

A woman with dark, wavy hair, wearing a vibrant red, strapless, floor-length gown, stands in a room decorated for Christmas. She is holding a large, gold, five-pointed star ornament. The room features a white fireplace mantel adorned with a garland of white and red flowers, a small round clock, and a red beaded garland. The background is a white wall with a large, festive wreath of white and red flowers and greenery.

*Christmas
Wallflowers*

Snowflakes[★] and Wallflowers

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAUREN SMITH

SNOWFLAKES AND WALLFLOWERS

Christmas Wallflowers



LAUREN SMITH

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ISBN: 978-1-958196-07-6 (e-book edition)

ISBN: 978-1-958196-08-3 (print edition)

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CHAPTER I



Cornwall, England, December 1822

Matilda Matthews's day was ruined by a terrible downpour of icy rain that shrouded her home Meadow Cross, the little cottage on the edge of the Earl of Castleton's estate where she had lived her entire life. She had hoped for snow; it was certainly cold enough.

A wall of unpleasant gray clouds and sleet had cast a pallid tone to the skies and ice shimmered on the rippling ivy that climbed up the cottage walls. They'd had such a late fall that the ivy on the walls had stayed green far longer than usual, but come tomorrow it would begin to wither beneath the frost. Not for the first time, Matilda was thankful for her Aunt Florence's beautiful paintings of spring flowers that hung upon the walls of their little cottage. She and her aunt had called the paintings "the wallflowers." For a few moments, one could look upon them and believe it was spring and not a bitterly cold winter.

Matilda gazed out the window with a weary sigh. She had wanted to go to the village today, but it was far too wintry to set foot outdoors. Her Aunt Florence had insisted she stay home where it was safe and warm, and she'd had to agree that was wise, no matter trapped she felt indoors.

"What is it, dear?" Florence spoke from where she sat in an armchair by the small fire. She had been ill for the past week, which worried Matilda greatly.

"Oh, nothing," Matilda said. "I just wish it hadn't rained."

The two lived a quiet life, one she loved, but every so often, she craved a little more excitement. She wanted to at least visit the shops in the village and mingle with her friends there, even though she had no money to spend. They lived on a very small yearly income left in a trust by Matilda's father, who had been the steward of the Castleton estate. He and the late earl, Bernard Brynnwood, had been close friends despite their age difference, and when her father had died, Bernard had set money aside each year for Matilda and Florence to live on. The earl had given them the use of Meadow Cross cottage for life. He charged them no rent, and his only wish was that, weather and health permitting, they would join him once a week for a nice dinner at his grand house a short way across the field, beyond a small patch of woods. Those dinners had always been enjoyable, and the old earl was as sweet to her as any doting grandfather, despite the fact that she was not a blood relation to him. But the earl had died two weeks ago, and their future was now uncertain.

Matilda splayed a hand on the glass windowpane and peered at the rain. She blinked, and suddenly it was snowing. In just a few moments, the rain had turned to thick thumb-sized clumps of snowflakes which drifted down so heavily, it was almost impossible to see anything beyond the small fence that bordered the garden in front of the cottage. Something dark moved in the snow, a hazy shape that grew larger as it drew closer.

Was it a figure in a cloak coming into the garden toward the cottage? She started toward the door, hoping to intercept the visitor, when she heard a rapid knock. She opened the door and saw the figure was already rushing away through the snow. Confused, she glanced about and then down at the ground. A letter sat on the edge of the doorway. Matilda bent and retrieved it. She turned the letter over to see the wax seal of the house of Castleton. She quickly shut the door and broke the seal. Since the passing of the old earl, she and Florence had been waiting to hear from the new earl, Bernard's grandnephew.

“Who was at the door?” Florence asked.

“I’m not sure. But they delivered a letter from His Lordship.” She unfolded the parchment and read the words silently to herself.

TO THE RESIDENCE OF MEADOW CROSS COTTAGE,

Arthur Brynnwood, the new Earl of Castleton, is the owner of Meadow Cross cottage where you now reside. He requests your immediate departure forthwith unless you are willing to pay one pound a month in rent. You have five days to collect all objects and furnishings which belong to you and to vacate the cottage. All questions can be directed to Lord Castleton or his new steward, Henry Fulton.

Sincerely,

Mr. Fulton

MATILDA READ THE LETTER TWICE MORE, HER CONFUSION AND distress growing so strong that her hands trembled. She and Aunt Florence couldn’t leave. Their annual income only covered food, firewood, a bit of coal, and other small but vital necessities. It could not cover his proposed rent here, let alone rent at a new place, assuming they could even find one. Cornwall was not a hospitable land this time of year, and there were few places to let at this time.

