eyeing Loki curiously. “He looks so high and mighty, don’t you think? As

though he thinks he's better than us." She chuckled, then looked up and took one of Sarah's hands. "I'll take good care of him. I promise."

"Thank you," Sarah breathed in relief.

"What do you think you will find at Birchwell?" Christina asked, and Sarah smiled at her gratefully for not directing their conversation back to Keir. "What is it that worries you?"

Sarah shrugged. "I wish I knew. All I know is that I have this feeling that...something isn't right. That Kate needs me." That, too, had been Keir's suggestion. After Sarah had confided in him about how she and Kate had once promised one another to come to each other's rescue, if need be, Keir had urged her to keep that promise, not doubting for a second that she could. After all, in his opinion, Sarah had rescued herself. All he had done had been to offer a bit of help.

Christina nodded. "I don't remember Lord Birchwell all that well. I only ever truly saw him once at Kate's wedding." She put a finger to the corner of her mouth, thinking. "At least, he's not an old man, about ten years Kate's senior, I would say."

Sarah nodded. "Yes, and he was handsome and polite. He seemed so taken with Kate. He couldn't stop staring at her."

"That sounds promising, does it not?" Christina remarked whereas the look upon her face whispered of doubt. "Still, good looks and polite manners are no guarantee for a good heart." Her brows rose meaningfully.

Sarah sighed deeply. "Yes, first impressions can be deceiving, can be wrong. He seemed amiable," she paused and met Christina's eyes, "but what if he's not? What if Kate is not happy? What if she's far, far from happy? What do I do then?" Indeed, should her sister's husband prove unworthy of her, there was nothing Sarah could do, was there? That was the shocking truth! All she could do was to offer her sister comfort, a shoulder to cry on perhaps.

Nothing more.

“I wish I could give you a simple answer.” Christina squeezed Sarah’s hand encouragingly, the look in her eyes far from one of surrender. “Yet if there is anything my grandmother, my parents ever truly taught me, it is that there is always a way. It might be hard to see, to find, but it is there, nonetheless.” She held Sarah’s eyes imploringly. “Remember that you are not alone, that you’re family, and that we will stand with you if need be.” Tears misted Christina’s eyes, and Sarah found her own throat close up. “You can call on us whenever you need to, and we shall answer. Always.”

The two old friends embraced, holding onto one another as they had since childhood, tears streaming down their faces. “I shall miss you dearly,” Sarah whispered. “I shall miss all of you. Thank you so much for everything you’ve done. I shall never forget.”

Christina sat back and looked into Sarah’s eyes, brushing a loose curl behind her ear. “You’re my friend, you’re my sister; it’s what family does.” She chuckled through the tears that still lingered upon her cheeks and clung to her eyelashes. “Promise that you will write to me.”

Sarah nodded. “Promise.” Brushing the tears from her eyes, she rose to her feet and rang for Molly. “If I am to leave on the morrow, I need to pack.” She inhaled a slow, shuddering breath. “I need to prepare.” *Yes, I need to prepare myself to bid Keir farewell one final time.*

As Christina took her leave and Molly came bustling into the room and then quickly busied herself packing Sarah’s belongings, Sarah pulled Loki into her arms once more and strode over to the window, overlooking the snow-covered garden. “You will have it good here with the Whickertons,” she told Loki, scratching him beneath his chin. “And I promise I shall be back as soon as I can.”

*At least, Loki will be awaiting my return,* Sarah thought. *Keir, however, will be long gone.* The thought brought fresh tears to her eyes, and Sarah kept her gaze fixed out the window so Molly would not see.

# Chapter Eight

## A TRUTH REVEALED



With his few belongings packed quickly, Keir stepped outside early the next morning. London appeared still asleep, only distant sounds drifting to his ears; yet the morning remained undisturbed. Snowflakes fell from the heavens, dancing down to settle upon the cobbled streets. The carriage was already covered in a thin layer, and as he walked, he left shallow footprints behind.

With practiced ease, Keir ensured that the carriage as well as the horses had been well taken care of and were ready for their journey. Scout tossed his head eagerly while Autumn waited patiently beside the carriage drawn by two chestnut-colored mares. Two footmen began loading Sarah's luggage onto the carriage, and her lady's maid carried a stack of blankets into the interior.

Then, the front door opened and the family stepped outside, Sarah amongst them. It seemed every Whickerton wished to embrace her, wish her well and assure her that she need only send word if any help was required. Keir saw laughing faces but also eyes misted with tears and sad smiles as farewells were uttered again and again, the moment of departure drawn out as none of them seemed to be able to say goodbye. Eventually, the dowager stepped forward, rapping her walking cane onto the cobbled sidewalk and ushering Sarah toward the carriage.

And then Sarah stood before him, and Keir felt his heart pause in his chest, for he could not help but wonder if some of the tears that clung to her lashes were for him. *Does she still*

*not know that I will accompany her once more?* He truly ought to have spoken to her the day before. However, after speaking to Phineas and Drake, he had been unable to catch a moment alone with her. And somehow, Keir had thought the topic too...intimate to discuss in front of the family.

Keir glanced at the dowager a few steps behind, not in the least surprised to see a conspiratorial spark light up her pale eyes. Of course, Grandma Edie had not uttered a word, had she?

With her gaze lowered to the ground, Sarah took another step closer to him, her breath shuddering past her lips and her fingers fidgeting nervously with a frayed handkerchief. Then she lifted her chin and her eyes met his, her own slightly red-rimmed and a rosy glow upon her cheeks. "I suppose this is goodbye," she murmured, and her voice broke.

Keir hated seeing her like this and knew that he truly ought to have spoken to her earlier. Yet a part of him had wanted to see her face this morning. As selfish as that was, he had wanted to look into her eyes and know how she felt.

Now, he did.

Yet with the entire Whickerton clan watching them, there was very little he could do. Still, he opened his mouth to reassure her, to finally tell her that he would not be leaving, not be returning to Scotland just yet. Only the dowager beat him to it. A few hobbled steps carried her forward, and then she stood beside them. "I entrusted her to you once," she said to Keir with a sideways glance at Sarah, "and I do not hesitate to do so again."

Ever so slowly, Sarah's eyes widened, her gaze moving from the dowager to him and back.

"Look after our Sarah," Grandma Edie instructed with a stern look in Keir's direction, "and return her to us safely." A wickedly amusing smile rested upon her lips, and Keir almost laughed. "Have a pleasant journey," she added as the cold made her shiver. "I fear I need to return indoors. This weather is truly dreadful." And with that, she turned upon her heel and returned to the warm embrace of her family.



Keir looked down at Sarah, her blue eyes wide and unblinking as she stared up at him, disbelief edged into every corner of her face. “Is it true?” she gasped breathlessly. “You’re coming with me? Truly?”

“Aye, I am.” Keir watched in fascination as the corners of her mouth began to quirk upward, a slow smile spreading across her face, making her glow and shine in a way Keir had rarely seen. *Is this truly for me?* he wondered, feeling the effects of Sarah’s sudden joy in every deep in his soul.

Suddenly, fresh tears shot to Sarah’s eyes and she hastily dabbed the frayed handkerchief to their corners, trying to stem the flow.

Keir reached out and placed a hand upon her shoulder. “I had no idea this news would disturb ye so, lass,” he remarked teasingly. “Would ye rather I didna come?”

Instantly, her eyes snapped up to meet his, now wide with shock. “No, that is not it. I...” She swallowed hard, one hand reaching out to him before she withdrew it, no doubt aware of their audience. “I do want you to come. I do.”

Keir smiled at her. “Good.”

“Why did you not tell me? I thought...” She dropped her gaze, and a shy smile came to her face. “I wish I had known.” Her eyes rose slowly to meet his once more.

Keir chuckled before leaning in ever so slightly. “If ye recall,” he dropped his voice to a whisper, his gaze locked upon hers, “ye didna give me much choice. I tried to tell ye, but before I could...” He quirked his brows meaningfully, hinting at the way she had flung herself into his arms and kissed him the day before.

Sarah’s blush was instantaneous, and Keir almost pulled her into his arms and kissed her right there on the spot. She looked utterly mortified, barely daring to look at him while casting uneasy glances over her shoulder at the Whickertons. They, too, looked deeply delighted, smiles on every face, and whispered words passing between them as they no doubt speculated about what was going on between him and Sarah.

No doubt, the dowager would fill them in later.

Or perhaps not.

After all, when it came to Grandma Edie, one could never be certain.

“Perhaps we should discuss this later,” Keir suggested with a chuckle.

Sarah nodded, a grateful expression in her eyes.

Nodding to the Whickertons in farewell, Keir offered Sarah his arm. “Allow me to escort ye to yer carriage.”

An unsteady breath left Sarah’s lips, but she stepped forward and then her hand descended upon his arm, a feather-light touch Keir felt in his bones. He handed her into the carriage where her lady’s maid, Molly, already sat waiting, a myriad of blankets draped around her and another pile stacked on the seat Sarah would take. “Before nightfall, we shall stop at an inn and then proceed onward in the morning.” He held Sarah’s gaze. “’Tis a quaint little place. I’ve been there before, and it never fails to remind me...of a cabin in the woods, far away from the rest of the world.”

While Molly seemed far from pleased by his statement, the scrunched-up expression upon her face evidence of that, Sarah’s blush darkened once more and she immediately dropped her gaze.

Aye, Keir would never forget their time together in the woods. Only the two of them. It had become a precious memory, and a part of him wished they could go back there.

Perhaps, judging from the look in her eyes, Sarah did as well.

## Chapter Nine

## LIKE A CABIN IN THE WOODS



As the carriage pulled away from the Whickertons' townhouse and out onto the streets of London, Sarah almost felt her heart explode with joy. Never in her wildest dreams would she have expected Keir to accompany her, to be her protector once more and stand at her side. The mere thought of it brought lightness to her heart, reminding her how differently she always felt with him nearby. Why he had that effect on her Sarah did not know. Yet she knew that he made her feel safe and protected and...

Yes, somehow his presence made her feel stronger, more capable. Even though they had only met a few weeks past, Keir believed in her, believed her capable of so much more than Sarah would have ever thought possible herself. It gave her courage, made her daring, made her...try...

...and not give up.

Yet the tears that threatened once more were tears of utter relief. The thought of bidding Keir farewell had weighed so heavily upon Sarah's heart that feeling it lifted now so unexpectedly made her feel as light as a feather. That crushing pressure was suddenly gone, and her chest rose and fell easily with each freeing breath. *He is not returning to Scotland*, Sarah kept thinking, cautioning herself not to speak out loud. *He's staying here. With me. At least for now.*

Of course, one day Keir *would* return home. Of course, he could not stay forever. Yet in that moment, Sarah forbade herself from thinking of tomorrow. Today was precious, and she would make the most of it.

Sarah frowned when Molly suddenly started to squirm in her seat. “Are you all right?”

Molly’s gaze was fixed upon the blankets that kept her warm when a look of alarm slowly stole onto her face.

“Is something wrong?” Sarah inquired, leaning forward and reaching out a hand to Molly.

Molly, however, seemed not to see or hear her, her gaze fixed upon the blankets upon her lap. She squirmed from side to side, her hands reaching out and under the blankets, tugging at them left and then right.

“Molly, what is it?”

A sudden shriek tore from Molly’s lips and she began to tear the blankets away from her, clawing at them as though they were a creature seeking to devour her.

“Sarah!” came Keir’s alarmed voice from outside the carriage. A moment later, he appeared beside the window, Scout tossing his head agitatedly. Keir’s eyes, too, were wide, and a tense expression rested upon his face. “What’s wrong?”

Sarah shook her head as the carriage drew to a halt and Keir flung the door open. “I don’t know.” She turned to her lady’s maid. “Molly! Please, tell us—”

From beneath Molly’s seat, a gray blur lunged forward and up onto the seat beside Sarah.

“Loki?” Sarah exclaimed in disbelief.

With one foot braced upon the carriage’s floor, Keir broke out into laughter, shaking his head at the rather annoyed-looking feline. “Good day, yer highness,” he greeted him with a feigned bow. “How good of ye to join us.”

Laughing, Sarah pulled the feline into her arms. “We shouldn’t be surprised, should we?” she said to Keir, who shook his head in answer. Then he tipped his hat and closed the door. He pulled himself back into the saddle and rode up ahead. A moment later, the carriage began to sway again as it moved onward.

“Loki, you mischievous little stowaway,” Sarah exclaimed rather affectionately, cradling Loki in her arms. “What are you doing here? You were supposed to stay with Christina.” Still, knowing her friend, Sarah knew that Christina would be grateful to be freed from her promise to take care of Loki. Of course, they could still turn around and bring him back to the Whickertons. Still, the thought of parting with him had Sarah remain quiet. *I’ll write to Christina so she will not worry.*

Trying to catch her breath, Molly glared at Loki. “That cat is a menace!”

Sarah laughed. “I know. But I cannot be angry with him.”

Although Molly clearly looked displeased with that statement, Sarah could not help but welcome Loki’s presence. Ever since their time in the woods, Loki had been her constant companion.

Her protector.

Her friend.

Leaving him behind felt wrong.

Clearly in agreement, Loki settled himself on her lap, purring contentedly as she began to stroke his fur. Sarah, too, felt herself grow more relaxed as she leaned back, her gaze drifting out the window as London slowly fell away. Although she had never been one to enjoy the unknown, Sarah no longer felt trepidation at the thought of what might lie ahead. After all, she was not alone.

Far from it.

Indeed, Sarah’s gaze strayed to Keir countless times that day, watching him ride ahead and then draw back to the carriage, sometimes riding alongside it. Every so often, their eyes would meet, and she felt something she had never felt before. The joy that had found her that morning remained and grew in spades until Sarah could barely believe that Keir was truly with her. It seemed like a dream, something that could not possibly be true.

*Of course, I ought not read too much into it,* Sarah reminded herself. After all, Grandma Edie had once again

asked for his assistance and Keir had granted it. Naturally, that did not mean that he...

Sarah sighed wistfully.

When darkness fell and the inn finally came into view, Sarah realized that the two-story building resembled the cabin in the woods in no way. Indeed, after Keir's words she had expected something entirely different. Her gaze moved to him, and she wondered why he had said what he had. Why had he drawn her thoughts back to their time together? Did the inn remind him of their time in the woods? Truly? But how could it?

Disembarking from the carriage, Sarah stretched her limbs, holding tightly to Loki lest he try to make an escape. Deep down, Sarah knew that he would not leave her, and yet she could not shake the fear of him disappearing into the woods once again, of them being forced to leave him behind.

Keir offered Sarah his arm, and together, they walked into the inn, Molly trailing behind them, muttering under her breath about the cold, the wind, the icy puddles. Sarah grinned, glancing up at Keir, delighting in the answering smirk that came to his face.

At the front desk, Keir rented two rooms, one for himself and one for Sarah and Molly. "Would you see to Loki?" Sarah asked her lady's maid, ignoring the displeased look that came to the young woman's face. "I believe he would love a saucer of milk."

Reluctantly, Molly took an equally displeased-looking Loki from Sarah's arms and carried him up the stairs, still muttering under her breath. This time about cats and their follies.

Turning back to Keir, Sarah found his blue eyes dancing with mirth as his gaze followed Molly and Loki until they were out of sight. "That feline is a menace," he remarked, just as Molly had earlier. Only Keir's voice swung with affection and no small measure of pride.

“Thank you,” Sarah blurted out, almost desperately searching for something to say to prolong this moment. “Thank you for...accompanying me.”

Keir’s gaze returned to her, and he shifted from one foot onto the other, the movement bringing him closer to her. “’Tis my pleasure,” he said with a grin, that teasing sparkle back in his eyes that never failed to heat Sarah’s cheeks.

Dropping her gaze, Sarah gritted her teeth, then pinched her eyes shut and said under her breath, “I’m sorry for... Well, yesterday, in the stable, I...I mean, perhaps I shouldn’t have... I thought you would...And so, I...” Mortification tied her tongue, and once again she wished she could sink into a hole in the ground.

If only.

A low chuckle rumbled in Keir’s throat, and she sensed him move closer. “There’s no need to apologize, lass,” he murmured, and his hand settled upon hers. “I dunna have any regrets. Do ye?”

Lifting her chin, Sarah met his gaze, her own still fleeting. “I’ve never...I mean, I’ve never done anything quite so...” Her blush deepened to the point where her head felt close to bursting into flames.

Keir looked utterly delighted. *The scoundrel!* “Did ye mind when *I* kissed *ye*, little wisp?” His blue eyes seemed to glow in the darkened taproom, the sound of dull conversations a soft hum in the background.

Sarah held her breath for a long moment. “No.”

“Then why do ye think I’d mind yer kiss?” Something inquisitive and equally teasing lay in his gaze that made Sarah begin to fidget with her handkerchief again.

“I don’t know,” she murmured, glancing up at him before dropping her gaze once more. “My mother always said that a lady ought not to be too...eh...”

Keir’s hand settled under her chin, urging her to look at him. “Trust yerself above all others.” His brows arched



meaningfully. “Always use yer own judgement and do what feels right.”

At the wicked delight in Keir’s gaze, an embarrassed smile claimed Sarah’s face. “Well, I...I wanted to, so...”

“I noticed,” Keir chuckled. Then, however, his gaze sobered. “Ye thought I was leaving.”

Sarah nodded, remembering the sleepless night she had spent, believing she would never see him again come morning.

Keir sighed, and for a moment, it looked as though he had more to say. Then, though, he glanced over his shoulder at the taproom. “Care for a bite to eat?”

Sarah nodded eagerly, only now realizing how famished she was.

Again, Keir offered her his arm, and they seated themselves at a small table in the corner near the fireplace. Keir ordered a hearty supper, and soon, Sarah’s chilled body began to warm from the fire and the food alike.

“How is it that you’re here now?” Sarah asked when the first pangs of hunger were satisfied. “I thought you wanted to return home. Did your family not write to you?”

Keir nodded. “Aye, they did, and I reckon they willna be pleased to hear that I’ll be staying in England a while longer.”

Sarah exhaled a slow breath at hearing him say so. She wanted to ask how much longer he intended to stay but did not dare.

Keir’s hand settled upon hers, and Sarah lifted her gaze to meet his eyes. “Dunna worry, lass. They will understand. Family always does.” He grinned at her. “They mightna agree with me, but in the end, they always support me.”

For a moment, Sarah stared at Keir. “It feels odd to hear you say so,” she murmured a bit absentmindedly as images of her own childhood, her own family flashed before her eyes. “I know what you speak of. I’ve seen families like that, particularly the Whickertons.” She blinked, and her gaze resettled upon him. “Yet those that I call family have never

quite acted like this. I've always seen what could be nearby, and yet...it was always somehow out of reach."

For once, there was nothing teasing in Keir's gaze. "Ye're mourning the family ye could have had. 'Tis not an easy thing to accept. As much as every man," he smiled at her, "and every woman forges his or her own destiny, there are still things outside our control."

Sarah nodded. "When we were little, Kate and I, we would sometimes pretend that..." She shrugged. "I don't quite know how to say it. We would pretend that our parents were under some curse, some spell, that, in truth, they loved us but could not show it because of the spell." Sarah chuckled nervously, feeling a bit ashamed of such a notion.

"'Tis in our nature to seek an explanation that suits us," Keir replied in a voice that made Sarah think he spoke from experience.

She eyed him curiously, not quite certain what to ask or if to ask anything at all.

Keir, though, saw her looking, saw the question in her eyes. "My sister never stopped wondering about her family, her birth family," he told her with a deep sigh, his hand still resting upon hers, the tips of his fingers drawing lazy circles upon her skin. "She always wondered if they left her or if something happened to tear them apart, some sort of tragedy. She never quite knew whether to be angry with them or mourn them. As a wee lass, she always conjured stories about what could have happened. Some painted her parents in an evil light, vicious creatures almost, from whom she had escaped and found safety and love elsewhere. In others, they gave their life to protect her from something dark and dangerous, making the ultimate sacrifice because they loved her so."

Tears pricked the backs of Sarah's eyes as she imagined a little girl all alone. "I cannot imagine how she must have felt. As distant as my parents have always been, at least, I had them. And I had Kate." She shook her head softly. "It must've been terrifying for her."

Keir sighed deeply. “I was only eleven at the time, myself, so I dunna remember it all that well. I remember first seeing her.” A smile teased his lips. “She looked like an earth sprite, covered in mud and leaves, her fiery-red hair sticking out in all directions.” He chuckled. “I dunna remember her looking frightened; yet in the beginning she didna speak, and for a long time, we thought she simply couldna.”

“And she never remembered what happened?”

Keir shook his head. “Sometimes she would see things in her dreams, but they never seemed to make any sense. They were only fragments, like a single piece to a puzzle with the rest missing. Alone it resembled nothing familiar.”

Sarah heaved a deep sigh, wondering why the world was like that. Why did children have to suffer such a fate? Was it not the natural order of things for parents to love and protect their child? Of course, it was. Many children had what Sarah had only ever dreamed of, and yet there were countless who did not. Was life simply a game of luck?

“How long has it been since ye’ve seen yer sister?” Keir inquired, his softly rumbling voice drawing Sarah back to the present, the here and now.

She blinked, her eyes focusing upon his face. The sounds around her, like the crackling fire or the muted conversations, once more registered, dancing in the background like leaves tossed about by a strong breeze. “It’s been years,” Sarah confessed, feeling an instant pang of guilt.

A thoughtful expression came to Keir’s face. “Why?”

Sarah closed her eyes, knowing that it was the one question she had not wanted to hear. “Because...Because I could not explain what had happened.” Her eyes snapped open, meeting his. She exhaled a sharp breath, her free hand gesturing wildly to express the confusion she had felt, the confusion she still felt. “At first, everything was as I thought it would be. However, then, with time...” Her mouth opened and closed as she desperately tried to put into words what had kept her from her sister’s side. “I don’t quite know. Somehow, Kate seemed...different.” She threw up her hands, utterly

unsatisfied with the word. “No, she...she felt different. She still spoke and smiled the way she always had, and yet...” Sarah shook her head, completely at a loss.

Despite her confused ramblings, Keir nodded, the expression in his eyes one of understanding. “’Tis the way with family. If ye’re close, ye notice things no one else does. Everything seems the same, and yet ’tis as though ye can sense the change coming.”

Sarah nodded, relieved to hear him say so. “I didn’t know what to do. I no longer knew how to speak to her, whether or not to share secrets, to speak confidentially. She no longer seemed like the sister I’d known all my life. I wasn’t certain if she still felt bound to honor the promises she’d made me, and at the same time, I felt awful for thinking thus.” She shrugged. “And so, we grew apart. I no longer asked to visit and neither did she. And now, here we are.”

Keir’s hand gripped Sarah’s more tightly. “Aye, here ye are, on the way to see yer sister because despite everything, despite distance and time, ye’re still family. Ye might’ve lost yer way for a bit, but eventually what belongs together will always find a way back.”

Blinking back tears, Sarah smiled at him. “How do you know? How can you be so certain?” She squeezed his hand, never wanting to let go. “Sometimes, I feel so hopeless, and then I speak to you, and...” She shrugged. “All of a sudden, I have hope again.”

Keir grinned at her. “’Tis a gift.” He chuckled. “A gift bestowed upon us by my grandmother.”

“Your grandmother? How so?”

Keir sighed, his eyes dancing from memories past, and Sarah recognized the familiar way he was settling in to tell another story. “When she was young, her parents—my great-grandparents—betrothed her to a family friend. She barely knew the man and soon found that although he was a good and decent man, they had nothing in common. Yet she knew she couldna disappoint her parents, for they were good and loving parents, convinced they were doing the right thing for their

daughter. Whenever she tells us that story, she recounts how desperate she felt, certain that all hope was lost, that her future was sealed for good.”

“And then?” Sarah asked eagerly as Keir paused, no doubt for dramatic effect.

He leaned closer as though to whisper a secret. “And then she fell in love.”

Sarah’s eyes opened wide. “With her betrothed?”

Shaking his head, Keir chuckled. “No, with my grandfather, who, as ye know, wasna even an Englishman, but a Scot from the far north.” He sighed almost wistfully, as though he could remember the time he spoke of. “And he loved her, too, but the union could never be.”

Sarah felt a smile light up her face, for she loved Keir’s stories, had loved each and every one he had told her. “And yet they were married. Clearly, they were. How?”

The grin that came to Keir’s face made his eyes glow and the air around them almost dance with joy. “Grandma Edie.”

Sarah’s jaw dropped. “No!”

Keir nodded, grinning from ear to ear.

“How?” Sarah stared at him, wide-eyed, utterly amazed. “How did she do it?”

Keir shrugged. “How she always does it, I suppose. She meddled to her heart’s delight, telling my grandmother not to worry, that all would be well. She said to trust her, and my grandma did.” He lifted his shoulders and let them drop, exhaling slowly. “I suppose after that, my grandmother never once doubted again. ’Twas something that convinced her that no matter what anything is possible. To this day, she always tells us to look on the bright side, to find the single ray of sunshine on a cloudy day.” He squeezed Sarah’s hand. “Grandma Edie taught her that long ago, and my grandma never forgot, and she never let us forget, either.”

Leaning against the backrest of her chair, her hand still wrapped in Keir’s, Sarah sighed deeply, a sigh that relieved the

tension in her shoulders and neck, that made her whole body feel lighter. “It truly is a gift, is it not?”

Keir nodded. “I’ve always thought so.” He held her gaze. “There are countless things in this world we canna control, but we do have a say in how we look at them.” He squeezed her hand, holding on tightly. “Whatever awaits ye, there will be a way. I promise ye.”

Tears misted Sarah’s eyes, and Keir’s image blurred. “Thank you,” she whispered, once again so utterly grateful that he was here, “for everything you’ve done and are still doing. The best things in my life have happened since I met you.” The last sentence slipped from her lips without thought, and Sarah felt instantly mortified. She dropped her gaze and tried to withdraw her hand, but Keir held on tightly.

“Let me escort ye to yer chamber,” he said softly, holding her gaze and pulling her to her feet. Then he placed her hand upon his arm and guided her toward the staircase that led to the guest rooms upstairs. Sarah could feel his strong arm beneath her hand, his presence at her side, safe and reassuring. And yet her breath suddenly came fast, and her thoughts scattered in all directions. Slowly, they walked down the hallway until Keir stopped outside her door. There were no sounds from inside, and Sarah wondered if Molly had already fallen asleep.

“Is this why you are here?” Sarah asked abruptly, unable to keep the thought quiet. It had slowly sneaked up on her during Keir’s story, growing louder and louder until it had become almost deafening.

Still holding onto her hand, Keir looked down at her, a slight frown upon his face. “What is?”

Sarah licked her lips, her mouth suddenly dry. “The gift Grandma Edie bestowed upon you, upon your family.” She tentatively lifted her gaze to meet his, afraid of what she might see there.

Keir’s lips hardened, and the frown that drew down his brows made him look almost angry. Yet he said nothing but merely looked at her.

Sarah felt herself shrink back beneath his gaze, worried that she had said something wrong, something to anger him. Yet the moment the thought entered her mind, she realized that she had never truly seen Keir angry. Was that part of his gift? Had anger simply no place in his life? Though Sarah had never known moments of deep anger herself, she had known countless that spoke of fear and disappointment and shame. Had Keir truly found a way to keep all these dark emotions out of his life? If so, Sarah envied him.

All of a sudden, Keir took a step closer, the tips of his boots brushing against the hem of her skirts. His right arm snaked around her, settling on the small of her back, tentatively at first, then slowly urging her closer. All the while, his eyes never left hers, the expression in his gaze unchanging. “Look at me, Sarah,” he murmured as she tried to drop her gaze.

Inhaling deeply, Sarah complied, feeling herself tremble, uncertain why. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry if what I said—”

His hand upon her back tensed. It felt like a soft tug, and she almost fell against his chest, lifting her hands to brace herself at the last moment. Instantly, she felt his warmth, his heartbeat, suddenly fast and far from controlled.

“I am here, little wisp,” Keir murmured softly, his breath warm as it teased her skin, “because I want to be here.” His blue eyes drilled into hers, holding on, unwavering. “There is no need for gratitude because I want to be here as much as ye want me here.” He looked deeper into her eyes. “Is that not so? Ye didna want me to go home. Ye wanted me here. With ye.”

Barely able to breathe, overwhelmed by the intense look in Keir’s eyes, Sarah nodded. “Yes.” She licked her lips. “Yes, I want you...here.”

Exhaling slowly, Keir nodded. “Good.” Then he released her, slowly, almost reluctantly. But he did. He took a step back and then nodded to her door. “Ye should get some sleep. Ye’ll need it.”

Swaying slightly upon her feet, Sarah nodded in agreement. *Yes, sleep does sound like a good idea.* “Good night,” she murmured and then turned away, her trembling hand reaching for the door handle.

“Oh, and Sarah?”

“Yes?” She turned back around to look at him.

Suddenly, Keir was there. His hands grasped her waist and pulled her to him the moment he dipped his head and pressed a kiss onto her mouth. “Good night, little wisp,” he murmured against her lips, that teasing chuckle once more rumbling deep in his throat, “and stay warm.” A wicked grin graced his features before he stepped back.

Yet again, Sarah’s blush was instantaneous, for those three words drew her back to the night he had climbed into her bed to warm her. She remembered the violent shivers that had shaken her but not nearly as much as she remembered the warmth of Keir’s skin against her own. Yes, it was a moment she would never forget, and Keir knew it, loved to tease her about it. And as much as Sarah disliked it, disliked the traitorous blush that always came to her cheeks; she also loved it.

It was a moment that belonged to the two of them. It was theirs, and would be forever.



# Chapter Ten

## AFTER LONG YEARS



The next morning, they departed early from the inn. Keir could tell that Sarah's thoughts lingered upon her sister, her forehead creased by frown lines, her brows drawn down and her gaze distant. He wondered about the thoughts that currently coursed through her head, the scenarios Sarah probably entertained, seeking an explanation for all that had happened.

A while back, Keir, too, had done so. After his sister had disappeared from one day to the next, he had come up with countless theories of what might have happened. And even though he had known the exercise to be futile, for it would never bring him true answers, he had been unable to stop. Perhaps it was simply human nature to want to know.

Fortunately, the weather remained fine during their journey. Only a few snowflakes fell, draping a light powdery blanket upon the country lanes. They made good time, stopped once at midday to allow the women to stretch their limbs after being cooped up in the carriage all morning, and then proceeded onward. By the time Birchwell came into view, it was already late afternoon, and the day's light was dimming.

Still, Keir's first impression of Birchwell was barely hindered by the waning light. The sun seemed to peek over a gentle slope, its golden-red rays touching the large estate, its marble columns as well as its immaculate lawns. Every bush seemed to grow as it ought to. Every hedge no higher than was permitted. Keir could not shake the feeling that the garden had been set up using mathematical equations, and he wondered if

Lord Birchwell was a man who liked to be in control, or if perhaps he simply had a very capable household staff.

When the carriage finally pulled to a halt in front of the stairs that led to the front entry, Keir dismounted, murmuring soft words of comfort to Scout. The gelding did not seem to care for this new place, flattening his ears as he tossed his head, eager to be off again.

As best as he could, Keir calmed the animal, reminding himself that there was always a reason when a horse was skittish. Was there perhaps simply a dog nearby or an unfamiliar smell? Or was it something utterly different?

As servants appeared to see to the horses and carriage, Keir offered Sarah his arm and helped her alight. Molly followed them, a rather displeased-looking Loki in her arms, who instantly—sensing freedom—squirmed to get away. At first, Molly persisted; however, the moment Loki's claws came out, the young lady's maid had no chance.

A hiss from Loki was quickly followed by a cry of pain from Molly, and then they saw the gray-brown cat disappear around a bush and vanish from sight.

Beside him, Keir felt Sarah tense. Yet when he turned to look at her, the expression upon her face was not one of alarm. "He will come back," she murmured to herself, then she looked up to meet his eyes. "He will come back."

Keir nodded reassuringly. "Of course, he will. I have no doubt he's merely scouting out these new surroundings as any trusted protector would." He smiled at Sarah and felt a bit of strain fall from her posture.

They climbed the front stairs, and a butler bowed low, inviting them inside. After receiving their names, he hurried off in order to alert the master of the house to their arrival.

Keir swept his gaze over the entry hall. It seemed vast and lifeless, not a speck of dust in sight or painting askew. To him, it looked like a museum or a mausoleum, and he was not surprised when he felt a faint shiver go through Sarah. "Didna ye say yer sister had children?"

Sarah nodded, the look in her eyes darkening with concern. “Two little girls,” she murmured, craning her neck to see in all directions as though hoping to spot her nieces. “Augusta and Dorothea.” She looked up at him, a touch of regret in her blue eyes. “I’ve never even seen Dorothea.” She heaved a deep sigh, and her lips thinned in determination. “This visit is long overdue.”

A moment later, the butler returned and ushered them forward and into a drawing room. It was lavishly furnished, and warm flames danced in the massive fireplace. Two armchairs were situated on either side. One was occupied by an elder lady while the other was taken by a young woman, her hands folded over her rounded belly. Oddly enough, Keir spotted Lord Birchwell not by his wife’s side but standing to the right of his mother’s armchair, one hand leisurely placed upon its backrest.

“Welcome to Birchwell,” the man intoned in a voice that did not speak of pleasure. “I admit we are quite surprised by your arrival.” Although Lord Birchwell maintained a polite expression, he failed to hide his irritation.

Beside him, Keir felt Sarah tense, her fingers almost digging into his arm. Her gaze remained fixed upon her sister, and tears collected in the corners of her eyes. Lady Birchwell, too, looked utterly shaken by this unexpected meeting. She sat as still as a statue, her eyes unblinking.

In contrast, Lord Birchwell as well as the dowager paid little attention to Sarah. They granted her no more than a furtive glance before settling their attention on him.

Keir almost chuckled. He knew very well that he did not dress as a gentleman should, and their disapproval was almost palpable. Of course, they wondered as to his identity as well as his connection to Sarah and her family. Yet even without information, they had already decided that they did not approve of him or his connection to their extended family. No doubt, they would prefer to ask him to leave. Unfortunately for them, though, decorum dictated otherwise. After all, Sarah *was* family.

Remembering her manners, the dowager countess rang for tea. Still, the scrunched-up expression upon her face did not change. In fact, she even cast a chiding look at her daughter-in-law, no doubt blaming her for this most inconvenient visit.

Lady Birchwell, however, failed to notice, for her gaze remained upon her sister. She looked pale, her eyes slightly red-rimmed as though she had been crying. Keir saw a clear resemblance between the two young women, though Lady Birchwell's hair was slightly darker than Sarah's, her eyes green and not blue.

Sarah cleared her throat, blinking her eyes rapidly as she fought for composure. "I apologize for our unannounced arrival," she said kindly, smiling at Lord Birchwell and his mother. "Had I known this opportunity would present itself I would have sent a letter in advance, I assure you."

The dowager made a disapproving sound. "How did it present itself?" she demanded in a rough tone, her sharp eyes darting to Keir.

Before Sarah could speak, Keir offered a formal bow. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Keir MacKinnear from the Highlands. I have familial relations to the Earl of Whickerton and was asked by the dowager countess to escort Miss Mortensen to visit her sister."

While Lord Birchwell's eyes merely narrowed, the dowager almost glared at Keir without even attempting to conceal her contempt. "Is that so? How kind of you to comply." Her quick eyes darted to Sarah's hand still upon his arm, her fingers digging in like claws as she stood by his side.

"It is good to see you, Sarah," Lady Birchwell suddenly said into the stillness that had momentarily fallen over the room. "It has been too long, has it not?" Hesitant joy shone in the young woman's eyes, but the way she glanced at her husband and mother-in-law made her seem uneasy.

Keir had no doubt the sisters' reunion would have gone quite differently without the young woman's husband and mother-in-law present. He wished he could think of a way to

spirit them away in order to give Sarah and her sister time alone. Unfortunately, that was not to be.

“Yes, it is good to see you again, Miss Mortensen,” Lord Birchwell agreed, though his tone said otherwise. “We have heard quite the distressing news about you. I trust you are well?”

Keir gritted his teeth as a wave of anger rolled through him at Lord Birchwell’s thinly veiled insult. No doubt he had heard of Sarah’s abduction and, thus, now considered her ruined as did society at large. In all likelihood, he felt that her presence in his home threatened his reputation and would see her gone rather sooner than later.

Though her hand was trembling, Sarah smiled at him kindly. “Yes, I am well. Thank you for your concern.” Her gaze moved to her sister. “And how are you, dear Kate? How are your daughters?”

Keir frowned when he saw a shadow pass over Lady Birchwell’s face, as though the mention of her children brought her pain.

“I’m well,” Lady Birchwell assured her sister with a bit of a forced smile upon her face. “My daughters are well also. Thank you for asking.” She looked up as her husband moved closer to her, their eyes meeting for no more than a moment, but it was enough.

Lady Birchwell’s demeanor changed.

The expression upon her face fell, and she seemed to steel herself against the words she would utter next. “It is most kind of you to visit, dear sister, however, at present my condition does not allow for me to play hostess.” She looked down at her rounded belly then back up at her husband before her gaze returned to her sister. “You’re welcome to stay the night; however, it might be best if you left on the morrow.” She swallowed hard, struggling to maintain the smile upon her face. “Perhaps in the summer there shall be opportunity for a prolonged visit. Does that not sound wonderful?”

For a moment, Sarah seemed uncertain. Clearly, she had not expected her sister to ask her to leave, and Keir doubted that Lady Birchwell did so out of her own free will. He wanted to interfere but knew it was not his place. Then, however, he saw Sarah's expression change, harden. "There is no need to play hostess with me, Kate. I'm your sister, not a guest. I'm here to help you, to read to you, to stroll with you through the garden. Anything you need." She moved closer and then knelt by her sister's chair, reaching out to take her hands. "It has been so long, and I have missed you so much. Please, give us this time. The two of us together again."

Lady Birchwell's lower lip began to quiver, and tears shot to her eyes as she looked down into Sarah's face.

Sarah smiled, squeezing her sister's hands. "I shall not take no for an answer," she said lightly, teasingly, and yet Keir could not shake the feeling that her statement was meant as much for her sister as it was meant for her brother-in-law.

Keir saw the man's jaw harden, his hands clenching, as though he wished to interfere but did not dare. Clearly, he knew what would happen. He knew he could not rid himself of Sarah and still maintain decorum.

Keir almost chuckled, amused by these theatrics society forced upon its members.

Into this tense stillness, tea was delivered, a cup poured for each of them, the sound of sloshing liquid almost deafening. Although Keir had never been one to enjoy drama unfolding before his eyes, he could not help but feel slightly entertained. Indeed, his grandmother had been correct, English upper society was most intriguing to watch...so long as one was not personally affected by its harmful influence.

"I suppose a few days might not be so bad," Lady Birchwell said tentatively, a glowing smile upon her face as she looked into Sarah's eyes. "It has been a long time...dear sister."

Lord Birchwell squared his shoulders, clearly disagreeing with his wife. He shifted uneasily from one foot onto the other, his gaze darting to his mother before quickly returning to some

neutral spot upon the wall ahead of him. The dowager, too, looked quite put out, close to arguing with her daughter-in-law's decision. Yet she held herself back, and Keir wondered what it would take for the old lady to reveal her true commanding nature in front of visitors.

Lady Birchwell rang for the butler, who immediately appeared and then hurried off again with the instructions to have rooms prepared for their visitors. "Will your...", Lady Birchwell began, casting a bit of an uneasy glance past Sarah's shoulder at Keir, "your companion remain here with us?" Her voice dropped even lower. "Or is he to depart?"

Keir grinned inwardly as Sarah turned to look at him, the expression in her eyes surprisingly steady. "No, he shall remain." She exhaled slowly, as though a wave of relief washed over her, and Keir felt the breath pause in his chest. "He is a dear friend, and I wish for him to remain." She turned back to look at her sister. "I hope that is no trouble?"

Though hesitantly, Lady Birchwell shook her head. "Of course not." Another tentative smile danced across her features before she gestured toward Sarah's teacup. "Surely, you must be parched. Would you like—?"

Abruptly, Lord Birchwell stepped forward, arms linked behind his back. "I apologize; however, I must insist we cut this meeting short. My wife is quite fatigued, and in her condition, she is in dire need of rest." He nodded to the butler, who stood in the doorway waiting. "Hempstead shall show you to your rooms."

Though clearly disappointed, Sarah rose to her feet. "Of course." She squeezed Lady Birchwell's hands. "I shall see you at supper then."

Lady Birchwell nodded. "I look forward to it."

Sarah took a step back and then turned to take Keir's offered arm. Together, they walked out of the drawing room, following in the butler's wake, as he led them across the hall, up the winding staircase and along a number of corridors.



Lowering his head toward Sarah, Keir whispered, “What is yer impression?” He waited until she looked up at him. “Do ye find yer fears justified?”

Sarah swallowed and for a moment said not a word. Then, though, she began to nod ever so slightly. “I’m afraid so.” She shrugged, casting a careful glance at the butler’s back, and her voice dropped even lower. “When I look into her eyes, I see my sister; and yet...it is not quite her.” She exhaled slowly, a shiver running down her arm. “I don’t know what to make of it. Of course, we have not seen each other in years. Perhaps it is simply the course of time. People change, do they not?”

“Not at their core,” Keir replied, wishing he could tell Sarah something reassuring. Still, untruthfulness had never served anyone. It was something in his heart and soul. Always had he been a man of his word, and the only reason he had ever withheld the truth from Sarah had been to serve someone dear to him.

Grandma Edie.

Sarah nodded, the look in her eyes not one of surprise. “Well, it is good that we came then.”

Keir smiled at her. “Aye, it is. Always trust yer instincts, little wisp, for they willna lead ye astray.”

Sarah exhaled slowly, and her hand upon his arm seemed to relax. “I shall,” she promised before a new frown drew down her brows. “What do you suppose happened? Clearly, there is no,” she glanced up at him tentatively, “deep connection between her and her husband.”

“At this point, we canna know.” Keir placed his hand upon hers, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “But we willna leave until we find out. I promise ye that.”

An enchanting smile came to Sarah’s lips, and once again Keir had to fight the urge to pull her close and kiss her right then and there.

# Chapter Eleven

## BETWEEN THE LINES



Supper was a tense affair. Even for Sarah. And considering her own rather selfish and self-involved parents and the company they kept, she was quite familiar with rather tense dinner conversations.

“It is always good to find peace and quiet in one’s own home,” Lord Birchwell remarked by and by, his gaze rather pointed and suggestive despite his words. “We abhor the frequent visits of friends and acquaintances one has to suffer in town, which is why we spend most of our time in the country.”

Sarah gritted her teeth, her gaze focused downward at her own dinner plate. A part of her wished to call out her sister’s husband and demand he speak clearly instead of hide behind colorful words. That notion alone surprised Sarah, for she had never experienced it before. Where had it suddenly come from?

Out of the corner of her eye, Sarah glanced at Keir, remembering his words of encouragement, urging her to be herself, to speak truthfully and stand tall. Yes, perhaps it had been his doing. Perhaps she had already changed more than she had thought. Was it the same for Kate? Had she changed because of her husband?

Sarah frowned. Of course, change could be good and bad, but how did one tell the difference? It was all so subjective, dependent upon one’s point of view, one’s own experience, one’s own opinion.

Yet despite this sudden unexpected urge to speak out, polite manners had been drilled into Sarah since infancy, and she simply could not. Not yet. It was simply not done. Especially in her position, she needed to hold her tongue and endure her brother-in-law's rude comments.

“Of course, my wife's well-being is of the utmost importance,” Lord Birchwell droned on. “In her condition, she ought not even be out of bed. Did the doctor not say so?” Instead of addressing his wife, Lord Birchwell turned to look at his mother.

Sarah wondered at the man her sister had married. He possessed pleasant features and a tall stature, making him look most appealing. And yet the way he spoke, the way he treated those around him made Sarah wonder about his heart. Did he care? Was he like many others of their station trapped in a world dictated more by what looked good and right than by what truly was? Or was the face he showed to the world his true self after all?

Sarah could not tell. He seemed to her not unlike this vast, tall-ceilinged dining room, full of pretty things but essentially empty. It was something Sarah had observed many times in her life. She had seen people and places alike, dolled-up and made to look impressive to hide something utterly flawed.

Right now, seated at this long table, with footmen standing at attention, ready to rush forward and provide whatever the master of the house and his guests might desire, Sarah could not help but wish to be elsewhere. Indeed, an image of the snug little cabin in the woods rose in her mind's eye. She once again saw the tiny kitchen, the table with the two rickety chairs, and it brought a smile to her face. It was nothing compared to this elaborate, expensively furnished dining room, and yet it had possessed soul. It had been warm and comforting, and Sarah had loved being there.

The dowager nodded, a sour expression upon her face. “I believe so.” Her gaze came to linger upon Sarah, hard and accusing. “He made it quite clear that any kind of stress, any kind of change to her normal routine could be harmful for mother and child.”

Sarah swallowed hard, unable to brush off their comments. Despite her efforts, they began to linger, needling her, digging into her mind, raising doubts. Was she truly putting her sister and her unborn child at risk by being here? After all, if the doctor had said so...

Lifting her gaze, Sarah looked at Kate. Her eyes were downcast, her fork hovering in midair as though she had all but forgotten about it. She looked pale and tense and, yes, in need of rest. All evening, she had barely said a word, barely eaten a bite. Was she truly unwell?

“Well,” Keir said into the tense stillness that weighed heavily upon Sarah’s shoulders, “’tis good then that ye’re here in the country, far away from any obligation to entertain.” Sarah lifted her gaze and met his eyes, finding her heart grow lighter when she caught the slight twitch of his lips. “Here, in the country,” he looked at her sister, a gentle smile upon his face, “with a loving family to dote upon ye, I have no doubt that ye shall find the peace ye need to prepare for the arrival of the wee one in yer belly.”

Sarah felt herself warm at Keir’s words. Kate, though, looked caught off guard, uncertain how to respond. She cast an uneasy glance at her husband, whose lips had thinned at Keir’s remark. Clearly, he disliked the way Sarah’s companion had spoken to his wife.

To Sarah’s delight, Keir did not seem to care. His smile did not falter, and he met Lord Birchwell’s gaze unflinchingly. “’Tis a lucky coincidence then that we arrived when we did. Clearly, Lady Birchwell will feel much better soon with her sister by her side. Would ye not agree, my lord?”

Sarah had to stifle a laugh, realizing how differently this evening would have gone without Keir’s presence. Yes, he did have a way of looking on the bright side, of finding that one ray of sunshine on a cloudy day. He never felt tempted to bow his head, did he? *Perhaps he does not even know how*, Sarah mused, finding herself once more in awe of the man who had come into her life so unexpectedly.

Lord Birchwell set down his glass rather noisily, his gaze hard. "I suppose," he replied curtly. "However, one can have too much of a good thing, can one not?"

Keir nodded in agreement, seemingly unperturbed by the other man's hostile manner. "Aye, I agree. Too much solitude can have a rather oppressing effect upon one's heart. 'Tis not good to be alone too much. As beautiful as the country is, companionship is what the soul truly needs."

Lord Birchwell's calm demeanor was beginning to slip away. Sarah saw sparks of anger in his eyes, and his hand looked rather clenched upon his fork.

And then his gaze shifted to her.

Sarah felt it like an icy rain upon her skin, and she swallowed hard, her gaze instantly seeking Keir's.