They had no other family or connections who might take them in. Even though Matilda was twenty years old, she felt ancient with her worries.

“Mattie, what is it? What does it say?” Her aunt’s question was punctuated by a violent sneeze at the end.

“It... it’s a letter from Arthur Brynnwood, the new earl. He is asserting a monthly rent of one pound... or else we must be gone from Meadow Cross cottage in five days.”

“He *what?*” Florence dissolved into a coughing fit. “He cannot do that... surely...”

“Unfortunately, as the new earl, he has every legal right.” Matilda’s reply was quiet, but her mind let out a desperate scream. What were they to do?

“Surely he can be reasoned with? Bernard was always so generous with us. I’m sure we need only remind his grandnephew of Bernard’s promise to us.”

“I’m not sure we can count on this man to be as compassionate.” Matilda feared he might be quite the opposite, given the abrupt tone of his steward’s letter.

“Perhaps I ought to speak with him,” Florence said. She started to rise from her chair, only to bow forward with a mighty cough. She withdrew a handkerchief and covered her mouth, her shoulders shaking.

Matilda caught her aunt and gently helped her back into the faded armchair.

“Your cold is getting worse. I think you need to stay here. *I’ll* speak to him.”

Perhaps if she batted her lashes and did her best to flatter his ego, this arrogant man would show some mercy and allow them to stay.

“You mustn’t be cross with him, Mattie. You said it yourself—this is his land, not ours.”

Matilda’s lips pressed into a firm line. Snow frosted the edge of the windows, and a chill wind whistled eerily down the chimney, making their small fire sputter and spark.

Five days. That was all she had to convince him to change his mind. With no time to waste, she would have to brave the weather. She kissed her aunt’s cheek, tucked a thick woolen blanket around her, and made her a cup of warm tea.

Matilda fetched her cloak from a hook by the door and found her thickest gloves that had the fewest holes in them. She already wore her walking boots in hopes that she’d been able to go to town. That had been before the storm had arrived of course. She hadn’t bothered to change back into her slippers and now she was glad for it since it would save her time.

She tucked a stray wisp of her russet hair beneath the hood of her cloak and headed for the door. It was madness to walk to Castleton house in this weather, but what choice did she have?

“Do be careful, love,” her aunt called out before she opened the front door to face the icy winter.

The walk to the earl’s home was bitterly cold, and her threadbare blue woolen gown was patched from years of frequent wear. She was soaked to the bone and frost coated her lashes long before she reached the woods and the narrow path that led to the grand house.

It was late afternoon by the time she reached Castleton Hall. The snowfall had created a gray dusk that would soon give way to the sweeping darkness of nightfall. Matilda climbed the steps to the large oak front door, her toes and fingers as numb as ice. Warm lights emanated from the windows on the ground floor in contrast to the gloomy, cold world outside. She grasped the brass knocker and rapped it hard three times.

At first she feared no one had heard her, and it was only when she raised her head to try again that the door opened and the elderly butler, Mr. Stodgens, answered. He usually offered her a warm smile, but this time he looked weary and there was no hint of a smile on his face. She knew that losing Bernard Brynnwood had been hard on the butler. He’d had started at Castleton Hall as a young footman, where he had served Bernard for over thirty years. He had been completely devoted to His Lordship.

Mr. Stodgens squinted at her in surprise.

“Good heavens, Miss Matthews. What are you doing out in this weather?”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Stodgens. I was wondering if His Lordship would grant me a brief audience?” She did her best to hide her chattering teeth, but the butler noticed.

“He won’t like it, but you had better come in. I shall inform His Lordship that you are here.” Stodgens motioned for

her to enter. She lifted her skirts above her boots and stepped into the grand entryway.

The house's interior had fine Italian marble columns and the walls were decorated with lovely tapestries of pastoral scenes depicting flowing meadows and lovelorn maidens of a bygone era gliding in swings or sitting with handsome gentlemen. It was one of the few homes in the region that bore such art, and Matilda had always adored touring the home's corridors to see its paintings, sculptures, and tapestries.

"Come into the evening room and warm yourself by the fire, Miss Matthews." The butler led her to a room with green wallpaper and gilded paintings of Castleton ancestors hanging upon the walls. She took a seat in the wingback chair by the fire and extended her hands toward the healthy flames, eager to banish the chill from her limbs.