"I must say," Lord Birchwell intoned in a surprisingly cheerful manner, "that we were rather surprised to hear of your...misfortunes, Miss Mortensen." He set his fork down and leaned back in his chair, a smug smile stealing onto his face. "We were expecting a wedding invitation instead of... such dreadful news."

Sarah exhaled slowly, reminding herself not to drop her gaze. She knew what he was doing, and she would not play into his hand. *And my mother sent an invitation, which you, my lord, declined!* "Yes, my lord, I was quite surprised by my misfortune as well. After all, I had not planned upon it." She was rather surprised, too, by the hint of humor in her voice.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sarah saw a wide smile come to Keir's face. It bolstered her spirit and gave her the strength to face her brother-in-law without shame.

Lord Birchwell's lips thinned again, clearly displeased that his words had so little effect on her. "And what of your wedding? Is it yet to be?"

Sarah shook her head. "It is not. Under the circumstances, I cried off." She lifted her chin another fraction, holding his gaze.

The dowager scoffed. “Of course. No gentleman in his right mind would marry...a tainted woman.” Her sharp eyes met Sarah’s, drilling into her. “It was the only decent thing to do. Forcing such an unfortunate connection upon another would be utterly heartless, would you not agree, Miss Mortensen?”

Sarah felt her lower lip tremble, knowing precisely what the dowager spoke of. Indeed, she was ruined now in the eyes of society, and by association those she cared for also suffered. Clearly, the dowager wished to shame Sarah into leaving her home.

To Sarah’s surprise, Keir seemed to bristle at Lady Birchwell’s words. All good humor left him, replaced by something deeply protective, and she felt her heart sigh in relief and gratitude. “’Tis an odd twist of logic, isn’t it?” Keir asked, looking around the table, something challenging in his gaze. “To blame the victim of an atrocity and not the culprit?”

Sarah almost flinched. Of course, in general, Keir’s words were right. Society did punish the innocent more often than not, while those that inflicted pain on others emerged unscathed. Still, in this case, her case, she *was* at fault. After all, she *had* agreed to this kidnapping. Without her consent, it would never have happened. Of course, neither the dowager nor Lord Birchwell knew so...

...and yet they laid blame at her feet.

At Keir’s words, the dowager’s lips thinned and she regarded him like an insect she wished to squash beneath her slipper. “Perhaps,” she conceded before adding, “however, not everyone allows themselves to be made a victim. Most take precautions, mindful of dangerous situations.” Her brows rose accusingly, and her sharp gaze returned to Sarah.

Sarah felt all eyes on her. While Lord Birchwell and the dowager eyed her with open hostility, Katherine’s gaze held sadness and regret.

“’Tis a sad state indeed,” Keir remarked mournfully, “if one can no longer feel safe in one’s own home. Is that not society’s failure? All our failure? Is it not our duty to create a

world in which a young woman is not wrong to feel safe in her own home?” He looked from Lord Birchwell to the dowager, his gaze open and demanding. “I, for one, hold great admiration for Miss Mortensen’s strength in overcoming such an atrocity committed against her.”

Though Lord Birchwell’s expression did not change, he begrudgingly said, “Your words have merit, and I hope that those responsible shall be apprehended swiftly.”

Sarah fought down the smile that sought to claim her features as her eyes met Keir’s. She was utterly grateful for his support, wishing she could tell him so. Yet in that moment, Keir’s eyes looked at her rather insistently, a message there that Sarah failed to understand at first. Then, however, its meaning dawned on her and she turned her attention to her other side, to her sister.

Indeed, Kate looked utterly exhausted, her features even paler than before. She seemed almost slumped over in her chair, one hand upon her belly, her breath labored. Oddly though, despite his earlier words, Lord Birchwell did not seem to notice.

Sarah nodded to Keir and then turned to look at Lord Birchwell. “Oh, my lord, it seems you are correct. My sister does seem tired and in need of rest.” Quickly, she rose to her feet and moved to Kate’s side. “I shall see her upstairs. Please do not be concerned.” She held out her hand to her sister.

Kate looked up at her with wide eyes, something indecisive in her gaze. She briefly glanced at her husband before accepting Sarah’s hand. “I am rather tired,” she murmured under her breath. “Please excuse me.”

Pulling her sister’s arm through her own, Sarah supported her as best as she could and they made their way out of the dining room and into the hall before Lord Birchwell could object. The moment the door closed behind them; Sarah breathed a sigh of relief. “How are you? Truly?”

Kate leaned heavily upon her arm. “I’m fine. Only a bit tired.” She tried to smile, but her features would not allow it.



“Why do you lie to me?”

Kate stopped in her tracks, her head snapping up. “I’m not lying,” she exclaimed, a stunned expression upon her face. “Why would you say that?”

Sarah eyed her sister warily, then tugged her along. “Come. You do need rest. We shall speak of this once you’re safely in your chamber.”

They walked on, and for a long moment, neither one of them spoke. Sarah could all but feel her sister’s thoughts racing, as though she were struggling to conjure some sort of explanation that would satisfy Sarah. *Why does she not simply tell me the truth? Does she not trust me?*

Upon reaching Kate’s chamber, Sarah sent the maid off for some tea and then helped her sister slip into bed. She pulled the covers up around her, entirely mesmerized by the soft movement along her sister’s protruding belly.

Kate chuckled, something warm and loving lighting up her face. “He is often most active when I need rest.” She brushed a hand over her belly. “I have no doubt he will be a handful.”

Sarah seated herself upon the side of the bed. “How can you know it is a boy?”

Kate’s expression darkened. “I do not. I simply hope so.”

Sarah watched the distant gaze that came to her sister’s eyes, the way she fidgeted with the hem of her sleeve, something nervous, almost fearful in her demeanor. “What if it is a girl?”

Kate’s head snapped up, and tears blurred in her eyes.

Sarah reached for her sister’s hands, a deep frown coming to her face. “Would it be so awful? What of Augusta and Dorothea? Would you not adore another little girl like them?”

“Of course, I would,” her sister answered without hesitation. Yet the sad look in her eyes remained. “However, every man wishes for a son, and every lord wishes for an heir. It is the natural order of things.”

Sarah nodded. Of that, she was aware. How could she not be? Was not every aspect of their way of life based upon that one truth? That a lord needed an heir to pass on his title? Did that not lie at the root of everything they did every day? Every rule? Every restriction? Every demand ever placed on a woman?

A son.

More specifically, an heir.

“And what of your daughters?” Sarah inquired carefully, noting how her sister’s shoulders seemed to slump, a shadow falling over her face. “Where are they? Did something happen?” Something cold and dark settled in Sarah’s belly, and fear clawed at her heart. Surely, if the girls had suffered some sort of accident, she would have been informed.

Kate swallowed. “They are well,” she said, lifting her eyes and meeting her sister’s. “I didn’t lie to you. My husband assured me that they are well.”

Sarah’s eyes flew open. “He assured you?” She shook her head, confused. “What does that mean? Where are they?”

Kate sighed. “In my condition,” she said, eyes now unsteady, her voice echoing words that were not her own, “I need peace and quiet, and my daughters are anything but.” Tears choked her voice. “They’re wild and rambunctious and...” A sob tore from her throat.

Sarah pulled her sister into her arms. At first, Kate did not return the embrace but rather sought to end it. However, as Sarah held on, her sister’s resistance began to wane. Her shoulders slumped, and her head fell forward, coming to rest upon Sarah’s shoulder. She wept as her fingers dug into Sarah’s arms, holding on as though for dear life.

For a long while, Sarah held her sister, stunned speechless at seeing Kate thus. She had always been so strong, so vivacious, as though nothing could ever frighten her. Yes, something had changed her, and not for the better it seemed.

Sniffling, Kate drew back, dabbing the hem of her sleeve at her eyes. “It is better like this,” she whispered between

sniffles. “Truly. My husband and I, we...fear for this child.” Wide eyes looked into Sarah’s. “We cannot lose it. Not this one.”

“Not this one,” Sarah echoed, and a cold chill traced itself down her back. “Have you lost a child before?” she asked in a choked voice. “You have, have you not?” Tears shot into her eyes.

Kate nodded, anguish contorting her features. “Yes,” she breathed, her hands once more like claws, digging into Sarah’s flesh. “Twice.” That last word brought forth more tears, and Kate once again sank into Sarah’s arms.

Sarah’s heart broke for her sister. “Why do I not know this? Why did you not tell me?” Yet she knew the answers to these questions. There had been too much distance between them, and such a loss was not something easily shared. It was not something one simply penned in a letter. It was something that tore into one’s heart, ripped it open and made it bleed. Sarah knew that to be true. Even though she was not a mother herself, every fiber of her being felt devastated by the mere thought of it.

“Hush,” Sarah murmured into her sister’s hair the way Kate had done countless times when they had been little. “Hush now. Everything will be well. I’m here.” She tightened her arms around her sister. “I’m here.”

Sobbing uncontrollably, Kate broke apart, and Sarah wondered for how long her sister had been carrying all that pain within her.

It was unthinkable.

## Chapter Twelve

## A FIERCE LADY



Frost lingered in the air, a thin layer of ice draped over everything, each blade of grass, each remaining leaf.

Keir could hear it in every soft crunch beneath their boots as they made their way across the lawn. They had left the path some minutes ago, rounding the large estate to escape the dowager's sharp eyes. As they had found over the past few days, she tended to linger in the drawing room while her son spent most of his time in his study. Both rooms faced the front, and so Keir led Sarah around back toward the gardens and the vast lawns there.

Over the past few days, they had barely had time to speak to one another. Sarah had constantly been at her sister's side, their only time together overshadowed by the presence of others. "Is she feeling any better?"

Sarah nodded. "She no longer seems as pale. Though her spirit is subdued still." She scoffed. "How could it not be?" She turned to look at him. "Her daughters are not here. It seems her husband sent them away."

Keir frowned. "Away where? Why?"

Sarah dropped her gaze, and a heavy, almost mournful sigh left her lips. "Because he fears for their child," she murmured before raising her eyes once more.

Keir saw that they were misted with tears, and instinctually, he moved closer, his hands reaching out to grasp hers.

Sarah pressed her lips tightly together, struggling to maintain her composure. “Since...Since Augusta and Dorothea were born, Kate has lost two children.” Her tears spilled over and slowly snaked down her cheeks.

“Oh, lass, I’m so verra sorry.” Keir reached out a hand and cupped her cheek, brushing away a tear with the pad of his thumb. “’Tis a harsh fate.”

Sniffing, Sarah nodded, a shuddering breath passing her lips. “Of course, she does not seem like herself. No one could go through something like this and remain who they were, could they?”

“I dunna know, lass.” He wished he could tell Sarah something reassuring, something that would ease her worry, her pain. “’Tis no doubt a trying time for yer sister, and she’s in need of those she loves.” He held her gaze. “Her husband doesna seem to know that.”

Sarah frowned. “Why would you say that? I mean, he seems very harsh in his ways; yet he’s clearly worried for her.”

Keir paused, then said, “He’s worried for the child, his heir.” He held Sarah’s gaze, arcing his brows, urging her to see the truth. “Why else would he not see that a mother needs her children? He canna be blind to her pain. A fool would see it. Nah, ’tis not concern for her that guides him.”

The expression upon Sarah’s face became thoughtful. “I thought so, too,” she murmured, seeking his gaze again. “But what if we’re wrong? After all, he, too, lost his children. Perhaps it simply made him very, very fearful.”

Keir nodded. “Aye, ’tis possible. Still, I have yet to see an affectionate look pass between them. If they were once close, they are not anymore.” He squeezed Sarah’s hand. “It seems yer sister is quite alone here with no one to confide in, no one to love.” He smiled at her. “Except for ye.”

“What do I do?”

Keir shrugged. “’Tis a difficult situation. Clearly, Lord Birchwell as well as the dowager wish us gone. They do not seem open to suggestions. All they think about is the child.”

He sighed. "If it is stillborn or a girl, they will blame her as I have no doubt they have done before."

Thunderstruck, Sarah stared at him. Clearly, her thoughts had not ventured in this direction before. Aye, despite her own experiences, Sarah tended to see the good in people, afraid to speak ill of anyone. "I believed her," Sarah murmured absentmindedly. "When she told me of all that had happened, of her husband's fears, I believed that he had only taken away her daughters because of his concern for her. But now..."

"Ye believed her because she believes it, and she believes it because the alternative would be too awful. After all, what choice does she have." Keir swept his gaze over the frozen world around them to the estate that was like a prison, a gilded cage, but a cage, nonetheless. "This is her life. There's no changing that, not to her own mind."

Sarah nodded. "She's trapped here, is she not? Trapped in a life she does not want. Like me."

Keir smiled at her, loving that tentative spark that came to her eyes. "Not anymore," he reminded her. "Ye freed yerself."

For a moment, Sarah fell silent, then her blue eyes once more sought his. "But she's married. She no longer has a choice."

Keir looked deep into her eyes. "There's always a choice, little wisp. 'Tis not always an easy one, but 'tis always there." He grasped both her hands, squeezing them reassuringly. "However, there is no saving her without her daughters. We need to find out where they are."

"I meant to inquire after them last night at supper," Sarah said abruptly, a displeased expression upon her face, "but the look upon Kate's face stopped me. Whether she likes it or not, she has accepted her husband's decision."

"She doesna know where they are?"

Sarah shook her head. "I do not think she does. Whenever I bring up the subject, she evades it. She does not wish to speak about it. I think it is too painful because it reminds her of how much she misses them." She exhaled a shuddering

breath. "Perhaps I simply ought to seek out her husband and speak to him in private." Her hands began to tremble within Keir's own. "Although I admit he makes me uneasy."

Keir nodded. "Aye, he's not a pleasant man. For someone so intent on upholding society's every rule, he has verra poor manners." He reached out and gently tucked a stray curl back into Sarah's hood, his fingers softly grazing her skin.

Sarah's eyes widened at the touch, and her breath faltered in her chest.

"Yet ye held yer head up high, little wisp," Keir continued, trailing the tip of his finger along the line of her jaw. "Ye're strong, always have been, to go against convention and free yerself from a life that would've crushed ye. Ye showed courage, and dunna ever let anyone make ye believe that what ye did was wrong. Ye have the right to demand respect for yerself."

The smile that came to Sarah's face at his words made Keir believe that the woman he had come to admire still stood before him. Over the last few days, he had seen her stumble upon occasion and feared that she might fall, never to rise again. Yet, now, here she stood before him.

"Ye're a fierce one," he reminded her, toying with a curl of her hair. "Never forget that." Keir still regretted the loss of her braids, for he had come to see them as a part of her, a part of their time together.

"I promise," Sarah whispered, the expression upon her face once again determined, whispering of someone who believed that good things did happen. "I suppose I should speak to Kate again."

"Aye, ye should." He swept his gaze over their surroundings. "I will walk the grounds and take a closer look at the house. Perhaps I can find out something." He grinned at her. "After all, servants are not known for their discretion. I might even speak to Lord Birchwell."

Sarah nodded. "Perhaps..." She paused. "Do you think we should write to Grandma Edie? Perhaps she can help. After all,



there seems to be very little she cannot do.” She cast him a bit of a conspiratorial smile.

Keir laughed. “To tell ye the truth; I already did.” He loved the joy that came to Sarah’s face. “And I might as well tell ye that there seems to be *nothing* the dowager canna do, at least in my experience. She is most likely the best-connected person in all of England. On top of that, she demanded to be kept informed as always.” He chuckled. “If there is anyone who can find out where yer sister’s children are, ’tis her. I dunna think Lord Birchwell can hide them anywhere where she willna find them.” Still, deep down, Keir wondered if perhaps it was not Lord Birchwell who stood as their opponent in this matter. Indeed, the man seemed guided by his mother in all things, her approval all he cared to secure. Perhaps he was merely a pawn in this game, and his mother the one they needed to outwit.

Indeed, earlier today, Keir had stepped around a corner and found himself face to face with the Dowager Lady Birchwell. The lady’s calculating gaze had sized him up within moments, her lips curling into a displeased snarl; yet the haughty expression upon her face had remained. She had even lifted her chin a fraction, looking down her nose at him—even though he was more than a head taller than her.

“How do you like England?” the dowager had inquired in that lofty way of hers. “Surely, it stands in stark contrast to... what you’re used to, *Mr. MacKinnear*.” She had emphasized his lack of title, no doubt in order to make him feel inferior.

Keir pitied people like her. “’Tis a beautiful country, to be sure,” he had replied with a broad smile, determined to take the wind out of her sails. “As is Scotland and most places in this world.” He had stepped toward her, lowering his head as though wishing to share a secret, and he had rather enjoyed the slightly startled expression that had come to the lady’s eyes. “I always found, though, that ‘tis the people who make a place what it is. Kindness and compassion are the hallmark of a good host and represent a land’s spirit like nothing else. Would ye not agree, *my lady*?” A teasing note had accompanied his words, his address of her in particular, and the lady in question

had huffed in outrage before spinning upon her heel and striding away down the corridor.

*As formidable as the Dowager Lady Birchwell seems, she certainly is no match for Grandma Edie!*

Sarah beamed up at him. “You love her dearly, do you not?”

Keir nodded, smirking. “’Twould seem so.” He sighed, remembering the dowager. “Aye, she’s a fierce lady like yerself. She might be meddlesome, but she’s loyal and devoted and that is no small thing. Aye, I respect her, more than I respect most people.”

“I know what you mean. Grandma Edie is a great woman, one of only a few I’ve ever met. If she gives you her word, it is as though it is written in stone, unshakable. If she told me I could fly, I would gladly leap off a cliff because the thought that she might be wrong would never cross my mind.” Sarah chuckled. “It sounds silly, I know, but it feels good to have such conviction in another, to trust another so completely.” She blinked up at him. “Kate needs that as well.” She nodded. “I will go and speak to her.” She made to step away.

Without thinking, Keir reached out and held her back. She came, her eyes wide and seeking his. “Be careful,” Keir urged her, grasping her chin gently, wanting to feel her again. “Yer sister must want to be saved.” He held her gaze imploringly, needing her to understand. “’Tis her choice, one that she must make. And if she doesna...” He brushed his thumb over her chin, savoring the moment, the way her breath mingled with his in the icy winter air.

“I know,” Sarah murmured, tentatively leaning into his touch. “We all must make our own choices. I made mine, and I’m glad for it.” She reached out and placed her right hand upon his chest, right over his thundering heart. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you. I don’t know if I can explain it so you’ll understand, but...I want to say it.”

Keir swallowed hard, every muscle in his body tensing as he waited.

Sarah exhaled slowly, and the small cloud of her breath danced away upon the icy wind. "I...I feel safe with you. Not because the dowager asked you to protect me, but because...of who you are. Aside from the Whickertons, I've never known anyone as open and honest as you. All my life, I was surrounded by people who said one thing and thought another, people with hidden motives, people who lied outright, people who cared not in the least if their deeds would hurt me or not. I've learned to be cautious, to doubt and be on my guard." She smiled at him suddenly, leaning closer, and then her other hand reached out and cupped his cheek. "But with you, I feel safe. I feel free. Free from worry and doubt. It is priceless, and selfishly, I want to keep you with me because I want to hold onto that feeling."

For once in his life, Keir was at a loss for words. Aye, this little wisp of a girl moved him like no other ever had before. She praised him for his openness and honesty when, in truth, she was the one who held nothing back, who gave everything of herself. She did not hesitate to reveal her every weakness, spoke honestly of what made her feel vulnerable, and it was that which Keir admired the most. Aye, he stood at her side because the dowager had asked him to; yet the fierceness with which he threw himself into this task had everything to do with Sarah alone.

"Sometimes I look at ye," Keir murmured, gently slipping his hands around her and pulling her closer, "and I am certain ye canna be real. There's something about ye that makes ye seem not from this world. It makes ye shine like a beacon, like an eternal flame, a fire deep within ye that can never be extinguished, and it draws me in close."

As always, Sarah's face revealed every emotion, every thought his words conjured. She seemed to glow like the beacon he had spoken of, her blue eyes luminous, and that tentative, shy smile that teased her lips almost made him forget everything.

"When the time is right," Keir said, slowly removing his hands from her, "I will kiss ye again, lass." He glanced toward

the house, wondering if anyone was watching them. “Ye have my word on that.”

The smile that came to Sarah’s face was accompanied by a familiar blush that made her cheeks glow in a rosy hue and gave her an utterly innocent expression. “I shall remind you,” she said boldly.

Keir chuckled. “Dunna worry. It willna be necessary. I willna forget.”

# Chapter Thirteen

## BY THE WINDOW



The past few days, Kate had kept to her chamber, many delightful hours spent with her sister. It was a blessing she had not expected but one she cherished. Although at first they had not quite known how to speak to one another, the old familiarity had soon settled in. Even now, Kate could hear the echo of her sister's gentle laugh as they had reminisced about their childhood, the happiest time of their lives. Perhaps it had been a mistake to keep Sarah out of her life, Kate mused. After all, it did feel good to confide in her, to share her pain with her, to have someone understand and look at her with love shining in their eyes.

With both her daughters gone, there was no one left at Birchwell who loved Kate. It was a sobering truth, one that made her feel cold and weak and utterly sad. Her heart felt heavy, and these days nothing possessed the power to lift her spirits. Not even the thought of her unborn child. Yes, it painted a smile upon her face every now and then, but most of the time, thinking of the child simply made Kate worry. *This is not how it ought to be, is it? Feeling my child grow ought to feel magical and fill me with hope and joy, ought it not?*

Pushing herself to her feet, Kate slowly, somewhat awkwardly rose from the armchair situated near the fireplace. She was glad for the dowager's absence, glad not to have to sit with her in the parlor downstairs. Yes, solitude was far more preferable than to be subjected to the old lady's censure. Every day, her husband's mother would find fault with her, blaming her for one thing or another. It had always been thus, and it

had only gotten worse each time Kate had failed to provide her husband with an heir.

Though weak upon her feet, Kate walked the length of her chamber, knowing she could not lie down or sit all day long. She needed to try and keep what little strength she had. And so, Kate walked slowly past the fireplace toward the window and then back.

Upon her third trip, something caught her eye and she paused by the window, her fingers brushing aside the curtain just a little. She leaned closer toward the windowpane, her gaze focusing on something outside in the gardens.

Sarah.

And the Scotsman.

Curious, Kate remained where she was, watching them speak to one another. Indeed, the Scotsman intrigued her. He looked so very unusual with his long hair and woodsman clothing, far from the refined gentlemen Kate knew. Yes, when she had first glimpsed him in her drawing room downstairs, she had been quite taken aback, surprised to hear that he had come as her sister's companion on this journey. Surely, Kate had thought, the Dowager Countess of Whickerton could have found someone more...suitable.

And then Kate had heard him speak of her sister at supper. His words had been beautiful, and she had heard true admiration and respect in them. It had surprised Kate, almost taken her breath away. She had seen the way he looked at Sarah, and it had given Kate pause. Indeed, only later that night, she had realized why.

The truth was, no one, not even her own husband, ever looked at her quite that way, and it had made Kate realize something that had escaped her attention before.

Mr. MacKinnear cared for her sister, did he not?

Standing by the window, Kate continued to watch them as they stood down below in the gardens, speaking to one another. Indeed, there was something rather intimate about their conversation. They stood close, too close for propriety's

sake, and even from this distance, Kate could tell that they longed to be closer still. It was in the way they angled their heads toward one another, in the way their bodies swayed ever so slightly, moving closer, seeking the other, before they remembered that they ought not. It was like a dance where some steps brought them together and others drew them apart.

And then Mr. MacKinnear suddenly reached out and tucked a curl of Sarah's hair back into her hood. Kate watched wide-eyed as his fingers brushed her sister's cheek.

Gently.

Tenderly.

Yet it made Kate tense. She did not even know why, but she held her breath, sudden concern rising in her chest.

Only Sarah did not pull away. She did not cringe or retreat. There was nothing in her demeanor that spoke of displeasure. Quite on the contrary, in fact.

Sarah...was smiling. Yes, she was smiling and a slight blush had come to her cheeks, her eyes locked upon Mr. MacKinnear's in a way that brought tears to Kate's eyes.

*Is this what longing looks like?* Kate wondered as her vision began to blur and she reached for a handkerchief to dab at her eyes. *Is this what it looks like when love begins to bloom between two people?*

Kate wished she knew; and yet deep down in her heart, she did.

Again, Kate recalled the moment Mr. MacKinnear had spoken of Sarah so highly. She also recalled all the many moments; her husband had put her down for failing him in some way or another. Never had he looked at her like this in all the years of their marriage, and she knew he never would. Truth be told, she had never looked at him like this, either.

Yes, in the beginning she had thought him handsome and appealing, and in the beginning, he had been.

During the first few weeks of their marriage, Kate remembered a certain hum beneath her skin whenever he had



drawn near. Yet it had not lasted but been quickly chased away by her husband's cold demeanor. While at first he might have been taken with her, those first tender feelings had not grown, and with time, she believed he had come to regret having married her—even before she had disappointed him by giving him a daughter instead of a son. Her hope that with time he would come to care for her and that her own affections would grow as a result of it had died a quick death. For years now, Kate had known that her husband would never look at her with anything resembling affection. He never had and he never would.

Never before had Kate admitted this quite so openly to herself. However, there was no sense in lying to oneself, was there? No, she knew her lot in life and she would do well to accept it.

Yet seeing her sister now, gazing at Mr. MacKinnear in such a way made Kate's heart ache despite herself. All of a sudden, her heart wanted again. She had taught it to be content with what it had been offered, but now, it suddenly wanted again. A fierce longing awakened, and Kate knew it would be her undoing.

To want was dangerous.

To want led to disappointed hopes.

To want threatened her heart all over again.

Kate sighed when she watched Sarah turn away, wishing she could have observed them just a little bit longer. Then, however, Mr. MacKinnear reached out and grasped her sister's arm, pulling her back.

Instantly, Kate tensed as before. At first, she did not even know why. It was like an instinct, something that surged to life within her, putting her on her guard. Then memories resurfaced of moments when her husband had sought her out. His touch had never been harsh or cruel, and Kate had never loathed it. Still, now in this moment, Kate realized that he had never asked. He had simply taken what he wanted because it was his, and she had not refused.

Not once.

Good wives did not refuse their husbands after all.

Only for Sarah and Mr. MacKinnear, it was different, was it not? After that first moment of tense shock, Kate's unease quickly receded, replaced by something warm and yearning, for she saw not even a flicker of resistance in Sarah.

As Mr. MacKinnear pulled her closer, her sister went willingly, her eyes shining as she placed a hand upon his chest. "They care for one another," Kate whispered, remembering the girlish dreams she and Sarah had once entertained of dashing gentlemen who would come and sweep them off their feet. "He's her prince."

Indeed, he had to be. It was there in the way they stood in each other's arms, the way they looked at one another, their lips moving as they whispered words Kate longed to hear. Had Sarah truly found love? Kate wondered, knowing without a doubt that her parents would never approve of the match. Yet after everything that had happened lately, after everything her husband had hinted at during supper these past few days, Kate wondered if perhaps they might. After all, Sarah no longer had the chance of a suitable match. Was it possible that her sister would soon find herself happily married?

Of course, Kate wished her sister well with all her heart. Well, with *almost* all her heart, for there was this one small corner that wished they could trade places. It envied Sarah, was displeased to see her happy when Kate knew she herself never would be. Not like this. Perhaps, if everything went well, she would be happy as a mother again. But she would never be in love. She would never know what it felt like to be wrapped in the arms of someone who cared for her so deeply.

Yes, that one small corner of her heart did not rejoice. It was the most selfish part of her, and it simply could not. It was too bruised and battered and knew only self-preservation.

After a long while, Sarah once more turned to go and this time Mr. MacKinnear did not stop her. Yet he remained where he was, watching her walk away, his gaze never leaving her until she vanished from sight. Then, he heaved a deep breath,

his shoulders rising and falling slowly, before turning around and walking away in the opposite direction.

For a long moment, Kate stood by the window, her eyes now closed and her heart aching. Only when her legs began to grow weak did she return to her seat by the fire, her emotions raw and painful. She pulled the blanket tightly around her, her hands brushing gently over her rounded belly. "If only," she mumbled into the stillness. "If only."

And then a sharp knock sounded on her door.

# Chapter Fourteen

## WHITE LIES



The moment Sarah left behind the garden, her gaze moving toward the terrace doors that would lead her back inside, a soft meow drifted to her ears. Instantly, she spun around and a deep smile came to her face when Loki came tiptoeing toward her from behind a thick bush. His eyes shone with adventure, and yet he looked as regal as he ever had. “Loki!” Sarah exclaimed, kneeling down to scratch him behind his ears. “Where have you been? I’ve been worried.” Despite the chiding tone in her voice, Sarah knew she could never be angry with him. After all, he had returned.

As before.

“I’m going to see my sister,” Sarah told him as she rose back to her feet. “Will you accompany me?”

Of course, he made no reply; and yet the moment she moved toward the door, he fell into step beside her.

Sarah smiled, remembering Keir’s words. After all, Loki had a way about him that made him seem almost human.

Inside, Sarah handed her cloak and gloves to a footman and then headed upstairs toward her sister’s chamber. All the while, Loki trailed behind her, his amber gaze sweeping over his new surroundings. Sarah wished she knew what he was thinking, what he made of all this, of the sudden change of scenery. He could not know why they were here or how long they would stay. Did the uncertainty bother him? Or did cats not concern themselves with such things?

Upon approaching her sister's door, Kate heard the rustle of skirts and turned to find the dowager standing by the large bay windows. Her attire was immaculate, and the expression upon her face as cold and distant as before. "You are to see Lady Birchwell?" the dowager asked in a disapproving tone as she approached. "Again?"

Sarah could not help the frown that came to her face. "Of course. She is my sister, and I've missed her dearly." At her feet, a low growl rose from Loki's throat as he regarded the dowager with as much contempt as the lady bestowed upon him.

Lifting her chin, the dowager pressed her lips together; yet no sound emerged as her gaze swept over Sarah. Judging from the expression upon the lady's face, she did not like what she saw. "For how long do you intend to remain here?"

Sarah pulled back her shoulders. "For as long as my sister needs me."

Again, the dowager pressed her lips together, clearly a sign that she disliked Sarah's reply. "I assure you that Lady Birchwell is well taken care of." She took a step closer, her cold eyes drilling into Sarah's. "Quite frankly, if you truly cared for your sister's well-being, you'd consider the...burden your presence places upon her shoulders."

"Burden?" Sarah felt a cold lump settle in her belly. "What do you speak of? I assure you my sister does not object to my being here. We are, in fact, quite close."

The dowager lifted a hand, as though to wave Sarah's words away as inconsequential. "You misunderstand, Miss Mortensen. I am referring to the burden of your tainted reputation." Her brows rose pointedly. "I apologize for being so bold; however, after your...mishap, Lady Birchwell's familial connection to you has become a burden upon our house. Surely, you understand the disgrace we now face." She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Your presence here only makes it worse."

Sarah felt her cheeks burn with shame and anger alike. More than anything, she wanted to defend herself; yet better

than anyone, she knew that the disgrace the dowager spoke of had been of Sarah's own making. After all, she had not truly been kidnapped. She was not truly innocent in this. No, she had brought this upon herself and, by extension, upon her family, her sister as well.

"Perhaps it would be wise for you to leave," the dowager suggested, the tone of her voice ringing with finality. "Lady Birchwell quite agrees with me. She is simply too kind to make such a request." Her brows rose meaningfully before she turned upon her heel and walked away.

For a long moment, Sarah stared after her sister's mother-in-law, reminding herself that there were more important things in life than status and reputation. Indeed, Kate needed her now. Tainted reputation or not, her sister was lonely and her heart ached for the children she had not seen in far too long. "No, I will not leave," Sarah murmured quietly, wishing she had had the courage to speak the words out loud and to the dowager. "Perhaps one day." Determined, Sarah pushed the conversation from her mind. After all, there were more important things to worry about.

Far more important.

Outside Kate's door, Sarah paused and looked down at Loki. "Be kind to her," she instructed him, his gaze upon hers as though he were listening intently. "She's very worried these days."

Again, Loki failed to make any sort of reply; yet Sarah felt that he understood.

Lifting her hand, she gave a quick knock upon Kate's door and waited. A moment of silence passed, and she wondered if perhaps Kate was taking a nap. Then, however, her sister's voice called for her to enter.

The moment Sarah stepped across the threshold, she knew that something was wrong. Remnants of tears still glistened in her sister's eyes, and the look upon her face almost broke Sarah's heart.

Quickly, she closed the door and then hastened toward her sister. She knelt down by the side of her chair and grasped her hands. “Kate, are you well? What’s the matter?” She glanced down at her sister’s rounded belly. “Is it the baby?”

Dabbing a handkerchief to her eyes, Kate did her best to smile. “I’m fine,” she assured Sarah in a broken voice. “Truly. It is nothing.” Her gaze moved past Sarah, and a bit of a puzzled look came to her face.

Sarah glanced down beside her and found Loki sitting right there, watching them intently. She smiled up at her sister. “This is Loki. He’s...a friend. A good friend.”

Kate looked a bit aghast before her features slowly relaxed. “Hello, Loki.” She held out her hand, and he walked over and touched his little nose to the back of it, almost like a gentleman bowing over her hand and giving it a quick peck.

A faint chuckle drifted from Kate’s lips. “He is something, isn’t he?” She looked up and met Sarah’s eyes. “He almost seems like a—”

“A king,” Sarah finished for her sister, nodding her head along in agreement. “Believe me, we have thought so for a while. He is a rather...unusual cat.”

Kate eyed her curiously. “We?”

“Keir and I,” Sarah replied without thinking. Yet the moment the words had left her lips, she realized her mistake. Involuntarily, she had revealed too much. Yet this was Kate. Her sister. *Ought I truly not trust her with this?*

Still, her sister’s eyes grew wide. “You call him by his first name?”

Sarah sighed, glancing at Loki who settled himself comfortably in front of the fire, resting his head upon his front paws. “He is...a good friend,” she said by way of explanation, knowing that these words fell far short. Yet there was no way for her to explain without telling the complete truth, and perhaps the time for that had not yet come.

Kate watched her carefully. “He seems to be more than a friend, dear sister.” Her brows rose meaningfully. “In fact, I’ve



never seen you look at anyone the way you look at him.” She paused, and a shadow passed over her face. “The way he looks at you.”

Of course, something deep in Sarah’s heart rejoiced at her sister’s observation. She longed to speak to Kate about this, to discuss everything that had happened. Yet Sarah had come here with a purpose. Something that was more important than her feelings for Keir.

Determined to find answers, Sarah looked up into her sister’s eyes, her hands once more wrapped tightly around her sister’s. “I shall tell you everything you wish to know if you answer me honestly.” She felt Kate’s hands tense within her own. “Why the tears?”

Kate sighed. “I’ve had this with all my children. Sometimes there are tears, and I don’t even know why.”

Although Kate’s words rang true, Sarah thought her sister’s explanation sounded like an excuse. “Please, Kate, talk to me,” she begged, wishing they could have that old trust between them once again. “Is it about your daughters?”

Instantly, Kate’s lips thinned, and fresh tears seemed to collect in her eyes.

Sarah sighed, holding her sister’s hands even tighter. “You said your husband sent them away, but where are they? Where did he send them?”

Closing her eyes, Kate shook her head. “It does not matter. They will return soon enough.” One hand withdrew from Sarah’s and settled upon her belly. “All will be well once this child is born.”

To Sarah’s ears, Kate’s words sounded like a hollow promise she had made herself, willing herself to believe it because she had nothing else to hold onto. “You don’t know where they are, do you?”

Kate’s eyes snapped open, the look in them deeply wounded. For a long moment, she stared at Sarah, the desire to argue, to deny shining in her eyes. Then, however, she exhaled

a deep, slow breath and with it every bit of strength seemed to leave her. She bowed her head as her eyes closed in defeat.

Sarah's heart ached to see her sister so forlorn. "Please, Kate, tell me what happened. Why will he not tell you where your children are? What kind of man does this?" The thought that Keir would treat his future wife like this—whoever she might be—was utterly absurd!

"He does so to protect me," Kate whispered, her gaze once more rising to meet Sarah's. "He seeks to protect this child."

Sarah shook her head, feeling anger rise within her. "That's an excuse, Kate, and you know it. How can anyone think that keeping a mother away from her children is beneficial to her? And even if he does believe so, why won't he, at least, tell you where they are?"

Kate's lips thinned, and for a moment, Sarah thought she would refuse to say another word about this. "You don't know him!" her sister snapped. "You don't know what made him do it! At first, he did tell me, but I—" Her eyes closed, and she bit back the words that lay upon her tongue.

Sarah gently tugged upon her sister's hands, urging her to speak. "But you what, Kate?"

Her sister's eyes flew open, a somewhat feverish expression in them. "I snuck away to see them!" she hissed, self-reproach heavy in her voice. "I could not stand it any longer. I had the carriage readied and went to see them. He caught up with me halfway there, and..."

Her eyes closed, and her head sank. "That night, I started bleeding." Her hands withdrew from Sarah's and wrapped around her belly and the unborn child within. "I almost lost him." Tears blurred her vision as she looked at Sarah again. "You don't know what it's like. You don't know what it's like to be so utterly powerless, unable to protect your children. I cannot go through that again. I know what it's like to lose—" Her voice broke, and heart-wrenching sobs tore from her throat.

Again, Sarah pulled her sister into her arms, tears streaming down her own face as she imagined such a fate. Indeed, it was unthinkable. Still, what her sister's husband was doing was wrong. Keeping a mother away from her children could not be the answer. *Why can he not see that? Why can my sister not see that? Why is she defending him?*

"There has to be another way," Sarah said gently. "Kate, do you not see that? Will you truly spend your life away from your children until your husband has his precious heir?"

"Do not berate him, Sarah!" Kate snapped, wiping the tears from her eyes. "He only demands what every other husband does. He is an earl, and he needs an heir."

Sarah wished she could drop the subject, but she did not dare. "Even at the expense of your happiness? Your health? How often were you with child over the past few years, Kate?"

Kate's hands began to tremble, and her gaze dropped from Sarah's. "He...He is my fifth child," she whispered, and Sarah wondered if in that moment her sister saw the faces of the two she had lost.

The thought brought new tears to Sarah's eyes, but she willed them away. After all, she had a purpose, and she must not forget it. "Five children in seven years," she said, trying to catch her sister's gaze. "He seems...very determined."

Kate nodded. "Every time I give him a girl, every time I lose his child, he..."

Something dark lingered in Kate's eyes, and it sent a shudder down Sarah's back. She did not know how it was between her sister and her husband; she could not rightly say she cared to. Yet it was easy for anyone to see that her sister's marriage was not like those of the Whickertons. There was no love or affection, no respect or consideration. There was only a husband who made demands upon his wife; a husband who did not in the least care what these demands did to her.

"Has it always been like this between the two of you?" Sarah dared to ask, wondering if it might help Kate to speak about it.

Kate sighed. “Marriage is what it is,” came her reply, her voice fatigued and resigned. “Nothing in life is perfect. Marriage least of all. It is nothing more than a union of two parties in order to preserve the noble lines of this country.”

Sarah stared at her sister, unable to believe her ears. Where was the vivacious young woman who had dreamed of adventure? Of love? Was she truly gone? Never to return?

Kate’s gaze hardened. “Do not speak to me of things you know nothing about, Sarah. I am glad you are here, but I must insist you leave if you continue to threaten my happiness.”

“Happiness?” Sarah echoed breathlessly. “Kate, you call this happiness? No, whatever this is, it is most certainly not happiness. That much I know.”

Kate stared at her, aghast, her lips thinning as she pulled her hands from Sarah’s. “What would you know of marriage? It’s been years, and yet you are still unwed. You don’t know what it means to be a wife. You don’t know—”

“I know enough.” Despite her sister’s painful words, Sarah knew she could not back down now. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Loki rise to his feet, his wide amber eyes trained on them. “I know that happiness can be found in marriage. I know what love looks like. I know that you deserve better. You deserve a man who puts you first. A man who would walk to the ends of the earth only to speak to you. A man who guards your heart with his life. A man who makes you smile and laugh. A man who makes you feel strong and bold and daring. You deserve a man like—” Sarah bit her tongue, cursing herself for saying too much yet again.

Kate stilled, her eyes watchful. “A man like who?” she demanded, her voice hard. Yet longing rested in her green eyes, the desire to hear Sarah finish that sentence and tell her precisely what her life could have been like.

*Should* have been like.

Sarah bowed her head and sighed. “It doesn’t matter,” she finally said, then tentatively lifted her gaze to meet her sister’s once more. “I’m not speaking of one specific man. I’m

speaking of the respect you deserve. Please, do not accept the way your husband treats you. You deserve better. Believe me.”

Rising to her feet, Kate shook her head. “You do not know my life, Sarah, so do not tell me what to do. We have not seen each other in years, and yet the moment we are back in the same room, you berate me for the poor choices I’ve made.”

“No, Kate, no.” Stepping into her sister’s path, Sarah grasped her by the shoulders. “I am not berating you. I’m saying these things because I’m worried about you. I can see how unhappy you are and—”

Kate shrugged off Sarah’s hands, her chin lifting. “I am not. You know nothing of which you speak.” Her lips pressed together in determination. “I believe it is time for you to leave.”

Staring at her sister, Sarah shook her head, her thoughts suddenly ringing with the dowager’s words. “You cannot mean that. Kate, please! Do you not remember the promises we once made one another? I came for you. I came because...” Tears misted in her eyes. “I came because you’re my sister and I love you.” *And I’ve missed you so much!*

For one precious moment, Kate stilled, the expression upon her face one of awe. She looked deeply touched and on the brink of giving in, of placing her trust in Sarah yet again. Then, however, her shoulders pulled back and her gaze hardened. “I love you as well, but as I said before it is now time for you to go. Perhaps in summer, we shall meet again when all is finally well and you can see that there is nothing wrong with my family.”

Sarah felt utterly defeated. She could see in her sister’s eyes that Kate would not back down, that she had made up her mind and would see this through no matter what it might cost her. Still, she could not simply turn and leave, could she? “I will not go, Kate!” Sarah insisted, wondering what else she could say to convince her sister. Loki suddenly appeared beside her, his wide eyes fixed upon her face as though urging her not to give in. Sarah straightened and met her sister’s gaze. “I will stay until I can be certain that you are well.”

“But I do not want you here,” Kate snapped, anger sparking in her eyes, and Loki’s body tensed. “This is my life, and I do not want you here.”

Sarah cringed at her sister’s words. “Well, I’m sorry to hear that, but it does not change my mind. I will not leave!”

Kate glared at her. “Why did you have to come here and ruin everything?” She threw up her hands, open accusation now in her eyes. “What makes you think you know better than I?” A frown creased her forehead. “I made a match in my first Season! My first Season! An earl, no less! And you? You’re still unwed, your reputation now irreparably ruined and yet—” This time it was Kate who bit back the words that threatened to tumble from her tongue.

“And yet?” Sarah dared her sister, her hands balled into fists as she fought the desire to run from this awful moment. Indeed, she had not imagined their reunion like this, now utterly afraid that she would lose her sister for good.

Kate swallowed hard, the look of anger gone from her face, replaced by a sense of deepest longing. “You found someone who loves you.” A gasp left her lips, and she shook her head in disbelief. “Is that not so? You...You...” Tears ran down her cheeks.

Sarah stared at her sister, her heart uncertain whether to dance with joy or pause with caution. Oh, she knew she was losing her heart to Keir. And she knew that he cared for her as well. But...love? Sarah had not dared think of it, for fear her heart might lead her down a most dangerous path.

“Kate,” Sarah whispered, reaching out a hand toward her sister.

Kate, though, backed away, staring at Sarah’s outstretched hand, as though it were a snake, its fangs bared and ready to strike. “No,” she whispered, her feet carrying her backwards. “You need to leave.” Her voice grew angry once more, its volume rising, and suddenly Loki moved toward her. “Do you hear me? I want you to leave. I—”

All of a sudden, Kate cringed, her face contorting in pain and shock, and her hands flew to her belly. Her eyes widened in panic as she stared back at Sarah. “No, it is too soon!” she gasped breathlessly. “Not yet! No! Three more weeks! Please!” A groan tore from her lips then, and she sank down onto her knees.

A mournful meow tore from Loki’s throat, and Sarah jumped forward, grasping her sister’s hand. “Kate! What is it? Is it the baby?” she asked, completely at a loss. What did she know of childbirthing? Nothing!

“The doctor!” Kate gasped, gritting her teeth in pain.

The moment Kate’s expression relaxed, Sarah pulled her up to her feet and helped her across the chamber and onto her bed. Loki instantly settled at Kate’s side. Then Sarah darted to the bellpull, yanking it twice before sprinting to the door and pulling it open. There, she came face to face with a startled maid. “Send for the doctor,” Sarah instructed. “Now!”

The maid threw one glance past Sarah, then spun on her heel and rushed back down the corridor, calling for someone Sarah did not know at the top of her lungs.

Returning to her sister’s side, Sarah looked at her wide-eyed. “What can I do? Tell me how to help you.” *Oh, please, this cannot be happening!*

Kate exhaled a labored breath through her nose, her face pale. Yet red blotches began to form upon her cheeks, and sweat trickled down her temple. “My husband will be furious,” Kate panted, staring into Sarah’s eyes, “if something happens to his heir. He will make me pay if I fail him again! He will make all of us pay.”

An ice-cold shiver snaked down Sarah’s skin, raising goosebumps. It was a feeling that reminded her of moments she had been forced to spend in her former fiancé’s presence. It was dread and panic, mingling with a deep sense of foreboding, as though something even worse lingered nearby, just around the corner, waiting to pounce.

Sarah's thoughts instinctively ventured to Keir, her need to have him by her side as life-sustaining as the air she drew into her lungs.

Yes, perhaps it was love.

At least, for her.



# Chapter Fifteen

## NO MERE ACQUAINTANCES



Approaching Lord Birchwell's study, Keir wondered how Sarah was faring, speaking to her sister. Would Lady Birchwell confide in her? Would the two of them be able to reconnect? Or was Sarah fighting a losing battle? Keir knew that sometimes it was hard—too hard!—to turn away from a path once chosen—even if it brought one nothing but pain and misery.

Rapping on the earl's door, Keir waited, then quickly entered upon the man's behest. Yet the moment Lord Birchwell beheld him, it was apparent that the man had not expected to see him. On top of that, it was rather obvious that Lord Birchwell disliked the very sight of him.

His lips curled into a snarl, and his eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid I'm quite busy at present," he remarked not bothering with a greeting, his voice curt and clearly intended to send Keir scrambling from the room.

Keir scoffed inwardly. He had never scrambled, and he would most certainly not start now. Unimpressed, he closed the door behind himself and stepped up to the earl's desk. "There's a matter I wish to discuss. It concerns yer wife."

As expected, that got Birchwell's attention. Suspicion sparked in his eyes, and he leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. "Is there?" he drawled, something hostile in his demeanor now.

Keir exhaled a slow breath, reminding himself not to antagonize the man. After all, he needed his cooperation—if

possible. Without her husband's consent, Sarah's sister had very few options in this world.

Doing his utmost to remain calm and appear friendly instead of hostile or aggressive, Keir said, "I assume yer wife spoke to ye of how close she and her sister were during childhood. Of course, adulthood brings changes and people often drift apart. However, Sarah," Keir cringed inwardly at his use of her first name, "I mean, Miss Mortensen wishes to remedy that. She regrets the distance between them and wishes for nothing more than to be close to her sister once again. I believe, such a change would be good for yer wife also." Keir ended his little speech with very little hope in his heart.