After several minutes, the butler returned and informed her that she was to be escorted to the earl's private study. When she reached the study and stepped inside, the sight that greeted her was an unexpected one.

A tall, well-built man stood behind a rosewood desk, his arms crossed over his chest, face fixed firmly in a scowl as Matilda entered his domain. He had a strong jaw and chin, with an aquiline nose and a pair of dark slashes for eyebrows over a pair of smoky gray eyes that sharpened on her in a predatory way.

Lord Arthur Brynnwood was a most striking and handsome man, Matilda decided, with his wild mane of dark hair unsettling arrogance. It was clear her presence at Castleton Hall was not welcome.

"Good evening, my lord," she said, her voice surprisingly calm.

She wondered how she must have appeared to him, half drowned in mud, her hair escaping her coiffure as she lowered the hood of her cloak. She had done her best not to drag the wintry muck of the outdoors into his home, but she knew she must have. She was a *peasant* in front of a prince.

Lord Brynwood wore black trousers and a silver waistcoat embroidered with green ivy patterns, which accented his broad shoulders and narrow hips. His white lawn shirt billowed out at the sleeves and his cravat was folded crisply to perfection. It had never been clearer to Matilda that the two of them were from different worlds, as different as a bird and a fish. Could creatures from the air and sea find a way to communicate? Matilda desperately hoped so.

“Stodgens said you are Miss Matilda Matthews, resident of Meadow Cross cottage, for the moment.”

She frowned slightly.

“I am, my lord,” she answered, keeping her voice soft despite the slow rising anger at his arrogant treatment.

“Good. Then you received my notice of your eviction five days from now. Unless, of course, you can pay the designated rent?”

It was growing harder and harder to control her temper.

“I did. It was your notice which brought me here. I must ask you to reconsider your decision to evict my aunt and me.”

The earl’s eyes narrowed and his lips twitched in an unpleasant smile.

“Are you asking me not to have you thrown off my property, Miss Matthews?”

“I am,” she admitted. It would be foolish to remind him of the promise his great-uncle had made to her and Aunt Florence. He was not bound by them.

“I suppose you have a list of reasons that you would like to tell me in hopes that I might find mercy in my black heart to let you remain at Meadow Cross?”

Matilda was astonished at the cool amusement in his tone. Were their lives a game to him? Before she could think better of it, she found herself coming toe to toe with him, angry and unafraid.

“Your great-uncle allowed my aunt and me to stay at the cottage because we have little income, no major support, and

no connections. He valued my father, who had once been his steward, and promised him he would take care of us. I had hoped to find you were the same sort of man with a sense of honor and duty. I see that I am mistaken. Excuse me, my lord, but I have a long walk back to the cottage and if you haven't noticed, it's snowing quite fiercely."

Matilda spun on her heel and was halfway out the room when he called after her.

"You walked here?"

She spun back to face him. "Of *course* I did. If we could *afford* a pound a month, we might have had some other form of conveyance other than our own two feet!" On that note, she stormed down the corridor muttering to herself. She reached the front door, which Stodgens hastily opened.

"So very sorry, Miss Matthews."

"It's quite all right, Mr. Stodgens. Your master is the monster, not you." She stepped out into the snowy night. She was only a dozen feet away when she heard Lord Castleton call out from the doorway.

"If you ask me sweetly, Miss Matthews, I might be convinced it's worth the trouble to have my coach take you home."

Matilda stopped dead and drew in a fortifying breath before she turned around.

"I'm afraid I'm all out of *sweetness*, my lord." She emphasized the word in her most honeyed tone. "Unless you are willing to allow my aunt and me to stay at Meadow Cross, we have nothing to discuss."

Castleton lounged in the doorway of his home, his arms crossed and face smug.

"No, I'm afraid not. I am the lord of this estate now, and I plan to see it do more than crumble from neglect as it had under my great-uncle. I have made my decision and it will be upheld. Five days are all you have to come up with the rent before I have you tossed out."

Matilda was never quite sure what made her do what she did next. It was rash, but she had been pushed to her limit. It was also immature, but then so was everything about this man's attitude. It was wrong, but at that moment she did not give a toss one way or the other.

She bent down, grabbing a slushy pile of snow in her gloved hands, packed it hard into a ball and, with no warning to her intended victim, hurled it directly at his head.

The slushy, icy mixture hit him square in the face and exploded. He lost his footing and fell onto his backside, laying half in the doorway of Castleton Hall.

"Bloody hell!" He roared and swiped a hand over his face, sending wet snow down the fine waistcoat he wore. She stared at him as he sat up and glared at her.

"Oh dear ..." Matilda gasped as her sanity restored itself. She lifted her skirt above her knees and started to sprint down the road. She was breathing hard as she struggled through the snow. His harsh breaths and heavy, booted steps grew ever closer as he chased her.

"Come back here, Miss Matthews!" he shouted.

Suddenly she tripped, plummeting facedown into the snow just as he slammed down on top of her. She struggled and managed to elbow him. He grunted and flipped onto her back beneath him. He lay fully on top of her, his gray eyes bright as he stared down at her.

"Aren't you a little polecat?" he growled as he pinned her wrists over her head in the snow. She was so furious and frightened, lying with the wet and cold seeping into her back beneath her.

"A woman shows the slightest courage and you deem her a polecat? You're no gentleman!" she snarled back.

The frown on his face vanished and he suddenly smiled. "I have never claimed to be a gentleman, only the lord of this land. And the fact is, I *like* polecats." His gaze drooped and she realized too late he was going to kiss her. The instant his

lips touched hers, she lifted her knee hard into his stomach. His eyes bulged as a loud groan escaped him.

“Christ! I was only going to steal a kiss!” He rolled off her and they both lay panting in the snow. Matilda stared up at the snowflakes coming down from the sky, still dazed from the encounter. The earl recovered before she did. He crouched over her and lifted her up into the cradle of his arms like some silly damsel in a gothic novel. Recovering her senses at last, she screeched and fought to escape his arms. He carried her past the very shocked Mr. Stodgens.

“My lord?” the butler said uncertainly.

“Do you have the key to that blue bedchamber facing the sea?” Castleton asked.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Give it to me. Now.”

The butler removed a heavy brass key from a ring of keys and gave it to Castleton. Then the earl was climbing up the stairs to the floor above.

“What are you doing?” she cried out, fearing the worst.

But he refused to answer her, telling her only to be quiet.

He entered a room, where she was dumped unceremoniously onto a wonderfully soft surface. By the time she realized it was a bed and not a dungeon cot she’d been deposited onto, he was outside the bedchamber, closing the door. The key turned in the lock with a deafening sense of finality.

“Castleton!” She shouted and ran to the door. “How dare you! Let me go at once!”

“Calm yourself, Miss Matthews. I don’t want the responsibility of you freezing to death on my land. I’ll send you home in the morning.”

The morning?

“Oh, but my aunt! She’s ill and all alone. *Please*, Lord Castleton, I must go back to take care of her.” The fight in her

died swiftly as she realized how dangerous it was for Florence to be left alone. “Please...” she cried and struck a fist against the door. “*Please*, she’s very ill.”

She was afraid he had already left, but then she heard a soft breath on the other side of the door.

“Ugh,” Castleton muttered. “Very well. I will fetch your aunt and bring her here before the snow is too thick for the coach to travel. She will remain as my guest, and if necessary, I will have a doctor called in to look after her. I will find some way that you can repay me for my mercy later.”

She sank against the door, listening to the sound of his booted steps grow fainter and fainter.

Lord, all she had done was throw a harmless snowball. By doing so, she’d managed to start a war with the Earl of Castleton.

CHAPTER 2



Arthur Brynnwood, the new Earl of Castleton, had just locked a woman in a bedchamber.

Good Lord. Now what?

He had been possessed by some flight of madness, that had to be it. It must have been caused by the pressure of being saddled with a new title and a vast estate. His great-uncle had been in good health and his death had been entirely unexpected. Arthur hadn't been prepared to take over this life, these lands, and certainly not the responsibility that came with it. He had enjoyed a life of leisure in London. He'd had money and a fine house, the best horses and excellent servants. Now he had even more, and that somehow made everything *harder*.

When he had arrived at the Castleton estate a week ago, his new steward, Mr. Fulton, had discussed all of the assets of the estate as well as its liabilities. This had included a small cottage on the edge of his land called Meadow Cross cottage.

Fulton had mentioned there were two people living in the cottage who hadn't been paying rent and were also receiving a small stipend from the estate. Yet no reason was provided as to why, or whether it had been a temporary condition that should have ended years ago. This was exactly the sort of oversight that allowed a grand estate to hemorrhage into bankruptcy if one was not careful.

Arthur didn't know why his great-uncle was paying for these people to live there instead of the other way around, but

it was going to end now. Whoever was living there could either pay a reasonable rent or leave.