After all, ever since his slip of the tongue, Lord Birchwell had been eyeing him most attentively, suspicion sparking anew in his eyes, making Keir wonder what the man might be thinking. Perhaps it had not been the best idea for him to accompany Sarah here after all. Strictly speaking, Keir possessed no familial ties to her or the Whickertons, thus giving rise to speculation.

Lord Birchwell exhaled a languid breath, then slowly rose to his feet, holding Keir's gaze, his own hard. "Why is it that you are here?" he asked, his voice commanding. "Why do you concern yourself with what Miss Mortensen wishes?" His brows rose in challenge.

For a moment, Keir wondered if without his slip of the tongue, Lord Birchwell would have been more inclined to hear him. However, he rather doubted it. The man seemed to have a fixed opinion, unwilling to consider a different viewpoint. "As I said," he replied with equal frankness, "I am a friend of the family, and I have never withheld a helping hand when it was needed, be it from a friend or acquaintance or even stranger."

Lord Birchwell regarded him through narrowed eyes, clearly weighing his words and wondering as to their truthfulness. Then he heaved a deep sigh, one that spoke of annoyance and impatience. "I'll be frank with you; I dislike having *Miss Mortensen* in my house after her misconduct. Whether we like it or not, society makes us what we are, and

I've worked too hard to see everything fall apart because of Miss Mortensen's...error in judgment."

Anger burned through Keir's veins, a feeling he had not encountered in a long time. He fought it down as best as he could, trying to remain calm. "In case ye were not privy to said information, let me remind ye that there was no error of judgment on Miss Mortensen's part. There was no misconduct. An atrocity was committed against her, and she handled the situation as best as she could. No one could have asked for more." Deep in his heart, Keir knew that he spoke the truth, even if he was referring to something other than Birchwell believed. Aye, Sarah had agreed to the kidnapping; yet she had been on the brink of being forced into a cruel marriage, an atrocity committed against young women every day. Yet no one ever seemed to care. At least not enough to step in and prevent it from happening. Ultimately, Sarah had been forced to save herself, and Keir was proud of the courage she had shown. *My fierce little wisp!*

For a long moment, Lord Birchwell said not a word, regarding Keir with open frankness. Then he moved to step around his desk. "You said you were a family friend," he remarked, linking his arms behind his back and lifting his chin, "yet I have never heard you spoken of once. Indeed, my own wife has never even heard of you. As you said yourself, my wife's family has always been quite close to the Whickertons. In fact, she grew up knowing their daughters quite well. Why is it then, I ask you, that she has never even heard your name?"

Keir wondered if he should even bother with an explanation. He could see suspicion in Birchwell's gaze and knew that no matter what he said, nothing would be able to dissuade the man from his suspicions. Yet would saying nothing make things worse?

"My own grandmother is the daughter of the late Duke of Ashbrook," Keir began, noting a surprised twitch come to Lord Birchwell's right eye. "She and the Dowager Countess of Whickerton have always been close friends, considering one another family. However, since my grandmother married the

laird of the MacKinnear Clan, they no longer saw one another on a regular basis. Of course, over such a distance, relationships change. Still, they remain in contact to this day.” He paused, allowing his words to sink in.

“I happened to be staying with the Whickertons when Miss Mortensen became the dowager’s companion following her ordeal.” He looked pointedly at Lord Birchwell. “And then, when Miss Mortensen expressed the wish to visit her sister, I offered my assistance since the dowager’s own grandson had only recently been married and was rather loathe to leave his wife’s side. They are very devoted to one another.” He quirked an eyebrow. “I am certain ye know what deep affection a man can feel for his wife.”

Birchwell cast him a mock smile. “Am I to understand that you and Miss Mortensen only met recently? That you are no more than new acquaintances?”

Keir gave a nod of the head.

Lord Birchwell crossed his arms thoughtfully. “I must say, for a mere acquaintance, you seem to know Miss Mortensen quite well.” A question lingered in his gaze, an accusation even, daring Keir to respond, to explain himself and perhaps say something unwise.

However, before Keir could decide what to do, the door to the earl’s study suddenly flew open and his butler burst in, his eyes wide in alarm, and his hands far from calm. “My lord,” he exclaimed, “I apologize for the interruption. But this concerns Lady Birchwell. I’ve already sent for the doctor.”

At his butler’s words, Lord Birchwell paled. For a long moment, he stood as still as a statue. Then his muscles slowly began to tense, and he blinked his eyes a moment before sweeping them around and glaring at Keir. “This is your fault!” he hissed, his body beginning to tremble with anger barely held in check. “I have done my utmost to keep my wife calm, to ensure that she had peace of mind, and now, my son’s life is in danger.” He advanced a step on Keir, his eyes wild and unfocused. “If my heir dies, you will pay for it!” he

snarled menacingly, then charged past Keir and rushed out the door.

Feeling his own pulse quicken, Keir hastened after him, wondering what had happened. He hoped that Sarah was all right, that Lady Birchwell and her child would be as well. Yet it had not escaped his notice that Lord Birchwell had only showed concern for his child, his heir. He did not seem the least bit concerned for his wife so long as she delivered him a healthy son to continue his line.

Keir's heart went out to the young countess. Indeed, having grown up with a loving family of his own, he could not imagine what it was like to live day in and out among people who cared for one so little. *Aye, 'tis a harsh fate.*

# Chapter Sixteen

## STORY-TELLING



Seated beside her sister upon the bed, Sarah held her hand tightly as maids rushed around fetching things, hurrying from one end of the chamber to the other. Loki lay curled at Kate's feet, watching her intently. The door was wide open, and people were coming and going, their hands busy and their eyes wide, furtive glances cast in Kate's direction, concern marking their features.

Fear even.

Belatedly, Sarah realized that while the situation was utterly new for her, they had seen it before. Had her sister not just told her that she had lost two children? Sarah could not help but wonder what went through the servants' minds in that moment. Were they, like her sister, reliving these heartbreaking moments when a birth had ended not with a happy mother and child but with soul crushing sadness instead?

The thought alone brought tears to Sarah's eyes. Yet one look at her sister made her blink them away. Now was not the time to lose her head. *No, Kate needs me.*

Kate was beside herself with fear, sobbing uncontrollably whenever her contractions waned and she was able to catch her breath. Her eyes were wide and her skin pale. She looked so fragile, so breakable, as Sarah had never seen her before. She knew it was an image she would never forget, and she could not help but wonder about the last time her sister had been in labor. Had she been alone? Alone with no one to hold her hand?



The thought broke Sarah's heart. *Oh, if only I had known. I should have known. I should have been here!*

"It's too soon!" Kate sobbed, her hand squeezing Sarah's so hard that she felt her bones would surely break. "No! No! No! He can't be born yet! Not yet! It's too soon. He will die."

Feeling her sister's panic sweep through her, Sarah felt her hands beginning to shake. Tears once more collected in her eyes, and a heavy lump settled in her throat. She felt herself close to breaking down as well, her only wish now to slump down onto the bed next to Kate and weep.

But she could not.

Instead, her thoughts circled back to one of her first moments with Keir. She had been terrified. Of him. Of the decision she had made. Of the horses.

Indeed, not long ago, Sarah had been terrified of horses, too terrified to step anywhere near them, much too terrified to even consider sitting atop one. Yet all that had changed.

Because of Keir.

Sarah remembered vividly how he had spoken to her, his soft, calming voice whispering in her ear, occupying her thoughts, drawing them away and directing them elsewhere. He had always known how to paint a picture with his words, bringing stories to life and whisking her away upon the wings of myths and legends.

Holding her sister's hand tightly within her own, Sarah shifted upon the bed, turning so she could look into Kate's eyes. "Kate!" she called softly but insistently. "Kate, look at me! Look at me!"

Her sister blinked, and her gaze focused upon Sarah's. Her breath remained labored, but her focus had shifted.

"Do you remember," Sarah began, surprised to find a tentative smile tug upon her lips, "the Christmas we snuck away to go ice-skating upon the lake?"

Kate stilled, and Sarah saw the memory of that day flash across her sister's face.

“Mother and Father had strictly forbidden us from venturing outside,” Sarah continued, holding on tightly to her sister’s hand. “But we couldn’t resist.” She chuckled. “We stood with our noses pressed to the window, watching snowflakes dance down, and then you suddenly straightened and spun to look at me.” Sarah felt her heart skip a beat. “Oh, I knew the moment I saw your eyes that you would get us in trouble.”

A weak smile appeared on Kate’s face. “And yet you did not hesitate. You followed me without question.”

“And I did not regret it,” Sarah assured her sister. “I trusted you, and I knew so long as we were together, we would be all right.”

Tears glistened in Kate’s eyes before she suddenly tensed, gritting her teeth, as another contraction took her.

Ignoring her own thundering pulse, Sarah continued, “We snuck downstairs, bundled up warmly and rushed outside as soon as the coast was clear.” She laughed the moment Kate’s face relaxed once more. “We did not even think about the footprints we were leaving behind.”

Kate chuckled, her eyes closing as she sank back into the pillows. “They found us before we had even the chance to pull on our skates,” she murmured, sighing deeply.

“Yet it was an adventure,” Sarah murmured softly, squeezing her sister’s hand. “One I cherish and will never forget.”

Kate’s eyes blinked open, and a wistful smile graced her features. “Neither will I.”

Suddenly, angry footsteps thundered closer from down the hall, and Kate flinched, her fingers curling more tightly around Sarah’s. At the foot of the bed, Loki rose to all fours, bristling, the fur upon his back rising as he fixed the door with a tense glare.

“Don’t worry,” Sarah murmured, rising from the bed yet not releasing her sister’s hand. “I am with you. It’s the two of us.” She glanced at Loki, his stance prepared as though he was

readying himself for battle. “The three of us,” she murmured under her breath, barely registering her sister’s soft sigh before the door was flung open and Lord Birchwell stormed in.

Indeed, the sight of him was terrifying. His eyes were wide, and his lips contorted into a snarl. Although there was a hint of concern upon his features, fury emanated from him. He looked like a raging lunatic, not in control of his actions, unable to be reasoned with. He charged toward the bed, his gaze fixed upon Kate. “What did you do?” He looked absolutely disgusted with her. “How dare you endanger my son?”

Digging his claws into the mattress, Loki hissed at him, a dark growl rumbling in his little throat.

Lord Birchwell blinked as his gaze dropped and he found himself staring at an unfamiliar cat. “Who let this creature in here?” he thundered, gesturing wildly at Loki. “Hempstead! What is the meaning of this?”

“He is mine,” Sarah said, moving half a step forward, as far as she could go while still holding on to her sister’s hand. “His name is Loki.” She turned to the feline. “Loki! Come here!”

Though reluctant, Loki turned to look at her. Then, even more reluctantly, he withdrew his claws from the mattress under his paws and moved toward her. Still, he did not abandon his battle stance, his eyes focused and his little body at the ready should the need arise to fling himself across the room and dig his claws into Lord Birchwell’s flesh.

Sarah wanted to hug her little protector.

Looking even more thunderous than before, Lord Birchwell lifted his gaze from Loki and then looked directly at Sarah.

Sarah wanted to sink into that always-elusive hole in the ground. Yet, of course, as always there was none to be found. Most importantly, even if there were, she could not. After all, suddenly, there was something more terrifying than Lord

Birchwell and that was to abandon her sister to her fate, to leave her alone when Kate needed her most.

And so, Sarah straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin, meeting her brother-in-law's hateful gaze without flinching. "I must ask you to refrain from addressing your wife in such a manner, my lord." The hand that was not clutched in Kate's curled into a tight fist as Sarah braced herself for his fury. Then, however, she blinked, her gaze catching a movement past Lord Birchwell's shoulder, and a sigh of utter relief shuddered past Sarah's lips.

Keir.

Tall and rather formidable-looking, he now stood in the doorway, his gaze sweeping over the scene before him. The pulse in his neck beat faster than Sarah would have expected judging from his relaxed demeanor. Yet he remained where he was, and then his eyes met hers.

As before, Sarah felt herself calm. His mere presence did that. She felt her pulse slow, her thoughts no longer racing, no longer confused but slowly clearing, focusing. Keir looked at her in a way that made her feel strong, and she knew in that moment that he had not come to interfere. He would certainly stand by her, ensure her safety if need be, but he trusted her to handle the situation on her own.

A slight nod of his head encouraged her to stand her ground and protect her sister.

"What did you say?" Lord Birchwell snarled at her, his gaze wild. Gone was the proper gentleman, replaced by a man who cared nothing for the hearts of others. Not even his own wife. "How dare you speak to me like this?"

Sarah squeezed her sister's hand as much as to give comfort as to receive it. "How dare you speak to your wife like this?" she threw his question back into his face, surprised by the strength in her own voice. Again, her eyes flickered to Keir before they returned to her sister's husband. "Can you not see how she struggles to give you what you want? Even at the expense of her own health? And what about what you are

doing? Do you truly think lashing out at her like this will ensure that your son is born safely?"

Clearly caught off guard, Lord Birchwell blinked, then blinked again as though to clear his vision. He swallowed hard, and his gaze moved to his wife the very moment another contraction clutched her within its grip.

Kate groaned, her face contorting in pain as she held on tightly to Sarah's hand.

Staring at his wife, Lord Birchwell seemed to shrink into himself, the look in his eyes aghast. He moved a step backward but then remained there, unable to avert his gaze and yet clearly overcome by the sight before his eyes.

Exhausted, Kate sank back into the pillows, her features relaxing once more. Her husband stared at her for a moment longer before the spell that had fallen over him vanished as though it had never been. Instantly, his features hardened once more as he looked from Kate to Sarah. "This is your doing," he snarled, pointing an accusing finger at her. "If you had not come, this would not have happened." He took a threatening step closer. "If anything happens to my son, you will pay for it."

Despite Loki's protective hiss, Sarah felt an ice-cold shiver run down her back at the promise of retribution in her brother-in-law's eyes. Yet in the next moment, Keir stood there, right beside him, his hand clasped upon Lord Birchwell's shoulder. "I know ye're fearful for yer child," he said in a calm voice, his grip upon Lord Birchwell's shoulder tightening, "yet this is no way to speak to another." For a moment he met Sarah's eyes before he then moved, stepping in between her and Birchwell, facing her brother-in-law as though it was the easiest thing in the world. "Calm yerself, and ye may be of some assistance. Yer wife needs yer kindness right now, not baseless accusations against her family."

Unfortunately, though, Lord Birchwell refused to heed Keir's words. His eyes narrowed, and he glared at him, as though Keir lay at the root of all his troubles. "How dare you enter my wife's bedchamber? Leave! Now!" His arm shot

sideways, pointing out the door. "Or I shall have you removed."

To Sarah's surprise, Keir looked completely unimpressed by her brother-in-law's threat...except for the small spike in his pulse. He crossed his arms, widening his stance, and said, "Aye, I'll leave...as should ye." He leaned forward ever so slightly, and Sarah wished she could see his eyes. Still, what she saw was the way her brother-in-law swallowed before he no doubt reminded himself that he was an earl and to be obeyed.

Looking past Keir, Lord Birchwell glared at her. "You leave as well! Now!"

Sarah shook her head as she felt her sister's hand clutch hers tightly. Kate's eyes were wide, and her breath suddenly quickened. "No, I will not leave my sister alone in this. I will stay and help her through this." She held his gaze, begging him to hear her. "I will keep her calm and do what I can to see your son delivered safely."

Keir cast her a reassuring smile over his shoulder, then faced Lord Birchwell once more. "That sounds like a good idea, my lord." He stepped toward him, his demeanor calming. "Let us wait outside."

Before Lord Birchwell could reply, an elderly man followed by a middle-aged woman rushed into the room, a footman carrying a black leather bag upon their heel.

"Dr. Parker," Lord Birchwell exclaimed, the strain upon his features waning a bit. "See to her! Ensure my son is born safely."

The elderly man gestured for the footman to set his bag upon the bed, then turned to Lord Birchwell. "I'll do what I can, my lord. Now, please, leave us." He stepped back and exchanged a few whispered words with the woman whom Sarah presumed to be the midwife.

Lord Birchwell nodded absentmindedly, his gaze fixed upon his wife, and yet Sarah could tell that he was not seeing

her, his gaze distant. Still, he did not move, his feet rooted to the spot.

“Come.” Keir clasped the man’s shoulder and gently steered him from the chamber. “Let us leave the women to themselves. It doesna help yer son if ye agitate yer wife.”

Reluctantly, Birchwell set one foot in front of the other, allowing Keir to lead him outside.

At the door, Keir turned and met Sarah’s gaze, his blue eyes tense before he vanished from sight. Sarah, too, swallowed hard. No one could know how today would end. She could only hope that Dr. Parker and the midwife would be able to keep Kate and her child safe.

But what if not? What if this day would end the way others had before?

A soft meow drew Sarah’s attention from her wayward thoughts, and she looked down at the mischievous feline. “Thank you, Loki,” Sarah whispered, then turned to sit by her sister’s side once again.

Indeed, nothing could tear her away.

## Chapter Seventeen



## SACRIFICES & REGRETS



Released from the grip of the contraction, Kate watched with fascination the brief moment that passed between her sister and the Scotsman. Indeed, the look in Mr. MacKinnear's eyes said more than a thousand words, as had his deeds. Kate knew, without a doubt, that he would always protect her sister. He had proved so more than once. All Sarah need do was call him to her side and he would be there. At the same time, the way he looked at her held awe and admiration. He did not see her as a weak female who could not exist without a strong hand to guide her. Indeed, had he not mere moments ago stood back and allowed Sarah to handle a most challenging situation herself?

Indeed, he had.

At first, Kate had felt caught off guard, confused. For a moment, she had even thought her eyesight impaired when Mr. MacKinnear had stood back instead of venturing forward. But then she had understood. What was between her sister and the Scotsman went beyond everything she had ever dreamed to find as a young girl. Their understanding of one another was so utterly complete that Kate felt the rest of the world dim in comparison to the sparks that ignited the moment their eyes met across a room.

Yet Kate still shuddered at the thought of her husband's words. The look of fury upon his face had never failed to make her quake. She knew his anger. She knew his frustration. It never ended well. Yes, Kate had been utterly grateful for her sister's presence when she had heard her husband's thunderous

footsteps approaching. Still, Kate could not deny her surprise at seeing Sarah face her husband with such steadfast courage. The Sarah Kate remembered would not have been capable of that, would she have been? *Indeed, she is stronger now. Because of him?*

Unfortunately, the last time her husband's anger had been directed at her, Kate had been alone. There had been no one but servants and the doctor by her side, all people who would not dare stand up to her husband. He had berated her then, too. Yelled at her for endangering his child. A child she had lost only a few hours later.

The mere thought brought tears to Kate's eyes, made her heart feel so heavy, so broken that she thought it must truly stop. Would today end the same way?

A reassuring squeeze of her hand made Kate look up, her eyes meeting her sister's. No, today was different, was it not? After all, she was not alone. Far from alone. Sarah was still here, right here by her side. She had faced down her husband, insisting she would stay and not abandon her.

And then there was Mr. MacKinnear.

Although he had left the room, Kate could all but feel his presence nearby. She could see it in the way Sarah met her eyes, a reassuring smile upon her face. Indeed, somehow Sarah had found strength she had never had before. Kate could not recall ever seeing her sister thus. She had changed. She was a different woman now. Was that because of Mr. MacKinnear? Kate could easily imagine it to be so.

Like her husband, he was a tall, imposing man with broad shoulders and large hands. He possessed piercing blue eyes that knew how to look deep. His voice spoke with authority, unwavering and full of certainty. Yet unlike her husband, Mr. MacKinnear did not use his physical stature to intimidate others, did he? At least not as far as Kate had seen. He had not threatened her husband in any way, not tried to force him out of her chamber. Not once had she seen him use any means of physical intimidation to make another comply. Instead, he

always remained calm, his words full of reason, nothing aggressive or threatening in his demeanor.

Indeed, the only time Kate had seen something dangerous spark in Mr. MacKinnear's eyes was when her husband had advanced upon Sarah. Without hesitation, the Scotsman had stepped in front of her, making it clear he would not allow any harm to come to her.

Deep in her heart, Kate wondered what it might be like to have a man like Mr. MacKinnear at her side. *Is he truly the kind of man I think him to be?* If so, Sarah was a most fortunate woman to have gained his respect and admiration. *Indeed, how would it feel? Kate wondered. To have those eyes looking into mine? To know that he would always be there to keep me safe?*

A soul-crushing yearning once more rose from deep within Kate's being. It had been so long since she had last felt safe. Would she ever again? Despite all her hopes, Kate could not imagine it to be so. What was safe? She had all but forgotten its meaning.

Another contraction gripped her mercilessly, and she groaned, clutching her sister's hand tightly. Her jaw began to hurt, and yet her teeth continued to press together against the pain that assailed her.

Still, through it all, Kate heard Sarah's voice speaking to her, telling her stories and conjuring memories of moments they had shared. Kate felt moved to tears one moment before another smile would tug upon her lips. She had never known Sarah to be quite such a storyteller, and here, in this moment, Kate hung upon every word.

"I never thought Harriet would ever marry," Sarah stated with a chuckle. "I think none of us did. After all, for years she'd been insisting that she never would. And then she met Jack." A dreamlike sigh drifted from Sarah's lips, and again Kate felt that twinge of envy, that deep yearning. "He utterly adores her, and she adores him all the same. They're both so very different, and yet they do seem like two halves of a whole."

As the doctor and the midwife hovered in the background, their calm and measured movements soothing, more stories flowed from Sarah's lips. She spoke of all the Whickerton siblings, of how each had found their perfect match, of how Grandma Edie had meddled to her heart's delight, seeking to secure her grandchildren's happiness. She spoke of Phineas', Lord Barrington's, persistence in pursuing Louisa, of how he had eventually persevered in winning her heart despite her insistence that she wanted to have nothing to do with him. She whispered of Leonora's sufferings, of how they had brought Drake, Lord Pemberton, to her side, teaching her how to defend herself, how to stand tall and meet society's censure with an unflinching gaze.

"And Christina," Sarah continued with a laugh, shaking her head in disbelief at the memory, "bold and daring as she has always been, interfered, risking everything to protect me when Mother and Father once again tried to match me with a wealthy man."

Kate all but hung on Sarah's words. The moment a contraction passed, she thought of little else but the wonderful stories she had not known until now. "How?" Kate asked panting. "What did she do?"

Sarah giggled. "She married him herself."

Kate's eyes opened wide and her jaw dropped. "You're not serious."

"I am perfectly serious," Sarah assured her with a smile. "I'm not entirely sure if she truly intended for it to happen, but they were discovered alone together in the library at her sister's wedding."

Kate felt her heart tense. "Then they were forced to wed."

Sarah shook her head, the look in her eyes conveying that she had noticed the change in Kate. "Lord Whickerton would never have dreamed of forcing Christina's hand. You know that. She, herself, told me that he made that perfectly clear. Still, she thought it was the only way to protect me."

Kate could not imagine such a sacrifice. “How could she do it? Giving up everything like that?” She shook her head, grasping Sarah’s hand tighter. “Does she suffer greatly in her marriage?”

Sarah laughed. “Not at all. You should see them together. They are utterly besotted with one another. It seems that Mr. Sharpe, despite not being of the peerage, is a truly good and kind man.” She sighed, and a bit of a thoughtful look came to her eyes. “Had I married him, I would not have suffered. He would have treated me with respect and kindness, I am certain of it. Yet...Christina was the one he wanted from the first moment he saw her. So, in the end, I’m glad everything worked out the way it did.”

Kate eyed her sister curiously. “Do you never regret having lost that chance?”

Sarah scoffed. “What chance? To be married to a man who loves another? No. No, I have no regrets.”

“Yet now—” Kate clenched her teeth as another wave of pain washed over her. She curled into herself, her hand gripping Sarah’s tightly.

“Breathe,” Sarah whispered, gently brushing a curl from Kate’s forehead. “It’ll be over soon. Breathe.”

When the pain subsided, Kate slumped back down into her pillows. She knew that these were not the soft twinges of early contractions that led nowhere. No. One look at the doctor’s eyes confirmed that her child would be born today and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She tried not to think of it, tried for as long as she could to hold onto the hope that perhaps this was a false alarm. Yet it was not. That was the truth of it.

Fear clawed at her heart anew, and tears shot to her eyes. Yet before they could fall, Kate once more turned to her sister, willing her thoughts into another direction. “Only now there is no more chance, is there?” Kate asked, knowing that she was selfish, regretting the heartache her words no doubt conjured for Sarah. “After...what happened.” Kate swallowed hard, but

then stilled, her eyes narrowing when she caught the look upon Sarah's face.

To her surprise, it held no regret, no shame or fear. No pain. It held none of the emotions Kate would have expected. Instead, what she saw...made her wonder. "I have not yet spoken of it," Kate mumbled, suddenly curious, unable not to speak, "not yet asked you about it, but now..." She tried to look deeper. "What happened that night? How were you taken from our parents' home? And then what...?" Kate did not quite know how to put her thoughts into words; yet the look upon Sarah's face told her that her sister understood.

"I cannot tell you everything," Sarah said softly, casting a watchful look over her shoulder at the doctor and the midwife across the room. "Not at this point. Hopefully someday."

Kate frowned, wondering why her sister acted so secretively. Of course, what had happened had ruined her. And yet...it was already known far and wide throughout society, was it not?

"Still, I wish for you to know," Sarah murmured, leaning closer so only Kate could hear her words, "that I did not suffer. No harm was done to me. On the contrary, it gave me the opportunity to break my engagement to Lord Blackmore. I'd rather never marry than be married to a man like him."

Kate could not believe her ears, staring at her sister rather dumbfounded. Yet the moment her lips parted to ask another question, a new contraction seized her, wiping everything from her mind as pain shot through her body.

The doctor approached, waiting until the contraction finally ceased, then placed his hands upon her belly, checking upon her child.

"Is he all right?" Kate asked on a shuddering breath.

The doctor nodded, a reassuring smile upon his face. "All is well. There's no reason for you to worry, my lady. Three weeks is early but not too early. In all likelihood, your child will be fine."

Try as she might, Kate could not hold onto those words, could not make herself believe them. She wanted to with all her heart, and yet...She had heard words like these before. She knew from experience that they were no guarantee.

*In all likelihood.*

Her last child had been lost in her eighth month of pregnancy. It had been a boy, and he had been stillborn. Everything had been fine until the moment when no sound had emerged from his lungs. The moment her son had been born, Kate had slumped back, utterly exhausted. Yet a smile had played across her features as her ears had strained to listen for that most beautiful of all worldly sounds.

Only it had never come.

Her heart had broken that day as had her husband's. After all, the child had been a boy, an heir. Her husband had never forgiven her for failing him so.

What would today bring? More heartache? Or final relief? "Please, be a boy," Kate whispered, her eyes pinched shut, every fiber of her being begging Fate to hear her. "Please, be a boy, and be all right. Be healthy. Be...alive."

Soft hands touched her face, brushed away strands of Kate's hair that clung to her sweaty forehead. She opened her eyes and looked up into her sister's. "I'm here," Sarah mumbled, and Kate was grateful that her sister did not try to make any uncertain promises. She could not bear them. "I'm here."

With tears in her eyes, Kate nodded as she clutched her sister's hand within her own.

As the hours passed, Kate allowed Sarah's voice to carry her away, to give her a much-needed reprieve between contractions that started to wear her down. She could feel herself grow weaker, her body no longer able to recover her strength the way she had before. At some point, Kate could not help but think that if she were to die today, she would never see her daughters again. *What will life be like for them without their mother?* Yet that thought was quickly followed by

another, one utterly truthful and shocking all the same. After all, had her daughters not already lost their mother? Indeed, months had passed since she had last seen them...all for the sake of this child. Would it be worth it? Kate wondered before her eyes closed and her hold on reality vanished.



# Chapter Eighteen

## SONS & DAUGHTERS



Keir remained in a nearby drawing room, not wishing to stray too far in case Sarah needed him. Lord Birchwell seemed livid, barking orders and rushing from one end of the estate to the other. He appeared utterly lost, terrified even, and a part of Keir felt for him. He could not help but wonder about the kind of man Birchwell was. Had he always been the same man Keir saw before him today? Or had the loss of his children changed him, too? Was he truly solely concerned for his heir? And what would he do should his expectations not be met?

The day wore on, and Lord Birchwell grew more and more agitated. That, at least, was nothing unusual. Any man would be beside himself when his wife was in labor. Was there a part of him that genuinely cared for her? A part that truly and honestly worried and feared that he might lose *her*?

Keir wished he knew the answer to that question; however, since he did not, he thought it prudent to be prepared. Therefore, he sat down and penned a letter to the dowager countess, explaining that Lady Birchwell had gone into labor and that they were concerned how her husband would react should the child be a girl or, heaven forbid, stillborn.

*Is there any news yet as to the location of Lady Birchwell's two daughters? Unfortunately, we were unable to procure any further information. Lady Birchwell seems ignorant of their location while her husband refuses to say anything on the matter.*

*I am concerned that intervention might be necessary and shall write again as soon as there is news.*

Sealing the letter, Keir handed it to a trusted messenger. The man had arrived a few days past on behest of the dowager. Watching him depart now with his letter in hand, Keir wondered what the next few days would bring. Where could Lord Birchwell have hidden his daughters? And why? Keir thought it most likely that they had been brought to some remote country estate; however, the question was which one.

Returning to the drawing room after delivering the letter to the messenger, Keir was surprised to see the Dowager Lady Birchwell standing by the windows overlooking the garden. Her back was to him, and he wondered if the expression upon her face would show any agitation, any concern for her daughter-in-law. After all, had she not birthed a child herself?

Unfortunately, the moment the dowager turned to face him, Keir realized that any sympathy she might feel toward her son's wife was hidden below a rather icy exterior. Again, she looked down her nose at him, her eyes unwavering as they swept over his features, open distaste in the way she regarded him. "Do you think it appropriate to linger so near Lady Birchwell's chambers?" The way her brows rose clearly stated that *she* did not deem it appropriate. "I'm surprised the servants do not already gossip about this impropriety."

Keir sighed, slightly shaking his head in a pitying gesture. "Are ye so determined to find fault with me when ye know that the only reason I am here is out of concern?"

At his direct approach, the dowager wrinkled her nose. Still, a touch of mortification shone through a miniscule crack in her icy exterior, and she forced her shoulders back even further to mask it. "Be that as it may, a reputation once ruined is lost forever." She fixed him with a pointy gaze. "I assumed you were aware of that, at least." She took a step toward him. "I believe you have trespassed upon our hospitality long enough and suggest you leave before Lord Birchwell demands it."

Holding her gaze, Keir mimicked the lady's behavior and took a step closer, now towering over her. "Is there anyone who can claim to have earned yer loyalty, my lady?" The dowager's hard gaze suddenly seemed to waver, her hands clenching at her sides. "Anyone ye would defend with the last breath of yer body?"

The dowager's lips pressed into a tight line, and a spark of fury flashed in her eyes. Yet she said not a word.

Keir sighed, wondering about the life she had lived. Had she once dreamed of love only to find it denied her? "I'm sorry," he murmured, realizing in that moment that there was no one in the dowager's life who mattered to her. Not even her own son. Not the way a son should matter to his mother. What had happened to prevent that bond? "Loneliness is not easily endured. It takes a truly remarkable person to bear it for so many years."

The dowager flinched, as though he had struck her, and she retreated a few steps. However, her retreat instantly sent red-hot shame to her face, and for a split-second, Keir found himself thinking of Sarah. Then the Dowager Lady Birchwell pushed past him, and without another word, she hurried away, her rushed footsteps drifting to his ears.

Keir remained by the windows, his gaze now directed out at the gardens, its soothing calmness a welcome reprieve. Still, he could not help but ponder the lady's life. What had made her so hard? So unfeeling? And yet, was she? Truly? Perhaps he had misjudged her. Perhaps she knew the meaning of love, after all. Or she had once. Perhaps there had been a time when she had opened her heart to another, and life had made her regret it.

Whichever the reason, the dowager clearly did not wish to be reminded of it. Nor was she willing to alter her approach to life.

Stepping away from the window, Keir moved back toward the door at the sudden sound of approaching footsteps. They sounded rushed and betrayed a certain agitation. Indeed, as he stepped out into the hallway, he saw Lord Birchwell approach

on quick feet, his face as tense as before while the glare in his eyes had darkened even further. He barely looked at Keir as he hastened past the door to the drawing room, then turned a corner.

Keir followed.

Rounding the corner himself, Keir found Lord Birchwell standing outside his wife's chamber. He seemed indecisive, moving a step forward and then two back. Occasionally, his hand would come up as though he wished to knock; however, it always stilled in midair before he dropped it back down and then raked his other hand through his hair. Indeed, the man looked livid with fear, and once again Keir found himself wondering if he had ever truly cared for his wife. If he had, what had happened to change it?

Suddenly, a bloodcurdling scream tore through the house.

Lord Birchwell flinched as though someone had slapped him right across the cheek. He rubbed his hands over his face and then began to pace in front of his wife's door. The moment his gaze fell on Keir, he paused, something dark contorting his features. "I ought never have married her." Again, he raked a hand through his hair, an almost disgusted expression upon his face. "She was young and beautiful," he growled accusingly, "I did not suspect she would be unable to give me a son." He threw up his hands. "How could I have known?" Again, he began to pace.

Slowly, Keir approached, watching the man carefully.

Upon occasion, Birchwell would glance up at him, the desire to send Keir from his home blazing to life again and again. Yet he did not. Instead, he continued his tirade. "Perhaps I ought to have known after all," he scoffed, meeting Keir's gaze, "as my wife has no brothers of her own. Only a sister."

Keir moved closer, unwilling to leave these statements without response. He did not truly believe that anything he said would make a difference, and yet he simply could not remain silent. "Have ye not found that daughters can be a father's pride and joy?" he asked, keeping his voice light and

conversational. "After all, I hear ye have two beautiful wee girls yerself. Ye ought to consider yerself fortunate."

Another scream tore through the house, and again, Birchwell flinched. Yet Keir could not see compassion upon his face. It did not seem he felt for his wife, experiencing her pain like his own. No, the agony he felt seemed to come from something else. Was it only the threat to his line? Nothing else?

"Fortunate?" The man spat, his upper lip curling upward in disgust. "What would you know of these matters? Where you hail from, do men not wish for sons?" He shook his head, as though such a thought seemed impossible. "Do you have children yourself?"

Keir shook his head. "I dunna. However, my parents had three sons, and yet my father was most delighted when he finally had a daughter." A fleeting smile touched his lips as his thoughts were briefly drawn back to the day Yvaine had joined their family.

Indeed, she had been a gift and all their pride and joy.

Birchwell scoffed. "It sounds as though your father is a fool." When another scream echoed through the door, Birchwell spun upon his heel and marched back down the corridor, disappearing around the corner.

Keir heaved a deep sigh, wondering what they could possibly do for Sarah's sister. Clearly, Lady Birchwell's life was far from happy. Sarah's instincts had proved right on this matter. Yet what could they do? Keir felt absolutely certain that Sarah would not leave her sister in this misery. Would she insist upon staying here, at Birchwell? Would Lord Birchwell allow it? And even if so, what kind of a life would that be for her?

Leaning back against the wall, Keir crossed his arms, his thoughts straying to Grandma Edie. He could not help but wonder what the dowager countess would suggest under these circumstances. *No doubt something utterly outrageous.*

Keir grinned. Perhaps that was precisely what was needed.

# Chapter Nineteen

## IF ONLY



The moment Kate's child was born, Sarah thought her fingers would break, for her sister clutched them so tightly they almost felt numb. Her heart raced within her chest, and she prayed that all would go well.

Kate looked utterly exhausted, her eyes barely open, her lids too heavy. Her breath came ragged, and sweat trickled down her temples, soaking her hair and the pillow beneath her head. The look in her eyes swayed back and forth between tentatively hopeful and devastatingly frightened.

Hours of not knowing took their toll. Hours of praying and hoping and begging. Hours of fearing the worst. Dark shadows lingered beneath Kate's eyes, and even Sarah could feel her own body starting to fail her. Every muscle ached, and her voice began to falter as she spoke to Kate, trying to raise her sister's spirits.

Sarah had had no idea that childbirth would be like this. Quite honestly, the thought of going through this herself made her feel utterly terrified. Out of nowhere, her mother's voice piped up, whispering in her head, 'That is something you need not concern yourself with, daughter. After all, your most recent choices ensure that you will never marry, never have children.'

Unbidden, Sarah flinched, the reminder suddenly painful and not bringing relief as it had before. Her thoughts instantly turned to Keir in that moment, conjuring his image and filling her heart with a tentative hope. A hope Sarah instantly shied away from. She did not dare dwell upon it, for she knew it



could never be. This hope had never been meant to be. It was nothing more than a dream and a wish, nothing that would ever take hold in reality. Yet, Sarah's heart could not help but think, *If only*.

And then the moment came.

Kate suddenly surged forward, one hand grasping her knee while the other held on tightly to Sarah's. The doctor told her to push, and Kate drew upon every last bit of strength, doing her utmost to bring this child into the world.

And then the baby was there.

A small, pinkish, shriveled little creature, quickly whisked away by the doctor and the midwife. It disappeared in a myriad of blankets and towels, people crowded around it, their hands reaching out toward it, their lips muttering words Sarah could not make out.

"Is the baby all right?" came Kate's fearful voice, her eyes suddenly wide, no longer overshadowed by exhaustion, as she looked up at Sarah pleadingly.

"I don't know," Sarah murmured, feeling her heart squeeze painfully within her chest. "I—"

A rather annoyed-sounding squeal suddenly echoed through the room, and both sisters froze, their eyes wide, staring at one another, afraid to believe.

"He's alive!" Kate exclaimed in a strained voice, trying to push herself up. "He's alive!" Her eyes moved over to the doctor, who in this moment came toward them, a little bundle in his arms and a grandfatherly smile upon his round face.

Sarah held her breath as she watched the doctor settle the baby in Kate's arms. "There you are, my lady. A beautiful, healthy, little girl."

At his words, Kate cringed, and the hopeful expression upon her face disappeared, replaced by one of anguish. Her entire face fell, fear blazing anew in her eyes.

Sarah wanted to weep at the sight; yet the moment the child came to rest in her mother's arms, Kate's whole

demeanor changed once again. A deep sigh rushed from her lungs, and a heartwarming smile claimed her features, one Sarah had never seen upon her sister's face before. Her eyes shone with love and devotion as she cradled her little girl to her chest, cooing softly as she rocked her from side to side.

Seeing her sister's reaction to her child, Sarah felt a deep ache awaken. It was unexpected and utterly overwhelming, and she barely knew how to describe it. She had never truly thought about being a mother, her main concern was always with the kind of husband her parents would choose for her. And now that she was finally free of their influence, Sarah had not yet had the chance to whisper a silent farewell to a future she would now never have. Of course, she had shed no tears for the loss of a society marriage. Yet in that moment, tears filled Sarah's eyes at the thought that she would never be a mother. Whether or not she could have loved her husband, Sarah knew she would have loved her children.

Now, that would never be.

The little girl's soft wail echoed through the chamber as Sarah watched her sister rock her daughter gently in her arms. Her green eyes glowed with wonder, and she gently brushed the tips of her fingers across the girl's forehead and then one down her nose, murmuring endearments. It was a beautiful moment, and Sarah could have watched it forever.

In the next moment, though, the magic was shattered by the sound of approaching footsteps.

Harsh and thunderous.

Instantly, Kate tensed, her arms tightening protectively around her daughter. That sense of wonderment disappeared from her eyes as they widened once more and then jerked upward to meet Sarah's, a silent plea in them.

Sarah gave a slow nod, a silent promise that all would be well. *I am here*, was what she had said, and she had meant it.

As the door flew open, Sarah slowly rose from the bed and then turned toward Lord Birchwell. She inhaled a deep breath, bracing herself for what was to come. No matter what, she

needed to ensure that her sister and her new niece would not suffer for it.

The look upon Lord Birchwell's face as he charged toward the bed was one of tentative hope, not unlike the expression she had seen upon Kate's face only moments earlier. His eyes were wide and fixed upon his wife as well as the little bundle in her arm. "Is it a boy?" was the only thing he asked, no thought of his going out to his wife's and child's health and well-being.

Sarah felt her whole body tremble with nerves, wishing she could simply disappear into thin air or into that sought-after hole in the ground. Only, of course, that was once again not an option. Still, when she glimpsed Keir out of the corner of her eye as he moved to stand in the doorway, maintaining his distance but ensuring she knew he was there, every muscle in her body seemed to exhale with relief.

For a moment, Sarah marveled at the sudden change in her. She could not say when it happened or how. Still, she had noticed lately that so long as Keir was by her side, she felt almost invincible. Perhaps invincible was a bit too strong a word. However, she felt, at least, capable of handling the situation she was facing. She loved how Keir gave her strength, and so she straightened her shoulders and moved to Kate's side.

At her husband's question, Kate swallowed hard, her gaze briefly falling from his to her daughter's little face, her eyes now closed in slumber. "I am sorry, my lord," she whispered, her voice barely audible, "but it is another girl." Reluctantly, she lifted her gaze to look upon her husband.

Sarah placed her hand upon Kate's shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze, reminding Kate that she was not alone in this.

In the next instant, Lord Birchwell's expression grew dark. Never in her life had Sarah seen a husband glare at his wife like this, as though she had intentionally betrayed him, as though she was somehow the enemy. His brows drew down, narrowing his eyes into slits, and his lips curled back into a snarl. He looked like a rabid animal about to attack. "I knew

you would fail me again!” he growled at Kate. “My mother was right. I should’ve never married you.” Pacing up and down in front of the bed, he shook his head vigorously. “You bewitched me!” He pointed an accusing finger at Kate. “With your feminine wiles, you bewitched me, making me forget what was true and right, my duty.” His feet suddenly stilled, and his gaze fixed upon his wife’s in a way that made Sarah’s knees tremble. “You will give me a son,” he snarled, “or die trying.” Then he spun around and flew from the room, grumbling curses under his breath.

Shocked to her bones, Sarah stared after him. Her gaze met Keir’s, and she could see anger brewing beneath his calm surface as well. His jaw looked tense, and the blue of his eyes had darkened. Yet he remained where he was, not giving in to the impulse Sarah felt pulsing in her own veins. More than anything, she wished she could shake Lord Birchwell awake, slap him hard across the face in order to make him see, make him understand. Yet even if she did, it would make no difference, would it? Men like Lord Birchwell could not be reasoned with. But what else was there?

And then Sarah saw the dowager standing in the doorway to Kate’s chamber. Her expression was as unreadable as always aside from the slight twitch to her lips that seemed to speak volumes. Her gaze lingered upon Kate, hard and accusing, and the moment Kate looked up and their eyes met, Sarah could feel her sister cringe away from the dowager’s hateful glare. She seemed to shrink, growing smaller and smaller, her head bowed and her eyes closed, as though to shut out the world.

At the sight of Kate’s misery, a spark of triumph seemed to light up the dowager’s eyes before she turned around and left without saying a single word.

Cradling her daughter in her arms, Kate sobbed quietly. And so, Sarah once more seated herself beside her sister upon the bed, drawing mother and child into her arms and murmuring words of comfort. Words that felt hollow because no matter what she said, essentially, there was nothing she could do. It was the shocking truth!

Lord Birchwell was Kate's husband, and as such, he had every right to dictate her life, to rule over her, no matter her objections. *Is this truly the world we live in?* Sarah wondered. Even though, all her life she had had very little say in determining its course, it was not until this very moment that Sarah realized how helpless she was.

How helpless even Kate was.

Kate!

Her daring, vivacious sister, who had always pushed the boundaries, always stepped past the line, always raised her head to the horizon, wishing to see beyond.

How had this happened? How had her sister become trapped in such a life? A life where her husband would continue to rob her of her children until she finally gave him a son? A life where her mother-in-law took pleasure in her pain? Indeed, such a fate was unimaginable!

Looking down at her sister, Sarah felt a wave of misery wash over her. Yes, this was the world Kate had been living in for years. And yet she had never said a word, never complained, never asked for help. Had Kate truly believed that she would receive none? That she was truly alone in this world?

Yet deep down, Sarah knew that before meeting Keir she would never have been able to help her sister in any way at all. It was another shocking truth; indeed, her time with Keir had changed her and made her a different woman. Perhaps it was a subtle change, one not glimpsed easily by others, and yet Sarah knew it to be there. As lost as she felt about what to do, her mind unable to conjure a solution, she knew she would not stand back and let this happen, let this continue. No, as Grandma Edie had said countless times, there always was a way. One only had to find it.

And she would; that, Sarah vowed.

If only she knew how.

## Chapter Twenty

## ALWAYS



As the maids tended to Lady Birchwell and her newborn daughter, Keir gently drew Sarah away. He could see the longing expression upon her face and knew that she did not wish to leave her sister. Still, there was much to talk about.

Deeply distraught, Sarah followed Keir down the corridor and then to the lower floor. She barely moved, her gaze staring straight ahead, the expression in her eyes far away as he placed a cloak upon her shoulders and slipped her hands into gloves. He knew she felt powerless in her desire to protect her sister. It was a dangerous emotion, heavy and crushing, easily able to break one's spirit. "Come with me, lass," Keir murmured gently, taking her hand and placing it upon his arm. "Ye could do with a bit of fresh air. It'll help clear yer mind." Then he drew her outside into the cold evening air.

Darkness had already fallen, the world around them illuminated by the soft glow of light shining out through the windows. Yet the cloak of darkness felt comforting, and Keir pulled Sarah along as silent tears began to fall from her eyes, leaving glistening trails upon her cheeks. For a long time, they simply walked on in silence, the moon shining overhead, accompanied by twinkling stars. It was a beautiful night, almost magical, and Keir wished they could have come out here under different circumstances.

Silent sobs fell from Sarah's lips, and her shoulders began to tremble. Yet she walked on, not saying a word, her gaze

fixed upon the far horizon where the midnight-black sky met the pitch black of the forest.

Once they were a good distance from the house, Keir drew to a halt and his hands settled upon Sarah's shoulders, halting her steps and pulling her into his arms. He wrapped her in a tight embrace, and she buried her face in his heavy coat and wept. Her fingers curled into his outer layer, holding on tightly, and her voice sounded choked as she whispered, "Thank you for being here. I would not know what to do without you."

Keir exhaled a slow breath, watching the small cloud dance away on the frosty air. "Always," was all he said, and he meant it.

When Sarah's sobs eventually ceased, she lifted her head, tears still glistening in her eyes, and looked up at him. "I had no idea," she murmured, the look upon her face anguished even in the dim moonlight. "I cannot believe she never said anything. All these years. All these years and I had no idea."

He reached out and gently brushed a tear from her cheek, trailing the tips of his fingers down her jaw until they tenderly grasped her chin. "Look at me, Sarah."

Her eyes blinked, and then her gaze focused, returning from her inner thoughts, from the place of guilt within her, and met his.

"There is no point in placing blame," Keir told her, instantly aware that she disagreed with him from the way the expression in her eyes changed. "I know of which I speak, lass. When my sister vanished from one day to the next, as though the earth had swallowed her whole, I did the same thing. If only I had gone out with her that day. If only I'd held her back, insisting she stay. If only..." Closing his eyes, Keir heaved a deep sigh, remembering those first few days after Yvaine's disappearance. He had thought himself lost in a nightmare, trying desperately to wake up. Yet once the realization came that he was indeed awake, it had been crippling in a way nothing else ever had. "There is no point to



it, and eventually you will come to see it.” He gave her chin a slight pinch. “’Tis time yer sister doesna have.”

Sarah blinked, and he could see that she was finally hearing him. “I cannot leave her here,” she murmured, her voice still soft and tentative, though, questioning and doubtful. “What am I to do? She’s trapped in this life, is she not? He is her husband, and short of death, nothing will ever change that.” Deep sadness fell over her face, and once again, she leaned into him, seeking closeness.

Keir wrapped his arms around her shoulders, holding her close, feeling her chest rise and fall in tandem with his own. “There’s always a way.”

To Keir’s surprise, a soft chuckle rumbled in her throat before she lifted her chin and met his eyes. “Grandma Edie.”

Keir grinned. “Aye, she’s a wise woman, unafraid to do even outrageous things in order to protect those she loves.” He held Sarah’s gaze, a sobering expression coming to his own. “How far are ye willing to go?”

Her lips parted, and yet, for a moment she stilled, as though those words had conjured some sort of memory. Then she swallowed and nodded. “To the ends of the earth.”

*Aye, that does sound familiar,* Keir thought. Had he himself not said something similar about his own sister? Aye, he had told Sarah he would walk to the ends of the earth in order to speak to Yvaine again. Indeed, no distance was too great to reclaim someone who held one’s heart.

“Before the wee girl was born tonight, I already sent a message to the dowager.” As the wind tugged loose one of Sarah’s curls, he reached out and gently brushed it back behind her ear, his fingers lingering upon her skin. “We both know she will never stand for this. None of the Whickertons will. They will do everything within their power to help.” He looked deep into her eyes. “Ye know that.”

Sarah nodded, drying her tears. “Yes, I do know that. Still, I cannot help but wonder what can be done.” She paused, her gaze drifting away before returning to him, her forehead

slightly furrowed. “Do you think there is any way, any way at all, to make Lord Birchwell understand? To help him become the husband my sister deserves?”

From the sound in her voice, Keir could tell that she did not truly believe that to be a possibility. And so, he shook his head, not bothering to sugarcoat his words. “I dunna believe so. After everything I’ve observed over the past few days, I canna imagine that anything short of a miracle will change him. He has grown up in a world where he can do no wrong, where he is entitled to everything he seeks.” He scoffed. “Ye’ve met his mother.”

Sarah heaved a deep sigh, one full of disappointment. Then, however, her shoulders pulled back, and she slowly lifted her chin, her eyes seeking his once more. “There’s no other way then,” she murmured hesitantly, clearly afraid to voice her thoughts. “We have to spirit them away.” Her wide eyes remained upon his, seeking confirmation.

Slowly, Keir nodded, well aware that the thought was outrageous to her. She was only just now settling into the new reality of her own life, coming to accept that the choice she had made to go against convention had been necessary and justified. Yet to spirit a wife and children away from a husband and father felt utterly wrong to her. Society had made sure of that, instilling in her a code of conduct which rarely went hand in hand with one’s own sense of right and wrong. *Aye, Keir thought, ’tis not easy to walk that line between one’s own judgment and that of others.*

Still, the truth that remained was that Birchwell was treating his family unjustly. Whether society saw that did not matter. Keir could tell by looking into Sarah’s face her heart knew the truth. It told her that her brother-in-law had no right to treat his family the way he did, and perhaps even now, in this moment, Sarah was coming to realize that it was her responsibility to interfere. After all, Kate was her sister, and family stood together no matter the obstacle.

Always.

“But how?” Sarah’s eyes were wide as her mind contemplated such an outrageous idea, the soft trembling in her jaw evidence of her emotional upheaval. “Where could they go?” She stared up at him, then slowly shook her head. “There’s nowhere where they would be safe, is there? He would come for them. He would find them anywhere.” She threw up her hands, her jaw hardening in frustration. “We would not even be able to get Kate and the baby out of the house. And we don’t know where the girls are. How are we to do this? How do we have any chance of succeeding if Lord Birchwell and his mother watch Kate like a hawk? She cannot take a step without him knowing.” A heavy sigh left her lips. “Kate told me she once tried to go visit her daughters. Yet she did not get far. He caught up with her swiftly.” A defeated expression came to Sarah’s face, and all of a sudden, that rebellious spark he had seen in her eyes only moments before grew dimmer.

Doubt was a powerful enemy. Keir knew that. It was neither truth nor lie, but it held the power of both. It not only weakened one’s resolve but also one’s strength. Doubt was crippling, and he knew he could not allow it to sink its talons into Sarah. Especially now, she needed to believe that this was possible.

That anything was possible.

Keir had grown up with that belief, had heard it whispered in stories told by his grandparents and parents alike. From the time he had been born, he had always been encouraged, told that the sky was the limit, that mind triumphed over matter. Aye, the Whickertons knew it as well. They had learned those very same ideals from Grandma Edie, who had passed them on down the line from one generation to the next. It was a powerful inheritance, one worth a lot more than title and fortune. Only Sarah had never been given such. Quite on the contrary, day in and day out, she had learned to doubt herself, her own strength, the possibilities available to her. All she knew were limits and obstacles.

*’Tis time to change that*, Keir knew. In fact, the change had already begun or Sarah would not be standing here with him,

contemplating such an endeavor. She was not yet ready to undertake it on her own, but the time for that would come. One day, she would be ready, and Keir vowed that he would do anything within his power to see it happen.

Keir smiled at her then, his fingers once more reaching out to grasp her chin. He loved the feel of her skin against his own, slightly chilled and yet pulsing with life, with warmth. “Ye seem to have made up yer mind, little wisp.” He chuckled, feeling his heart pause in his chest the moment her large eyes met his.

Once again, she was trembling, completely overwhelmed by this sudden debate about right and wrong, about which path to follow and how to do so. Still, despite her doubts, Keir could tell that she had already made her decision. Aye, if the heart felt strongly enough, there was nothing the mind could do to overrule it.

Sarah stilled, perhaps only now realizing the truth. “I suppose I have,” she murmured, disbelief heavy in her voice. “What else am I to do? I cannot simply walk away, can I?” Keir could feel determination hardening her jaw. “No, she’s my sister and...” Her gaze became distant, and Keir could all but sense a memory materializing. Then Sarah blinked, her gaze back upon his. “We promised one another as children,” she told him as she had before, back in the woods. “We promised to always stand together, to come for one another if need be. I cannot break that promise now. I cannot abandon her.” Tears misted in her eyes, glistening in the moonlight.

Keir nodded, touched by the power of her emotions. “I would never dream of asking ye to, and I promise that I will help ye any way I can.”

Something enchanting came to her face, and she reached out her right hand and cupped it to his cheek. “Thank you, Keir. I’m so grateful that you are here.”

Keir gently leaned into her touch, his hands reaching out to grasp her waist and pulling her closer. “I, too, have given a promise, and I intend to see it through.”

A hint of confusion lingered in Sarah's eyes, and yet Keir did not want to clarify what he spoke of. Aye, he had given Grandma Edie his word to protect Sarah. And yet the promise he spoke of was one of his own. He had not even yet given it voice, its only place of existence was in his mind and heart. But it was enough.

More than enough.

"Ye need to speak to yer sister, lass," Keir reminded her. "After all, in the end, 'tis her decision. We canna act against her will." He sighed deeply, praying that Lady Birchwell still carried that same flicker of resistance in her heart. "Her husband has done that for far too long."

Sarah nodded. "I shall." Her lips pressed together in determination. "I shall speak to her, and I shall convince her. Whatever it takes." She made to step away, her mind already focused on the task before her.

Yet Keir held her back, his hands upon her waist loath to release her. He felt her warmth and her strength, her kindness and her courage, and he simply wanted to hold her close a moment longer.

Sarah's gaze searched his face. "Is everything all right?" She looked up into his eyes, and a corner of her mouth quirked into a tentative smile. "There's that glimmer in your eyes that..." She exhaled a shuddering breath, and Keir could see that she knew what he was thinking. Aye, she'd come to know him well.

He could not deny that he liked that.

"There's another promise I intend to uphold," he murmured teasingly as his hands upon her back tightened, urging her closer. "A promise I've been rather looking forward to."

In the dark, Keir could not tell if Sarah was blushing. Yet the way she dropped her gaze before raising it once more said more than a thousand words.

"'Tis the perfect moment," he murmured as the distance between them shrank, inch by inch, his gaze trained upon hers.

“We are alone, and there are no prying eyes nearby.” He could feel her warm breath upon his lips. “Do ye object?”

A slow smile curled up the corners of her mouth, a smile that seemed neither shy nor hesitant. “I wouldn’t dream of it,” Sarah replied boldly, her hands reaching for him just as much as his were holding onto her.

Keir chuckled deep in his throat. “Ye’re a fierce one. I always knew ye to be.” Pride filled his heart as he slipped a hand into her hood, his fingers grazing the side of her neck before cupping the back of her head. “I have dreamed of this.”

For a second, Sarah seemed to still, her eyes widening ever so slightly as she looked up at him.

“I’ve dreamed of this...many times,” Keir told her, answering her silent question. “’Twould seem ye’re always on my mind, little wisp. No matter where I am or what I’m doing, my thoughts always stray to ye.”

An utterly enchanting smile touched her lips, and yet she averted her gaze rather shyly.

“Ye’re blushing again, lass,” Keir remarked with a chuckle, certain that it was so, even if he could not see it. “Why are ye blushing? Do ye not believe me?”

A shuddering breath left Sarah’s lips. “I want to,” she whispered, her fingers curling into his coat, holding on tightly. “Yet there is this voice in my head that whispers that it cannot be, that I’m a fool for—”

Tugging her close, Keir kissed her. He kissed her deeply and thoroughly, wanting to silence every doubt she had ever had. He needed her to know how precious she was to him, how deeply he had come to feel for her. Aye, sometimes it still surprised him. He could not deny that a part of him was still reeling from everything that had happened in the past few weeks. Yet deep down, Keir knew that it was real.

He cared for her.

More than he should.

More than was wise.

His traitorous heart, though, did not seem to care, urging him to pull her close, to hold her tight and prove to her that she was one of a kind.

Truly and utterly.

The odds of finding her had been slim, and yet here she was in his arms.

Unexpectedly.

But real, nonetheless.

Keir smiled against her lips, realizing in that moment that he would never let her go. No matter what the obstacles, he would remain by her side.

Always.

## Chapter Twenty-One



## LOCKED IN A TOWER



When Sarah returned to her sister's chamber, she found Kate asleep, exhaustion painted on her features. Yet with her eyes closed and her face relaxed, Sarah could almost glimpse the young woman she had once known, the young woman Kate had once been.

For a long time, Sarah simply stood there beside her sister's bed and watched her sleep. Her newborn daughter lay snuggled in her embrace, Kate's arm protectively wrapped around her. The moment was heartbreakingly perfect, and Sarah wished that the smile that had come to Kate's face upon first seeing her daughter could always be there.

Quiet steps carried Sarah around the room as her mind churned. Yes, by agreeing to Grandma Edie's outrageous plan, Sarah had saved herself. There was no longer the threat of marriage upon the horizon. No husband who would dominate her life, forcing her to comply with his every whim and desire.

A deep breath rushed from Sarah's lungs as she felt the image of Lord Blackmore retreat. Over the past few months, it had always been there like a dark cloud hanging over her head. Now, though, the sky was clearing, and she found she could breathe more easily.

With a sigh, Sarah glanced over her shoulder at her sister, her sleeping face illuminated by the dim light from the moon shining in through the windows. "I got away," she whispered, feeling such relief that tears came to her eyes. "But you did not."

More than anything, Sarah wished she could wake Kate, sit down with her and speak openly. She burned to know her sister's thoughts, not the placating excuses Kate had always conjured thus far but the naked truth instead, as painful and crushing as it might be. In the end, lies and pretenses would always make things worse. Only by facing the truth could a solution be found.

*There's always a way.* Those words echoed through Sarah's mind, making her think of Grandma Edie and Keir alike. They were both such life-affirming people, not a flicker of doubt in their eyes. Oh, how Sarah wished she, too, could be such a person. "Perhaps one day," Sarah whispered to herself. "Perhaps one day I will be."

Returning to her own chamber, Sarah slipped into bed and closed her eyes. She had all but expected to find herself lying awake for hours on end. Yet the stress of that day had taken its toll, and her mind slipped into oblivion almost as soon as her head touched the pillow.

The next morning sent her bright and early back to her sister's chamber. She did not even go downstairs for a bit of breakfast, her emotions too raw to wait.

Kate was seated in her bed with her newborn daughter sleeping peacefully in her arm. Once again, there was this glow upon Kate's face, as though the world were perfect, as though there were nothing to dampen her spirits. It seemed motherhood held great power, Sarah mused, watching her sister with a smile upon her face. If only the rest of the world could be like this as well.

"How are you this morning?" Sarah asked as she approached on quiet feet, not wishing to disturb her little niece. *Oh, she is beautiful. And she looks so much like Kate.*

Kate wrenched her gaze away from the mesmerizing child in her arms and looked up at Sarah, that overwhelming smile still lingering. "I'm well," she breathed, a touch of disbelief in her eyes. "Tired but," she glanced down at her daughter, "happy."

Smiling, Sarah seated herself beside her sister upon the bed. Her gaze strayed to the little girl, whose eyes were closed in slumber, a tuft of dark hair curled upon her head. “She’s beautiful. Do you already have a name for her?”

“Frederica,” Kate exclaimed with a mother’s pride. Then, however, the look in her eyes dimmed. “My husband wanted to name our son Frederick.” Warring emotions danced across Kate’s face before she blinked rapidly and then lifted her chin. “I thought it would be beautiful and perhaps remind him that even though she’s a girl, she still is his child.”

Sarah nodded. “I like it.” Yet she doubted that her sister’s husband would see it as such. No doubt he would consider it an unfortunate reminder of the loss he had suffered. A daughter instead of an heir. Sarah could not imagine it to be any different. If she could, perhaps another way could be found after all.

“Will Augusta and Dorothea now return to Birchwell?” Sarah inquired, wondering if her sister had already spoken to her husband.

Tucking Frederica a little tighter into her embrace, Kate exhaled slowly. “I hope so.” She glanced down at the little girl. “After all, she’s perfectly fine. Two rambunctious elder sisters will not see her come to any harm.” She chuckled; yet it was a sound full of doubt and hesitation.

Sarah sighed, trying to find the right words to broach the subject of her sister’s future. What if Kate refused to see reason? What if she insisted on continuing on like this, only ever hoping for the best without ever doing anything to make it happen?

“When you were first wed,” Sarah began tentatively, seeking her sister’s gaze, “what was it like?”

For a long moment, Kate said nothing, the look in her eyes reluctant and yet faraway as though she could not help but remember. Then she swallowed and met Sarah’s eyes. “At first, I liked him,” Kate answered with a frankness Sarah had not expected. “He was kind and considerate, and I truly thought myself fortunate to have gained his favor, to have him

for my husband.” Guilt and shame slowly etched themselves into Kate’s face.

Sarah understood. To speak about her own husband in such a way was a deep betrayal. A wife ought never do so, and yet it seemed that Kate had reached the point where she could no longer pretend. She had done so for far too long.

“And then?” Sarah reached out and placed a hand upon her sister’s, her gaze briefly darting to the sleeping little girl. “What changed?”

Kate sank back into the pillows, her eyes closing. “It all truly started when Augusta was born. Right away, it was obvious that he was disappointed, though at the time he still tried to hide it. His mother, of course, saw no such need. She endlessly berated him for marrying me.” Her eyes opened, and she looked at Sarah. “I did not know it at the time, but it seemed that she was against the marriage, thinking I would not make an appropriate wife for her son. It seems she was correct.”

Sarah grasped her sister’s hand tightly. “Neither is her son an appropriate husband for you,” she pointed out sternly. “You have done everything anyone could ever ask, and how has he treated you?” She shook her head vehemently. “No, no one has any right to lay blame at your feet. Please, don’t for a second believe what they are saying.”

A tentative smile came to Kate’s face. “I forgot what it is like not to be alone, to have someone who cares...about me.” Tears rose in her eyes, and she shifted Frederica in her arms, laying her upon her chest, the little girl’s cheek no doubt warm against Kate’s skin. “I’m so relieved you are here.”

Sarah smiled at her sister. “Had I known, I would have come sooner.” In truth, Sarah was uncertain if she would have, if she *could* have. Yet she would have wanted to. At least, that much was true. “Do you remember the promise we once made each other?”

Kate chuckled, and Frederica briefly stirred in her sleep. “Hush, hush, little one,” Kate said in a singsong voice, trailing

the tips of her fingers gently over her daughter's little face. "Sleep. All is well."

Once the child had calmed down once more, Kate's eyes returned to Sarah. "Of course, I remember. We always pretended that mother was some evil witch, keeping us locked away in a tower." Again, she chuckled, but quieter this time. "We always dreamed of princes coming one day to rescue us and take us away to a beautiful place where we would forever be happy."

Sarah nodded, deeply touched by this moment as much as by the memory Kate's words conjured. "Yes, we did. We also promised one another that should only one of us find her prince, she would return for the one left behind."

Kate's expression darkened, and she heaved a deep sigh. "I should've come for you," she murmured, squeezing Sarah's hand in return. "I went away, and I left you behind. I'm so sorry."

Sarah shook her hand. "No, that is not what I meant to say." She gripped Kate's hand tighter. "It does not matter who left and who stayed. What matters is that we promised to be there for one another." She held her sister's gaze until Kate nodded, tears glistening in her eyes. "Then let me be there for you right now, Kate. Please, tell me everything and hold nothing back, and together, we will find a way. I promise you."

A shuddering breath left Kate's lips. "Would you... Would you put her in her crib?" she whispered breathlessly, brushing a hand over Frederica's head. Tears now stood in her eyes, the look upon her face anguished.

Sarah nodded and then gently gathered her little niece into her arms. The child stirred, reluctant to leave her mother, her comforting warmth and reassuring heartbeat. Sarah rocked Frederica gently, humming a lullaby under her breath as she settled the little girl into the crib. Then she returned to her sister's side.

Sitting with a bowed head, Kate stared into nothing. Yet her hand once more sought Sarah's. "In the beginning, I stood up to him." Her gaze rose, and she looked at her sister.

“Believe me, I did. I told him he could not treat me like this.” She exhaled slowly. “He disagreed.”

Sarah could feel her sister’s fingers digging into her flesh.

“I tried everything I could think of. I tried to remain calm and speak to him reasonably. I...I yelled at him, demanding he treat me with respect.” She closed her eyes, a look of utter defeat upon her face. “I think my resistance made everything worse. It gave his mother ammunition against me. She was like a constant voice in his ear, pointing to every mistake I’d made, reminding him that he ought never have married me.” She rested her head back against the pillow, her eyes still closed. “Eventually, he came to agree with her. Suddenly, I was the enemy, and no matter what I did, it was never good enough. He no longer cared how I felt. All he cared about was having an heir.”

Her eyes blinked open, and her tears spilled over, slowly snaking their way down her cheeks. “I told him he could not treat me like this, and yet I was wrong. He could and he did, and it made me realize that I was trapped and at his mercy. No one would help me. I even spoke to Mother, but she only told me to be an obedient wife and not make a fuss about things.” An utterly forlorn expression came to Kate’s eyes. “It is hard to stand alone, with no one to lean on, with no one to hold your hand.”

Sarah’s heart twisted painfully as she listened to her sister’s story. All those years, and she had not known. *I should never have believed her letters*, Sarah reminded herself, feeling anger spark to life about having been so gullible. *I should’ve known something was wrong. Perhaps I even did, and yet I did nothing.*

After all, Sarah, too, knew what it was to stand alone. After Kate had married, she had felt alone as well. And yet she had had Christina and the Whickertons. They had tried their utmost to remain at her side, to help whenever help was needed. And now, there was Keir.

Like no one else, he stood by her side. Whatever she needed, he was there. He made her feel strong and capable,

and he was the very reason why she was here right now, ready to offer help to her sister in her time of need.

“I wish I could’ve stood with you,” Sarah said to her sister, holding Kate’s gaze imploringly. “I’m sorry I did not. I’m sorry for not coming sooner. But I am here now, and I am offering you a choice.”

A frown drew down Kate’s brows, and Sarah thought to see an inkling of understanding. Still, she asked, “A choice? What do you mean?” Her hands began to tremble, as though she feared to hear what Sarah had to say.

Holding her sister’s gaze, Sarah leaned closer, her hands wrapped tightly around Kate’s. “To save yourself.”

Kate stared into Sarah’s eyes, as though she had not truly understood the words Sarah had spoken. Slowly, creases came to her forehead, transforming her face into a frown. Yet there was a glimmer of suspicion in her green eyes. “Save myself,” Kate murmured and slowly shook her head, her brows drawing down. “What do you mean?”

Sarah inhaled a slow breath, wondering if her sister was truly ready to hear this. Yet there was no other way. Too much time had already passed. Sarah’s little nieces had already spent too much time without their mother, and Kate’s spirit had been broken far too often. “What I mean is,” Sarah said slowly, licking her lips, for her mouth seemed suddenly dry, “that you should leave him. Take your daughters and begin anew somewhere else.”

At first, Kate’s expression remained absolutely still, not a twitch of emotion showing upon her face. Then, ever so slowly, her eyes grew larger, shock and disbelief visible there. “You cannot truly mean that!” Kate breathed in a whisper, her voice barely audible. “You cannot actually suggest I...”

“But I am,” Sarah insisted as her sister continued to stare at her in utter disbelief. Yet, deep below these layers of shock and outrage, Sarah thought to see a spark of temptation. A spark Kate did not allow to grow, no doubt fearing what it might lead to. “What is the alternative? To remain here and continue this life as before? Truly, is this what you want?”

Pressing her lips into a tight line, Kate shook her head as tears slowly rolled down her cheeks. "I cannot," she sobbed, her grip so tight upon Sarah's hands that she feared her bones might crack. "I cannot betray my husband like that. What would Mother and Father say? What would—?" Her eyes widened in utter panic as she no doubt considered every single implication. Yes, once, Sarah had done the same. It had taken her some time to agree to Grandma Edie's plan.

And so, Sarah pulled her sister into her arms and rocked her gently, mumbling words of comfort into her ear, assuring her that somehow all would be well. Of course, Kate could not agree to such a life-changing step in the blink of an eye. Sarah ought to have known, and perhaps she had. Still, deep inside, she simply wanted to see her sister happy again.

Rather today than tomorrow.

Yet she would have to be patient and speak to her again and again, slowly allowing this idea to sink in. Kate needed time to become more and more comfortable with this new possibility, and perhaps, eventually, she would feel bold enough to agree. Sarah prayed that it was so. Yet what if Kate would never be ready?

*What am I to do then?* Sarah thought in a sudden rush of panic. *Am I to leave her here? Surely, I cannot stay indefinitely. Her husband will not allow it. He already thinks of me as a nuisance, wishing me gone.*

For a moment, Sarah felt utterly disheartened. Then, however, she called herself to reason, reminding herself of everything that had happened so recently, everything she had thought impossible not too long ago. Indeed, there always was a way, and with every day that passed, Sarah was starting to believe it a little bit more. Certainly, it would not be easy to pry Kate away from her husband, but it could be done.

Sarah would see to it.

One way or another.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

## THE LIFE OF A COUNTESS



It was nothing short of magic.

Kate knew it to be. She knew this feeling of awe, of wonderment, of utter disbelief as she looked down into her daughter's tiny face, her blue eyes open and looking back into hers. She saw Frederica's little soul, a new life gathering its first few glimpses of the world. There was awareness there, the will to live, to learn, to be all she could be. Kate also saw infallible trust, and a part of her ached to claim it for herself, to go back to those first innocent days of childhood while another, darker part of her soul cringed at the thought that, like herself, Frederica would one day lose that trust. It would be stripped from her by the harsh world she had been born into. A world that would show her no respect, no consideration, no compassion.

A world that only knew demands.

Closing her eyes, Kate hugged her precious child to her chest, rocking her gently, clinging to these first pure moments with every heartbeat. For Frederica's sake as well as her own. Yet eventually, they would pass. They had to. And then?

Sarah's voice echoed in Kate's ears. *Save yourself*. Even the memory of her sister's words made Kate cringe, and her gaze flew around the room as though someone might have overheard her wayward thoughts. Indeed, they were outrageous! Kate knew that to be true. Yet what was even more outrageous than these thoughts themselves was the fact that...they intrigued Kate.

Bowing her head, Kate once more looked down into Frederica's little face, her blue eyes now closed in slumber. Her tiny chest rose and fell with even breaths, and her right hand was curled into Kate's robe, holding on as though Frederica, too, felt the threat of separation that lingered nearby.

Tears shot to Kate's eyes as a memory of Augusta and Dorothea took shape in her mind. She saw them laughing and giggling, their little teacups clinking together as they served her imaginary tea. They added make-believe sugar in heaps before stirring the tea rather vigorously and then upending the cup before it even made it halfway to Kate's outstretched hand.

"Oh, my darlings, I miss you so," Kate whispered in a choked voice, reminding herself not to clutch Frederica too tightly.

"Tears again?"

At the sound of her mother-in-law's voice, Kate spun around, her eyes wide and her heart all but beating out of her chest, and for a terrifying second, Kate felt convinced that the dowager knew precisely what thoughts she had entertained only moments ago.

Her expression cold as always, the dowager took a few steps into the room. "May I remind you that you are the Countess of Birchwell?" Her tone sent a chill down Kate's back. "Act as such. It does not suit to weep all day."

Kate blinked tears from her lashes. "I'm in my chambers with no one to see." Her arms involuntarily tightened upon Frederica. "What is it to you?"

Her mother-in-law's gaze narrowed. "Since when do you show such little respect?" she demanded, her eyes fixed upon Kate as she approached, like a lioness stalking a gazelle. "It is no doubt your sister's influence." Standing in front of Kate, the dowager drew back her shoulders, her chin rising another fraction. "Indeed, it is time for Miss Mortensen...and *that man*...to leave."

Kate felt something cold sweep through her at the thought of being alone once more, of having no one to lean on, no one who cared how she felt. Indeed, only now that Sarah had come had Kate realized how lonely she had been.

Suddenly, the dowager's gaze drifted lower to Frederica, and the cold that clutched Kate's heart grew more painful. "Birchwell needs a son, an heir," the dowager proclaimed as though it were an altogether novel thought. "We all have a duty to fulfil, and you have failed in yours. Again."

Kate swallowed hard. "What am I to do? I gave you three grandchildren."

"Three granddaughters," the dowager corrected, her nose crinkled in disapproval. "I'd rather have one grandson." Her brows rose meaningfully, and in that moment, Kate heard the echo of her husband's threat, *You will give me a son or die trying.*

"Send them away," the dowager ordered, "or Birchwell will do it for you." For a moment, her cold gaze remained upon Kate's before she turned to leave, not even sparing a glance at her newest granddaughter.

"Do you truly feel nothing when you look at her?" Kate asked without thinking, wondering not for the first time about her mother-in-law's unfeeling demeanor. "Is there no part of you that aches to hold her? To protect her?"

Halting her steps, the dowager turned to look at her, not a twitch of emotion visible upon her face. "I protect the earldom. I always have, and I always will. As should you." And with that, she left.

Kate stared after her, unable to catch a clear thought. Her emotions felt raw, and her body weak. She all but dropped into the nearest armchair, her breathing coming fast and her eyes sliding closed as she leaned her head against the backrest.

*Heaven help me! What am I to do?*

## Chapter Twenty-Three

## AN EAGER LADY



At the same time at Whickerton Grove

The icy country air felt utterly invigorating in Harriet's lungs, and she breathed in deeply, her gaze directed down the small slope toward Whickerton Grove. Her mare Moon pranced eagerly; her legs not yet tired from their run across the meadow. A breath of snow lay draped across the world, icy crystals sparkling everywhere in the barren trees. The world glittered, sunlight reflected in every drop of frozen water, making it look almost magical.

Like some faraway place straight out of a fairytale or a myth or legend.

"What is it?" Harriet's husband Jack asked as he pulled up his gelding beside her. "You have that look upon your face again." He eyed her curiously, his dark hair rather unkempt and his warm brown eyes sparkling with the excitement of their chase.

As much as Jack always tried to appear the proper duke, Harriet knew him to be an adventurer at heart—just like herself. Life, though, had taught him not to be, society's rules ingrained in him to the bone. Yet ever since their paths had crossed the year before, things had begun to change.

Harriet met his gaze. "What are you trying to say?" she challenged with a wide grin upon her face.

Jack chuckled. "I'm saying that you seem to be up to something." He urged his gelding closer until his knee bumped

against hers, sending a shiver of awareness through Harriet. “What is going on?”

Oh, she loved the way Jack sometimes drew closer, the look in his eyes all innocence, as though he had not an inkling of what his nearness did to her. “Sweet Jack, do you truly not know?” Leaning toward him, Harriet reached out a hand, then ran her fingers through his hair. “I had thought you more observant.”

A slow grin came to his face as his eyes lingered upon hers. “What can I say?” he murmured, his warm breath teasing her lips. “You can be utterly distracting.”

“Is that a compliment?”

The right corner of his mouth twitched, and then he dipped his head, bridging what little distance remained between them, and kissed her. He kissed her in that unique way of his, gently, tenderly, his passion for her held in check until Harriet could no longer bear it, her eagerness tugging him forward, demanding more.

Slinking her arms around his shoulders, Harriet all but pulled herself out of Moon’s saddle and onto her husband’s lap. Unfortunately, both horses began prancing nervously, clearly disliking their riders’ amorous activities.

Jack’s hands settled on her waist, urging her back onto Moon’s back. “Careful, Harry. You don’t want to end up in the grass again.”

Harriet chuckled. “As long as you end up in the grass with me.” She winked at him, delighting in the way he rolled his eyes at her, yet unable to hide a grin.

“Then tell me,” Jack began, his knee bumping against hers once more, this time with meaning, “what is going on? What did you see that failed to catch my attention?”

Harriet turned her gaze back toward Whickerton Grove. “Over there,” she said, nodding her head toward the winding road that led up to the front door. It cut through fields of grass, currently frosted over, the air biting with cold. “Do you not see him?”

Squinting his eyes, Jack lifted his right hand to shield himself from the bright winter sun. “What is that? A rider?” He frowned, then turned toward her. “Who is that? Do you know?”

Harriet grinned. “I do not have the slightest idea.”

Jack’s frown deepened. “Why, then, are you watching him with such rapt attention?”

Harriet inhaled deeply, watching the man dismount, then hand his horse’s reins to a stable hand. “Because I feel as though I’ve seen him before.”

“You can tell from this distance? I cannot even make out his face.”

Harriet laughed. “Neither can I. However, I recognize his horse. His dapple-gray has a similar coloring to Moon’s.”

Jack nodded. “I see,” he murmured, that touch of incredulity still in his voice. “And where have you seen that horse before?”

“In our stable, in London,” Harriet replied, lifting her brows meaningfully.

Jack huffed out a deep breath, a touch of annoyance coming to his expression. “What exactly are you saying?”

Harriet threw up her hands, wondering if Jack truly did not know or if he was merely feigning ignorance in order to draw her out. Sometimes, he was hard to read, and Harriet loved that about him. “Isn’t it obvious? Grandma Edie is once again up to something. I am sure of it.” She reached out to tug upon his arm. “Come on! Let’s investigate!” And with that, she kicked Moon’s flanks and raced her down the slope toward the house.

Jack followed as she knew he would, and together, they reached the front yard, handing their horses over to two stable hands. With her arm slung through Jack’s, Harriet all but dragged him up the front steps and into the entry hall. They quickly stomped the clinging bits of snow off their boots and handed their coats and mittens and scarves and hats over to a footman, nearly burying the poor man under a pile of clothing.



“We have no way of knowing where he went,” Jack remarked in a whisper, his gaze sweeping from side to side, trying to peek down the various corridors. “He could be visiting anyone.”

Harriet rolled her eyes at him. “Trust me, he is here to see Grandma Edie.” She tugged him onward, knowing precisely which drawing room her grandmother favored this time of day.

On silent feet, they hurried onward, down the corridor and around a corner. Harriet could feel excitement bubbling beneath her skin, wishing her grandmother were not so secretive and allow them more involvement in these endeavors of hers. After all, they sounded marvelous. One adventure after the other that Harriet wished she could participate in. And she would. This time, she would not only hear of it once all the excitement was over. No, this time she would be a part of it.

Drawing closer to the drawing room door, Harriet shushed her husband when he opened his mouth to ask a question. Her eyes fixed him with a hard stare, and she slowly shook her head, urging him to remain quiet. Then she released his arm and tiptoed closer, her ears straining to listen.

Indeed, she could make out voices, dim and muted from behind the door. One definitely belonged to her meddlesome grandmother while the other sounded rather unfamiliar to Harriet. It certainly was a man’s voice; however, beyond that, it did not tell her anything.

Pressing her ear to the door, Harriet listened.

“Marvelous!” came Grandma Edie’s voice. “That is, indeed, good news.”

“I thought you might be pleased,” the man remarked, his voice friendly. “Will you be requiring my assistance again?”

A moment of silence followed before Harriet’s grandmother spoke again. “I shall see to Lady Birchwell’s daughters myself. However, I think it best you travel to the estate in case Mr. MacKinnear requires your assistance. According to his letter, time may be of the essence.”

Harriet stilled when sudden footsteps echoed to her ears. The man was leaving! Instantly, she spun around, grabbed her husband's arm and pulled him back down the corridor. They slipped into the next room and shut the door, leaving only a small gap for Harriet to peek out of.

"This is ludicrous," Jack mumbled behind her. "Harriet, why don't you simply—?"

"There is no *simply* where my grandmother is concerned," Harriet objected, her eyes narrowing as she watched the man step out of the drawing room. Indeed, he did not look familiar.

Once the man had disappeared from view, Harriet dragged Jack back out into the corridor, silently approaching the drawing room door.

"What do you intend to do?" Jack whispered. "Why do you not simply ask—?"

Harriet fixed him with an incredulous stare. "Have you only met my grandmother yesterday?" she asked with a chiding look. "That woman knows how to keep secrets like no one else. If I have nothing tangible in hand, she will never admit that—"

"Harriet, dear, why don't you come inside instead of loitering in the hall?" her grandmother's voice interrupted the relative stillness of the corridor.

Harriet flinched, gritting her teeth. Then she heaved a deep sigh and pushed open the door. "How did you know I was there?" she asked, gesturing for Jack to follow her inside.

He looked a bit contrite and offered the dowager a formal bow. "I apologize for eavesdropping."

The dowager chuckled, clearly touched by his words and his honest demeanor. Then her gaze returned to Harriet. "I'm afraid, my dear, you are not as quiet as you like to believe." She waited until they had both seated themselves upon the settee. "Pray tell, what is on your mind?"

"Who was your visitor?" Harriet asked, not bothering to hide her frankness behind polite words. "Why was he here?"

Her grandmother chuckled. “His name is Mr. Garner, and he provided me with some much-needed information.”

Harriet’s gaze narrowed, and she was all but holding her breath, dreading the moment when her grandmother would once again refuse to answer her questions. “What information?” She racked her mind, trying to remember what she had heard. “What does this have to do with Kate? I heard you mention Lady Birchwell.”

Indeed, Sarah, accompanied by Keir, had traveled to her sister’s estate not long ago. Apparently, all of this was connected. But how? Harriet longed to know. She did not remember Sarah’s sister all that well as she had only been a child when Kate had been married. Still, over the years, she had heard numerous stories about the two sisters from Sarah as well as her own siblings.

For a long moment, her grandmother regarded her rather shrewdly. Harriet could all but hear the little cogs inside her head turning, contemplating, weighing her options. Then finally, she nodded her head. “Very well.”

Harriet exhaled a rushed breath, a bit stunned. “You will tell me what all this is about?”

Her grandmother nodded. “It seems reasonable. After all, I do require your assistance in this matter.”

Harriet felt her pulse hitch higher. Her hand dashed sideways and grasped her husband’s, squeezing it hard.

As Jack flinched, drawing in a sharp breath, her grandmother chuckled. “I can tell you’re all ears.”

Harriet nodded eagerly. “So?”

Her grandmother exhaled a slow breath, and the look in her eyes sobered. All humor vanished, and Harriet could tell that what she was about to hear was a serious matter. “It seems,” her grandmother began, “that in his quest for an heir, Lord Birchwell considered it necessary to separate his wife from her children. Not even she knows the location of their whereabouts. Apparently, he fears that she might seek them out without his permission.”

Deeply disturbed, Harriet stared at her grandmother. Of course, she knew that some husbands reigned like kings over their families; and yet in Harriet's own little world nothing like that ever happened. It seemed impossible!

"What can we do?" Jack asked, the tone in his voice mirroring Harriet's own feelings. Indeed, one look into his kind brown eyes told her that he, too, was outraged.

And Harriet loved him for it.

"But you know where they are, do you not?" Harriet asked her grandmother as she squeezed Jack's hand affectionately. "That is what Mr. Garner came here to tell you, am I right?"

Her grandmother nodded.

"Good. Then what's your plan?" She looked at Jack, one brow raised in question.

Holding her gaze, he gave a gentle nod of his head.

Instantly, Harriet whipped back around to look at her grandmother. "We're in! Whatever it is, we're in!"

Her grandmother chuckled. "I had hoped you would say that. Then go and fetch your siblings and their spouses." Her brows rose meaningfully. "For this, we'll need everyone."

Harriet felt her skin tingle with excitement as she raced off to do as her grandmother had asked. The thought of a mother separated from her children—at the whim of her husband—made Harriet's heart burn with fury. Oh, they would fix this. And hopefully teach Lord Birchwell a lesson.

A much-needed, long-overdue lesson.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

ONCE UPON A HEARTBREAKINGLY SWEET  
KISS



Midnight had come and gone when Keir returned to his chamber. Lately, he often found sleep eluding him, his thoughts occupied with what to do. He knew that Sarah's conversation with her sister had not gone as she had hoped. That, of course, had to be expected. A decision like that could not be made from one second to the next. After all, Lady Birchwell had grown accustomed to her life over many years. She had come to accept it, knowing that it would never be any different. Of course, she knew that her husband would not change. How could she not?

Indeed, acceptance was something incredibly dangerous. What at first might have felt shocking, even outrageous, lost its impact with time. Eventually, it was simply one thing of many that were a part of life.

Ordinary.

Expected.

Accepted.

And once something was accepted, people no longer saw the need to change it. After all, why would they?

Walking down the corridor toward his own chamber, Keir paused when he saw a flicker of light upon its other end. He spotted a door opening and then someone step out into the corridor.

Sarah.

With Loki following upon her heels.

Concerned, Keir quickened his steps. He did not wish to call out to her, afraid he might startle her or draw unwanted attention. Still, he worried what had happened to make her wander about the house at night.

Her steps led her down toward the first floor and then along another darkened hallway, her candle the only light guiding Keir's way. Then from one moment to the next, it disappeared.

Keir paused, blinking his eyes against the sudden darkness. As much as he wished to hurry his steps, he did not, waiting for his eyesight to adjust. Slowly, things took shape around him, and he could make out a large door farther down on the right side of the corridor.

The library.

Keir exhaled audibly, certain that, like him, sleep had eluded Sarah, and so she had come down here in search of a good book. He considered leaving her to her peace and returning upstairs. However, he could not. Not only was he worried about her state of mind or the possibility of someone else coming upon her, but he also longed for a moment alone with her.

It had been nearly a sennight since Lady Birchwell's wee daughter had been born and he and Sarah had stepped outside, strolling the gardens in the moonlight.

Pushing down the door handle, Keir silently stepped into the library. Again, the only light to meet him was the single candle Sarah carried in front of her. He saw her standing by one of the tall bookshelves, her arm raised, her candle illuminating the spines in front of her. Loki lay by her feet, and his gaze moved to Keir the moment he stepped inside.

Keir smiled at the feline, glad he had accompanied them on their journey, relieved to know that he rarely left Sarah's side.

"I see ye canna sleep either," Keir said into the stillness of the night, quiet feet carrying him closer.

At the sound of his voice, Sarah flinched and almost dropped the candle. One hand flew to her chest, and a panting breath escaped her lips. “Keir!” she gasped, relief marking her features. “Oh, it is you.”

“I’m sorry,” Keir murmured as he moved closer, his gaze sweeping over her undone tresses to her robe, which allowed him a glimpse at her night rail underneath, down to her bare feet. “I didna mean to startle ye.”

Clearly not ignorant of his lingering gaze, Sarah blushed, her hands reaching for the loose knot on her night robe, tugging the garment closed. “I cannot sleep,” she murmured, raising shy eyes to him. “So, I thought I’d come down here and...” Her voice trailed off as she nodded toward the bookshelves.

“Ye’re blushing again, lass,” Keir remarked with a grin, unable to help himself. He was mesmerized by those different shades of her, utterly shy and timid one moment and then daring and bold the next.

As expected, Sarah’s cheeks bloomed a crimson red and she bowed her head, her eyes closing for a brief moment as she exhaled slowly. “I kept thinking about Kate,” she muttered, clearly determined to guide their conversation back to safer terrain. “I kept thinking about what I could possibly say to convince her.” She lifted her chin and met his gaze. “Yet everything sounds so...inadequate. What if I cannot find the right words?” She shrugged helplessly. “What if no matter what I say, she will choose to remain here...as his wife?”

Keir moved closer, wondering what to say to reassure her when his gaze came to linger upon a small braid upon her temple. Instantly, his heart seemed to skip a beat, and he stilled. Indeed, after weeks of their absence, there they were again, one braid upon each temple, joining in the back of her head and then trailing down her back.

At his silence, Sarah blinked in confusion before she realized what he was staring at, what held his rapt attention. Instantly, her blush deepened even more, and self-consciously, her hands flew up, her fingers touching the delicate braids.



“I...I simply thought...” She swallowed, chancing a look up at him. “I suppose...I missed them.” Tentatively, she held his gaze. “They...They remind me of the cabin, of...our time there.” Rather helplessly, she shrugged. “Sometimes, I miss it.”

Mesmerized, Keir nodded, then he reached out a hand, the tips of his fingers tracing along the little braid. Sarah held her breath, her gaze fixed upon his. “It pained me to see them gone,” Keir murmured, looking down into her eyes. “And I wondered why ye didna wear them anymore.”

“I wanted to,” Sarah whispered breathlessly as their fingers met in a fleeting touch. “Only I thought it unwise.” Her gaze flickered to his own braids. “I thought people might think it odd if we both wore them. They would think...” She swallowed, clearly uncertain how to finish that sentence.

Keir nodded. “Aye, perhaps ’twas wise then. Still...” His fingers trailed down Sarah’s temple, and he could feel her shiver beneath his touch. He knew he ought to bid her a good night and leave; yet he could not.

Instead, he pulled her closer, one hand sliding to the back of her neck, and kissed her. She melted into his embrace; her skin warm against his own. Again, all shyness vanished as she curled her fingers into his collar, tugging him closer, her mouth opening to him.

Keir loved the feel of her heartbeat against his. He loved the way her pulse thudded against the tips of his fingers as he trailed them down her neck. She was overwhelmingly beautiful when she abandoned all thoughts, all doubts and simply lived in the moment, giving in to all she wanted.

To him.

Keir knew that his heart was in danger. He had known so for a while. Something about her called out to him, drew him close and kept him by her side. He loved the soft blush of her cheeks, the gentle spark that occasionally widened her blue eyes, the way she bit her lower lip and then lifted her chin despite the fluttering nerves only visible in her trembling hands. He loved her kindness and her compassion as much as

her fierce spirit and her dauntless courage. Despite everything, she still stood tall, not because it came easily to her, but because she refused to surrender.

No matter how much she might be tempted.

Lifting his head, Keir gazed down into her eyes, wide and luminous in the dim light of the library. “There’s a fire in ye, little wisp,” Keir murmured against her lips. “A fire that ye kept burning despite strong winds and icy temperatures.”

Tears shimmered in Sarah’s eyes, and she leaned into his touch as his hand rose to cradle her cheek.

Keir exhaled slowly, sadness weighing upon his mind. “A fire that was extinguished in yer sister. She needs ye, lass. Ye’re her shield. Ye needa protect her because she canna do so herself.”

Brushing a tear from the corner of her eye, Sarah nodded, renewed courage shining upon her face. “I will. I promise.” She blinked her eyes against the tears that clung to her lashes. “I will find a way.” She smiled at him. “There’s always a way, is there not?”

“Aye,” Keir replied with a grin. “Aye, there is.” He brushed his lips against hers in a fleeting kiss. “Ye’re a fierce one, little wisp. Yer sister is fortunate to have ye.”

Self-conscious, Sarah briefly dropped her gaze. “If only I knew what to say.”

Still holding her in his arms, Keir sought her gaze. “What was it for ye?” he asked, remembering his thoughts on that first night on the road out of London. “What made ye take the risk and save yerself?”

An instant shudder went through Sarah, and she pressed her eyes shut, as though trying to shake it off.

“Sarah,” Keir pressed, despite himself.

Raising her chin, Sarah reluctantly met his eyes. “It was one moment,” she murmured, and her gaze became distant. “One moment that made me feel so afraid that I...” She shook

her head. "I could not bear it, and all of a sudden, the risk did not seem so great."

"What moment?"

Sarah's shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. "It was one night after supper. My parents had invited Lord Blackmore, and then they suddenly...left me alone with him." She shrugged, the look upon her face understanding, despite the turmoil in her eyes. "Of course, he was my fiancé, and perhaps there was nothing truly wrong in that."

Keir felt himself tense as the expression upon her face darkened, grew fearful.

"He...drew closer," Sarah continued, her fingers now like claws upon Keir's arms, "and said that he had certain expectations of the woman who was to be his wife." Suddenly, Sarah scoffed, and resistance sparked in her eyes before they snapped up and looked into Keir's without flinching. "He demanded obedience as though...I were a dog. I remember the look upon his face. There was not the slightest doubt that I would comply."

Keir smiled at her, applauding her rebellious spirit. "Yet he was wrong. Very wrong."

Sarah nodded, pride shining in her eyes. "He was." She stilled. "Only he does not know it. Sometimes I wish...I could tell him what I did."

Keir nodded. "I understand. I wish that, too."

"In any case," Sarah continued, her tone rather matter-of-fact now, "he suddenly stepped closer, pushed me against the wall and kissed me." Again, she scoffed as Keir's insides tensed in outrage. "He did not care what I wanted." Her eyes sought his. "Not for a second. It did not even occur to him to ask." She shook her head. "I knew then and there what a life with him would be like, and I could not bear it. Not even the thought of it. I was barely able to endure his touch for a short kiss, but for the rest of my life? No!" Her lips pressed into a determined line.

“I’m glad for it,” Keir said, trying to rein in his own emotions. “I’m glad ye found the strength to save yerself.”

Sarah nodded. “After, I told my mother, and she simply said that physical intimacies are generally not pleasant for women. She told me not to think on it as they are rather infrequent, especially after an heir is born. And Lord Blackmore already has an heir.” She frowned, then again sought his gaze. “Are men told that as well?” she asked abruptly, then instantly blushed, clamping a hand over her mouth.

Keir chuckled—he could not help himself!—and as she pulled away, he drew her back into his arms. “Ye’re adorable, little wisp. Dunna ever be sorry to speak openly. ’Tis what I love most about ye.”

“You...love that...about me?” Sarah asked tentatively, the desire to avert her gaze only too visible in the shy smile that teased her lips. Yet she did not.

“Aye, I do.” Keir held her gaze, wanting her to know that he meant every word. “Well, to answer yer question,” maintaining eye contact, he paused as she began worrying her lower lip. “All I can say is that my parents never told me so, no.” He smiled. “But my parents are in love, and they married for love. As did my grandparents.”

Sarah nodded thoughtfully. “And the Whickertons as well. Yet that is rare.” Her gaze focused upon his once more. “I remember that Christina and I once overheard some old matron whisper that men not of the peerage demand rather...unspeakable things of their wives.” Her blush deepened a little, but her chin remained up. “Unfortunately, she did not say what those unspeakable things were. Christina was quite disappointed.” She chuckled, then stilled as though a thought had only just occurred to her. “I wonder if she finally received her answer considering that she married a man not of the peerage. In any case, she does not seem...displeased with her husband. So, either that matron was wrong or...”

Keir grinned as her voice trailed off. “Or unspeakable things mightna be as bad as the rumors that exist about them.

Perhaps not bad at all.” Aye, he loved the way words sometimes flew from her lips, her thoughts charging out into the world without censure.

Open and honest.

Sarah looked up at him shyly. “Perhaps,” was all she said; yet there was a question in her gaze.

“I’m not of the peerage,” Keir remarked, tugging her a bit closer, his gaze fixed upon hers.

Sarah gasped in surprise, but that look in her eyes held nothing discouraging. Quite on the contrary.

“Do ye dislike it when I kiss ye?” he whispered, resting his forehead against hers, their breaths mingling. “Would ye rather I did not?”

Again, Sarah’s teeth sank into her lower lip, and Keir could all but feel the heat shooting into her face. “Do you truly have to ask?” Sarah whispered breathlessly. “Can you not tell?”

Keir smiled. “Aye, I suppose I can. Yet in such matters, ’tis not wrong to speak openly, to be certain of the other’s feelings. I would never want ye to force yerself to endure my touch.”

To both their surprise, a burst of laughter fell from Sarah’s lips, the kind of sound that marked a thought as absolutely ludicrous.

Keir grinned, and Sarah’s mouth dropped open in an adorably shocked expression. Then she pinched her eyes shut, mortification written all over her face. “I’m sorry I laughed,” she rushed to assure him, her eyes still closed as though she did not dare look at him. “I mean, the thought that...” She swallowed, then opened her eyes and met his gaze, her own serious. “I never once disliked your touch. Truly.” She shook her head. “I know my mother would be outraged if she knew...what we...that you...that...” She broke off, then shrugged. “But I like...being close...to you. I like it very much.”

It was a daring speech, and Keir marveled at the young woman who had slept in Sarah’s breast all this time, the young

woman who was now finally awakening, looking out into the world and taking her first tentative steps. “I like it as well, lass,” Keir murmured against her lips. “May I?”

Unexpectedly, Sarah paused, then pulled back a little and looked into his eyes. “May I?” she asked, unable to hide the smile that came to her face.

Keir chuckled. “Always.”

Tentatively, Sarah reached out to touch his face, the tips of her fingers barely upon his skin. It was a feather-light touch, and yet Keir felt it in every cell of his body. He burned for her, but the anticipation that built within him, with every feathered breath against his lips and every fleeting caress upon his skin, made the moment even more perfect.

When Sarah’s lips finally touched his, Keir wrapped his arms more tightly around, her chest molded to his, their heartbeats as one.

In that moment, though, somewhere in a far corner of his mind, his father’s voice demanded, “Do ye know what yer doing there, son? What are yer intentions regarding the lass?”

Indeed, what *were* his intentions?

Surprisingly, the answer was quite simple.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

## A LIFETIME'S WORTH



Kate stood and stared, her heart beating fiercely in her chest.

Tears misted her eyes, and a deep longing pulsed in her veins. She knew she ought not be there. She knew she ought to turn around and head back to her own chamber. Yet she could not. She simply stood there, hidden behind a tall shelf, mesmerized.

Overwhelmed.

Envious.

Frederica lay sleeping in Kate's arms, her little cheek warm and soft against Kate's chest. Her eyes remained closed, her breathing even, that flicker of a smile dancing across her features every now and then. Kate loved that smile. She had already loved it upon Augusta's and Dorothea's faces. It was a smile that spoke of utter peace, of that deep trust children had when they came into the world. It was a smile untainted by the harsh reality Kate lived in.

Wrapping her arms more tightly around her child, Kate watched her sister sink into Mr. MacKinnear's arms as silent tears rolled down her own cheeks.

Earlier that night, Frederica had been most agitated and nothing Kate had tried had made a difference. In the end, Kate had ventured from her chamber, remembering how she had walked the halls of Birchwell at night with Augusta and then also with Dorothea in her arms. Somehow, the quiet night and



the soft swaying of her walking and walking had always calmed them, lulling them back to sleep.

Kate had not bothered with a candle. From experience, she knew every nook and cranny of Birchwell, having walked all the corridors too many times to count. Also, she had wanted to remain hidden, knowing perfectly well what her husband would say should he learn of her nightly endeavors. He had chided her before, insisting she hand her child over to her nursemaid. Somehow, he did not feel the need to be with their children, to dry their tears and watch over their sleep. Kate, though, did. She could not imagine it any other way. She could not imagine handing her child over to another woman, leaving her daughter alone when she was crying, her heart aching for something.

No, Kate had always wanted to be there, and now that she was beginning to feel stronger, the strain of the birth falling away, she had bundled Frederica up warmly and then slipped out of her chamber, a tentative smile upon her face.

Indeed, there was something peaceful about walking the halls at night. Some might feel wary of the shadows, but Kate did not. She had never been afraid of the dark. After all, the dark was something natural, something peaceful. There was nothing in the dark that was not also there in the light. No, Kate feared other things.

Only too clearly did Kate recall her sister asking when Augusta and Dorothea would return to Birchwell. She had not known, and she still did not. She had wanted to ask her husband, but something had held her back.

Some sense of foreboding...as though a part of her knew or, at least, feared that that time had not yet come, that instead she was—without even knowing so—on the brink of losing even her newest daughter.

Had her mother-in-law not suggested something of the kind upon her last visit? Had she not spoken of *sending them away*? Had she meant Sarah and her companion? Or perhaps...?

Of course, Kate's rational mind argued that now that Frederica was born there was no reason to keep the other two away. Their presence would cause no harm. Yet her husband was still without an heir, and deep down, a part of Kate she had not yet given voice to, feared that he would insist upon removing all distractions in order to focus fully upon the one thing he had always wanted.

Yes, that deep-seated fear was another reason why Kate could not seem to part with her child. Not even for a moment. After all, every moment was precious, for she did not know when it might come to an end.

And so, Kate had found herself walking along the darkened corridors, her feet carrying her toward the library, a place of peace and tranquility. She had often read there with her daughters, telling them stories of dragons and knights, of great adventures and beautiful dreams. Sometimes, when Kate stood within the vaulted room, she could still hear their laughter echoing from the walls.

Only that night when Kate had stepped silently across the threshold of the side door, she had found something utterly unexpected.

As before when she had glimpsed her sister and Mr. MacKinnear out in the gardens, Kate felt instantly mesmerized by the sight of them. She could not quite say what it was that touched her so. Was it the enchanted expression upon Sarah's face? The way she gazed up at Mr. MacKinnear, the look in her eyes trusting despite the blush that would so often claim her face? Or perhaps it was the way Mr. MacKinnear looked at Sarah. In his eyes, Kate saw such awe and admiration, such utter devotion, that she instantly wished to trade places with her sister. How had Sarah found such a man? Was he the only one of his kind? Kate could not help but wonder. Or were there others like him and she had simply never encountered one?

For long moments, Kate simply stood and stared, straining her ears to listen. She picked up a few bits and pieces of their conversation, beautiful words of kindness and respect, words that brought even more tears to her eyes and made her heart ache more acutely.

While Kate had never truly loathed her husband's touch, neither had she ever enjoyed it. To her, it had been a wife's duty. Never more. Yet her sister's words whispered of something else. So, too, did the look in her eyes as well as the bold way she suddenly reached out toward Mr. MacKinnear, seeking his touch as though...

Kate pressed her lips tightly together to keep the sob that rose in her throat buried. Indeed, she would never know, would she? What it felt like to want to be in another's arms? It would forever remain a thought and a dream, something unattainable, fleeting, leaving her forever wondering, wishing.

With a heavy heart, Kate then turned away, silently retracing her steps, and leaving her sister and Mr. MacKinnear to their beautiful moment. With her child in her arms, Kate ventured back toward her chamber, her steps slow and her mind full of *if only's*.

Yet when she reached her door, she saw a faint light drift out into the hall from underneath. Kate frowned, for she could not remember having left a candle lit. Had someone—?

The next instant, the door was yanked open from within and Kate found herself face to face with her husband. His eyes were hard and fixed upon her, his lips curled into a snarl and anger pulsing in his neck. "Where have you been?" His gaze briefly darted to Frederica. "Walking the halls again!" He shook his head, then reached out and grasped her arm, yanking her inside.

Kate wrapped her arms tightly around her daughter, but Frederica began to stir, her peaceful slumber interrupted by her father's harsh voice.

"Please," Kate begged, gently rocking her child, "speak quietly. Frederica only just fell asleep."

"Frederica," her husband spat, not at all enthralled by the name as Kate had hoped. Instead, his gaze filled with hatred, as though he could not believe that she had betrayed him thus.

Fixing her with a hate-filled stare, her husband advanced on her. "You still owe me an heir," he snarled menacingly as

she backed away, cradling Frederica in her arms, “and I’ll see to it that you give me one.”

Kate shivered beneath his stare, holding on tightly to her child as his gaze dropped lower, no affection in his gaze as he looked at Frederica.

“In a fortnight,” her husband hissed, his gaze hard and unyielding, “*Frederica* will join our other two daughters so that you, dear wife,” he reached out and grasped her chin, his hand like an iron vice, “can focus on giving me a son. Is that understood?”

Trembling, Kate nodded, her vision blurred by the tears that shot to her eyes. Tears of fear, of misery, of utter hopelessness. And yet, she had known, had she not? She had seen it coming, had known that there would be no happily ever after for her and her children. But a fortnight? So soon?

Kate wanted to argue, to beg, but she did not, knowing it would not change anything. Over the years, she had learned that once her husband made up his mind, there was no changing it. She had tried before and failed.

And so, she simply watched him step back, his gaze hard upon hers for another moment before he spun around and strode toward the door. Once there, he looked back at her, though. “And I want your sister and that man gone. Is that understood?”

Again, Kate nodded. After all, what else could she do? This was her life, and there was no changing it.

Listening to the receding sound of her husband’s footsteps, Kate sank onto the corner of her bed, Frederica still clutched tightly in her arms. By some miracle, the child had remained asleep, oblivious to her father’s disregard. “What am I to do?” Kate sobbed silently. “I cannot lose you, too! I can no longer bear to be parted from Augusta and Dorothea. I cannot...”

As all her strength fell away, Kate slid off the edge of the bed and slowly sank down onto the floor. The floodgates opened, and again, she cried.

So many tears.

So much heartache.

More than a lifetime's worth.

As the dark cloak of misery wrapped itself tighter and tighter around Kate's shoulders, she suddenly saw a spark of light.

Something unexpected.

Something she had brushed aside at the time.

Something she had not even dared to consider.

Did she dare now?

## Chapter Twenty-Six

## A SISTER'S SHIELD



Feeling jittery, Sarah approached her sister's door, determined to speak to her again, to find the right words, to make her see reason. "I am her shield," Sarah murmured quietly, repeating the words Keir had spoken to her a few nights before. "I am her shield, and I need to protect her, her and her children." As much as Sarah wanted to turn away from this challenge, this very thought would not allow her. Too much was at stake. She could not falter now. Somehow, she had to find a way.

For Kate, as much as for herself. After all, would she ever have a chance of being happy, knowing that her sister lived day after day in such misery? Sarah knew the answer to that question without a doubt.

So perhaps, her motivation was not all that selfless. Still, was that not what family was? One could not be happy without the happiness of the other?

Giving her sister's door a forceful knock, Sarah then stepped across the threshold. As before, she found her sister standing by the window, Frederica in her arms and an almost wistful expression upon her face. Indeed, Sarah wished she knew what her sister was thinking. Did she ever have doubts? Did she ever wish she could go back and change things?

"Good morning, Kate," Sarah greeted her sister, then turned her eyes to her new niece. "Good morning to you as well, Frederica." She smiled when she saw Kate's eyes light up, her gaze drifting down to her precious child. "May I hold her?"

Kate looked up and met her gaze. “Of course,” she replied without hesitation, and yet there was a longing, even painful look in her eyes when she placed Frederica in Sarah’s arm. “Make sure you support her head.”

Indeed, the soft little weight of her niece felt heavenly in Sarah’s arms. Her eyes drifted over Frederica’s perfect little face and then looked deep into her eyes, their color a startling blue. And Frederica looked back at her, curiosity in her gaze, something undaunting and even adventurous, a new soul ready to explore the world. Her little arms rose, and Sarah watched mesmerized as her little fingers curled and uncurled, as though she was trying to reach for something. “She’s incredible,” Sarah whispered in awe, once again feeling that soft tug upon her heart, that longing need to hold a little one of her own. “I had no idea.”

A wide smile stole onto Kate’s face. “It quite catches one off guard, does it not? I still remember that first moment I saw Augusta.” She shook her head, clearly unable to find words that would do justice to the emotions that had swept her away. “All of a sudden, everything changed. I was no longer who I had been. Nothing and no one seemed to matter, only her.”

Sarah held her sister’s gaze, watched tears slowly well up and knew she had found the one argument Kate could hold nothing against. “I came to speak to you again,” Sarah said gently, afraid to spook Kate back into resistance. Then she stepped over to the crib and carefully laid Frederica down before facing her sister once more.

To Sarah’s surprise, Kate nodded as though she had all but expected her to say that. “I’m glad to hear it. I wish to speak to you as well.” Kate looked tense as she wrung her hands, then began to pace. Of course, she had looked tense before; however, this was different.

“Has something happened?” Sarah inquired, uncertain what to make of her sister’s reaction. “You look unsettled.”

Kate nodded in acknowledgment, and Sarah could see that her sister was on the brink of saying something. Yet she



seemed to have trouble finding the right words or perhaps the courage to speak them.

“Please tell me what’s on your mind, Kate.” Sarah grasped her sister’s hands, for the first time since her arrival encouraged to believe that somehow all of this might end well.

Kate looked at her. “I don’t quite know where to begin. I have...questions I wish to ask. I’ve been wondering about a lot of things, and I need your help.”

Excitement hummed beneath Sarah’s skin, and she struggled to keep from dancing on the spot as hope blossomed in her heart. “Anything, Kate. Ask me whatever you wish, and I will tell you honestly.”

A grateful smile came to Kate’s lips. “Before, you spoke of your kidnapping.” She paused, the look in her eyes watchful, as though expecting Sarah to cringe away from the thought. When Sarah did not, Kate continued. “You said you were not harmed, and that it gave you the opportunity to break your engagement to Lord Blackmore.”

Sarah nodded. “What is it you wish to know?”

Kate hesitated, then exhaled a slow breath and said, “Of course, I do not know what happened. However, thinking about it again last night, I thought...What I’m saying is, I felt as though...”

Sarah grinned. “As though I did not mind being kidnapped?”

With wide eyes, Kate stared up at her. “Yes.” Abruptly, her gaze narrowed, and no small measure of shock dropped her jaw. “Oh, god, you did not, did you?”

Holding on tightly to her sister’s hands, Sarah glanced over her shoulder at the door, ensuring that it was firmly closed. Then she met Kate’s eyes and dropped her voice to a whisper. “Promise me, Kate, that you will not breathe a word of this to anyone.”

Still staring at her, Kate nodded her head vigorously, no words falling from her lips.

“The truth is,” Sarah began, feeling an odd sense of exhilaration at sharing this adventure with her sister, “that I was not kidnapped at all.”

“Oh, dear heaven!” Kate exclaimed in a hushed whisper before she clamped a hand over her mouth, then gave a quick nod for Sarah to continue.

“It was a ploy,” Sarah confided in her sister. “I didn’t wish to marry Lord Blackmore,” her lips twisted upward in revulsion at the thought, “and when Grandma Edie offered me a way out, I took it.”

“Grandma Edie?” Kate gasped from behind her hand.

Sarah nodded. “Yes, she planned it all. She told me precisely what to do, where to go and what to say. Quite frankly, I could not have done it without her. I was a flutter of nerves, so terrified that something might go wrong, that I was making a tremendous mistake.” She gripped her sister’s hand tighter, looking deeply into her eyes. “Please, Kate, believe me. I did not make this decision lightly. I was just as terrified as you are now. Still, the truth remains that I have no regrets. Taking this risk is the best choice I’ve ever made because it set me free, because it taught me something invaluable.”

The expression upon Kate’s face told Sarah that her sister was hanging on every word. “What did it teach you?”

Sarah exhaled slowly, straightening her shoulders. “That I matter.” She swallowed hard as tears came to her eyes, overwhelming relief mingling with anger deep in her chest. “It taught me that I matter, that what I want matters. It is not right for others to dictate our lives, Kate. You need to believe right now that you have a right to be happy, to claim that right for yourself as well as your children. If you do not, you will forever regret it.” She smiled at her sister through a curtain of tears. “Believe me, the risk is worth it. I know that you are afraid—I was as well—but you can’t let that fear hold you back.”

Though tentatively, Kate nodded. “I don’t know what to do, though.”

“I know that feeling,” Sarah confided. “Believe me, without Grandma Edie I would’ve done nothing, I would not even have known what to do.” She exhaled a deep breath, reminding herself not to rush forward too fast. “What are your dreams for the future?” It was a question Keir had asked Sarah not too long ago. A question that had made her realize that she had no dreams.

But was that still true? She wondered for a moment. Was there something she now wanted?

Instantly, her thoughts traveled to Keir, and in that moment, Sarah finally admitted to herself that after everything they had been through together, after everything he had done for her, everything he had given her, she wanted no one else.

Only him.

Only Keir.

Ironically, Sarah had finally lost her heart to someone the very moment she had made certain that no man would ever want her. Still, was that also true for Keir?

She shook her head, clearing her thoughts. Indeed, they would have to wait for another day.

As Sarah had a few weeks past, Kate shook her head. “I do not know.” She glanced toward the crib where Frederica was waving her little fists vigorously, soft cooing sounds passing her lips. “I only ever wanted my children, with me and happy. I wish my husband had not come to loathe the very sight of me, that my mother-in-law would finally accept me.”

“Those are not dreams, Kate,” Sarah objected, squeezing her sister’s hands. “Those are fears. You simply no longer wish to be afraid. But is that truly a dream? Seeing your children safe and avoiding your husband’s wrath?”

With a heavy sigh, Kate closed her eyes, a look of utter defeat coming to her face.

Sarah knew she had to make use of this moment, of her sister’s emotional state. “One day, your husband will force your daughters into marriage just like our parents did to you. You know this to be true. They, too, will live your life.” Kate’s

eyes flew open, sadness in them. “Is that what you want? Will you allow this to happen?”

Though the sadness remained, the expression upon Kate’s face became determined, her gaze emboldened as though she had finally come to a decision. “No.” It was one word, and she all but breathed it out into the world. Yet it was enough.

Sarah had never felt more hopeful.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

## A PLAN FORGED



Sarah felt tingly all over, every inch of her humming with excitement, as she rushed through Birchwell, eyes wide and searching for Keir, Loki as always upon her heels. Unfortunately, for once, he seemed to be nowhere nearby.

Eventually, Sarah came upon Hempstead, her brother-in-law's butler. "Pardon me. Have you seen Mr. MacKinnear?"

The old man's gaze narrowed in disapproval. Clearly, he shared his master's opinion. "I believe Mr. MacKinnear to be outside in the stable." He glared at Loki through narrowed eyes.

Undeterred, Sarah smiled at him in gratitude. "Thank you." Then she rushed to don her cloak and mittens, slipping her feet into her winter boots. As she stepped outside, the chilled winter air once again reminded her of her time in the cabin in the woods. Deep down, Sarah knew that from now on, she would forever love winter.

The snow. The icy chill in the air. The way her breath turned into small puffy clouds. The soft prickle of the cold upon her cheeks. The way the sun glittered in every tiny ice crystal. The snug warmth of the inside. Sitting by an open fire, a cup of hot tea in her chilled hands.

Sarah sighed deeply. Yes, winter was her new favorite season.

Quickening her steps, she rounded the house and headed toward the back where the stable was located. Its roof sported a layer of frost, and even the pebbled path leading back around

to the front glittered slightly beneath her feet. It had not snowed in a few days, and yet a soft icy blanket remained, as though permanently draped upon the world.

The moment Sarah stepped into the stables, she breathed in deeply of the hay-scented air, enjoying the soft warmth that touched her skin. Not long ago, the idea of approaching horses had been utterly terrifying to her, and now, stepping into their world made her feel safe. Indeed, the world was a strange place and more often than not people knew very little about where their path would lead them. Perhaps it was good this way. Perhaps these little unpredictabilities were what made life precious.

In a stall halfway down the aisle, Sarah spotted Keir's dark head, little braids as always ensuring his hair would not fall into his face as he brushed down Scout. Although Lord Birchwell had a number of servants whose only task it was to see to the horses, Sarah knew that Keir would never abandon Scout and Autumn. No, he would always ensure their safety, their well-being himself, reluctant to trust another with this task.

Autumn tossed her head in greeting, and even Scout nickered gently. Loki, in turn, ignored them all, seating himself almost majestically upon a post near them. Keir lifted his head, a delighted smile coming to his face the moment he beheld her. The way his eyes lit up, as though her mere presence somehow brightened his day, touched Sarah deeply. How had this happened? She felt this deep connection to him, a man she had not even known a few weeks past. Was this one of life's unpredictabilities?

It would seem so.

Sarah was utterly grateful for it.

The moment Keir beheld her, Sarah could tell that he knew something was up. Of course, he had always been able to read her face as though she were an open book. "Did ye speak to yer sister?" he guessed correctly, setting aside the brush and stepping toward her.

Without hesitation, Sarah moved into the stall with Keir and Scout, slipping her hands into his as though they belonged there. In an odd way, it all felt so natural. “I did,” she breathed, her voice almost inaudible, her heart was hammering so wildly.

Keir chuckled. “I suspect good news.”

Like a grinning fool, Sarah bobbed her head up and down. “Oh, yes, it is good news. Very good news.” Again, her heart seemed to skip a beat. “I never thought it possible. Only now do I realize how deeply I feared that she would never agree to this.”

Keir drew closer, his warmth reaching out to her. “What did she say?”

Sarah exhaled slowly, seeking to calm her thundering pulse. “She said she’s willing to do everything necessary in order to protect her daughters.” She held on tighter to his hands, remembering what her sister had told her. “Apparently, her husband said that he would send little Frederica away within a fortnight. He still wants his heir.”

A muscle in Keir’s jaw twitched, and Sarah saw anger spark in his eyes. It was a rare sight. Anger and fear were not emotions often seen upon his face. Indeed, somehow Keir always managed to look upon the bright side, to find that one ray of sunshine. “Aye, threatening her children will make even the most dutiful wife go against her husband.” He clicked his tongue in disapproval. “He oughtna have done that. ’Twas a mistake. One day he will know that. Unfortunately, ’twill be too late for him.”

Sarah stared up at Keir, feeling his words slowly sink in. “If this works,” she mumbled, feeling her mind grow lightheaded, “the girls will not grow up with their father, will they?”

Keir shook his head. “They willna,” he replied honestly. “Yet I ask ye, lass, is he a part of their lives now? The role he has in their lives, is it even that of a father?” Again, Keir shook his head. “Aye, a part of me feels for him, regrets the path he has chosen. Yet no one is granted endless chances in



one's life. At some point, they're all used up and all that is left to us is regret." He squeezed her hands, a soft smile coming to his features. "No, the time to act is now. Yer sister and her children canna wait any longer, hoping for a miracle that might never happen, that in all likelihood will never happen."

"Then what do we do?" Sarah felt her whole body tense up at what lay ahead. "If we try this, and he discovers us..." She did not even want to think about it.

"He mustna." Keir's gaze was insistent, something hard and unyielding in his eyes. "We must plan this very carefully, for we will have one chance. One chance only." He released one of her hands and reached inside his coat pocket, withdrawing a letter from within. "I've received word from Grandma Edie."

Sarah stilled, her eyes widening as she stared at the parchment. "What does it say? Did she find Kate's daughters?"

A slow smile curled up the corners of Keir's mouth. "She did."

Sarah almost danced with joy, afraid to believe that this could truly work, that her sister could finally be free, free and happy, safe with her children by her side. Indeed, it was too good to be true, and yet it had to be. "Where are they?"

Loki eyed her curiously, his little head slightly cocked to the side, no doubt taken aback by her sudden inability to keep her feet still. Never in her life had she felt so restless.

"A small estate to the north," Keir replied, his blue eyes sparking with adventure, and Sarah wondered if perhaps he missed the excitement of striding out into the world and helping those that needed it.

Like her.

Or had it only been that? Sarah wondered in that moment. Did she mean no more to him than a moment of adventure? An exciting quest? She certainly hoped that there was more to it. In some moments, she could almost feel it. The way he

sometimes looked at her made Sarah feel as though she had strayed into a dream.

Still, this was not the time to think about that. “Then how do we go about it?” Her forehead furrowed as she considered what to do. “If we find a way to spirit Kate away, he will no doubt seek out his children next, guessing that she would never leave without them.”

“Aye, I agree. We need to get them all away in the same night so as not to tip off her husband.”

Sarah nodded eagerly, then paused. “And take them where? I cannot think of a place where they would be safe. No doubt Lord Birchwell would find them anywhere. Do we need to take them out of the country? But where to?”

Keir placed his large hands upon her shoulders, their weight a calming pressure. “Leave that to Grandma Edie,” he said gently, looking deeply into her eyes. “She will think of something. She always does.”

“Yes, Grandma Edie,” Sarah repeated, her hands reaching out, her fingers curling into the lapels of Keir’s coat. “When then? It has to happen at night, does it not? How else could we hope to smuggle not only Kate but also her daughters away?” She frowned. “What if he has someone watching her? After all, she left before when she went to go see her children...or tried to.”

“Aye, ye might be right, lass,” Keir agreed thoughtfully. “Perhaps we need some sort of distraction. Or a decoy.”

“I could trade places with her,” Sarah blurted out without thinking, driven by that almost overwhelming desire to protect her sister. “Just long enough for her to get away. After all, he cannot keep me here. I’m not his wife. You could take Kate and little Frederica away, and I’ll follow as soon as possible.”

Keir tensed at her suggestion. “I willna leave ye behind.” His hands grasped her shoulders more tightly. “No, we have to come up with a different plan.”

Sarah wanted to hug him, seeing his concern for her. “There is no other plan,” she insisted, unwilling to allow him

to deter her. “He needs to think that Kate is still in her chamber. Otherwise, he will come after her right away. Someone has to take her place, and there is no one else.”

The muscles in Keir’s jaw clenched, and he drew in a slow breath through his nose. “I dunna like this idea.”

Sarah did not like it either. “But it is all we have, is it not? Or can you think of another way?” Sarah could see quite plainly that he could not. “You said it yourself; I am her shield. I have to do this. I *want* to do this.”

Reaching out to touch her face, Keir pulled her closer, his blue eyes looking deep into hers. “I willna stand in yer way if this is what ye choose,” he murmured, tracing the tips of his fingers down her temple, where a few nights past her little braids had been. “However, ye needa be careful. We dunna know what Birchwell will do should he discovers his wife gone and ye in her place.” He glanced past her shoulder before meeting her eyes once more. “Keep Loki with ye at all times.”

Sarah nodded, feeling her pulse beat rather erratically, every once in a while skipping a beat and then providing two where there should be only one. “I promise.”

Again, Keir’s gaze traveled past her shoulder, and she knew that he was looking at Loki. “Look after her,” he instructed the haughty feline, nothing humorous in his gaze. “Protect her.”

As though Loki understood him perfectly, he jumped down from the post, his amber eyes deeply expressive. He meowed once, then settled himself beside Sarah, his gaze watchful, like a guard taking his new assignment seriously.

Sarah chuckled at the sight of him. “With Loki by my side, what can go wrong?”

A strained smile appeared on Keir’s face. “I pray nothing will go wrong.” Again, his hand settled on Sarah’s shoulders, drawing her farther into his arms. “Whatever happens, I will come back for ye as soon as I can.”

“I know,” Sarah replied, feeling not a single doubt. After all, this was Keir. He had always looked after her, always been

there when she needed him. He would come, she was certain of it, and that knowledge gave her the strength to do this.

All they needed now was to agree upon a date, and then Kate and her children would finally be free.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

## AN OUTRAGEOUS THOUGHT



Once the decision had been made, Kate felt liberated... but also terrified. She could not shake the thought that everyone could read it upon her face, the decision to betray her husband, to rob him of his children.

Of his wife.

Of any chance for an heir.

Yet what was she to do? Kate knew she had very little choice. Still, doubts remained, and she felt herself teeter back and forth between staying and leaving. She knew that Sarah and Mr. MacKinnear had begun to work on a plan to spirit her and her daughters away. Of course, she was grateful for their efforts, for they gave her hope. Still, that dark feeling in the pit of her stomach remained, urging her to reconsider, to bow her head as before and simply hope for the best.

Kate was on her way to seek out her husband in his study, to speak to him again and hopefully reach some sort of agreement when his voice—slightly muffled—drifted through the door and to her ears. Instantly, Kate paused in her step, barely drawing breath. Indeed, the door had not completely fallen shut. A minuscule gap remained.

Although Kate felt terrified of being discovered, she huddled closer, straining her ears to listen. She heard her husband's footsteps, marching up and down, and she could all but imagine him raking his hands through his hair, the expression in his eyes aggravated. *What happened?* Kate wondered. *Is someone in there with him?*

“Why the long face, Birchwell?”

Kate flinched at hearing the dowager’s voice, every muscle in her body tensing as ice-cold shivers gripped her. Yet she could not move, her feet remaining fixed in place.

“When I told her, she was devastated,” her husband remarked, a hint of anger in his voice. “Why can I not allow her to keep the child?” His steps drew to a halt. “With the nurse to see to the girl’s care, she will not be in the way.”

Kate held her breath, her teeth sinking into her lower lip. Was her husband truly arguing in favor of her keeping Frederica with her?

The dowager scoffed. “It will split her focus,” she snapped. “You need an heir rather today than tomorrow. You know that, Birchwell. There is no time to lose.” She heaved out a deep breath. “Would you truly wish for your cousin to inherit the estate and title when you’re gone? After all, *he* has a son. Three of them, to be correct.”

Kate hung her head, able to imagine the disappointed and disparaging look upon the dowager’s face. Indeed, in her opinion, Kate had failed her husband time and time again.

“I know,” her husband replied, sounding defeated and even a bit apologetic. “I know that there is no time to lose, that I need a son.” He paused. “That Birchwell needs an heir.”

“Then don’t waste another moment discussing this nonsense,” the dowager replied, her voice dark and unfeeling. “Send the girl away and return to the task of begetting a son upon your wife. Nothing is more important.”

Kate could imagine her husband bowing his head. She had seen it before, and it had often made her wonder. Who was he deep inside? Which words were his own? Truly his own and not his mother’s? Yet so long as he refused to separate himself from her, Kate knew that she would never find out.

“Stop looking so downcast!” the dowager snapped as Kate heard her push to her feet, the sound of chair legs scraping over hardwood floors drifting to her ears. “A wife is to obey

her husband. It is the way of the world. Seek her out and father a son.”

Footsteps approached, and Kate drew back from the door, her heart pounding in her chest.

“And send that sister of hers and her companion away,” the dowager hissed. “They serve no purpose and only get in the way. I’ve seen the way your wife looks at you these days. Her sister is a bad influence, and you’d do well to ensure she leaves. Soon.”

Again, there was the sound of footsteps, and this time, Kate spun around and rushed back down the corridor. Indeed, she had heard enough. Without her mother-in-law, she might have been able to reason with her husband. Yet the way things were, there was no chance at all, was there? Whether he disliked it or not, he would forever do his mother’s bidding.

Even against his own wife.

Even against his children.

He would never put them first.

Never.

Ultimately, it took the decision out of Kate’s hands. Suddenly, all doubt was gone. She knew there was no other way. She had to risk it all...and leave.

It was an outrageous thought, and yet it was slowly coming to feel familiar.

After all, there was no choice.



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

## IN A HEARTBEAT



Keir did not like the idea. He did not like it at all. He had had a sennight to mull it over, and he still did not like it any better. The idea of Sarah putting herself in such danger made him feel sick to his stomach. He wished it was not necessary; however, as much as he had tried to come up with another plan, he had failed. In the end, someone had to trade places with Lady Birchwell, ensuring that her husband believed her to be in her chambers. And who else was there but Sarah?

On top of everything, they were running out of time. Lord Birchwell had made it unmistakably clear that he expected Sarah and him to leave within a fortnight. One week was already up, and in order to buy themselves some time, in order not to arouse suspicions, they were making travel arrangements, openly discussing whom to visit next and where to stay. He hoped it would be enough; that Lord Birchwell would simply be relieved, counting the days until they would finally be gone.

Still, they could leave nothing to chance. Everything had to be precise. If they acted prematurely, all might be lost.

Seated upon Scout, he urged the gelding farther down the path, his gaze sweeping his surroundings. The dowager had promised to send word as soon as preparations were completed, and so, Keir had been out here every day of the week, waiting as patiently as he could for that last bit of information they needed.

What day?

Or more precisely, what night?

Only the last few days, he had waited in vain. No one had come, bringing them this much-desired information. Sarah as well as her sister were becoming more agitated day by day, their nerves constantly aflutter. Keir had stressed how important it was that they remain calm, that they play along as though everything were as it should be. After all, Lord Birchwell needed to believe so as well.

The air was crisp and cold, frost lingering upon the branches of the trees surrounding him. Each blade of grass was encased in a thin layer of ice, giving off a soft crunching sound as Scout moved slowly through the forest. Few animals were out and about. Most had retreated to the safety of their dens and burrows, waiting out the harshness of winter.

Keir drew his coat tighter around his shoulders, securing his scarf over his mouth, so that the air he breathed was not quite as cold. Still, the crisp air felt invigorating, and he enjoyed being out here. What he did not enjoy was waiting.

Truly, there was nothing worse in the world than waiting.

Also, Keir disliked that the success of their plan depended on so many different people, on the demand that they work hand in hand, their timing perfect. As soon as one of them slipped up, the whole endeavor was in danger. Indeed, it was an insane plan, and yet that fact oddly reminded Keir of the dowager countess.

Behind his scarf, Keir chuckled, shaking his head. Perhaps everything would go well after all. Was this not Grandma Edie's plan? Had she not been the one to craft it, her attention on every detail? Indeed, it had been so, and that was reassuring. Although Keir did not know who Grandma Edie would send to fetch the girls, he trusted that she had found someone worthy of that task. Now, all that was needed was to know when to act.

Again, Keir swept his gaze over the woods surrounding him, shielding him from prying eyes. Of course, it was nothing unusual for him to ride out, something he did every day. Still,

he hoped no one would come upon him...except, of course, for Grandma Edie's messenger.

As though on cue, a soft rustling in the underbrush drew Keir's attention. His gaze narrowed, and he swiveled his head around, trying to glimpse what had caused it.

Indeed, in the deep of winter, the bare trees did not offer much protection from prying eyes. Keir quickly spotted movement between them and detected the plumes of a horse's billowing breath in the cold air. The mount's coat, though, was a pale dapple-gray and it blended in well with the frosted environment. The man on top wore dark brown colors, a wide-brimmed hat pulled deep into his face. Still, Keir instantly recognized the man's posture, the way he held himself, a rifle slung across his shoulder.

Exhaling a deep breath of relief, Keir moved forward. "I wondered if she would send ye," he greeted the hunter, who had come upon Keir and Sarah near the cabin in the woods a few weeks past. At that point, Keir had not yet known the man. He had even suspected the man might have been sent by Lord Blackmore, Sarah's fiancé, in order to search them out. Yet in the end, the hunter had been sent by none other than the dowager herself, who was intent on being kept informed as well as having a helping hand nearby in case it was needed.

Mr. Garner greeted Keir with a friendly smile, pulling his mount to a halt. "Truth be told, I did not know I would be sent here until moments before I departed." He chuckled. "The lady does keep her secrets close to her heart, does she not?"

Keir laughed good-naturedly, remembering how little the dowager had shared with him about Sarah's feigned kidnapping. "Truer words have never been spoken," he told the hunter. "Well then, tell me what she told ye. What night is it to be?"

The hunter nodded, the expression upon his face sobering. "Two days from today," he answered in a tight voice, suggesting that he knew the risks that threatened this endeavor as well as the importance of its success. "She will send in people to fetch the girls at midnight."

“Who?”

The hunter shrugged. “That I do not know.”

Keir was not truly surprised by that answer. “Did she tell ye anything else?”

Mr. Garner shook his head.

Again, Keir had expected that. “Verra well,” he murmured, relieved that they had at least two more days to plan, knowing at the same time that it would not make a difference. There was no way to keep Sarah out of harm’s way, and he could only hope that all would go well. He would never forgive himself if something were to happen to her. “What are ye to do next? Are ye to return to Whickerton Grove? To report back to her?”

“I am to remain here, nearby,” the hunter replied to Keir’s surprise. “If you are to successfully spirit away a new mother and her newborn babe, you will be needing a carriage, won’t you?”

Keir nodded. He had thought of it before, wondering how he might procure one without raising suspicions. “That is to be yer task?”

The hunter nodded. “Ensure that the lady and her child are brought to this place,” he nodded toward the edge of the forest, close to a road that led north, “and I shall see them safely away...so long as her husband does not come after us.” His brows rose meaningfully.

“Aye, the plan is to leave someone behind in the lady’s place,” Keir replied, feeling a cold shiver trail down his spine at the mere thought. “Hopefully, that should deter the man, making him believe that his wife is still in her chambers.”

The hunter nodded, his gaze watchful, something in his eyes that suggested he knew there was something Keir was not saying. “Very well.” He picked up his reins. “Good luck then.” He nodded to Keir and then turned his mount around.

“To ye as well,” Keir murmured, hoping that they would not need luck, that everything would go as planned. But what if it did not, Keir could not help but think. If Lord Birchwell

were to discover his wife's absence, discover Sarah in her place while Keir was spiriting Lady Birchwell away, there was nothing he could do to protect Sarah. He had sworn to stay by her side, to protect her from any harm, and now, he had to leave her behind.

The thought did not sit well with Keir.

Not at all.

Yet he understood Sarah's desire to protect her sister. Keir would do the same for Yvaine.

In a heartbeat.

Of course, Keir knew he could not forbid her from doing something he would do as well. He could only do his utmost to ensure the success of this mission. Unfortunately, sometimes, his abilities were limited. He could not be in two places at once. He had no choice. He would have to trust that Sarah could handle this on her own.

But what if she could not?

Try as he might, Keir could not ban this question from his mind.

## Chapter Thirty

## A FAIRY COMETH



Leading Moon by the reins, Harriet walked toward the small estate, her gaze moving from window to window as she wondered what lay beyond these walls. Where was the nursery? Was it one of these windows? If only she knew. Excitement coursed through her veins, and more than anything she wanted to rush ahead, yank open the door and search for the girls.

Yet that would no doubt draw unwanted attention. *Of course, it would.* And thus, she held herself back.

“I can see what you’re thinking,” Jack remarked, walking beside her, leading his own mount. The expression upon his face held a hint of concern, and Harriet smiled. After all, her husband knew her well.

“Well, you don’t have to worry,” she assured him, reaching out to grasp his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “I promise I won’t do anything rash...no matter how tempted I might be.” She grinned at him wickedly.

Jack tried his hardest not to smile, to look at her sternly, but he could not. The corners of his eyes crinkled, and his lips twitched. “You remember the plan, do you not?”

Harriet fluttered her lashes at him, looking all innocent, ignorant debutante. “Plan? What plan?” Moon tossed her head and neighed, drawing Harriet’s attention. “It’s all right, girl. I assure you it will not be for much longer.” She patted Moon’s neck, her eyes glancing down toward the hoof that was missing a shoe. “We’re almost there.”



Despite the bright sunshine, the air was cold, and Harriet was grateful for the thick cloak she wore. The tip of her nose felt almost frozen, and she wriggled her fingers within her mittens. “Too bad it is not summer,” she remarked, “or this would be so much more pleasant without all these layers of clothing.”

Jack chuckled. “Don’t forget the cold.”

Harriet rolled her eyes at him. “That is what I meant. Jack, sometimes you can be so utterly—”

“Infuriating?” he finished for her, his brown eyes meeting hers, his brows quirking upward. “Exasperating? Irritating? Aggrav—?”

“Are you saying *I* am any of those things?” Harriet demanded, enjoying these little back-and-forths between them. Jack had a way of teasing her that was absolutely endearing.

He scoffed, amusement sparkling in his eyes. “Not any of them,” he replied with a daring expression upon his face.

Harriet laughed. “Indeed, I have many layers,” she replied almost haughtily, as though he had just now praised all of her best qualities. “How do I do it?”

A few more strides, and they had reached the small estate. It looked almost asleep, no movement behind the windows or servants running about. Harriet supposed with only two girls in residence, there was no need. “Hand me your reins,” Harriet told him, holding out her hand. “And then go ahead and announce us.”

A surprised expression came to Jack’s face.

“What?” Harriet demanded with a huff. “It would look suspicious if I were to do it, wouldn’t it? It’s once again a man’s prerogative.” Crossing her arms, she shook her head.

Jack laughed. “You truly do remember the plan,” he murmured, handing her his gelding’s reins. Then he moved up the front steps toward the door and knocked.

Long minutes passed, and nothing happened. For a second, Harriet thought that perhaps the information they had received

was false. *Is no one in residence after all?* Then, however, the old door creaked open and a rather spindly looking butler appeared.

Sticking to the plan, Jack played his part, pretending they had been on a ride across the country when Harriet's mare had lost a shoe. Then he inquired after the master of the house, which made the butler look a bit flustered. Yet the man quickly referred to a steward who was present and bid them inside, sending for a stable boy to take the horses.

Though, clearly, Lord Birchwell considered this place of no importance, the inside of the manor was immaculate. While few servants bustled about, apparently there were enough to keep the place spotless. Following the butler, Harriet took note of the staircase that led to the upper floor, two corridors running in either direction, and she wondered which way would lead to the girls' nursery. *I suppose I shall find out soon.* They were shown to a small drawing room where a footman immediately set to work on lighting a fire in the hearth before a maid bustled in, offering them tea and biscuits.

"I shall inform Mr. Ashton of your arrival," the butler murmured with a quick bow before disappearing through the door.

"You know what to do?" Jack asked the moment the door fell closed and they were alone once more.

Harriet eyed him curiously. "Have we only just met, sweet Jack? Or do you not trust me to see this through?" She arched her brows daringly.

Jack huffed out a deep breath. "I'm not allowed to be concerned?" he demanded, walking over and reaching out to grasp her hands. With a swift tug, he pulled her into his arms. "Be careful," he murmured before placing a swift kiss upon her lips.

"Am I not always?"

Jack scoffed good-naturedly, and Harriet wanted to slap him.

The next moment, however, the sound of approaching footsteps flew to their ears.

Instantly, they moved apart. While Harriet seated herself upon the settee, Jack stood by her side, giving the impression of a most devoted husband. *Of course*, Harriet thought, *that is not a ploy*.

Mr. Ashton, the steward, greeted them most kindly. "I am sorry to hear of your misfortune, my lord," he said to Jack, offering him a formal bow, the expression in his eyes clearly suggesting a certain amount of nervousness at coming face to face with a duke. "I've already sent for someone to reshoe your horse. Please, warm yourselves by the fire and partake of some refreshments. You are most welcome here."

Jack offered his gratitude and then, after casting a meaningful look at Harriet, he stepped closer toward Mr. Ashton, lowering his voice ever so slightly. "Pardon me, but it seems the excitement was a bit too much for my wife."

Harriet pressed her lips into a tight line and did her utmost not to burst out laughing. Indeed, this was a true challenge for her. After all, never in her life had she been a weak female, fainting at the mere whisper of excitement. Quite the opposite.

"I believe she could do with a moment of rest," Jack added with a meaningful look in his eyes.

Instantly, Mr. Ashton nodded vigorously. "Of course. Of course." He gestured toward the butler, who in turn sent for a maid to bring a wet cloth and some smelling salts.

Moments later, Harriet found herself lying upon the settee, a wet cloth upon her forehead, while Jack ushered the other men out of the room. Only the young maid remained, dutifully sitting by her side in case Harriet should require anything. Truthfully, all Harriet required was for her to leave.

"Could I trouble you for a bit of mint tea?" Harriet asked weakly. "I find it quite soothing."

Instantly, the young woman shot to her feet. "Of course, my lady."

“Ensure that it steeps for a good twenty minutes,” Harriet instructed sternly. “I like it strong. There’s no point to it if it’s not strong.”

The maid did not dare question her, but instantly bobbed her head and then vanished out the door.

Pulling the wet cloth from her forehead, Harriet wasted no time. She quickly pushed to her feet, her legs carrying her toward the door. She pressed one ear to it, waiting until the maid’s footsteps had disappeared. Then, when everything remained quiet, she carefully opened the door a crack.

The hall lay in complete silence, and so Harriet moved onward. On quiet feet, she crossed to the stairs, wondering where the children could be. *Indeed, it is almost eerily quiet.* In her own childhood, the house had been a hubbub of noise. Harriet could not count how often she and her siblings had slid down the banister to the ground floor, much to their parents’ displeasure. But parents worried. It was the natural order of things, and no reason to stop what one was doing, Harriet had always found.

Upon reaching the upper floor, Harriet proceeded onward down a long corridor, her back close to the wall. She peeked into room after room. Unfortunately, none proved to be the nursery, and so Harriet moved on quickly. After all, she only had twenty minutes. Hopefully.

Every once in a while, a voice or the sound of footsteps drifted to her ears, but no one ever drew close. Truth be told, Harriet was a little disappointed that this appeared to be far too easy. She was about to test another room, her hand on the door handle when the sound of another’s approach suddenly slammed against Harriet’s eardrums and she spun around.

To her utter surprise, she found herself staring at a little girl of about six years of age. *Augusta.* Her mind helpfully supplied.

The little girl looked at her most curiously, her blue eyes not at all widened in alarm. In fact, Harriet thought to see a spark of mischief there, which she liked all the more because it

spoke to something deep inside herself. Here was a kindred spirit, her instincts told her, and she waved the little girl over.

Augusta's blond curls bounced as she followed Harriet's direction without hesitation. "Who are you?" the girl inquired as her blue eyes lingered upon Harriet's tresses. "I love your hair. It looks as though it's on fire." She reached out a tentative hand, her eyes aglow with wonder.

Harriet smiled, kneeling down in front of the girl, praying that no one would come upon them. "I'm a fairy," she said, a suggestion Christina had made in order to gain the girls' trust. Harriet's sister was a born storyteller and knew how to capture the hearts of children.

Harriet knew so from personal experience.

At Harriet's admission, Augusta's eyes grew wide and she snatched her hand back before it could touch Harriet's curls. "A fairy?" For a long moment, Augusta simply stood and stared. "But...But you're too big for a fairy. And where are your wings?"

"It's a disguise," Harriet whispered conspiratorially, leaning closer. "After all, adults don't believe in fairies, do they?"

Sadly, Augusta shook her head. She looked at Harriet with a scrutinizing expression in her eyes, then crossed her arms over her chest. "Prove it," she dared.

Harriet loved the girl's mettle! "Of course. But can we first go somewhere private? I do not wish to be overheard."

For a moment, Augusta hesitated, perhaps contemplating the wisdom of Harriet's suggestion. Then, however, she nodded, waving Harriet onward. "In here," she murmured, her voice dropping to a whisper as she glanced up and down the corridor. "No one ever comes here. Thea and I sometimes hide here when we don't want Miss Newton to find us."

"Your nursemaid?"

Augusta nodded, pushing open the door and holding it for Harriet. "She's very strict." Her little face scrunched up into a disapproving frown. "Everything has to be just so."

Closing the door behind them, Harriet once more kneeled down in front of Augusta. "I'm sorry to hear that. I'm sure that must be very hard for you and your sister."

Again, Augusta nodded, but then paused. "How do you know I have a sister?"

A knowing grin played over Harriet's features. "I'm a fairy, remember?"

Augusta's brows drew down in thought. "What else do you know?"

Harriet put a thoughtful finger to her lips. "I know that your name is Augusta, that you are six years old and that," she paused, watching the little girl's eyes widen with every word she spoke, "you miss your mother very much."

Augusta's face stilled in a way that made Harriet's breath lodge in her throat. Her eyes suddenly glistened with unshed tears, and her lower lip trembled ever so slightly.

Harriet reached for Augusta's hands, holding them gently within her own. "I'm a fairy. So, tell me, what is your dearest wish?"

Clearly understanding the implication of Harriet's words, Augusta's eyes widened. "You can do that?" she whispered in awe. "Truly?"

Harriet nodded. "All you have to do is speak the words."

A shiver danced down the little girl's arms, and she inhaled a slow, deep breath. "I wish to see my mother again," she whispered with such longing in her blue eyes that Harriet felt a heavy lump lodge in her throat.

Willing a smile onto her face, Harriet nodded to Augusta. "Well, then you shall." She squeezed the little girl's hands, and a wide, almost heartbreaking smile came to Augusta's face.

"Truly? Truly truly?"

"I give you my word," Harriet told her solemnly. "Now listen carefully, because this is very important."

Augusta nodded eagerly.

“I will come for you and your sister tonight at midnight,” Harriet whispered conspiratorially, knowing that the little girl hung on every word. “You must ensure that you’re ready to go, that no one is with you, do you understand?”

Again, Augusta’s head bobbed up and down.

“Which room is the nursery?” Harriet asked, hoping that Augusta would not question why she suddenly did not know this.

Fortunately, the little girl did not, her heart no doubt focused upon the thought of seeing her mother again soon. “Down that corridor,” she murmured, her left hand moving to gesture blindly in the direction. “It’s the third door on the right.”

A skeptical look upon her face, Harriet asked, “How do you know it’s the third door?”

“I know how to count.” Augusta looked at her a bit indignantly. “I’m already six.”

“I know,” Harriet replied grinning. “That was only a test. You truly are a clever little girl, one I can trust with this secret. Go back now, and make sure that you and your sister are ready at midnight. Can you do that?”

Augusta nodded, her eyes shining brightly. “I can. I promise.” She tiptoed over to the door and pulled it open a bit. Then she paused and looked back at Harriet, an almost magical expression upon her face. “You truly are a fairy, are you not?”

“Of course, I am,” Harriet replied earnestly, deeply touched by Augusta’s faith in her. “Now, go. Be quick about it. Don’t say a word to anyone or your wish cannot come true.”

With her eyes wide, Augusta clamped a hand over her mouth, her reply a bit muffled. “You have my word.” She slipped out the door, and Harriet heard her footsteps disappear down the corridor.

“Please let this work,” Harriet murmured fervently, loathing the idea of seeing that little girl disappointed. Yes,

they *had* to succeed. They simply had to. And she would do everything within her power to make sure of it.

Peeking out into the corridor, Harriet rushed to return to the drawing room, determined not to arouse suspicions, determined to have everything go according to plan.



# Chapter Thirty-One

## STEADFAST DESPITE FEAR



“I know. I know,” Sarah insisted for what felt like the hundredth time. “I promise you I will be careful.” She looked up into Keir’s eyes, willing him to believe her, to trust her. Yet deep down, Sarah knew that his concern for her was not out of lack of faith but simply because he cared for her so deeply, did he not?

Every time that thought entered Sarah’s head, she could not quite believe it. Yet it had to be so. The look in his eyes told her so, after all.

Keir heaved a deep sigh, then slipped his right hand inside his coat, retrieving something from an inner pocket. “Take this,” he insisted, pressing something cold and hard into her hands. “Just in case.”

Sarah looked down at her open hands, at the small blade Keir had given her. Instantly, an icy cold gripped her, and her thoughts returned to the night out in the woods when Lord Blackmore’s men had found them. Keir had almost died that night, and Sarah had taken a man’s life to prevent it. Although she did not regret the deed, the memory of it still sent a cold shiver down Sarah’s spine. Unblinkingly, she stared at the small blade in her hands and more than anything, she simply wanted to hand it back. However, one look into Keir’s eyes told her that that was not an option. And so, she took it, nodding her head. “Very well.” She took a step back toward the door, her heart and soul resisting the idea of leaving him, of leaving his side. “Take good care of her, of them both.”

“I give ye my word, lass,” Keir vowed solemnly. “No harm shall come to them.” His lips pressed into a tight line, the look in his eyes almost anguished. “Promise me,” he added quietly, “that if ye have to, ye will use it.” For a second, his gaze darted down to the blade in her hand.

Sarah nodded. “I promise; although I do not think it will be necessary.” She forced a chuckle past her lips. “Believe me, nothing will happen. I will stay in my sister’s chamber for a few hours, just in case a maid enters to check on her. She will not recognize me as me. She will only see a sleeping form under the covers and think it my sister. Trust me, Keir. Everything will go well.”

Keir nodded, and yet doubt remained in his gaze. Still, he said no more but simply stood and watched as she reached out her hand for the door handle at her back.

Slowly.

Ever so slowly.

The moment grew longer, and every bit of movement harder. Sarah felt as though she had to fight her way out of the chamber, some kind of invisible force keeping her in place.

And then Keir suddenly moved.

In two large steps, he stood right in front of her, his hands cupping her face gently. “This is the last time I’m letting ye go, little wisp.” The blue in his gaze seemed to intensify as he looked deep into her eyes. “The last time, do ye hear?”

At his words, Sarah wanted to dance with joy. Every fiber of her being urged her to sink into his embrace and remain there forever. All of a sudden, the future looked bright, and Sarah felt full of hope. Clearly, something connected them. Something Keir felt as well. *It is not only me. It cannot be. Otherwise, he would not say these things, would he?*

“I hear you,” Sarah whispered, “and I will hold you to that.” She grinned at him, delighted by the way the corners of his mouth twitched an answer. “Will you kiss me before I go?”

Keir’s answering grin made Sarah feel lightheaded, and when his lips finally brushed against hers, she almost forgot

the world around her.

Only the sound of Loki's rather insistent meow managed to draw her back to the present. In an instant, the importance of this night came rushing back to her, and Sarah knew there was no time to lose. She had to leave. She had to leave now.

Bending down to scoop up Loki, Sarah smiled at Keir. "I will see you soon." Then she tucked the dark blue cloak tightly around herself, wrapping it even around Loki so that only his head poked out. And with one final look into Keir's eyes, Sarah stepped from the room and closed the door behind her.

For a moment, she felt her courage falter, doubt returning, whispering of everything that could go wrong and *would* most likely go wrong.

"No," Sarah whispered determinedly to herself, to that voice deep within that always doubted her. "No, this will work." She lifted her chin and turned down the corridor, her arms wrapped tightly around Loki. More than ever, she was grateful for his presence.

His warmth.

His faith in her.

For once not squirming to get away, Loki settled comfortably into her arms, as though he knew that this was part of the plan, as though he knew how important this was.

The sun had already disappeared a few hours past, and only candles guided her way through Birchwell, along the many corridors and toward her sister's chamber. The occasional servant glanced at her in surprise when they saw Loki's head poking out of her cloak. Yet, by now, people had become accustomed to the feline following her wherever she went. Some smirked in amusement. Others shook their heads in incomprehension. The footmen positioned in the corridor outside Kate's chamber eyed her curiously. Yet no one said a word.

No one would dare.

The moment Sarah stepped up to the door, it opened and her sister's maid, Jane, stepped out. She gave a quick curtsy,

barely able to hide the amused smile that came to her face at seeing Loki wrapped like a little baby in Sarah's arms. Still, even the maid said nothing and quickly went on her way.

Not bothering to knock, Sarah entered Kate's chamber, exhaling a deep breath at having reached her destination. She closed the door behind herself and then freed Loki from his confinement. He jumped to the floor and stretched his limbs, as though he had been stuck in this position for hours.

A nervous smile lingered upon Kate's face as she approached. "He is a bit of a dramatic one, is he not?"

Sarah laughed, savoring the feeling. "You have no idea."

A moment later, Kate's smile vanished and only a nervous expression remained upon her face. "Did people see you?" She glanced at Loki. "The both of you?"

Sarah nodded. "Do not worry," she assured her sister, finding their roles oddly reversed to how it had been as children. "All will go well." She removed her dark blue cloak and then draped it upon Kate's shoulders, fastening it with a heavy silver brooch. "You remember where to go?"

Kate nodded. Then she stepped up to the crib and gently settled Frederica into her arms. "I just nursed her and changed her, and she looks ready to fall asleep." Her gaze rose to meet Sarah's. "I hope she will...Or all this—"

Sarah placed her hands upon Kate's shoulders. "Don't worry. She will fall asleep. But you need to relax, Kate, or she will sense your distress." Sarah tucked the cloak around mother and child. "Walk around a bit and speak to me. Let's try to lull her to sleep."

Kate nodded and began pacing the length of her chamber, her expression still strained, doubt in her eyes. "I cannot help but think of Augusta and Dorothea," she murmured, gently rocking Frederica in her arms. "Do you know who is fetching them tonight?"

Sarah shook her head, wishing she could tell her sister something reassuring. "Unfortunately, I do not. But you know how Grandma Edie always likes to keep her secrets close."

She chuckled despite the nervousness that coursed through her veins as well. “In the end, though, she knows what she’s doing.”

Kate nodded; yet the look of uncertainty in her eyes remained. “I hope they’re not too frightened,” she murmured, her arms tightening around Frederica. “I cannot imagine how they must feel, being taken from their beds in the middle of the night and by strangers, no less.” She pinched her eyes shut, her teeth digging into her bottom lip. “Perhaps this is a mistake.”

Sarah moved toward her sister, placing her hands upon her shoulders, their eyes locking. “Don’t even think that for a moment, Kate. You know this to be the right course of action. Yes, it is not without risk, and yes, it is deeply unsettling. Believe me, I know how you feel. But deep down, you know that this is right.” She held her sister’s gaze until Kate slowly exhaled the breath she had been holding.

“Y-Yes,” Kate stammered, bobbing her head up and down, as though the movement served to remind her of the truth. “Yes, it is the right thing to do. I have to protect them. I have to be strong for them.”

Sarah squeezed her sister’s shoulders in reassurance. “Trust me, everything will go fine.” She looked down at Frederica and smiled. “It seems your daughter agrees.”

Kate’s eyes darted to the child in her arms, and a soft smile came to her face when she found Frederica’s eyes closed in slumber. Her little chest rose and fell slowly, peacefully, one of her little fists curled into Kate’s woolen dress.

“You should go now while she sleeps,” Sarah insisted, once more draping the cloak gently around mother and child, ensuring that Frederica’s face could not be seen, that she would be mistaken for Loki. “Keep your head low and don’t walk too fast.”

Kate nodded, her eyes blinking rapidly as though she could not believe what she was hearing. “Head low,” she murmured to herself. “Don’t walk too fast.” Slowly she approached the door, her steps uncertain.

“You can do this,” Sarah told her reassuringly, moving to open the door. “For your daughters.”

Kate nodded. “For my daughters.” And then, as Sarah held open the door, in a way so she herself remained hidden, Kate stepped out into the corridor. More than anything, Sarah wanted to stand in the doorway and watch her sister walk away. She wanted to see with her own eyes that everything was going well. Still, that would most certainly give them away.

And so, Sarah immediately closed the door behind Kate, praying that she would not be discovered, that everyone who happened to lay eyes on her would think her to be the other sister.

Sarah.

Closing her eyes, Sarah exhaled a deep breath, resting her head against the door, because only then, only after Kate and Frederica had gone, did Sarah suddenly realize how terrified she herself was. Up to this moment, she had had to be strong, her mind occupied with the next step, with what was important. Now, however, all she had to do was wait and hope.

And it was not enough. Doubt sneaked back in, making her limbs tremble and her breath come fast.

Again, Keir’s words echoed through Sarah’s head, forcing her to imagine what might happen if she were to be discovered. Was there any sort of explanation she could possibly give in order to explain her presence in her sister’s chamber with her sister herself gone? Sarah doubted it. More than that, she knew that in all likelihood she would not be able to conjure any words at all. Let alone, reasonable ones.

Convincing ones.

Perhaps Grandma Edie would have no trouble conjuring an explanation out of thin air. Unfortunately, Sarah was not that adept at lying.

She chuckled, once again hearing Keir’s reassuring voice calling her an awful liar. Indeed, tonight that was far from a

compliment. Tonight, Sarah wished she knew how to lie. Tonight, she wished she knew how to lie convincingly.

Determined to push aside her nervousness, Sarah reached for the small blade Keir had given her. The thought of using it was ludicrous, for her hands had already begun to tremble simply looking at it. How was she ever to use it? Yet a few weeks past, she had, had she not? Still, looking down at the blade in her hands, Sarah smiled, for all of a sudden, it served as a reminder of Keir and that thought gave her strength. Despite his concern, Keir trusted her, had faith in her, believed that she could do this or—she knew with absolute certainty!—he would never have allowed her to do this.

Seating herself upon her sister's bed, Sarah pulled Loki into her arms. He snuggled close, sensing her unease, and the feeling of his warm little body slowly eased Sarah's nerves. Perhaps everything would go well after all. Had it not before? Despite them being discovered after all during her feigned abduction in the woods, everything had worked out. To this day, Lord Blackmore had no idea that she had been part of the plan, that she had agreed to it, that the ransom he had paid for her return had freed her father of debt.

Yes, perhaps sometimes, things did go well.

Hopefully, tonight was one of those times.



## Chapter Thirty-Two

## A COUNTESS DISAPPEARS



Kate felt utterly terrified. Each step felt as though it might be her last, that at any moment, someone might materialize out of the shadows and discover her ruse. She could barely breathe, and bright spots began to dance in front of her eyes. Then she felt her daughter shift in her arms, a soft sound of disapproval falling from her lips, and Kate realized that she was holding her too tightly.

Stopping for a moment, Kate inhaled a slow breath, forcing herself to loosen her grip upon Frederica. After all, it would serve no one if her child started crying now. After a few more deep breaths, Kate continued down the hall. She glimpsed a footman here and there or a maid walking past her. However, they paid her no further attention, no more than glancing in her direction.

*They believe me to be Sarah,* Kate thought gratefully, feeling her pulse calm a little. *With Loki in my arms.* Now, it was not much farther. Only down the stairs, around to the back and out the side door.

On a regular day, the distance would have taken Kate no more than a few minutes. Tonight, however, a small eternity seemed to pass before Kate's gaze finally fell upon the side door.

Off to its side, another hooded figure waited. Although Kate knew her to be Molly, her sister's lady's maid, she tensed involuntarily, imagining all sorts of horrifying things.

“Are you all right, my lady?” Molly whispered as she stepped forward, her face barely visible in the dim light. Yet her eyes, too, seemed wider than usual, her cheeks just a bit paler.

Kate nodded, and Molly draped another cloak upon her shoulders, a thicker one meant for the outdoors. Then Molly pushed open the door, and Kate followed her out into the cold night air. She adjusted the cloak to ensure her daughter would remain warm...and asleep.

With their heads bowed, they moved quietly, sticking to the shadows as they rounded the house and headed toward the outer edge of the garden. At first, Kate could see nothing, their path leading them into nowhere. All she spied in the dim light from the moon above were hulking shadows she presumed to be trees or bushes. Then, however, a man separated from one of the shadows to her right. As though he had materialized out of thin air, he suddenly stood there.

Kate drew in a sharp breath, her arms instinctively drawing her daughter closer to her chest.

“This way,” the man beckoned, and only now did Kate recognize him or rather his soft Scottish lilt. He moved quietly through the trees, his dark coat and fluid movements making him hard to see. Yet somehow, Kate and Molly managed to keep him in sight, and after no more than a few moments, they came upon two horses, waiting patiently near a fallen tree.

The horses seemed skittish at first, but the moment Mr. MacKinnear spoke to them they immediately calmed. “We have to ride for a bit,” he said to Kate, turning around to look at her. “In this weather, the carriage canna reach us back here, and it would be too dangerous to have it come up the drive.”

Kate nodded. “Of course,” she muttered, watching the cloud of her breath dance away upon the icy air. Still, the idea of riding on horseback with her baby daughter in her arms filled her with terror.

“Not to worry,” Mr. MacKinnear said, as though he could read her thoughts. “No harm will come to ye or yer child.” He turned and withdrew a piece of cloth from one of the

saddlebags, then moved back to her. “I will lash her to yer chest so ye canna drop her.”

Staring at him, Kate could do little else but nod. The whole situation felt so utterly overwhelming. A part of her simply wanted to return to her chamber while another argued that that was impossible. And so, she stood still and allowed Mr. MacKinnear to tie Frederica to her chest. Rather unexpectedly, the child did not wake, no more than a few faint murmurs drifting from her lips.

Mr. MacKinnear smiled when he saw Frederica’s lips twitch in her sleep. “Hush, wee one,” he murmured softly. “Aye, sleep on. Ye’re safe. Ye’re safe.”

For a moment, Kate felt utterly mesmerized by his words as well as the sound of his voice. It had the most unusual effect on her: calming her instantly. *Why does he make me feel thus?*

Mr. MacKinnear then helped Molly onto a young chestnut mare. The maid’s face suggested that she would rather keep her two feet on the ground; however, that was not an option at present.

Looking toward the bay gelding, Kate felt her forehead furrow. *How am I supposed to get up there?* She glanced down at her daughter and then over at Mr. MacKinnear the moment he turned away from Molly and headed back toward her. “I do not think I can...” She nodded toward the horse.

Mr. MacKinnear smiled at her, not even a hint of doubt in his eyes. “Leave that to me, lass.” And then he suddenly lifted her into his arms and placed her gently upon the horse’s back.

Kate felt her heart almost beat out of her chest, her breath lodging in her throat. Once again, to her surprise, Frederica did not seem to care. Her eyes remained closed, and as Kate looked down at her, a soft smile teased the corners of her lips. “I cannot believe she does not wake.”

Mr. MacKinnear chuckled. “She’s in yer arms, reassured by yer warmth, yer scent, yer heartbeat.” He shrugged, the look in his eyes holding not even a glimmer of uncertainty.

“Why ought she feel unease?” In the next moment, the Scotsman drew himself into the saddle behind Kate, his arms reaching around her to take hold of the reins.

Kate froze instantly. *Oh, this is not proper. Far from it.*

“Ye’re a lot like yer sister,” Mr. MacKinnear chuckled behind her. “She didna care for riding with me, either, when we first met.”

Kate exhaled a slow breath, suddenly remembering that she knew very little about her sister’s relationship to this man. “She rode with you?”

“Aye, she did,” Mr. MacKinnear replied as he urged the gelding onward, clicking his tongue to make the mare follow. Molly drew in a sharp breath, her hands gripping the mare’s mane tightly. “She sat in front of me like a stick in the mud.” He chuckled again. “But not for long.” His hand settled gently upon her shoulder, urging her to lean back against him. “Ye canna ride like this for long, lass, especially with a wee lassie strapped to ye.”

Knowing his words to be true, Kate forced herself to relax. Still, the moment her back came to rest against his chest, she all but held her breath.

“Breathe, lass.”

Kate blinked. “How did you know?” she asked without thinking.

“Look over there,” Mr. MacKinnear said instead of answering her question, one arm pointed through the trees. “There’s a bit of a path that curves to the east and then snakes back around. At its end, we’ll meet a carriage. It willna be long.”

Kate exhaled in relief, and they rode on. She had to admit that seated in Mr. MacKinnear’s embrace, the cold did not feel quite as biting, and the man kept a respectful distance—if one could call it that!—touching her no more than necessary under the circumstances. Still, Kate wondered how Sarah had felt riding with him like this. And why? Would her sister still mind today should the need arise again? Clearly, some kind of bond

existed between them, one that far extended beyond the boundaries of a simple friendship.

Thinking of the kiss Kate had observed the other night still brought heat to her cheeks, sending a most unfamiliar longing through her body. She could not help but wonder how Sarah had felt in that moment. “How do you come to know my sister?”

For a moment, Mr. MacKinnear remained quiet. “She didna tell ye?”

“She called you a friend. Still...” *She does not look at you as though you were merely a friend.*

Behind her, she could feel Mr. MacKinnear sigh. “I have the utmost respect for yer sister,” he murmured near her ear, his breath warm against her skin. “She’s an incredible woman, unlike any I’ve ever met.”

It did not escape Kate that he was not answering her question. At least, not the one she had asked. “You care for her.”

“Aye, I do,” Mr. MacKinnear replied without hesitation, his deep voice rumbling in her ear.

Kate sighed, then gritted her teeth as another wave of longing surged through her. Indeed, not until she had seen her sister with Mr. MacKinnear, had seen the way they looked at one another, spoke of one another, had Kate realized what was missing from her own marriage.

What she would never have.

Now, each look at them was a constant reminder...and it hurt.

It hurt so much.

It was like a wound in her body, one she had barely felt before because she had been asleep. Only now, she was awake, and she could no longer ignore it. It stung every moment of every day, and she wondered if it would ever stop. *Do not weep now. Don't.*

“There,” Mr. MacKinnear murmured all of a sudden, nodding his chin to her right.

Blinking her eyes against the tears that had sneaked up on her, Kate then squinted her eyes. In the dim light, she could make out the vague outline of a carriage half-hidden within a small grove of pine trees, a man standing beside it.

Pulling the gelding to a halt, Mr. MacKinnear jumped down to the ground. Then he turned and lifted her and Frederica out of the saddle, as though they weighed nothing. In the meantime, the man from the carriage assisted Molly down, and the young maid instantly fled into the warmth of the carriage, her teeth chattering loudly.

The two men exchanged a meaningful look before Mr. MacKinnear moved back to Kate’s side. “Allow me,” he murmured, placing her hand upon his arm and escorting her to the carriage. “Do ye wish to have yer daughter remain lashed to ye, lass? Might be easier in the carriage if ye wish to sleep yerself.”

Kate nodded. “Yes, perhaps that’s a good idea.” The thought of Frederica sliding out of her arms terrified her, and were she to change her mind, Molly would be there to assist her.

Allowing Mr. MacKinnear to hand her into the carriage, Kate sighed at the tender warmth within. Molly instantly wrapped a blanket around her legs and pushed a heated brick under her feet. “Thank you,” Kate whispered as Mr. MacKinnear turned to go.

His dark gaze met hers in the dim light. “Dunna worry, lass. Mr. Garner will take good care of ye until ye reach Whickerton Grove.”

Kate nodded, then stopped Mr. MacKinnear when he once more turned to go. “See to my sister, will you? I cannot believe I allowed her to do this, to take this risk.”

Despite the smile that came to his face, Mr. MacKinnear looked tense. “Ye couldna have stopped her. She loves ye quite

fiercely, and she would do anything to see ye and yer daughters safe.”

“You seem to know her well,” Kate replied with a smile.

“Aye, I do.” The look in his eyes held warmth and admiration, and Kate felt the chill slowly leave her body.

“See her safe,” she begged him.

Mr. MacKinnear gave her a quick nod, then he spun upon his heels and jumped back onto the gelding’s back. In the silvery light of the moon, he looked like a phantom in his dark coat that hung well below his knees. His hair seemed black, and his gaze was hard as he kicked the gelding’s flanks. The mount sprang off, the mare following behind.

Kate exhaled a deep sigh. No matter what would happen, Kate knew Mr. MacKinnear would not hesitate to do whatever necessary to protect Sarah, and Kate felt better believing that.



## Chapter Thirty-Three

## A FAIRY RETURNETH



Hiding behind a large bush, Harriet peered at the small country estate. All lights had been extinguished about an hour ago, and no sounds or movements had been heard or seen since. Hopefully, everyone was fast asleep.

With her gaze fixed upon the side entrance, Harriet inched closer...until a large hand clamped upon her arm, holding her back.

“Be careful,” her husband reminded her with a penetrating gaze, his eyes dark in the night.

Harriet grinned, then leaned over and kissed him. “I’m always careful.”

“Harry, I mean it.” A warning swung in Jack’s voice, and Harriet knew that his mind was flashing back to last year when she had been abducted by a love-sick suitor. “If you’re not out in half an hour, I’ll come in after you.”

Harriet wrapped her arms around her husband’s neck. “I promise to be careful,” she vowed, then pressed another kiss to his lips before pulling back.

Jack’s arms released her only with great reluctance. “Perhaps I should simply go in there with you now.”

“No, you should not,” Harriet hissed in a whisper, slapping him on the shoulder. “You’ll frighten the poor dears with that dark scowl upon your face.” She poked a teasing finger at Jack’s furrowed brow.

Casting another glance at the house, Harriet grinned at the others, half-hidden behind the frosted hedge. After all, not only Jack had accompanied her this night, but there was also her brother Troy, her sisters Louisa and Christina, as well as her brothers-in-law Drake, Phineas, Thorne, and Christopher.

In Harriet's opinion, there were far too many of them. They should all have stayed at the inn, but as usual she had been unable to deter them. In a way, Harriet understood. After all, nothing could have swayed her from joining this adventure.

On top of her siblings, Harriet's father had also insisted on accompanying them. She met his eyes in the dark, that look of continual concern once again upon his face. Yet Harriet could not remember a single moment when he had forbidden her from doing something she had chosen to do, and she cast him a reassuring smile.

Two days ago, they had all been gathered in the downstairs drawing room with Grandma Edie, who was providing last-minute instructions, when her father had suddenly stood in the doorway. Instantly, his dark brown eyes had narrowed, suspicion sneaking onto his face. "What are you having them do this time, Mother?" he had demanded in a rather exasperated voice, his head swiveling around to look at Grandma Edie.

As she was wont to do, Harriet's grandmother had merely shrugged, a rather innocent expression upon her face. "I have no idea what you're talking about, my son."

An exasperated breath had left her father's lips in that moment, and Harriet had watched his shoulders slump as his gaze had swept over them all. "Whatever it is," he had said, stepping toward them all, "I'm in."

Harriet and Christina had hugged their father in that moment, grateful beyond words that he understood even without them explaining. What was important to one of them was important to them all. In Harriet's opinion, that was precisely what made their family strong. No one was more

important than the other, and yet at the same time, none of them ever stood alone.

Once again squeezing her husband's hand reassuringly, Harriet whispered, "I'll be back in mere moments. I promise you."

Jack held onto her hand. "I'll hold you to that." Then, his hand uncurled and he released hers, allowing her to go, trusting her to go.

Harriet knew it was not easy for him, for any of them, and yet they understood that she had to do this, that she wanted to do this. It was precisely the kind of adventure Harriet had always longed for.

Something important.

Something she believed in.

*With all my heart.*

Staying low, Harriet moved closer to the house, her gaze open and watchful. Behind her, she could almost feel her family's eyes upon her, watching her every move, their own bodies tense with concern. Harriet knew she would have felt the same way had their roles been reversed. Fortunately for her, though, they were not.

Upon reaching the side door, Harriet removed the few tools Thorne had given her. Christina's husband had grown up far from the English upper class, allowing him to acquire skills she had only ever dreamed of, skills few lords possessed. And so, within a few short moments the night before, Thorne had taught her how to pick a lock, and Harriet had loved every moment of it.

Now, standing out here in the cold as a mild drizzle set in, her pulse thudding wildly in her veins, Harriet felt alive beyond anything. Yet to her surprise, her hands remained steady, and within moments, the lock sprang open silently.

For a second, Harriet simply stood and stared, moderately surprised that this had truly worked. Then, however, she called herself to reason and silently slipped into the house, closing the door behind her. She returned the tools she had used to an

inner pocket of her dress and then sneaked onward. She crossed the kitchen quickly, her eyes momentarily drawn to the remaining embers that glowed somewhere off to her right. Then, she left it behind without another thought, her steps moving her through the dark house, from shadow to shadow, her ears listening intently.

Somewhere in the distance, Harriet could make out the soft ticking of a grandfather clock. Yet beyond that, her ears detected no sound. Of course, that was not surprising in the least. After all, thus far, Lord Birchwell had no reason to suspect anything. As far as he knew, his two daughters were safe and sound, locked away in a small country estate with no one—except for their mother, of course—interested in their whereabouts or their well-being.

Harriet almost laughed at the thought, wishing she could be there the moment he realized what had happened. Indeed, Grandma Edie's insistence they coordinate, choosing the same night to spirit away not only Lord Birchwell's daughters but also his wife and newest child, proved wise. With no one expecting anything, it had been ridiculously easy to slip into the house.

Tiptoeing along the large staircase in the foyer, Harriet felt a moment of nervousness at being thus exposed. Yet she need not have been, for no one came upon her. She reached the upper floor without incident and then proceeded along the corridor. She knew precisely where she needed to go; after all, she already had been here earlier this day.

As Augusta had instructed her, Harriet continued down the deserted hallway, her gaze locked upon the third door on the right. For a moment, she paused, once again listening, wondering if anyone else besides the two girls was inside. When she heard nothing, though, she pushed open the door slowly, thanking the Fates that the hinges did not creak. Then, she quickly stepped across the threshold and closed the door behind her.

The nursery lay in near-darkness, the soft glow of the embers in the hearth casting shadows across the walls. Two little beds stood near the window, and Harriet spotted a little

head upon each pillow. Augusta's blond curls shimmered almost golden in the light from the embers while Dorothea's looked a bit darker, more earthy. Both girls were fast asleep, their eyes closed; yet the expression upon Augusta's face told Harriet that wild thoughts raced through her head even in her dream.

Knowing that there was no time to lose, that Jack might do something unwise at any moment, Harriet hurried over to Augusta's bed, kneeling down beside it. Gently, she reached out a hand and shook the girl's shoulder.

A heavy sigh drifted from Augusta's lips, but her eyes began to flutter, her arms moving, stretching. A second later, her eyes blinked open and looked at Harriet. It took a moment for recognition to flare up, but once it did, it sent Augusta shooting upright lightning quick. "You came!" the girl exclaimed in a whisper, instantly clamping her hands over her mouth as her eyes darted around the chamber.

Harriet smiled. "Of course, I came. I promised, did I not?" *Oh, I truly feel like a magical creature right now about to grant a little girl's dearest wish.*

With her hand still clamped around her little mouth, Augusta nodded her head vigorously up and down. Her eyes were wide and staring at Harriet in utter awe. "I did not mean to fall asleep," she mumbled behind her hand. "I tried to stay awake, but..."

Harriet smiled at her. "That's all right. You're awake now."

"Did you truly come to take us to Mother?" Augusta whispered once her hands finally fell away from her mouth. "Truly truly?"

Harriet nodded. "Truly truly!" She glanced over at the other bed, at Dorothea. "Did you tell your sister?"

Augusta shook her head as she pushed the blanket away and then slipped out of bed. "I did not dare," she whispered, eyeing her sister with a bit of a scrunched-up expression. "She's not yet good at keeping secrets like I am." Then she

turned and smiled at Harriet. “But she will learn. I will teach her.”

“I am very proud of you, Augusta,” Harriet told the little girl, then nodded toward the other bed. “Now, go and wake your sister, but make certain she makes no noise. We must not be discovered.” She winked at Augusta, a wide grin upon her face.

The little girl giggled, then tiptoed over to Dorothea’s bed. She gave her sister a good shake, whispering her name again and again. It took a moment, but then Dorothea’s eyes opened, and she blinked up at her sister. “What is it?” the girl demanded, her voice heavy with sleep. “Why do you wake me?”

Augusta put a finger to her lips and leaned closer. “Don’t make a sound, Thea. But there’s a fairy here to take us to Mother.”

Harriet held her breath as she watched the scene before her eyes.

At first, Augusta’s words did not seem to reach Dorothea at all. Then, however, her little eyes widened ever so slightly as she stared at her sister. “A fairy?” she mumbled, and then her gaze darted past Augusta and found Harriet.

Instantly, Dorothea shot upright, her jaw dropping as she scrambled onto her knees, the blanket clutched tightly in her little hands. “You’re truly a fairy?” she asked in a thankfully quiet voice.

Harriet nodded, moving closer. “I know what you’re thinking,” she addressed the little girl. “You’re wondering where my wings are, are you not?”

Looking thunderstruck, Dorothea nodded.

“It’s a disguise,” Augusta explained before Harriet could, the tone in her voice that of an elder sister who simply possessed just a tad more wisdom. “After all, grownups do not believe in fairies, do they?”

With her eyes going back and forth between her sister and Harriet, Dorothea shook her head.

“Come,” Augusta urged her little sister. “We must be quick. Dress warmly and don’t forget your mittens.” She waved Dorothea forward and then all but pushed her toward their armoire in the corner. “I already set aside some clothes for you before I went to bed last night.” She glanced at Harriet, a proud smile upon her face.

Though slightly confused, Dorothea did as she was bid. “Why? Where are we going?”

Augusta paused and turned to her sister, gently taking her little hands within her own. “I told you,” she whispered, the sound in her voice threatening to break Harriet’s heart. “She’s taking us to Mother.”

Dorothea’s little face stilled in a way that made Harriet want to hug her. “Truly?”

Augusta nodded, unshed tears shimmering in her eyes. “Go get dressed.”

Both girls hurried to pull clothes over their heads and slip their feet into boots. They slung scarves around their necks and pulled hats deep into their faces before slipping on their mittens.

Harriet quietly slid open the door, putting a finger to her lips as she looked back at the girls. Then, she waved them forward. One by one, they slipped out the door and Harriet once more closed it behind them, praying that it would be some time before someone went to check on the girls. She was about to move back down the corridor when Augusta reached for her sleeve and pulled her back. “What is it, dear?”

Augusta waved her down, and Harriet brought her ear closer to Augusta’s lips. “There’s a back staircase. It’ll be quicker and out of sight.”

Harriet grinned at the girl. “I like the way you think, Gus.”

A proud smile stretched across Augusta’s face before she turned around, pulled her little sister’s hand into her own and then led the way down the other side of the corridor. Indeed, within moments, they reached the back staircase and quietly descended to the ground floor.



All remained quiet, and Harriet followed Augusta to another back door. This one, too, was locked. However, Harriet once more pulled out her trusted tools and had it open within moments. Both girls stared at her with wide eyes. “These are like little wands,” Harriet explained. “However, not everyone can use them. There is a secret to it. Perhaps one day I will share it with you.”

As they stepped out into the cold night air, Harriet reached out a hand to each of the girls. She pulled them close and led them through the rain and wind, trying her best to remain in the shadows as they rounded the house back to where she had started.

The moment they drew closer to the hedge, heads poked up and they were quickly enveloped by Harriet’s family, relief palpable upon their faces as they looked at her and the girls.

“So, everything went all right?” Thorne asked, glancing back at the house. “The tools?”

Harriet grinned. “Worked nicely. Twice.”

Thorne gave her an approving nod.

Harriet kneeled down and placed an arm around each one of the girls. Both were staring with wide eyes at all the people suddenly surrounding them. “This is my family. They came here tonight to help me see you safely to your mother.” She took their hands and drew them toward the waiting carriage, hidden behind a large grove of trees. “These two lovely ladies are my fairy sisters,” Harriet said, winking at Christina and Louisa. Especially Louisa had a hard time maintaining a straight face. “They will accompany you to a place called Whickerton Grove while I go and fetch your mother, all right?”

The girls nodded.

“Shall I tell you a story?” Christina offered as she helped them into the carriage. “A story about a fairy perhaps?”

The girls nodded eagerly as they were bundled up warmly on the carriage seat, their eyes aglow and their arms wrapped around one another. “Yes, please.”

“I shall see you soon,” Harriet whispered as she waved them farewell. “I’ll just go and fetch your mother and then I will bring her to you.” *No one dare get in my way!*

Louisa eyed her with a curious expression. “*You* will go and fetch their mother?” she asked under her breath before stepping into the carriage after Christina.

Harry arched her brows. “Of course, I’m the hero of this story, didn’t you know?” She grinned wickedly at her sister.

Louisa shook her head and laughed. “You’re impossible, Harry.”

“Thank you so much for noticing.” And with one last wave at the girls as the carriage pulled away, Harriet spun around and turned back to the others. While Phineas and Thorne, Louisa’s and Christina’s husbands, would escort the carriage back to Whickerton Grove, the rest of them would join Harriet and head toward Birchwell.

Just in case.

Only they did not know that yet. Still, it made sense. It was very Grandma Edie, and Harriet was convinced that her grandmother would approve of her decision, that her way of thinking was, in fact, why she had put Harriet in charge.

“Let’s get going,” Harriet exclaimed, waving the others forward. “We don’t know how much time we have.”

“Going?” Jack asked with a frown, and his gaze moved to the carriage as it was slowly swallowed up by the dark. “We’re not going with *them*?”

Harriet shook her head as the others eyed her with various degrees of confusion. “There is nothing for us to do at Whickerton Grove.” She met her father’s steady gaze. “But Keir and Sarah might need us.” Her eyes held his. “We should go. Just in case.”

For a moment, silence lingered as they stood in a small circle out in the dark, rain pelting down at them as wind tugged upon their hair and clothes. Then her father slowly nodded, his shoulders drawing back as he breathed in deeply

of the earthy night air. “Everyone ready to go?” he inquired, looking around their small circle.

Affirmative nods met him, and without delay, they mounted their horses. “Does anyone truly think that we will be needed this night?” Troy inquired, looking from their father to his brothers-in-law.

Drake, Leonora’s husband, shrugged. “There is no way of knowing. In my experience, unforeseen circumstances most often arise when one least expects them.”

Harriet laughed, guiding Moon closer to her brother-in-law’s side. “So, what you’re saying is if we go, we will not be needed. However, if we don’t, then we will be?” She grinned at him.

A hint of mirth came to Drake’s face, a man who was rather earnest and rarely gave into laughter. Still, that humorous twinkle in his eyes was enough.

Christopher, Juliet’s husband, though, chuckled loudly. “A unique way of looking at the world, Harry.”

Harriet shrugged. “What can I say? I tend to look on the bright side.”

“The bright side?” Jack scoffed, teasingly rolling his eyes at her.

Harriet bumped his knee with hers. “Yes, to me, the bright side is more of this wonderful adventure.” She leaned closer, holding his gaze. “You cannot tell me that you’re not enjoying this.”

Jack fought to hide a grin. “Well, perhaps...a little.” He reached out and took her hand. “I’m glad you’re all right.” The expression upon his face told her that he had truly been concerned for her, the way he always was. Perhaps it was nothing too unusual, and it had taken Harriet a good while to understand that his concern did not mean that he did not trust her. It was simply something that came with loving another.

Harriet nodded. “I’m glad you’re all right, too.” She bumped his knee again. “Last one to Birchwell is a rotten

egg!” she called and then kicked her mare’s flanks, sending Moon into a gallop.

Bathed in the soft glow of the moon, Harriet raced along, through the last stretch of forest and then out across the wind-whipped and rain-pelted meadow. She loved to feel the icy touch of the elements upon her cheeks, the way they tugged upon her curls. It made her feel alive and strong and almost invincible. Indeed, this was a wonderful adventure, and she never wanted it to stop.

Soon, Harriet could hear the others thundering along behind her, slowly gaining ground. She looked over her shoulder at them, seeing their determination to see this through, to ensure that a mother would be reunited with her daughters. Indeed, it was something that did not leave Harriet unaffected. Of course not. Yet if she gave into that sense of sorrow that assailed her whenever she thought about what Kate had gone through, it threatened to make her weep. And Harriet hated weeping. It served no purpose, and she would not have it.

No, instead, she would continue to think of this is a wonderful adventure. It was a thought that gave her strength and made her surge ahead, unwavering and dauntless.

Yes, she would never tire of this feeling.

# Chapter Thirty-Four

## A MENACE



Sarah held her breath as she heard the door to her sister's chamber slowly swing open. Curled up in Kate's bed, Sarah had tucked the blanket tightly around her shoulders. Only her hair, quite similar in color to her sister's, lay draped openly across the pillow. She prayed with all her being that the maid would not linger, that there was no reason for *her sister* to be woken.

Footsteps moved into the room, and Sarah pinched her eyes shut, willing herself to breathe evenly. She was not quite certain how much time had passed since her sister and her niece had left. Had they already reached Keir? Were they perhaps already seated in the carriage?

Sarah hoped that it was so. Yet she could not be certain. What if there was still enough time for her husband to catch up to them should he find out now?

The soft sound of another's breathing drifted to Sarah's ears, and she hoped that Loki would remain where he was, snuggled up on the blanket beneath her bed. Yet thus far, her loyal companion had always possessed a clear insight into what was needed of him.

And then the door swung closed.

Sarah almost flinched, for she had not heard the footsteps retreat. Yet they had to have, did they not? Indeed, she remained still for a moment longer, listening, wondering if anyone was still in the room. However, when only silence met

her ears, she slowly turned her head, sweeping her gaze around the darkened chamber.

All the shadows that lingered were of furniture, unmoving, their place fixed. She could not make out any kind of movement, and so she slowly sat up in bed. Her heart was hammering, and she knew she would not be able to sleep this night. Of course, that was not the plan. The plan was for her to wait here until Keir came to fetch her. Yet when would that be?

Sarah did not know, and so she settled herself as comfortably as she could, knowing that she had a long wait ahead of her.

At what point in the night her eyes did close, Sarah did not know. However, they had to have, for they suddenly flew open as a harsh sound shot to her ears.

Instantly, Sarah jerked awake, a pinch in her neck from the odd angle she had slept in. The world around her was still dark, and for one moment, Sarah did not know where she was or what was happening. Then, however, memory returned, filling in the gaps and providing answers.

Sarah's fingers curled into the blankets, clutching them tightly, as she listened. Indeed, it was the sound of footsteps that had awoken her. Footsteps of someone all but marching up and down the length of the room on the other side of the wall.

The chamber of Kate's husband.

Instantly, Sarah's eyes flew to the connecting door. It had been at the root of most of her worries for tonight. Yet according to Kate, her husband had never come to visit his wife so soon after a birth. Would he tonight?

That, of course, would change things.

Sarah shivered at the thought. If Lord Birchwell were to seek out his wife, confrontation could not be avoided. Sarah doubted that he would be discouraged by his wife feigning sleep. No doubt, he would discover Sarah's true identity, realize his wife was missing and then do whatever necessary

to fetch her back. Would he be able to? Sarah wondered, wishing she knew where Kate was at that moment.

The footsteps on the other side of the wall continued, and Sarah could tell from the dull sound that Lord Birchwell was rather agitated. Something quite obviously plagued him, robbing him of sleep. Had something transpired to upset him? Sarah did not know, and neither did Kate or, Sarah was certain, her sister would have told her.

*Perhaps it is nothing*, Sarah reasoned, trying to calm herself. Perhaps her sister's husband simply had trouble sleeping and would soon retire to his bed again. After all, throughout Sarah's entire stay at Birchwell, she had rarely seen her brother-in-law take any kind of interest in his wife. The only times he ever spoke to her had been about the heir he had expected and then lost when his daughter had been born. There was no conversation between them, nothing that would suggest he would seek out Kate's company.

Except for—

Sarah stilled when the sound of footsteps fell away. All of a sudden, it was almost eerily quiet, Sarah's own breathing loud in her ears. She kept her gaze fixed upon the darkened door, imagining all kinds of horrific scenarios, when the door handle began to move.

Panic made Sarah's heart slam painfully against her rib cage as she scooted back down, pulling the blanket higher, up to her chin. Her gaze remained fixed upon the door as it slowly slid open, faint light falling into the darkened chamber from the other room.

*Oh, this is not happening!* Sarah whispered to herself again and again, disbelief warring with the sudden question of what to do. Ought she to remain hidden for as long as she possibly could? Or rather reveal herself right now?

Sarah wished she knew. Even though she had done her utmost to contemplate every scenario, she had never for a second believed that her sister's husband would come to his wife's chamber this night of all nights. What had been the odds?



A touch of anger settled in Sarah's heart at seeing Lord Birchwell disrupt their so carefully laid out plans. *How dare he? Can he not wait another night? Why tonight?* Sarah paused. *Does he suspect something? No.* If he did, he would act differently. She was certain of it.

What then could he want? He couldn't possibly be here because...

Pinching her eyes closed once more, Sarah listened to the sound of now almost soft footfalls moving closer. A part of her urged her to reveal herself while another was almost cowering in fear. What would he do if he found her, Sarah, here?

And then, Sarah felt a soft tug upon the blanket. "Do not feign sleep," Lord Birchwell's harsh voice suddenly spoke into the quiet of the night. "I told you you would give me a son, and I'm here to make good on that promise."

The moment Sarah felt the mattress dip as Lord Birchwell slid beneath the covers, she surged upright and out of bed, almost falling to the floor. In the last moment, Sarah managed to catch herself, getting her feet back under her before she spun around, panting, her eyes wide as she stared at him.

For a small eternity, neither of them said a word. Sarah could feel Lord Birchwell's eyes upon her. She could sense his confusion as he half-sat, half-kneeled upon the bed, blinking his eyes as though he feared himself lost in some sort of dream.

Perhaps some sort of nightmare.

Working to slow her own breathing, Sarah quickly slipped on her slippers, thinking that doing so was a good idea. Somehow, the thought even felt familiar, almost reassuring. "Lord Birchwell," she began tentatively, "let me explain."

Stumbling from the bed, dressed in shirt and breeches, sleeves rolled up casually, the man continued to stare at her. "Miss...Mortensen?" He moved closer, and Sarah forced herself to remain where she was. "What are you doing here?" For once, his voice held only surprise, nothing of that harsh and threatening tone that had come to sound familiar, and

Sarah wondered in that moment who he might have been once. She could not imagine he had always been the kind of man he was today. What had he been like as a child? As a little boy? Had there been kindness in his eyes? Had he ever been frightened by a raging storm outside? Had he ever dreamed of love?

Perhaps he had long ago before he had lost that side of himself.

“What are you doing here?” Lord Birchwell demanded again, and this time, the tone in his voice did hold anger. “Where is my wife?” With his dark gaze fixed upon her, he advanced slowly.

Sarah swallowed hard. “Well, that is a funny story,” she began, trying to keep her voice light and failing to do so. “Kate and I...Well, you see...I had trouble sleeping, and so my sister suggested...We trade chambers because...” Sarah frowned, wondering if anything she was babbling on about made any sense at all. Indeed, she had not once contemplated such a scenario and was, thus, utterly unprepared.

“Do not lie to me!” Lord Birchwell snarled. “Where is my wife?” His hands had balled into fists, and he was shaking with silent rage.

Sarah was beginning to feel dizzy. *What am I to say?* She could not tell him the truth. She would never. And yet she could not lie either, could she? Even if she tried again, as she had, he would know right away. Again, Keir’s voice echoed through her head, telling her she was an awful liar and would be forever. When he had spoken, though, it had sounded like a compliment and she knew that he had meant it as such; yet here, in this moment, it did not serve her.

Again, Lord Birchwell advanced upon her, every step he took threatening. Only this time, someone interfered.

In the dark, Sarah could barely glimpse him. All she saw was a shadowy blur that surged up from beneath the bed. It hissed and spat, and in the next moment, Lord Birchwell howled in pain, stumbling backwards.

Loki!

Sarah almost smiled as she spotted him positioning himself between her and Lord Birchwell, everything about his stance radiating aggression, warning Lord Birchwell to stay clear while a loud hiss rumbled in his throat. Sarah could not help but think that, on top of having been a king, Loki might have been a guard dog in a previous life.

“That cat is a menace!” Birchwell growled, touching a place upon his lower leg where Loki had attacked him. “Did I not tell you to get rid of it?” Then his gaze shifted once more to Sarah. “I demand you tell me where my wife is!” he snarled, not looking at all concerned with the little ball of fur still hissing and spitting in his direction. “Katherine never disobeyed me before. She learned her lesson early on and bowed her head as a good wife ought to.” He shook his head at her. “I should never have allowed you to stay. You are a bad influence on your sister. Suddenly, she forgets her place.” He took a step closer. “Where is she?”

Despite the fact that fear was shooting up and down every nerve of Sarah’s body, she could feel that spark of anger from before blooming into something more. Her chin lifted without her knowing, and her shoulders pulled back. “Did no one ever tell you that *a good husband* ought to respect his wife?” she demanded of Lord Birchwell, surprised that for once her voice did not seem to waver. “She has done everything within her power to give you what you want, and yet nothing she does is ever good enough. Do you truly believe it to be her fault that you are still without an heir? Do you truly believe she has that kind of power?” Sarah shook her head at him, a touch of pity coming to her heart as she imagined the life Lord Birchwell led. *How lonely he has to be.*

After all, he had a lovely wife like Kate by his side, and yet he knew nothing of her, had robbed himself of her love without thinking about it twice.

“That is none of your concern,” Lord Birchwell snarled at her. “She is mine, mine alone!” Suddenly, he moved toward her, reaching out a hand. “Where is she?”

In the last second, Sarah managed to duck out of reach, her feet carrying her backward, Loki hissing and spitting at her side. Her hand reached within the folds of her dress and retrieved the small blade Keir had given her. It glinted in the dim light drifting in through the windows at her back.

Seeing it, Lord Birchwell paused, and Sarah imagined a look of utter surprise coming to his face. She wished she could see it in the dim light. Unfortunately, he recovered quickly. “What sort of woman are you?”

Despite the disparaging tone in his voice, Sarah felt pride well up in her heart. “The best kind,” she dared to reply, imagining Keir smiling at her. “The kind that will not be bullied. Rant as much as you wish, but I will not betray my sister. I will not tell you where she is.”

Indeed, for a second, Lord Birchwell seemed stunned speechless. Then, however, with a last glance at the blade in her hand, he spun around and strode toward the door. “Then I shall find her myself. After all, she couldn’t have gone far.” He paused, looking back at Sarah over his shoulder. “Where is the child? Did she take it?” Perhaps reading the answer upon Sarah’s face, he scoffed darkly. “She will not get far. Not with the child. Foolish woman!”

Fear once more surged to the forefront of Sarah’s mind. Where was Kate now? Too far away for her husband to reach her? Or—?

Without thinking, Sarah rushed to block Lord Birchwell’s path, her back pressed to the door the moment he reached for its handle.

Again, a touch of confusion came to his eyes, stating quite clearly that Sarah’s behavior was beyond anything he would ever have expected. “Out of my way!” he snarled a moment later, clearly not intrigued enough to abandon his current course of action.

When Sarah failed to comply, her feet all but frozen in place, Lord Birchwell grabbed her arm and yanked her away from the door and toward him. “This is not how a woman ought to behave,” he snarled into her face, his eyes angry slits.

“This is not how a gentleman ought to behave,” Sarah countered, instantly shocked speechless by her own boldness. Indeed, she had changed a great deal over the course of the past weeks, Sarah realized. Before, she would never have dared speak to her sister’s husband like this. *I would never have dared to do a lot of things.*

Lord Birchwell’s lips thinned, and Sarah thought he would lash out at her again. However, his face suddenly contorted into a mask of pain, a loud yowl escaping his throat. He staggered back, favoring his right leg.

A hiss from Loki drew Sarah’s attention, and she spotted the feline advancing on Birchwell yet again, and her heart felt a little lighter.

At least, for a moment.

Dodging Loki’s next attack, Lord Birchwell kicked in his direction, missed, and then caught him with his other foot.

Sarah’s heart stopped as she watched in shock as Loki was flung sideways, his little body hitting the floor with a dull thud.

“Loki!” When the feline failed to react to her call, failed to move at all, Sarah rushed forward, her eyes fixed on his little body as her pulse pounded in her ears.

Before she could take more than two steps, though, Lord Birchwell caught her by the arm again, the look in his eyes raging mad. He pulled back his right arm and slapped her hard across the face, the impact making her ears ring. “You harlot, I will teach you manners!”

Dazed, Sarah blinked her eyes, unable to focus, her vision blurred. She felt Lord Birchwell shove her backward, her feet stumbling along before she lost her balance and fell....

...onto the bed.

A moment later, Lord Birchwell was on top of her, pushing her into the mattress. “Perhaps *you* can give me a son,” Lord Birchwell sneered into her face, his weight holding her in place. “Worth a try, wouldn’t you say?”

Sarah felt as though trapped in a nightmare. She could not quite believe that this was truly happening, a distant part of her urging her to open her eyes and simply wake up. At the same time, another part succumbed to utter panic, canceling out any rational thought, any strategic thinking. She could not even say where Keir's small blade had gone. Had she dropped it? Was it still in her hand?

"After spending...what?...a fortnight as a hostage, in the control of common criminals, this should not be unfamiliar to you," Lord Birchwell snarled into her face as he pulled her arms above her head and pushed them into the mattress. "After all, you're in my wife's chamber, pretending to be her, refusing to tell me where she is." He laughed maniacally. "Then be her in every way. See how you like it."

Sarah pinched her eyes shut as she felt rough hands upon her body and Lord Birchwell's hot breath touching her skin. Was this what her sister had endured these past years? Sarah wanted to weep, but she knew she could not. If she did...

"Release me this instant!" Sarah snarled, opening her eyes and meeting his. "What evil sort of man are you? Are you not supposed to be a lord of the realm? Someone honorable and respectful? Someone who protects the weak and faces down the wicked of this world?" She stared up at him, his eyes fixed on hers, the look in them oddly unblinking. "Look at you!" Sarah demanded, her voice reverberating within her own bones. "Is this the man you want to be? The man you can be proud to be? What if," she swallowed hard, "some day in the future, some man were to treat your daughters, your own flesh and blood, like this, what would you think of him?"

Though trembling despite her forceful words, Sarah held Lord Birchwell's gaze, saw him blink as though on some level he had heard her after all. Was that a touch of shame she saw flash across his face?

Sarah did not know for sure, but his grip upon her arms lessened, and then he closed his eyes and exhaled a slow breath.

As the echo of her words fell away, Sarah felt the shivers return. Her body grew cold, and panic once more clawed at her heart. If Lord Birchwell did not release her, what could she hold against him? What else did she have aside from the words she had spoken?

She did not know, and it terrified her.

## Chapter Thirty-Five



## TO HER RESCUE



Leaving Scout and Autumn tied to a low-hanging branch near the stable, Keir sneaked silently toward the back door of Birchwell's manor house. The place seemed asleep. No sounds echoed to his ears, and from where he stood, he could spot not a shimmer of light. Had their escape truly gone unnoticed? Was Sarah safe and sound upstairs in Lady Birchwell's chamber waiting for him?

Keir prayed that it was so.

Entering the house, he slowly made his way upstairs, reminding himself that if no one had taken note of their escape, there was no need for him to remain unnoticed. And so, he straightened and marched confidently—though still quietly—down the hall.

Fortunately, Keir encountered no one. The corridors stood deserted, and no one poked a head out of any of the doors he walked past. As he approached Lady Birchwell's chamber, his gaze moved from left to right, trailing ahead of his steps down the hallway. Most of the footmen who stood positioned in this corridor were gone, no doubt retired for the night. However, up front, near the lady's door, Keir spotted two remaining on their posts. Yet they looked tired and utterly bored, their eyelids drooping every so often as they forced themselves to remain standing.

Keir hung back, contemplating what to do. Of course, he did not know what orders they had been given; yet he doubted that Lord Birchwell had foreseen his wife's escape. It was unlikely that anyone was on the lookout for him, Keir. Still,

the footmen would no doubt object to him simply entering Lady Birchwell's chamber and would try to prevent him or, at least, alert Lord Birchwell.

That was something Keir would like to avoid if possible.

Yet as he stood and waited, contemplating what to do, Keir noticed the expression upon the men's faces changing. For one, they suddenly looked far more alert than before. On top of that, the way they looked at one another, exchanging a glance before turning to look back toward Lady Birchwell's door, made them seem deeply uncomfortable.

Keir frowned, wondering what was going on, what had changed. Indeed, something ice-cold trailed down his spine, suddenly sending him into motion without another thought. He approached the two footmen, met their eyes and said on a hunch, "Good evening. Lord Birchwell asked me to relieve ye of yer duties here. Unfortunately, I was detained." He offered them an apologetic smile. "Ye may retire now." He took a step to the side and nodded down the corridor.

The expression upon the men's faces changed to one of relief, and yet they hesitated...but only for a moment. As they hastened down the corridor, clearly eager to get away, Keir noticed the sound of muffled voices drifting through Lady Birchwell's door.

Instantly, his body stilled, his heart pausing in his chest as his ears strained to listen. As much as he hoped to be mistaken, Keir knew it was not so. At first, he could not quite be certain of whose voice it was. Then, however, its soft rhythm began to feel familiar.

*Sarah!*

A deep frown drew down his brows. Why was she speaking? After all, she ought to be alone in that chamber. Was she? Or not? Was it possible that someone else was in there with her? But if so, who could it be? A maid?

Keir stalked closer, all but pressing his ear to the door as he listened. Again, the only voice he heard was Sarah's. It made no sense. Not at all. Still, that icy tingle remained, that

feeling deep inside that told him that something was wrong. As much as Keir wished to remain unnoticed, he did not dare linger.

In one swift motion, Keir pushed open the door...and then almost toppled over in shock at the sight that met him.

Whatever he had expected, it was most certainly not this. Not Sarah flat on her back upon the bed with Lord Birchwell on top of her, his hands holding her confined, preventing her from rising to her feet. From where Keir stood, the man's intentions seemed clear, and yet an odd stillness lingered upon the two of them.

Still, Keir hesitated no more than a second. Shoving aside the shock he still felt in his bones, he lunged forward. Sarah's eyes briefly met his before he grasped Birchwell and yanked him off her. He did not bother asking any questions but instead planted Birchwell a facer. The man instantly went down like a sack of potatoes.

“Keir?”

At the anxious note in Sarah's voice, Keir spun around, the man at his feet all but forgotten, and rushed back to her side. “Are ye all right? Did he hurt ye?” Her hands reached for him, and Keir grasped them, pulling her up, off the bed and into his arms.

Sarah buried her face in his shoulder and held on tightly, her delicate frame trembling and her breath suddenly coming fast, as though she had not dared breathe in a long while.

Holding her wrapped in his arms, Keir closed his eyes and exhaled deeply. “I should never have agreed to this,” he murmured more to himself than to her. “I should never have left ye alone.”

Suddenly pulling back, Sarah looked up at him, tears shining in her eyes. “I-Is Kate all right?” Her voice was unsteady, and her lower lip trembled. “S-She and the b-baby?”

Keir nodded. “They're both fine, lass.” He dipped his head and looked deep into her eyes. “Are ye?” He felt his lips press into a tight line as he waited for her answer.

Swallowing hard, Sarah nodded. "I'm all right." Again, her shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath, and she kept nodding her head up and down. "I'm all right. Yes, I'm all right. I'm fine."

Gently, Keir grasped her chin, making her meet his eyes. "What happened here?" He did not even dare glance behind Sarah at Birchwell, afraid of what he might do. "What is he doing here? What did he...do?"

Sarah's eyes closed, and her cheeks grew crimson. "He... He came in here, looking for Kate, because he..." She bowed her head, resting her forehead against his chest.

Keir wrapped an arm around her trembling shoulders, placing the other upon the side of her head, the tips of his fingers brushing one of those adorable wisps behind her ear. Murderous outrage seethed deep within his bones, and yet Keir knew that was not what Sarah needed right now. She had been through enough tonight. It was time he take her away from this place. "Did he hurt ye?" Keir asked, trying to assess the situation and what to do next.

With her forehead still resting against his chest, Sarah shook her head. "He frightened me, though," she admitted, her voice still trembling. "He...He slapped me."

Keir pulled back, his hand once more settling beneath her chin. "He did what?" He looked down into her eyes, and then, despite the crimson color of her cheeks, despite the dim light of the chamber, Keir thought to see the beginnings of a bruise form upon her left cheek.

Instantly, his pulse spiked.

Sarah's fingers curled into his coat, holding on tightly, as tears ran down her cheeks. "I'm so glad you are here," she whispered, her voice trembling. "I didn't know what to do. I tried to fight him. I tried to reason with him, but he—" Suddenly, her eyes grew wide.

"What is it?" Keir demanded, a fresh wave of panic rushing through his veins. "Sarah." He gave her a little shake.

“Loki!” Sarah gasped almost breathlessly. Then she suddenly released him and spun around, quick steps carrying her across the chamber toward a corner of the room.

Keir hastened after her, his gaze falling upon the little feline lying upon his side, his eyes closed. His chest, though, rose and fell slowly. “What happened?” he asked as Sarah reached out tentative hands, brushing them over Loki’s head and down along his back.

“He came to my rescue,” she whispered, tears streaming down her face as she gently stroked Loki’s fur. “He attacked Lord Birchwell, and he...he kicked Loki.” A strangled sob fell from her lips. “He kicked him across the room and then grabbed me before I could get to him.” Her tears fell upon her hands and Loki’s gray-brown fur alike. “Oh, Loki, please be all right.” She turned to look at Keir. “Do you think he is all right?”

After feeling the fierce little feline’s pulse, Keir ran his hands over Loki’s back and abdomen, relieved to feel them soft and yielding. “Aye, I think he will be,” he told Sarah gently, praying that future events would not make him a liar.

Indeed, seeing Loki lying there, after witnessing Birchwell’s attack upon Sarah, made Keir wonder about men like Sarah’s brother-in-law, cowards who only dared attack those weaker than them. All day long, these men were concerned with honor and reputation, and then they did something so utterly dishonorable. *How is that possible? How can these sods face their own reflection in the mirror?*

Keir did not know.

Fetching a small blanket from Frederica’s crib, Keir gently wrapped it around Loki, settling him into the crook of his arm “Come, lass. We have to go.”

Sarah nodded but then stopped and turned. “But what about—?”

They both stilled when they found the floor deserted and Birchwell gone.

Keir cursed under his breath. "He musta made his escape when we were seeing to Loki," he growled, peering out the open door and down the corridor. "Come, lass. Now, we truly needa run." It certainly would not bode well if Birchwell alerted the whole house, and they would be apprehended.

Rummaging through her sister's armoire, Sarah retrieved a warm winter cloak and quickly draped it upon her shoulders. Then she slipped her feet into the boots they had hidden in Lady Birchwell's chamber before. "What do you think he will do?" Sarah asked, fear etched into her face. "Before, he..." She exhaled slowly, something dark falling over her face. "He was determined to go after her. He guessed that she had taken Frederica and that the two of them could not have gone far."

Keir nodded, then he grasped Sarah's hand and pulled her out of the room and into the corridor. "'Tis possible." Still, Birchwell could not know where they had taken Sarah and the child. Would he simply ride around the countryside randomly? "Did he ask ye where they were?"

Sarah nodded as they hastened along with large strides. "He did," she whispered, clinging to his arm. "But I did not tell him. I swear it."

Keir smiled at her. "Of course, ye didna." They rushed down the stairs to the ground floor. Although the house still lay sleeping, Keir sensed something brewing. Perhaps Birchwell would wake the whole house, after all, rousing his servants in order to find his wife. Whatever the man was planning, it was essential they leave now.

Leading Sarah outside to where the horses stood waiting, Keir used his free arm to help her onto Autumn's back. Sarah greeted her mare affectionately, and Autumn neighed softly in reply. Then Keir quickly mounted Scout, careful to hold Loki tight against his chest. The feline had begun to stir a little, yet his eyes remained closed. Keir prayed that he would be all right. Oddly enough, he could not imagine never seeing his mischievous grin again.

"Follow me!" Keir called softly, nodding in the direction of the woods. Then he urged Scout onward, and together, they

disappeared into the woods.

At first, they moved slowly, allowing the horses to carefully pick their way over roots and brambles, their hooves sinking into the thick layer of pine needles upon the ground. Then, when they were clear of the forest, they urged the two mounts onward. Sarah clung tightly to Autumn's back, her cheeks rosy in the cold night air, her gaze directed forward, her jaw set in determination. Keir loved the sight of her thus; yet he could not forget all she had been through this night, that part of the rosy glow upon her cheek would darken and turn into a bruise. *Aye, I shouldna have left her.*

Focusing his thoughts, Keir directed his gaze upon the horizon. The pitch-black of the night sky made it seem endless, the moon's twinkling brilliance a soothing counterweight. He wondered how long it would take for them to catch up with the carriage. After all, Mr. Garner had a good head start. Still, considering Lady Birchwell's condition so close after giving birth as well as the presence of an infant, the carriage could not move too swiftly over such uneven ground.

As they continued onward, Keir glanced over his shoulder, belatedly becoming aware of the occasional print their horses were leaving behind. Although the ground was still frozen, a good tracker would no doubt find their trail. Still, Keir doubted that Birchwell had such a man in his employ, let alone was one himself. However, what if Lord Birchwell had not ridden ahead, randomly searching the countryside? What if he had lain in wait, biding his time until he could follow them?

Keir groaned under his breath. He ought to have been more careful. He ought to have thought first and acted with more caution. Yet wherever Sarah was concerned, he seemed to have a hard time doing so. As before, she proved quite the distraction. Not that that was her fault. No, it was his, for abandoning his focus. Now, though, it was too late for regrets. They could not turn around now. Where would they go? Now, they could only push onward, hoping that no one was in pursuit.

## Chapter Thirty-Six



## A FINAL CONFRONTATION



Sarah breathed a deep sigh of relief when the carriage finally came into view. Fatigue had settled into her limbs hours ago, and yet the night did not seem to want to end. Darkness still lingered, although, perhaps, the sky did look a little lighter? The pitch-black replaced by a very dark, almost blackish sort of blue?

Sarah blinked her eyes, trying to focus her thoughts. “I hope she’s all right,” she mumbled to Autumn, patting her mare’s neck. “I hope they both are.” Sarah did not know how soon after giving birth a woman...felt like herself again. *Is this too much for Kate? Ought she be resting and not fleeing her home in the middle of the night?*

Beside her, Keir pushed Scout onward, one arm wrapped around Loki. Again and again, that night, Sarah’s thoughts had strayed to the little feline, her concern growing. More than anything, she wanted him to squirm out of Keir’s arms, determined to show them that he could take care of himself and need not be carried. She longed to see that haughty expression in his eyes again and hear that soft chiding meow whenever she did something he thought silly or unnecessary or foolish.

Yet Sarah’s hopes were not answered. Loki remained safely tucked into Keir’s arm, his little body too weak to protest against such handling.

Upon beholding the carriage, Keir called out a greeting, then waved his free arm above his head as the driver of the carriage turned to look at them. The moment he saw them, he

pulled upon the reins and slowed down the carriage, bringing it to a stop.

As they drew closer, Sarah could see the man's face. She frowned, thinking that he looked familiar, before realization dawned. "The hunter," she whispered, shock over finding him here, assisting them, trailing down her spine.

The man, though, smiled broadly at them. "I'm glad to see you," he offered in greeting, jumping down from the box, his boots crunching on the frozen grass. "You had me worried there for a second." He looked up at Keir, lifting his hand and tipping his hat.

Keir nodded. "Aye, we had ourselves worried. Any problems?"

The hunter shook his head.

"Sarah?"

At the sound of her sister's voice, Sarah urged Autumn onward. The mare trotted quickly toward the carriage, and Sarah jumped down the moment she reached its side. Without waiting, she flung open the door, utter relief gripping her heart when her eyes fell upon her sister, Frederica cradled in her arm. "You're all right," she gasped, and all of a sudden, tears were rolling down her cheeks. "I'm so glad you're all right."

Kate's eyes misted with tears as well. "So am I. I was so very worried about you, Sarah." She held out her hand, and Sarah grasped it. "Did everything go all right? Did my husband suspect anything? Or my maid?"

Sarah swallowed hard, the memories of only a few hours ago assailing her in a harsh manner, one she could not seem to block from her mind. It had to have shown upon her face, for Kate suddenly paled, her jaw dropping and her eyes going wide.

"What happened?" her sister asked, her arms tightening upon her daughter. "Tell me."

Gritting her teeth, Sarah shook her head. "Later," she said with finality. "Now, we need to keep going. I only had to see with my own eyes that you two were well." She turned toward

the bench opposite Kate's and cast Molly a grateful smile. "Thank you for assisting us with this."

Her young lady's maid nodded, the look upon her face clearly suggesting that she would prefer to not have this repeat itself.

Keir appeared next to Sarah. "I'm glad to see ye're all right," he said to Kate before his gaze moved to Molly. "Would ye mind holding Loki? He was...hurt." Sarah did not fail to notice that Keir would not elaborate, that he kept his gaze firmly fixed upon Molly and did not even dare glance at Kate.

Although Molly looked clearly reluctant, she held out her arms and then settled Loki onto her lap. As much as she had always disliked the little feline, a touch of concern came to her face when he did not stir, his little body limp in her arms.

"Have you had any word?" Kate suddenly asked, the look upon her face tense. "Of my daughters?"

Keir shook his head. "Neither was I expecting one," he assured her. "But I have no doubt that they're fine."

Sarah nodded. "The Whickertons will see to it, be assured of that."

Sighing, Kate briefly closed her eyes. "Yes, they were always a formidable family. They will make certain my darlings are all right."

Sarah smiled at her sister. "They will, Kate. They will."

Closing the door once more, Sarah and Keir remounted their horses. "Ye could ride in the carriage with them, lass," Keir remarked, his right brow raised in suggestion. "'Tis cold out here, and ye could do with a bit of warmth." The hint of a teasing grin came to his features. "Remember? I like ye better warm."

Sarah blushed instantly, a wide smile coming to her face that she did not even try to hide. "You're impossible," she accused, holding his gaze despite the fact that his knowing eyes lingered upon her, seeing far too much. "But for once, I do not mind blushing."

As the carriage swayed onward, Keir urged Scout closer to Sarah and her mare, his blue eyes sparkling as they sought hers. “Why is that?”

Sarah grinned at him. “Because it chases away the chill,” she retorted, then kicked her mare’s flanks and hastened after the carriage, delighting in the soft laughter that fell from Keir’s lips.

As they continued onward, the sky slowly began to brighten, making the frosted world all around them glisten in the tentative morning light. Sarah breathed in deeply of the clear, fresh air, determined to see this morning as one of new beginnings. Indeed, as hard as the journey had been, they had finally left behind the burdens of the past. She glanced at the carriage and a smile tugged upon her lips. Yes, Kate and Frederica were here, safe and sound, and Augusta and Dorothea would soon join them. Sarah had no doubt, her faith in the Whickertons absolute. Indeed, today was a good day.

The first of many more to come, no doubt.

As though fate wished to contradict her, to once more test her conviction, a shout rang out in that very moment, making Sarah flinch and Keir abruptly turn Scout around.

Before Sarah could even pull upon her mare’s reins and bring her to a halt, she heard a muffled curse fly from Keir’s lips. Her head whipped around and there in the distance she could see riders coming.

Even with the dark forest in their backs, Sarah could see that the riders were heading straight toward them. She could not make out their faces yet, but she held no doubts about who they were. The one in the lead was definitely Lord Birchwell come to retrieve his wife. But who were the others? Were those friends or family of his? Yet during the whole of her stay, Sarah had not encountered any close relation except for the dowager. “What do we do?” Sarah asked, turning pleading eyes to Keir.

Though his expression was tense, his demeanor remained calm. His blue eyes were slightly narrowed as he watched the approaching riders. Then his gaze moved around and met the

hunter's, something unspoken passing between them. Barely a moment later, the hunter urged the horses onward, increasing their speed as he tried to put as much distance between the carriage and the approaching riders as possible.

“Go!” Keir suddenly called out to Sarah as he came charging toward her. “Go with the carriage!” Again, he glanced at the approaching riders. “I will hold them off for as long as I can.” For a long moment, he held her gaze then nodded for her to follow in the carriage's wake. “Go,” he said softly, and the look in his eyes held something deeply meaningful, as though there were countless words he wished to say but could not.

Time was running out.

Surprising herself, Sarah shook her head. “No, I'll stay.” Cold terror ran down her limbs, chilling her skin and stealing the breath from her lungs, and yet there was a thought worse than that of the approaching riders. She had left Keir before, and it had almost cost him his life. Once again, she was placing him in harm's way. He was here because of her and for no other reason. And once again, he was willing to risk his life to protect her, sending her to safety while he stood back and ensured she would get away.

*Not this time*, Sarah thought fiercely, knowing that he would object, knowing that she would have to stand her ground.

Keir stared at her dumbfounded, for a moment too stunned to respond. Then, however, his lips hardened and the expression in his eyes grew as fierce as her own. “Go, Sarah!” He urged Scout closer, his gaze burning into hers. “I willna see ye come to harm.”

Sarah lifted her chin. “And I will not see *you* come to harm.”

For a moment, neither one of them moved, their expressions still, almost frozen. Then, Keir closed his eyes and his face fell. “Ye will be the death of me, little wisp,” he whispered, his breath puffing out in a small cloud. He urged

Scout beside her, his knee pumping against hers in a gesture of affection and encouragement, Sarah supposed.

She smiled at him, grateful, and turned her gaze back to the approaching riders. By now, she could make out the vague lines of Lord Birchwell's face. He looked furious, thunderous, and deep down, Sarah knew that he could not be reasoned with. It seemed as though something was driving him, pushing him to a point from whence there was no turning back. *Is this truly his own doing?* She could not help but wonder in that moment. Indeed, when he had attacked her only a few hours ago, there had been a moment when Sarah could have sworn to see a flicker of something else.

Of doubt and regret and shame.

Was he perhaps also trapped in a world he felt he could not escape? From experience, Sarah knew that young women were rarely provided with a choice, their lives directed by others. Yet what about young men? How had Lord Birchwell grown up, knowing he was the heir, knowing he would be the next earl one day? When had his father passed on? When had he inherited the title? Who had guided his decisions?

An image of Lord Birchwell's mother, the dowager, flickered through Sarah's mind, and she wondered how much of what had happened would have happened, had she not been there. Indeed, some people held great sway over the lives of others. Only not all of them were good influences, like Grandma Edie, who continually meddled in order to ensure people's happiness. Others, like Lord Birchwell's mother, seemed to be driven solely by the need for reputation and achievements. It was a sad thought, and for one second, Sarah felt her heart go out to him. Then, though, she straightened her shoulders, reminding herself that he was a grown man and could have chosen a different path. Not all blame could be placed upon his mother.

*I chose a different path*, Sarah murmured to herself in that moment, remembering that she, too, had been forced down a certain path. Of course, she had had help in resisting her parents, but she had found the courage to do so. *Why can't he?*

“These men are not fighters,” Keir murmured beside her, his gaze squinted as he watched them approach. “They know how to sit a horse, but their bearing is not one of self-assurance.”

“Who do you think they are?”

Keir shrugged his shoulders, but then he paused. His gaze narrowed further and he leaned slightly forward in the saddle. “I’ve seen them before.” He nodded toward the man on the far right. “His face looks familiar. He—” The ghost of a smile flickered across Keir’s face. “He’s a stable hand.”

“Stable hand?” Sarah swept her gaze over the four men accompanying Lord Birchwell. “What does this mean?”

Keir laughed, slapping his knee. “It means that Lord Birchwell has no allies. He forced his servants to accompany him to make him appear more dominant. Yet, do you see the looks upon their faces?” He nodded toward them.

Sarah squinted her eyes. “They look...uncertain? Reluctant perhaps.”

Keir nodded, patting Scout’s neck as the gelding tossed his head. “They are no threat,” he surmised. “Only Birchwell is.” He turned to look at her. “Sarah, please, leave.”

Holding his gaze, Sarah slowly shook her head. “Would you if I asked the same of you?”

Keir’s mouth opened, and she could see that he was ready to argue his point. Then, however, he decided against it and closed it once more.

By now, the riders were close enough to easily identify their faces. Sarah felt every muscle in her body tense as she waited for what was to come. “Do you think they will try to go after the carriage?”

Something dark rumbled in Keir’s throat. “We willna let them.” He met her gaze. “Will we?”

Sarah exhaled a deep breath. “We will not.”

Fanning out as far as was possible with only two riders, Keir and Sarah stood to block their path. Thankfully, Lord

Birchwell did not try to ride them down or simply go around them. He pulled his steed to a halt, his expression as thunderous as before. Yet, now a bruise was forming upon the side of his face where Keir had struck him. Absentmindedly, Sarah touched the tips of her fingers to her own cheek, wincing slightly at the soft pain the touch caused.

Lord Birchwell's mount panted, tossing its head. "Where is she?" Lord Birchwell snarled, glancing past Keir and Sarah toward the carriage. "Do you truly think you can still keep her from me?"

Calmly as though discussing the weather, Keir met her brother-in-law's gaze. "Turn around and head back home, Birchwell. There's nothing for ye here."

Lord Birchwell scoffed. "That is *my* wife!" He jerked his arm forward and pointed angrily toward the receding carriage. "*My* wife and *my* child! I have every right to take them back home. They belong with me, and I will have you arrested if you try to stand in my way."

Sarah swallowed hard at her brother-in-law's threats. Yet she knew she could not back down. One glance at Keir told her that he was equally determined, for something dark suddenly appeared in his gaze as he stared at Lord Birchwell. "Say what ye will, but I willna allow ye to lay a hand on either one of the sisters ever again."

Again, Lord Birchwell scoffed. "And how do you think to prevent me? There's only one of you and five of us."

Again, Sarah saw nervousness flash across the men's faces. They clearly did not wish to be here, uncertain how to proceed, unable to speak out against their master. "There are two of us," Sarah corrected her brother-in-law in a strong voice, holding his gaze as the corners of his mouth began to quirk as though he wished to laugh.

He did not though.

"One or two does not matter," he snarled then. "We shall take you down and then have no trouble catching up to the



carriage. You might as well step aside. It will serve you better.”

Slowly, Keir shook his head from side to side. “I’m afraid we canna do that.”

Sarah felt her hands tense upon the reins, her heart beating so fast she thought it might jump out of her chest. Her gaze drifted from face to face, hoping to see something there that would give her courage, that might reassure her that this day would not end in disaster.

And then she saw it.

At first, it was no more than a flicker. A trick of light perhaps as the sun began to peek over the horizon. She squinted her eyes, looked past the men and toward the edge of the forest. *There!*

Indeed, she had not been mistaken. There was movement there. But what—?

Sarah drew in a shuddering breath, her heart suddenly pounding with utter joy, as her eyes fell upon another group of riders, quickly approaching from the side. They rode fast, their horses eating up the ground quickly...

...Harriet in the lead.

Indeed, the youngest Whickerton’s flaming red hair seemed to be on fire. The sun’s tentative light reflected upon her crimson tresses billowing in the wind as she charged down the field.

Sarah almost laughed with joy and relief as she met Keir’s eyes. He, too, had spotted the riders, his demeanor now more relaxed than before. He met Lord Birchwell’s startled gaze, a smirk upon his own. “It looks like things are about to change.” He nodded toward the riders. “The Whickertons are here.”

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

## THE WHICKERTONS ARRIVE



Keir raked a hand through his hair in relief. Indeed, the sight of the Whickertons had never been more welcome.

While he as an untitled man would have a hard time standing against an earl, the Whickertons would have no such problem. Indeed, he spotted not only the patriarch of the family, but also his own son Troy as well as his sons-in-law Drake, Jack and Christopher; a marquess, a duke and an earl themselves. Unfortunately, title and rank seemed to be the only language men like Birchwell understood.

Meeting Sarah's eyes, Keir smiled at her. "Go on after the carriage," he urged her and then added as she looked ready to object, "and assure them that all is well." He nodded toward the approaching Whickertons. "After all, help has arrived."

Finally, Sarah nodded in agreement, the expression upon her face one of utter relief. Of course, she, too, had been terrified. How could she not have been? Yet she had shown great courage and the willingness to sacrifice in the face of danger. She was a strong woman, far stronger than she, herself, knew. *If only she didna have to be.*

Watching her turn Autumn around and go after the carriage, Keir finally realized how afraid he had been for her. Aye, he had been tempted to take the choice out of her hands and make her leave. It had been the hardest thing in his life to respect her decision to stay. Especially after what had happened earlier that night. Whenever he closed his eyes, he could still see the way Birchwell had pinned her down, his intent clear.

Like a stampede, the Whickertons thundered toward them, the expression upon their faces determined. Especially Harriet looked furious, her green eyes sparking with the need for retribution as they had that morning near Gretna Green when she had met another disrespectful peer upon the field of honor, ready to prove to him that women were far from weak. Keir still had to smile at the memory.

“What is going on here?” Lord Whickerton demanded as he and his family pulled their horses to a halt, each one positioned in such a way that they stood in a half-circle around Birchwell and his men.

Keir smiled at Harriet, then nodded his head at her father, grateful that they had come.

Birchwell looked furious, now even more so that the odds had shifted toward his disadvantage. The stable hands he had forced to accompany him appeared more uncertain than ever, their eyes lowered to the ground, their shoulders hunched. “I am retrieving my wife,” Birchwell hissed, glaring at Lord Whickerton. “You cannot deny me that.”

“Of course, we can,” Harriet retorted with a scoff, fury blazing in her eyes as she glared at Birchwell.

Lord Whickerton met his daughter’s eyes, the expression in his urging her to stand down. Then he gently kicked his horse’s flanks and moved toward Birchwell, his demeanor calm, his gaze, though, hard. “Allow me to ask you this, my lord,” he began in an oddly soothing voice, “does your wife *wish* to be retrieved?” His brows rose in challenge, and there was a sharp edge to his voice as he spoke the last word.

For a moment, Birchwell appeared thrown, confused, utterly at a loss as to how to respond. Then his hands tensed upon the reins, and his head turned a darker shade of red. “What she wishes does not signify,” he snapped, his gaze sweeping around the small circle of riders assembled around him. “She’s my wife, and it is my right to take her back.”

Keir could tell that Birchwell truly believed himself to be in the right; yet with each word he spoke it became more and more clear that he no longer felt certain of being able to

accomplish said task. Right or wrong, the Whickertons would not allow him, and he was beginning to see that.

Then, however, a deeply unsettling smile slowly took shape upon his face, one that sent a cold chill down Keir's back. "Take her if you will," he finally hissed. "I guarantee that she will return on her own. After all, she knows what's best for her."

Clearly, Birchwell thought to blackmail his wife, determined to keep her children from her if she did not return to his side. Keir met Lord Whickerton's gaze, his own bearing a question.

Harriet's father nodded ever so slightly in confirmation, and Keir exhaled a deep breath. The Whickertons had succeeded. The children were safe.

Still, there was no need to inform Birchwell of that fact. He would know soon enough. Right now, all that mattered was that he allowed them to leave, granting them a head start.

With a last sneer upon his face, Birchwell turned his horse around, signaling for his stable hands to follow him. Relieved expressions appeared upon their faces as they, too, turned their mounts back toward the estate.

Watching them ride away, Keir jumped to the ground, his eyes upon the Whickertons. "I must say ye have impeccably good timing." He laughed, all the tension finally leaving his body.

Harriet dismounted and threw herself into his arms, hugging him fiercely. "You did well yourself," she complimented him, her green eyes alight as she stepped back. "Sarah and Kate are all right?"

One by one, the Whickertons dismounted and stepped closer, their faces serious but tentatively hopeful.

Keir nodded. "They are." He felt himself tense ever so slightly when he thought of all Sarah had gone through this night. Although Drake, Leonora's husband, did not ask, Keir saw his gaze narrow. Somehow, Keir felt certain that the marquess suspected something.

“What now?” Jack asked as he stepped up to his wife, slipping an arm around her. It had not escaped Keir’s notice that the man had disliked the way his wife had rushed into Keir’s arms. Of course, he tried not to show it, no doubt reasoning with himself that there was no reason for concern. Still, deep down Keir supposed it was something that no one was completely free of, the fear to lose someone they loved.

“Well,” Lord Whickerton began with a thoughtful gaze, “now that Lord Birchwell knows who aided his wife, there is even less time.” Everyone nodded in agreement. “She cannot stay at Whickerton Grove for long, not even a day.” Again, everyone nodded. “We need to move them elsewhere, but where?”

“Nowhere in England will be safe,” Troy remarked with a shake of his head, the expression in his dark eyes sorrowful. “I’m sorry to say it but to ensure her safety we need to send her abroad.”

Drake nodded, that knowing gaze once more upon Keir, as though he knew more than he should. “Birchwell cares nothing for his wife’s well-being,” he stated matter-of-factly, the look upon his face grim, “and he is still without an heir. He will do whatever necessary to see her returned to him or,” he paused, and something almost chilling came to his gaze, “he will ensure that he will not need her any longer.”

Keir shuddered at the marquess’s direct words. “I would say that is a fair assessment.” Aye, if Birchwell could not find a way to see his wife returned to him so he could beget an heir upon her, he would seek to rid himself of her so that he might marry again, no doubt hoping to be more fortunate with another wife.

Harriet frowned. “What are you saying? If he cannot get Kate back, he will...?” Her brows rose meaningfully as her gaze moved from Drake to her husband. “Jack?” Something almost vulnerable rested in her gaze now, and Keir knew that as brave and dauntless as Harriet always seemed, she had not yet experienced the darkest places of this world.

“Nothing will happen to her,” Jack said sternly, pulling Harriet into a tight embrace. His gaze locked upon hers, and the look in his eyes did not allow for doubt. “We will make certain of that, agreed?”

The slight quiver in Harriet’s jaw vanished, and her eyes hardened. “Agreed,” she said in a hard voice, giving a quick nod of the head.

“We still don’t know where to take her,” Christopher reminded them. “Of course, anywhere in England is out of the question. The continent then?”

Looking undecided, Lord Whickerton shrugged. “Possibly. My wife has...friends in France. Perhaps she can make some inquiries. However—”

“—there’s no time for that,” Harriet finished for her father, and he nodded. “No, we need to find a place for them tonight. Right now.” She looked around their small circle, her gaze meeting each one of theirs.

“Ireland,” Christopher suggested when none of them spoke. “It is a beautiful place with kind and decent people. I took my son there to protect him from the scorn of the English peerage.” He all but spat the last two words.

As far as Keir knew, Christopher had taken his illegitimate son out of England after his mother had initially tried to keep father and son apart in order to prevent shame from befalling the family. Christopher, though, had not hesitated to do right by his son; after all, a father’s foremost right and duty was to protect his child. And thus, he had taken little Bash out of England and to Ireland to see him grow up in peace, happy and safe.

“I suppose that is an option,” Troy remarked, glancing at his father, who nodded in agreement, “so long as we can ensure that Lord Birchwell does not discover her whereabouts.”

Christopher nodded. “I shall—”

“I’ll take them to Scotland,” Keir interrupted, suddenly absolutely certain that Grandma Edie had already planned on

it. Indeed, it made sense, did it not? Few English peers ever ventured that far north, and the MacKinnear clan was located upon a small group of islands, unreachable without some sort of sailing vessel. Watchtowers stood upon their shores from days long ago when the danger of war had been upon them. Aye, even if Birchwell were to discover his wife's whereabouts, it would be almost impossible for him to reach her there. And if need be, they could always put her on a ship and take her elsewhere; after all, the MacKinnears had always been a seafaring clan.

“Are you certain?” Lord Whickerton inquired, an earnest expression in his eyes. “It is no small responsibility.”

Keir nodded. “I am aware.” He met Lord Whickerton's gaze, and the man nodded in understanding. “I believe it to be the best possible solution for all of us. Ye all have families to think of and protect.” He looked around their small circle. “And for me, 'tis about time I return home.”

“Are you certain your family will not mind?” Troy asked thoughtfully. “After all, we cannot be certain what Lord Birchwell will do. It might pose a threat to them to provide shelter to his wife.”

Keir chuckled. “For a moment there I forgot that ye dunna know my family as I have come to know yers. Please, dunna for a second doubt that they will guard her most fiercely.” He shifted his gaze to Harriet, seeing an answering smile upon her lips. “My grandmother is not unlike yers. She has a strong will and always room for more people in her heart. No, I have no doubt that when she hears Lady Birchwell's story, she willna hesitate to offer her help.” He chuckled. “In fact, she will insist upon it.”

Lord Whickerton clapped his hands together in decision. “Well, I suppose it is decided.” He glanced over his shoulder down the slope and toward the carriage now no more than a speck upon the horizon. “I suppose we should continue on. After all, there is no time to lose.”

The others nodded in agreement. Everyone returned to their horses, pulling themselves into the saddle. However, as



Keir made to mount Scout, Harriet held him back. He turned to look at her, finding something unsettling in the way her green eyes looked into his.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, looking from her to Jack, who stood a few paces away holding the reins of their horses.

For a moment, Harriet hesitated, her eyes searching his face, as though she did not trust the answer he might give her. Then she lifted her chin, and a challenge sparked in her eyes. “What about Sarah?” And then, with a pat on his arm and a smirk upon her face, she spun around and hastened toward her husband.

A bit dazed, Keir watched them pull themselves into the saddle, his own movements suddenly slow and sluggish. Indeed, what about Sarah?

Of course, he would never dream of leaving her behind. She had to know that by now, did she not?

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

## REUNION



Kate could tell from the expression in Sarah's eyes and the slowly forming bruise upon her sister's left cheek that something had happened. She knew it to be true. Yet Sarah refused to speak of it, and Kate was afraid to ask. Suspicion lingered in her bones, sending shivers up and down her body, and she willed it away with every bit of strength she had left. It was selfish of her. She knew it to be. And yet if she gave into these thoughts, if she pressured her sister into revealing all, Kate knew she might never be able to recover from that knowledge.

As the carriage rumbled along, Kate allowed her gaze to sweep out the window. The Whickertons now rode alongside the carriage, their faces calm and confident, and the sight of them soothed Kate's rattled nerves.

Although years had passed since Kate had last seen them, spoken to them, she knew them to be a tightknit, devoted family. First, they had come to Sarah's aid and now her own. The thought still brought tears to her eyes because she would never have expected it. For so long, Kate had thought herself alone in this world.

She had never been gladder to have been wrong.

The moment Kate had seen the riders coming, she had almost slumped to the floor of the carriage, tears streaming down her face. Only Frederica had kept her upright, her arms slung around her precious girl. Terror had pulsed in her heart, for Kate had known without a doubt that if her husband

succeeded in getting his hands on her and her children again, they would never recover from it.

Never.

Kate knew his anger. An anger only fueled by his mother's disapproving words. As entitled as her husband was as the Earl of Birchwell, his mother always found fault with him. Perhaps it had all begun when he had refused to marry according to her wishes. *Perhaps that is why she hates me*, Kate thought. In her eyes, he had no longer been good enough and each time Kate failed her husband, he as a son failed his mother. How low was his own opinion of himself?

If only he had allowed her to help him. They could have stood together against his mother, creating a beautiful life away from her disparaging words and found happiness. Yet he had chosen differently. He had chosen to make her his enemy, and as much as Kate had tried to please him, it simply had not been enough.

Only a son, an heir could have appeased the dowager and, thus, her son.

Gently, Kate rocked Frederica in her arms, her limbs not tiring from holding her child. Indeed, in the back of her mind that constant worry still lingered, that thought that each moment was precious because it might be ripped from her fingers any second. Would she see Augusta and Dorothea again? Indeed, the Whickertons had told her that they had retrieved her daughters from the estate where her husband had hidden them. Kate had been beside herself with sudden joy upon hearing it. Still, deep in her heart, doubts remained. She did not know what her husband would do next. Would he find some way to circumvent their plans? Was he already aware that the Whickertons had taken her children?

Kate closed her eyes, holding Frederica a little tighter. There were so many questions in her mind that her head was beginning to pound. Never had there been that many uncertainties, and yet never had the next day seemed more hopeful. Yet hope was something Kate knew not how to handle. It frightened her and made her want to turn away. But

if her daughters were to have any sort of happy future, then she needed to be strong. She needed to have faith.

Now.

Today.

Willing herself not to falter, Kate held on tightly to the thought of her two little girls. She allowed her mind to wander backwards and relive moments she had shared with them. Tears soon misted her eyes, and yet a most wonderful smile claimed her features. The longing in her heart grew, and she closed her eyes tightly against the harsh light of the sun as it began to climb over the horizon.

The next thing Kate knew was the carriage pulling into Whickerton Grove. She had to have fallen asleep, for Kate could not remember the last few hours of their journey. All of a sudden, the sun stood high in the sky, the large country estate she vaguely remembered from her own childhood looking as warm and welcoming as she had hoped.

And then the front doors opened and two little girls dashed out, down the steps and across the frosted lawn.

Kate felt her heart sigh at the sight of them. Her vision blurred as tears filled her eyes, and she felt her limbs begin to tremble.

“Let me hold Frederica,” Sarah said with a smile, holding out her hands, “and go to them.”

Struggling to finally release her claw-like hold on her newest little daughter, Kate gently settled the girl into Sarah’s arms. Then she all but flew out of the carriage, her arms spread wide as she raced to meet her children. She almost tripped over her own feet, stumbled and then allowed herself to drop to her knees upon the frozen ground.

A moment later, Augusta and Dorothea were in her arms.

Kate sobbed with joy, embracing her daughters tightly, savoring their sweet little voices as they called out to her over and over again. “Mama, it’s truly you,” Augusta cried, wiping tears from her face with both hands. “We thought we’d never see you again. You were gone for so long.”

Dorothea sniffled helplessly, no words passing her lips. Yet the anguished look in her wide blue eyes broke Kate's heart. She ought to have acted sooner. She ought never have waited this long.

Kate knew she would never forgive herself for allowing her husband to separate her from her children.

"I'm so sorry, darlings," Kate sobbed again and again, not bothering to hide her own tears. She held them fiercely and looked deep into their eyes. "Nothing shall ever separate us again. I promise." Of course, she could not know if she would be able to keep that promise, but she would do everything within her power to see it happen.

And then Augusta suddenly looked up and past Kate's shoulder. "You truly are a fairy," she breathed in awe, her bright blue eyes aglow. "Thank you."

As Harriet walked past Kate, she winked at her, a dazzling smile upon her lips. "You're welcome, Gus."

"Fairy?" Kate asked, meeting Augusta's eyes, acutely aware that she had no clue what had happened in her daughters' lives these past months.

Augusta and Dorothea nodded. "Yes, she's a fairy," Augusta said, pointing at Harriet as she walked upon her husband's arm into the house. "She came to me the night before last and asked what my dearest wish was."

Kate held her breath.

Fresh tears stood in Augusta's eyes. "I told her I wanted you back." She flung herself back in Kate's arms, holding on tightly. "She made me promise not to tell," Augusta continued, her voice choking as she murmured the next few words into Kate's hair. "She said she would come back and take me and Thea to see you. I was afraid to believe her, but...but..." Her voice broke, and heavy sobs tore from her throat.

Kate's legs gave out and she sank onto the wet ground, her daughters clinging to her neck. She knew they could not remain here, would catch a terrible cold if they did; yet her limbs would not move, did not possess the strength to bring

her to her feet, and so Kate remained where she was as the cold slowly seeped into her bones.

And then out of nowhere, arms lifted her, her and her daughters. Kate could not even say who it was or how they all made it into the house; eventually, though, they found themselves snuggled up in front of a roaring fire, blankets wrapping them in a warm embrace. Tears still clung to Kate's eyes when the rhythmic breathing sounds of her two sleeping children drifted to her ears. Exhaustion had finally closed their eyes, and Kate held them a little tighter, savoring this most unexpected moment.

"I have them back," Kate whispered into the soft stillness of the chamber, the only other sound that of the crackling fire in the hearth. "I have them back." Then she paused. "Frederica?"

"Over here," came Sarah's soft-spoken voice a moment before she appeared in Kate's line of view. Her youngest little girl lay tucked into the crook of her aunt's arm, sleeping soundly like her two sisters. "She's all right," Sarah whispered, seating herself in the armchair opposite what appeared to be a settee—if Kate had to guess. "Don't worry."

"Thank you for everything," Kate whispered, her voice choked as she looked into her sister's eyes. "Thank you for coming. Thank you..." She shrugged helplessly, her voice no longer cooperating.

Sarah smiled at her. "What can I say? Perhaps I'm a fairy as well."

Laughter spilled from Kate's lips, and she bit down hard to quiet it lest it rouse her daughters. Still, that warm, gentle and utterly peaceful feeling deep inside felt overwhelmingly wonderful. Oh, she had known it once, remembered it vaguely, but had found it absent for far too long.

"Yes, you certainly are," Kate agreed, remembering how harshly she had spoken to her not long ago and how bravely Sarah had stood her ground. "Thank you for not giving up on me. Thank you for...coming to my rescue."

“Always,” Sarah said fiercely, then she leaned forward and placed her free hand upon one of Kate’s. “We’re sisters. Nothing can ever break us apart.”

Despite the tears that kept flowing down her cheeks, Kate could not stop smiling. “I couldn’t ask for a better sister. You were so brave.” She shook her head in disbelief. “How did you come to be so brave?”

A faraway look came to Sarah’s eyes, and a rosy flush crept up her cheeks.

“Mr. MacKinnear?” Kate guessed with a chuckle.

Meeting Kate’s eyes, Sarah nodded, once again gently rocking Frederica from side to side. “He’s...” She sighed and gave up.

“An unusual man,” Kate finished for her sister, feeling that faint sting of envy yet again. “What will happen with the two of you?”

Sarah’s face darkened. “I don’t know.” She shrugged. “I wish I did.”



## Chapter Thirty-Nine

## SAFE HARBOR



After Kate and her children had fallen asleep, Sarah settled Frederica in a little crib the Whickertons had used themselves along ago. Now, that Louisa's little daughter was born, Whickerton Grove was once again well-equipped for the care of infants like Frederica. As the girl closed her eyes, Sarah tiptoed from the drawing room, granting the little family a few more moments of peaceful sleep. Soon, they would no doubt need to continue their journey. But where to?

At the thought, Sarah felt a heavy lump settle in her belly. After years of distance, Sarah could not bear the thought of being separated from her sister once more. They had only just found one another again.

Still, Kate could not stay. It was far too dangerous for her here. Sarah shuddered at the thought of what her husband would do should he learn of her whereabouts. And how could he not? After all, he now knew that the Whickertons were involved, and so, this was the first place he would look for his wife, was it not? No, Kate had to leave, but where?

Sarah paused halfway down the corridor. *Can I not go with her? With them?* Oddly enough, that thought had not occurred to her. Perhaps her mind had simply been too focused on seeing her sister and nieces safely away to consider questions of what might lie beyond. Kate would certainly need help with the three girls no matter where she went, and Sarah had no responsibilities that kept her in London, in England even.

After all, had Grandma Edie not told her that she was as free as a bird?

Sarah exhaled a deep breath, her hands trembling with these new thoughts. She needed to find out what Grandma Edie's plan was. Surely, she already knew where to send Kate and her daughters. After all, the dowager never left anything to chance.

After a few inquiries, Sarah stepped into Grandma Edie's favorite drawing room and found all the Whickertons assembled there, their faces serious as they discussed the matter of Kate's safety.

"We cannot wait," Lord Whickerton stressed, the tone of his voice signaling finality. "Any moment Lord Birchwell could barge in here." He met Sarah's eyes as she stepped tentatively closer. "We need to ready the carriages now."

Sarah nodded, surprised when a sweep of the room revealed Keir's absence. "Where are you sending them?" she asked, settling her attention upon the dowager.

Seated in her favorite chair, Grandma Edie met her gaze. "I know it is hard to see them go," Sarah tensed at the dowager's words, "but, at least, there they'll be safe. Keir will make certain of it."

An odd hum settled beneath Sarah's skin, reminding her of that sense of awareness that always swept over her the moment Keir drew near. Yet at the same time, it felt like little pinpricks, needling her mercilessly and tensing all her muscles. "Keir? What...? Where...?" Suddenly, her mind seemed incapable of stringing two words together. All she knew was that Grandma Edie clearly did not intend for her to accompany Kate and the girls while Keir...

"Scotland," Harriet put in helpfully, her green eyes lighting up with that familiar longing for adventure. "His people will protect them. He assured us of it."

Sarah nodded. "Good. That's good." She was still nodding, suddenly uncertain how to stop. "Yes, that is truly...good."

Something heavy settled upon her heart, weighing it down, and threatening to buckle her knees along with it. "When?"

"Tonight, at sundown," Troy explained, his kind eyes looking into hers, as though he knew that her heart was breaking in that very moment. "We shall have a number of carriages readied, which will all depart at the same time but into different directions. Each will convey a young woman," he looked at Louisa, Christina, Juliet and Nora, his own wife, "and, if possible, a child while a fiercely protective husband will ride alongside," he added when Nora moved closer to him, slipping her hand through the crook of his arm. "We'll make certain to stop at a number of inns along the way in order to throw Lord Birchwell off Kate's tracks." He stepped forward and placed a hand upon Sarah's shoulder while his other held on to his beloved wife. "Don't worry. Nothing will happen to them. Keir will ensure that they'll reach the Highlands and the safety of his clan."

Sarah nodded, her gaze drifting out the window to the setting sun. *Soon, she thought, not only Kate will be gone, but Keir also. And I will remain behind.*

*You knew that, remember?* another voice murmured softly, as though someone were whispering in her ear. Of course, Sarah *had* known. She had known ever since she had first met him. It had been clear from the very beginning that Keir would not remain in her life. And while that had not in the least disturbed her that very first day, her heart had soon changed. Now, the thought of him leaving was crippling, and although, Sarah had known that that day would come, a part of her still could not believe that the moment would be upon her in a matter of hours.

As the burden became too heavy to bear, Sarah mumbled an excuse and then fled the room. Blindly, she stumbled along as tears blurred her eyes. Her heart ached, and all she wanted was to be alone.

Truth be told, all she wanted was to keep Keir at her side. Always. Yet that did not seem to be an option, and so Sarah settled for a sanctuary that would allow her to settle her emotions. After all, it would not help if she broke down now.

It would only make it harder for Kate to leave. Indeed, she needed to be strong for her sister.

Now more than ever.

Now was no time to be selfish.

Slipping down a quiet hallway, Sarah flinched when the sound of footsteps drifted to her ears. Instantly, she quickened her own, afraid to be discovered like this, her face tear-streaked and her eyes no doubt red-rimmed.

“Sarah!”

The sound of Keir’s voice made it even worse, placing Sarah’s emotions into such an upheaval that she fled into the next available room...which turned out to be rather small-sized sitting room...with nowhere to go and, particularly, nowhere to hide.

Knowing Keir would follow, Sarah rubbed her sleeves over her eyes, trying to stem the flood of tears, knowing they would end up looking even more red-rimmed than before. But what else could she do? After all, he was not supposed to know that his leaving would break her heart. If he were to find out—

Sarah stilled as the door was pushed open a second time and she heard Keir step across the threshold. Indeed, what would happen if he found out? Would it truly make her heartbreak any worse?

Sarah could not imagine it to be so.

“Are ye all right, lass?” Keir asked as she struggled to muster the nerve to face him. “I’ve been calling ye. Did ye not hear me?”

The moment Sarah did turn around, two things happened at once. While Sarah’s eyes grew wide the moment she beheld Loki in Keir’s arms, his eyes open and as haughty-looking as ever, Keir’s gaze narrowed in concern.

“Loki!”

“Ye’ve been crying, lass!”

Ignoring Keir's remark, Sarah swept Loki into her arms and hugged him tightly until he began to protest, mewling rather dramatically. "He's fine!" Sarah exclaimed, looking up at Keir. "Is he fine?"

Keir nodded, that touch of concern still in his gaze. "He certainly seems to be." He brushed an affectionate hand over Loki's head, ruffling his fur, which Loki did not seem to care for at all. "He's already gulped down two saucers of milk and made it unmistakably clear that he willna sleep on the floor. He dragged one of Lady Whickerton's embroidered pillows in front of the fireplace in the upstairs drawing room."

Sarah grinned at Loki's antics. "You're impossible," she told him with utter pride. "Oh, I was so worried about you. Thank you for coming to my rescue, your highness. You were very brave." Lifting her gaze, she found Keir still looking at her, his brows rising questioningly.

"What happened, lass? Why were ye crying?"

Sarah cleared her throat, knowing she would not be able to escape this conversation. Keir would not let her. Perhaps that was the most annoying thing about him, this insistence to dig into her soul every time her face revealed a tender emotion... which happened far too often. Why did he have to know? Why could he not simply let this go?

Sarah swallowed hard, then set Loki upon the floor and for a brief moment watched him settle himself upon a cushioned armchair. "I heard that you're taking Kate and my nieces to Scotland." She tentatively raised her eyes.

Keir sighed. "I'm sorry, little wisp. I know 'tis sudden." He reached out a hand toward her, his fingers tucking a stray curl behind her ear. "But ye know she canna stay, do ye not?"

Sarah barely managed a nod, holding herself stock-still as the tips of his fingers brushed against her skin. As always, his presence completely overwhelmed her, stealing the very breath from her body as well as every conscious thought, leaving her head muddled and unfocused. He towered over her, his tall stature dwarfing not only her, but the room also. Indeed, Keir had always seemed larger than life to her, as though he did not

truly exist, as though her mind had conjured him, needing something to believe in, someone to help her stand tall.

And Keir had, had he not? More than anyone he had helped her become a woman Sarah was more and more proud to be.

And now, he was leaving and...

...Sarah suddenly wanted him to know.

Whether her heart broke into a hundred pieces or a thousand, what did it matter? It would be broken all the same. At least, if she told him, he would know that he had stolen her heart.

Not with pretty words.

Not with meaningless flowers.

Not with platitudes.

“I promise nothing will happen to yer sister,” Keir assured her in that calming voice of his that had never failed to make Sarah believe that all would be well again. “She’ll be safe with my clan. I doubt her husband will find her there, and even if he does,” he held her gaze, that teasing smile playing over his lips again, “he will come to regret it. My family is every bit as fierce as the Whickertons, and on top of that, he’ll be far from London and any influence he might have. Ye’ll see.” Gently, he took her hand, a compassionate sigh leaving his lips. “I know ’tis far away, and it will upend yer life, lass. I’m sorry for it. I truly am. But I’m afraid there is no other way.”

Sarah nodded, feeling her hands begin to tremble as her muddled mind did its best to string more than two words together. “I’m grateful to you, Keir, for everything,” she finally told him, finding it easier to begin with gratitude than with love. “I know that my sister will be safe with you, but, truth be told,” she exhaled slowly, her hands now trembling so badly that a frown was back on Keir’s forehead, “not all my tears...were for losing Kate.”

“Losing Kate?” Keir murmured, his brows drawing down slowly. Then his expression stilled, and his brows rose once more, as though he had suddenly solved a riddle that had

confused him before. “Aye?” Keir asked after a moment, and the right corner of his mouth twitched into a lopsided smile.

Sarah stared up at him, unable to shake the thought that he *knew*. That he knew everything she had never been bold enough to tell him. How was that possible? All she had said was that not all her tears had been for the loss of her sister. From that, how had he deduced that...?

Sarah frowned. *Does he know? Or am I once again misunderstanding him?*

“Stop,” Keir whispered, and his hands grasped hers tightly, pulling her closer.

“Stop what?”

“Stop thinking,” Keir elaborated, giving her chin a gentle pinch. “Stop *overthinking*. I can see the thoughts spin in yer head, lass.”

Sarah chuckled as another fierce blush claimed her cheeks. “I cannot help it. It simply happens. I—”

“Is it true?” Keir interrupted softly. “Were some of yer tears for me?”

Swallowing, Sarah nodded. “Yes. Oh, Keir, I will miss you so much.” All of a sudden, the dam broke and everything came rushing out. “I already miss you whenever you leave the room. What will it be like when you’re gone? All the way gone?” Sarah shook her head, unable to imagine such a scenario. “I will never speak to you again. Never hear you call me ‘little wisp’. Never see that teasing smile upon your face that makes me blush to the tips of my toes.” She gulped down a breath of air as Keir chuckled.

“Would ye truly miss that, lass? I always thought ye didna truly care for it.”

Sarah shrugged. “I did not in the beginning.” She glanced up at him. “But then everything changed, and now I cannot imagine what life will feel like without you there, seeing precisely what I’m thinking, what I’m feeling.” Her gaze rose more fully. “I love the way you tease me even though it makes me blush. I love how you never allow me to cower but push



me to face whatever frightens me. I love the way you—” Sarah broke off, and her teeth dug into her lower lip as she realized what she had been about to say.

Keir grinned. “Ye’re blushing again, lass,” he remarked as he had countless times before, and then, as though he had once more read her thoughts, he pulled her against him and kissed her.

*Yes, Sarah thought, this is precisely what I’ve come to love.* The way he made her feel special, as though there were no one in the world like her. As though she were a treasure and he the luckiest man alive to have discovered her. She loved the way he kissed her, with heart and soul, as though he longed for her as much as she longed for him.

Sarah wanted to weep. Perhaps it did feel worse to have her heart broken into a thousand pieces instead of only a measly hundred. Perhaps she ought not be kissing him. Perhaps knowing that he cared for her made bidding him farewell harder after all. Perhaps—

“Little wisp,” Keir murmured, touching his mouth to hers in a teasing kiss. “Ye’re doing it again.” She could feel him smile against her lips. “Is there nothing I can do to distract ye?” He gently nipped her lower lip. “Nothing to make ye cease thinking?”

Pinching her eyes shut, Sarah curled her fingers into his vest, holding on tightly. “I’m afraid not,” she mumbled, wishing he would kiss her again. “I cannot help but think that in a few hours you’ll be leaving and I—”

“Then come with me.”

Sarah stilled, certain she had to have misunderstood him. Her eyes blinked open, and she lifted her chin.

His blue gaze shone dark in the dimming light, the hands upon the small of her back a gentle pressure, locking her in his embrace.

“What?” It was no more than a whisper, barely audible, and yet it echoed through the small chamber in a hum that made her skin tingle.

Grasping her chin once more, Keir brushed the pad of his thumb along the line of her bottom lip. "I once promised ye I would show ye the Highlands, remember?" Sarah barely managed a nod, her breath all but lodged in her throat as she struggled with the overwhelming joy that wanted to sweep through her body without thought for caution. "Ye agreed," Keir reminded her with a grin.

"I did." Indeed, never would Sarah forget that morning when they had been on the verge of another farewell. Would this forever be their story? The threat of another farewell upon the horizon? "But..." Sarah wanted to kick herself as she felt words rise to her lips that would question the wisdom of his request. Still...

"What is it, lass?"

"Why?" Sarah asked as tears once again pricked the backs of her eyes.

"Why what?"

"Why do you...ask me to come?" The moment the last word left her lips, Sarah pinched her eyes shut, unable to look at him. Was he only asking because of Kate? Or simply because he could not bear to see her hurting? After all, he was a deeply compassionate—

"Look at me, little wisp," Keir murmured, then brushed his lips against hers. Sarah blinked her eyes open, and Keir instantly tightened his hold upon her, the look in his eyes serious. "Why do ye think I agreed to accompany ye to yer sister when the dowager asked?" His brows rose meaningfully.

Sarah's heart thudded wildly in her chest as she stared up into his eyes, unable to utter a single word.

"Because I had nothing better to do? Because I longed to meet the Earl of Birchwell?" He chuckled, giving her chin a soft pinch. Then he inhaled a slow breath, his gaze sobering as it held hers. "'Twas none of these things, lass. I assure ye."

Sarah swallowed hard. "Then w-why?" Her heart felt as though it were about to beat out of her chest.

“I agreed because I wanted more time with ye, lass,” Keir said softly, the expression in his eyes almost vulnerable. “As much as my family wanted to see me come home, I couldna imagine leaving. And I couldna imagine leaving because of ye, lass, for no other reason.” He sighed deeply. “I wanted more time with ye, and I want more time with ye still. It never seems to be enough.” He chuckled softly and then touched his forehead to hers, breathing in deeply. “I, too, miss ye, little wisp, when ye leave a room. ’Tis odd, is it not?”

With tears streaming down her face, Sarah chuckled. “I thought so, too.” She lifted her chin and met his eyes, her hands reaching out to cup his face. “When I first met you, I was so frightened, but then you put me at ease so quickly that I thought I must be losing my mind. I could not believe how deeply I’d come to trust you...to care for you.” She shook her head in disbelief as she recalled their first encounter. “And only in a matter of days. How did you do it?”

Keir shrugged, and his gaze drifted to her temple. She felt his fingers tug upon a stray curl, his skin warm against her own. “I dunna know, lass.” He met her eyes. “Is that not what life is about? To walk the earth looking for those who belong with ye? Ye never know when or where or under what circumstances ye might find them,” he chuckled, “but once ye do, ye know.” He exhaled slowly, and again, the tips of his fingers brushed against her temple, smoothing back a curl; his eyes, though, remained upon hers, thoughtful. “Come with me, lass. Give us more time together. I’m not yet ready to bid ye farewell.” He swallowed hard. “I might never be.”

“Neither am I,” Sarah whispered breathlessly. Then she flung herself into Keir’s arms, hugging him to her in a rib-crushing embrace as utter joy washed over her, wiping away all doubt. She felt bathed in light, warm and soothing and so promising, and for once, Sarah was not afraid.

For once, she dared to trust.

Keir chuckled, and Sarah could feel his tense muscles relax. Yet he still held her tightly, almost lifting her off her feet as he cradled her in his arms.

*Is this a dream?* Sarah wondered. *It certainly feels like one.*

A wonderful dream she never wanted to wake from.

# Chapter Forty

## MORE TIME



Keir had never meant to leave England without Sarah. While over the past fortnight his thoughts had been focused upon getting her sister and her children to safety, Keir could no longer ignore his own hopes for the future the moment they reached the relative safety of Whickerton Grove.

Everything had happened so quickly then. Decisions had been made without time to dwell on them, to consider them from all sides. Yet, instinctively, Keir had known what he needed to do. So, he had offered to take Lady Birchwell and her children to Scotland, not for a second imagining that Sarah would not join them on their journey. Unfortunately, he had failed to make that clear to her. He had meant to, of course. Yet with all the preparations, there had not been a second alone for them. Only a few moments ago, when he had caught a glimpse of her hurrying down the corridor, had such an opportunity arisen. At that point, however, Sarah had already been convinced that he would leave without her.

Unthinkable!

Keir could not help but wonder if Grandma Edie had had something to do with that. Indeed, he would not put it past the dowager to suggest such a thing to Sarah. Was that what had happened? Was that what had brought tears to Sarah's eyes? Had the dowager told Sarah that he would be taking her sister and nieces to Scotland and leave her behind?

"I need to pack," Sarah suddenly exclaimed, her hands aflutter and her gaze distant, as though she was making a

mental list of all the things she needed to take care of before their departure. “What about Loki? We cannot leave him.” She met his eyes, her own determined.

Keir smiled. He loved seeing this fierce side of her spirit. It had not been there in the beginning, but with time, it had more and more dug itself free. “Of course, Loki is coming. He’s family,” Keir assured her with a grin, casting a sideways glance at the feline, who still lay snoozing the day away in the cushioned armchair.

Sarah nodded, her head bobbing up and down, her gaze still focused elsewhere. “Good. Good,” she murmured, her feet carrying her across the room and then back. Then her chin rose, and she met his eyes. “There’s nothing I *can* pack,” she realized, blue eyes widening. “Aside from that one small bag, most of my belongings are still back at Birchwell.”

Grinning, Keir reached for her hands, holding them gently within his own until he felt she had calmed a bit. “There is no need, lass. As far as I know, everything is prepared. I believe, the dowager asked her granddaughters to provide ye and yer sister with some clothing for the journey.”

Sarah blinked. “She asked them to provide clothing...for me?” She shook her head. “But...”

Keir squeezed her hands. “Are ye truly surprised? Have we not all seen her plan things based upon a truth long before those concerned realized it themselves?” He grinned, wondering about the many contradicting sides of the dowager. While Grandma Edie had no doubt told Sarah that she would stay behind, she had at the same time arranged for her departure. “She knew I would never leave ye here.”

A tentative smile bloomed on Sarah’s face, slowly teasing the corners of her mouth upward, spreading until her entire face seemed to glow like the sun itself. There was such unadulterated joy in her eyes that Keir wanted to kiss her again.

As though on cue, the sound of a walking cane upon hardwood floors drifted to their ears. Keir chuckled, then he turned, strode to the door and opened it. “I assume ye’re

looking for us,” Keir remarked with a smirk the moment the dowager appeared in the doorway.

The expression upon Grandma Edie’s face was as innocent as ever. “Well, there is no time to lose, is there?” Her knowing blue eyes drifted from him to Sarah, and for a moment, Keir thought to see triumph spark there. “The carriages are being prepared. Everyone is getting ready.” Her gaze swept over Sarah. “Remember to dress warmly. Scotland’s cold this time of year.” She gave a short shiver. “Even colder than England.”

Looking at Grandma Edie as though she had turned into a fairy with golden wings and a magical wand in her hand, Sarah took a tentative step toward her. “Why did you—? Before, you said...” Her shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath, her blue eyes now scrutinizing as she looked at Grandma Edie. “You made me think I could not go. You made me think I had to bid them all farewell.” Her brows drew together, a touch of disappointment in her eyes. “Why? Why did you do that? I felt so...”

A gentle smile came to the dowager’s face as she placed a wrinkled hand upon Sarah’s arm. “If I had not, would you have told him how you feel? Would you have had the courage to risk your heart?”

Keir almost laughed, but then quickly reminded himself that he ought not be surprised.

Sarah’s cheeks paled before a furious blush stole onto her face. She stared at Grandma Edie, and then her eyes suddenly darted to him.

Keir smiled at her. “I know how ye feel, lass. Caught off guard, somewhat annoyed and also a bit angry, but mostly,” he moved to take her hand, “relieved beyond belief.” He wound his fingers through hers and held her hand tightly within his own. “’Tis how I always feel when she does that.”

The dowager chuckled rather wickedly. “I cannot deny that I rather like it.” Then the devilish expression in her eyes changed, and she smiled at Sarah good-naturedly. “I apologize for the deceit, but I thought it necessary.”



Keir did not believe his ears. Never had he heard Grandma Edie admit to one of her *deeds* so openly, let alone apologize for the means she used to achieve her goal. Perhaps miracles happened after all; perhaps more often than people knew.

Squeezing Sarah's hand, Keir waited until she lifted her gaze to him. "Had ye said nothing, lass, I still would not have left without ye." He looked pointedly at the dowager, who once again chose to ignore him. "Ye could've simply said something."

Grandma Edie shrugged. "You have your ways. I have mine." Then she once more smiled at Sarah, patting her hand. "I never meant to cause you heartache, dear. Though, from experience, I know that sometimes people need a bit of a push."

Sarah swallowed, the look in her eyes no longer one of disappointment, and for a heartbeat or two, she turned to look at him, a rather enchanting smile upon her lips. Then she once more faced the dowager. "How did you know?"

The dowager regarded her curiously, that innocent expression back on her face; an expression Keir had seen far too often for his liking. "Know what?"

Keir laughed. "Believe me," he said to Sarah, "she willna answer ye no matter how much ye want to know. I'm surprised she said as much as she did."

The dowager huffed out a slightly exasperated breath. "I don't have the slightest inkling what you're talking about." Then she turned around and hobbled back out into the hallway. "Quickly now, my dears." She paused and turned to look at Keir over her shoulder. "And tell Addie to look after our girls." A wistful sigh drifted from her lips. "And give her my love." Then she turned once more and made her way down the hallway.

Sarah frowned, looking at him. "Addie?"

"My grandmother. Her name is Adele."

A sharp knock echoed to their ears from down the hall before Grandma Edie's voice called, "Sundown waits for no

one.”

Keir laughed. “I suppose we ought to hurry.” He grasped Sarah’s hands and met her eyes. “I’ll see ye at the carriage.”

Sarah’s eyes shone brightly as she nodded. “Yes, at the carriage.” Again, a deep smile stretched across her face and she dug her teeth into her lower lip. Then she released his hands and darted away.

Keir allowed himself a moment to breathe, to feel his heart beat strong and determined in his chest, every inch of him eager for what lay ahead. Aye, he could not imagine going to Scotland without Sarah. It seemed she belonged at his side as he belonged at hers. How that had happened, Keir still did not know. Perhaps it was not important. Perhaps they simply ought to be grateful to have found one another. Indeed, Fate appeared to resemble Grandma Edie. One often did not see it coming, felt quite overwhelmed when it struck one between the eyes, but in the end, one was grateful.

As the sun slowly moved across the sky, Whickerton Grove bustled with activity. There was not much time, and a lot of things needed doing. Fortunately, five carriages stood at the ready, each one prepared, with trunks and bags loaded upon their roofs. Horses stood prancing, flicking their ears, eager to be off. The Whickerton siblings and their spouses who would pose as decoys bundled up just as warmly, whispering excitedly to their children about an adventure they were about to embark upon. Keir could only hope that this plan would work, that it would throw Lord Birchwell off their tracks, confuse him and make him follow the wrong breadcrumbs.

When the time to say farewell finally came, the front steps of Whickerton Grove bustled with people. Hugs and kisses were exchanged again and again, smiles everywhere, some eyes misted with tears.

“Don’t forget to send word should you need us,” Harriet reminded Keir with a grin. “I would not mind another little adventure.” She embraced him, her green eyes sparkling. “I knew you would not leave without her,” she whispered

conspiratorially, then glanced over her shoulder to where Sarah and Christina were embracing one another, both their faces streaked with tears. “Grandma brought you here for her, did she not? At first, I thought she wanted to match you with Juliet. We all did.” She shrugged, chuckling. “I suppose we were wrong. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Keir laughed. “Aye, I suppose there is no telling what goes on in the dowager’s mind. We should all consider ourselves lucky that she is on our side.”

“Most definitely,” Harriet agreed, giving a little shudder at the thought of a world in which Grandma Edie were working against them. Indeed, it was unthinkable! “I wish I could see what happens next between the two of you,” Harriet whispered, that mischievous twinkle in her eyes again. “Perhaps I shall come visit you up north.”

Keir frowned at her, determined to steer the conversation away from him and Sarah. “Truly? After all, the last time ye ventured into Scotland it did not go so well, did it?”

Harriet looked at him rather aghast. “Quite on the contrary, it went splendidly. I won a duel against a most obnoxious man, one who most certainly does not deserve to be called gentleman, and,” she sighed, and her gaze strayed across the crowded yard toward her husband, “I realized I was in love.” Her green eyes returned to him, and Keir thought to see a bit of a challenge there.

“Goodbye, Harry. Thank ye for all yer help.”

“It is not goodbye,” Harriet objected, squeezing his hand. “It is merely until we see each other again. After all, you’re family now.” She glanced at Sarah. “You both are, and family never stays apart for long. After all, I’d love to meet your grandma and the rest of your family as well. After hearing so much about them, I feel as though I know them already.”

As the shadows grew longer, Lord Whickerton finally broke up the prolonged farewells and shooed his family into the carriages. He stepped toward Keir and grasped his hand. “I know you will take good care of them, but please, send word.” He smiled. “And not only if you have need for assistance.”

“Thank ye,” Keir replied, shaking the man’s hand. “’Tis been a pleasure. Ye have an unusual but quite remarkable family, and I feel honored to consider myself a part of them.”

“As do we,” Lord Whickerton assured him. “Now go. Time is of the essence.”

Keir nodded and then turned toward Scout, swiftly pulling himself into the saddle. He saw Lady Birchwell and Sarah seat themselves in the carriage, the children and Loki joining them. All were bundled up warmly, and the smiles upon the two little girls’ faces possessed the power to warm one in the deep of winter. Lady Birchwell certainly looked like it. Despite the touch of nervousness, of uncertainty that lay in the air, all were of good spirits, hopeful that tomorrow would be as promised.

And then they moved out, each carriage rolling down the long drive, each accompanied by a lone rider, before each turned into a different direction. Indeed, it would be a while before they would see each other again, Keir knew. Yet he was certain that they would. Harriet was correct. Family never strayed too far from one another.

One day, they would all be back at Whickerton Grove, celebrating a day of reunion. Keir had no doubt. Now, however, he needed to focus upon what lay ahead.

The road to Scotland.

Back home.

With Sarah.

# Chapter Forty-One

## RETRIBUTION



Birchwell, England, March 1804

A Fortnight later

Albert Harris, Baron Blackmore, followed the butler into an elaborately furnished drawing room. A warm fire burned in the grate, and the Dowager Lady Birchwell was seated comfortably upon a cushioned armchair near the fireplace. Her hair was graying, and wrinkles teased the corners of her eyes. Yet the lady's gaze remained sharp, assessing, speculative.

One glance was enough for Albert to know that the Dowager Lady Birchwell was a woman he ought not underestimate.

Her son, Lord Birchwell, on the other hand, was a different matter. Despite the way he stood with his shoulders back and his chin slightly raised, Albert could not shake the thought that he was not the one in charge at Birchwell. Indeed, his right hand rested upon the back rest of his mother's chair, his position slightly behind her. *Interesting*, Albert mused silently.

"Good day, Lord Blackmore," Lord Birchwell greeted him, the expression upon his face barely masking his surprise. "What brings you here today?" Lord Birchwell gestured for him to sit before finding his own seat to his mother's right.

All the while, Albert felt the dowager's gaze upon him; the expression upon her face, though, remained unreadable.

"I do apologize for this impromptu visit," Albert began, wondering who he ought to be addressing. Of course, he had

intended to speak with Lord Birchwell; however, now, Albert thought that perhaps the dowager might be a more formidable ally. “However, I have heard rumors that would suggest a certain...misfortune has befallen you.”

Instantly, Lord Birchwell’s lips thinned. “Whatever you think you know, you are mistaken,” he hissed, unable to conceal his outrage, his shame. “My wife merely went to visit family abroad.”

Albert glanced at the dowager, her eyes slightly narrowed as she regarded him. “Then you still hope to see her returned to you soon?”

“Of course!”

Before Lord Birchwell could fabricate more elaborate lies, the dowager reached out and placed a calming hand upon his arm. Then her scrutinizing gaze moved to meet Albert’s. “As far as we hear,” she began, her voice soft but authoritative, “you, too, have recently experienced a misfortune.” Her eyebrows rose ever so slightly. “Is that not so?”

Despite the anger that always threatened to burn through his veins whenever his thoughts strayed back to the injustice he had suffered, Albert maintained a straight face, priding himself on his ability to remain in control. Unlike Lord Birchwell. “You are too right, my lady. That is precisely the reason I am here today.”

The dowager’s gaze narrowed further, and yet the ghost of a smile seemed to tickle her lips. “I see,” she murmured calmly. “What is it you are proposing?”

Though aware that Lord Birchwell was watching their conversation with rapt attention, Albert continued to direct his next words at the dowager. “I propose that we assist one another. After all, at this point, it is reasonable to assume that your wife,” he glanced at Lord Birchwell, “and my fiancée are hiding out in the same place, would you not agree? After all, Lady Birchwell disappeared following a visit by her sister, did she not?”

A disbelieving frown drew down the dowager's brows. "You truly wish to see your fiancée returned to you?" The look in her eyes clearly challenged his words. "Is that wise? I had thought you considered yourself lucky to have escaped the union after...what happened."

Albert exhaled slowly, reminding himself that after the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Smith, his most trusted lackey, he could do with a shrewd ally. "Of course, my lady, your words are wise, and I assure you that I have no longer any intention of making Miss Mortensen my wife." He could not prevent the hint of a satisfied smile from curling up the corners of his mouth. "What I do intend, though, is to settle a score."

Understanding lit up the dowager's eyes, and she briefly nodded her head. "I see," she murmured, and again a smile seemed to tease her lips. Not one of joy or cheerfulness but one that seemed to resemble the smiles Albert often felt come to his own face. "Then I must agree with you, my lord. It does seem as though we share a mutual goal. Perhaps it would be wise to assist one another."

Albert exhaled a slow breath, leaning back a bit more comfortably in his chair, his outlook upon the future now brighter than before. Indeed, the dowager countess appeared a most shrewd woman, one unburdened by scruples as others were so often. Clearly, her son was no more than a puppet, with strings firmly attached and resting in his mother's hands, giving her leave to direct him wherever she chose.

Indeed, it was a most provoking thought, Albert mused. Was it too late to do so with his own son? After all, Anthony had quite unfortunately developed far too much concern for the well-being of others. Yes, perhaps an association with the dowager would prove advantageous in many ways.

First things first, though. "What do you know of your wife's disappearance?" He looked at Lord Birchwell, then returned his gaze to the dowager. "Were you able to ascertain where she went or who assisted her? After all, the two young ladies did not act on their own, did they?"



Lord Birchwell's face darkened. "As far as I can tell it was the Whickertons who assisted them," he spat. "They also removed my daughters from the country estate where I...had sent them."

Of course, Albert was not in the least surprised to hear that once again the Whickertons were involved. It seemed a habit of that family to meddle in things that did not concern them. Perhaps it was about time he taught them a lesson.

"Unfortunately," the dowager remarked with a rather chiding tone, "Lady Birchwell and her sister no longer seem to be in residence at Whickerton Grove. As far as we could ascertain, a number of carriages left the estate that very night, traveling in various directions." She exhaled a deep breath through her nose. "We have people making inquiries as we speak; however, at this point, we cannot rightly say which one spirited Lady Birchwell away."

Albert nodded, not surprised that the Dowager Lady Whickerton had concocted such a plan. Indeed, with every bit of information he had managed to unearth about her, Albert had come to realize that the lady left very little to chance. It was a thought that also made him wonder about his fiancée's kidnapping. To this day, he could not shake the thought that not all had happened the way it had appeared.

The way he had been made to believe.

But he would find out.

Soon.

And then, Miss Mortensen would pay.

## TO BE CONTINUED

Of course, Sarah's and Keir's story does not end here. How could it? There is more to come...so much more! So, stay tuned for the next part of their story as they return to Keir's home and meet his family. But will Sarah and Kate truly be safe with the MacKinnears?

*Out of Smoke and Ashes*, coming soon!

In the meantime, have you read my *Whickertons in Love* series?

It is set in Regency-era England, portraying the at times turbulent ways the six Whickerton siblings' search for love - including their matchmaking Grandma Edie, and, of course, family friend Sarah, who is already trying to escape her parent's marriage schemes. We'll also get a glimpse of Keir in the last three books of the series.



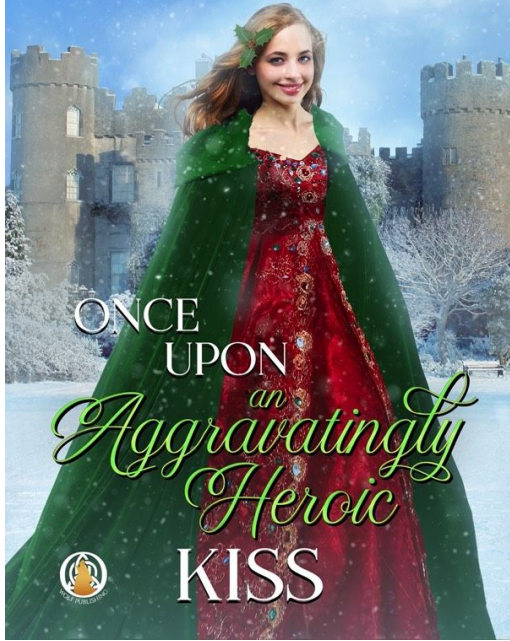
Start with the Christmas prequel [Once Upon an Aggravatingly Heroic Kiss](#), which tells Grandma Edie's story, when she was fell in love as a young debutante.

Once upon a time, our beloved Grandma Edie began her career as the best matchmaker in known history by using her extraordinary talent to bring about her own happily-ever-after...

Determined to perform a Christmas miracle by seeing her friend wed to the man she loves, Edith finds herself distracted from her task by a teasing gentleman with wicked eyes and a devilish smile.

Read on for a sneak peek!

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
BREE WOLF



ONCE  
UPON  
*an Aggravatingly  
Heroic*  
KISS



## PROLOGUE

Somewhere in northern England, 1749 (or a variation thereof)

The carriage rattled through a particularly deep hole in the frozen road, swaying so violently from side to side, that Lady Edith Weston, daughter to the Earl of Swansborough, was surprised to see Lord and Lady Ashbrook continue to slumber like babes rocked gently in their mothers' arms. While Lady Ashbrook's breaths came evenly, her husband uttered a slight snore every once in a while that echoed through the carriage and almost drowned out the rattling sound of the carriage's wheels.

Edith chuckled, covering her mouth with her hand as she glanced at her oldest friend, seated beside her. "Addie, would you say this is their secret?" she asked with another sideways glance at Lord and Lady Ashbrook. "Sleeping in the carriage?"

With a wide grin upon her face, Lady Adele Berkley, daughter to the Duke and Duchess of Ashbrook, rolled her eyes. "Quite frankly, I cannot remember a journey of any length when they did not fall asleep." Still, an almost adoring look came to her hazel eyes as she looked at her parents. "Somehow, they cannot seem to stay awake."

"Fortunately for us, wouldn't you agree?" Edith pointed out with an arched brow. "After all, conversation is so much easier when one is not constantly overheard by one's parents, even parents as adorable as yours."

Adele nodded. "Indeed, there are some things I would rather not have my parents know about me." Her smile dimmed and then vanished as a thoughtful gaze came to her eyes.

Edith placed a hand upon her friend's. "Is it your betrothal?" Although betrothed since she had been a babe, Adele barely knew the man she was to marry. He was the son of Lord Ashbrook's oldest friend, and the day after Adele had been born, the two fathers had thought it a marvelous idea to

draw up a marriage contract, tying their two children to one another for life.

As much as Edith adored Adele's parents, she could not help but shake her head at such a foolish notion. Of course, she knew well that, among the *ton*, marriages were most often agreed upon for fairly rational reasons. However, in her heart, Edith believed that there was no better foundation for any marriage than affection.

True and honest affection.

Adele's gaze swept over the snow-covered landscape outside the window, her shoulders rising and falling with each long, heavy breath. "Do you think I shall like him?" she asked unexpectedly and then turned to look at Edith.

Shrugging, Edith wished she could reassure her friend. "I have no way of knowing," she said quite honestly. "I, myself, have seen the man no more than once or twice. Do you think he's the adventurous type? Traveling the continent, going from place to place, seeing the world?"

A small smile teased Adele's lips. "I hope he is," she replied, a faraway look coming into her eyes. Indeed, Edith knew perfectly well that Adele possessed an adventurous spirit. She might seem shy at times or act hesitantly, but deep inside she longed for new experiences. Would this unknown husband be a good match for her?

"Will you truly do this?" Edith inquired carefully. "Marry a man you hardly know?"

Adele shrugged. "I don't have much of choice, do I? My father gave his word, and I cannot dishonor him."

"Even if it robs you of happiness?"

For a brief moment, Adele closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. Then she straightened and met Edith's gaze. "Perhaps at the end of this house party, he will be a stranger no longer." She glanced across the carriage. "Perhaps my parents were right to do as they did. Perhaps they did choose wisely for me. In any case, this house party is a good chance for me to get to know him, would you not agree?"

Edith nodded. "It is a chance; however, we cannot be certain of the result. What if you get to know him, only to realize that you do not care for him? What then? Will you still marry him?"

Adele's shoulders slumped instantly. "Must you always point out the flaws in any endeavor?" She heaved a deep sigh. "Honestly, Edie, sometimes it is better to simply look on the bright side."

"I suppose that approach has...some...merit," Edith conceded, surprised by her friend's words. Indeed, she had always thought of herself as someone seeing rather the good than the bad. "However, I do not believe it wise to simply accept what is because one believes oneself without options."

"I am without options!" Adele exclaimed rather loudly, the sound of her agitated voice causing her parents to stir in their sleep. Fortunately, they did not wake.

"Of course, you have options," Edith insisted, disliking the notion of simply giving up and accepting one's fate.

Adele rolled her eyes at her. "That is easy for you to say. Your parents allow you to choose freely. You do not need to worry about disappointing them."

Edith looked across at the slumbering Lord and Lady Ashbrook. "Do you truly think they would be disappointed? What if you simply told them the truth? Do you think they would not help you? Do you think they would not understand?"

Adele slumped back in her seat. "I don't know. My father always speaks with such admiration and fondness for his old friend that I cannot help but think it would break his heart." She heaved a deep sigh. "Oh, I wish we could switch places," she whispered then, turned her head slightly toward Edith and cast her a mischievous smile. "However, I would not wish this situation on you, either."

Edith laughed. "I have a feeling that this Christmas season shall bring a lot of new revelations. Just you wait. I assure you everything will be all right."

Adele stared at her for a moment before she finally blinked. “You have a feeling? What does that mean?” Chuckling, she shook her head. “Honestly, Edie, sometimes you confuse me.”

Edith held her friend’s gaze. “There *always* is a bright side, Addie. Trust me.” She squeezed her friend’s hand. “I want to see you happy, and if Lord Halston’s son does not make you happy, then you should not marry him.” A deep smile came to her face. “Can you imagine marriage being based on affection alone? What would such a world be like?”

Both women sat back, exhaling a deep breath as their thoughts contemplated such an idea. Indeed, Adele’s parents had meant no harm when they had set up the contract between her and Lord Halston’s son. At the same time, Edith’s parents did not allow her to choose freely who she would marry out of the goodness of their hearts. With six elder siblings advantageously married, they simply did not worry about their youngest daughter’s choice, no doubt believing that everything would sort itself out.

“Do you think you will know right away?” Edith asked, turning her head from the window, and looking once more back toward her friend. “Do you think one glance can ever be enough to know?”

Adele shrugged. “I’ve never been in love,” she stated quite matter-of-factly. “I do not know. Yet I cannot imagine seeing a stranger and...” She shrugged once more, and Edie could tell that an instant connection seemed truly impossible to her.

Edith smiled. “I think I’ll know.” Indeed, over the past few years, Edith had watched her siblings most attentively. She had seen them become betrothed, seen them married and become husbands and wives, and more than that, she had seen the way they had looked at their spouses, spoken to their spouses. Indeed, she felt quite confident in her ability to judge another’s affections correctly. In her opinion, her eldest brother as well as two of her sisters were in love with their spouses. Although her youngest brother clearly held affection for his wife, it was not the kind of love she had seen in the other three marriages. Unfortunately, her other two sisters seemed rather indifferent

to their husbands, clearly not seeking their company, most content when they could spend time apart.

For so long now, Edith had watched them all, observed those little interactions between husband and wife, and come to the conclusion that there was only one kind of marriage she would ever agree to. She wanted love, plain and simple.

For herself.

But also for Addie.

“Truly?” Adele inquired, a questioning look in her eyes. “Do you truly expect to see someone, look into his eyes and...?” Again, she shrugged. “I mean, even if he looks dashing and kind, you still do not know him. You do not know his thoughts, the way he would speak to you. How can your heart possibly...?”

Edith squeezed her friend’s hand encouragingly. “Don’t worry, Addie. I shall help you find your one true love.”

Adele laughed. “Oh, Edie, you’ll be the death of me one day! Please, do not make me hope!”

Edith cast her a wicked grin. “There should always be hope!” she exclaimed determinedly. “What would life be without hope? Never give up on it, Addie! Never!” Again, she squeezed her friend’s hand. “Trust me. All will be well. I promise.”

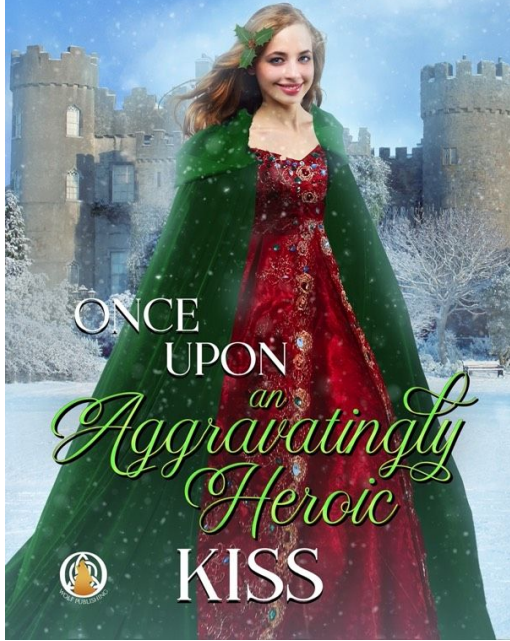
Heaving a deep breath, she sat back in her seat, allowing her eyes to drift out the window and sweep over the glistening countryside. In the distance, she could see Lord Cumberton’s ancient castle appearing upon the horizon and wondered what this Christmas season would bring. She could only hope it would see Adele happy. With Lord Halston’s son or another, it did not matter to her. The only thing that mattered was to ensure Addie’s happiness.

And Edith vowed she would not rest until she saw it secured.

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ONCE  
UPON  
*an Aggravatingly  
Heroic*  
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## About Bree

USA Today bestselling and award-winning author, Bree Wolf has always been a language enthusiast (though not a grammarian!) and is rarely found without a book in her hand or her fingers glued to a keyboard. Trying to find her way, she has taught English as a second language, traveled abroad and worked at a translation agency as well as a law firm in Ireland. She also spent loooong years obtaining a BA in English and Education and an MA in Specialized Translation while wishing she could simply be a writer. Although there is nothing simple about being a writer, her dreams have finally come true.

“A big thanks to my fairy godmother!”

Currently, Bree has found her new home in the historical romance genre, writing Regency novels and novellas. Enjoying the mix of fact and fiction, she occasionally feels like a puppet master (or mistress? Although that sounds weird!), forcing her characters into ever-new situations that will put their strength, their beliefs, their love to the test, hoping that in the end they will triumph and get the happily-ever-after we are all looking for.

If you're an avid reader, [sign up for Bree's newsletter](#) on [www.breewolf.com](http://www.breewolf.com) as she has the tendency to simply give books away. Find out about freebies, giveaways as well as occasional advance reader copies and read before the book is even on the shelves!

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