He'd been satisfied with his decision, until he'd learned he would be tossing out two spinsters into the literal cold. Well, Matilda Matthews was too young to be considered a spinster, and too pretty. It didn't change his stance on the matter, however. Sentimentality had no place in running an estate.

Stodgens hurried after Arthur as he walked away from the bedchamber he'd locked Matilda in. He'd let her out once he decided how best to handle all of this. The woman was clearly stubborn and pigheaded. If he hadn't locked her up, the woman would have stormed back out into the snowy night and perished. She could call him a monster all he liked, but at least she'd be warm and safe tonight.

"My lord?" his butler asked, seeking instructions on what to do next.

"Have my coach brought around. I assume it can travel through the woods to this Meadow Cross cottage?"

"Yes, sir. The snow shouldn't be too thick yet."

"Good. Prepare a room for this aunt of Miss Matthews."

"Ahh, yes, sir. That would be Miss Florence Wells." Stodgens supplied the name quickly.

"See that all is ready for her and for Miss Matthews. And send one of the grooms into the village to bring the doctor back if he can travel. It sounds as though the aunt may be unwell."

Arthur wasn't exactly compassionate, but if word reached the villagers that he had killed an old spinster through neglect and allowed her niece to freeze in the woods, he would be run off his land with pitchforks.

"I will see to it, my lord."

Collecting his cloak and gloves, Arthur went to steal a biscuit from the kitchen and filled a small flask with brandy to tide him over in the coach. He'd worked all day with only a light luncheon, and it was still well over an hour before dinner.

He spent the ride to Meadow Cross cottage puzzling over his predicament. The predicament being what on earth to do with Matilda and her aunt.

The little spitfire had the nerve to march up to his door and call him out for his callousness. London ladies had tongues sharp enough to pierce a man's heart along with cold smiles and even colder hearts, and they could hold their own against the heartless men of London like him. They battled for dominance with subtle warfare in the ballrooms that would have frightened even the likes of Napoleon.

Here in the country, though, it was different. Women were warmer, softer, *real*, right down to their tempers and their impressive ball pitching skills. His lips twitched, remembering how Matilda had dared to wallop him with a snowball. He'd never once seen any lady of society do *that*.

He'd been furious at first and then had wanted to laugh so hard his stomach cramped. When she'd been all flushed with her fine fury, he had glimpsed what she might be like in the height of passion in a man's arms, and what a sight it would be for the man lucky enough to bed her. Whenever he came across a lady of gentle breeding who had a hint of a hellion in her, it always attracted him, but he encountered such women so rarely that he hadn't been tempted in a long time.

But Matilda had tempted him tonight, was *still* tempting him.

When the coach stopped in front of a little cottage, he was surprised at how small it actually was. Two gently born women shared this place? It couldn't have more than three or four rooms in all. He'd been convinced that it was a grander place, one suitable for two gently born women to live in. It was why he'd set such a high rent. In London, twelve pounds a year for rent was considered reasonable for a decent-sized house.

He peered at the cottage, his confusion deepening. Where did they keep their servants? He jumped down out of the coach and told the driver to wait for him. He walked briskly up the

path to the front door and knocked. It was a few moments before someone came to answer.

“Mattie, I was so worried, you—” A woman in her late forties held up a candle to Arthur’s face when she cracked the door open. When she saw it was a man and not Matilda, she shrieked.

“Please be at ease, Miss Wells. I am Lord Castleton.”

She peered up at him, still holding the candle aloft. “You’re Bernard’s grandnephew?”

“Yes.”

“I suppose I see him in you, at least around the eyes and mouth. Please come in. I simply adored your great uncle.” Miss Wells smiled, but he noticed her nose was bright red and she sniffled. She was pretty, and not at all the ancient aunt he’d expected to find, though on the plainer side. She lacked her niece’s temper.

“Er... Thank you, Miss Wells. I’m actually inviting you and your niece to stay for a few days at my home. I’ve come to collect you personally.”

“Stay with you? At Castleton Hall?” Her eyes went round. “Mattie was only supposed to convince you to let us stay here, not invite herself into your home. Oh my Lord, I am so sorry for her impertinence.”

“She did not invite herself, Miss Wells. It was my idea and I’m afraid I was rather insistent on it, given the state of the weather.”

Miss Wells frowned. “Oh, yes, I see. So I am to come stay with you tonight at Castleton Hall?”

“Longer, actually. I am told the weather will not improve for some time. Please pack a valise with at least a week’s worth of clothes for yourself and your niece.”

“Please do come inside, my lord. It will take me a few minutes to gather the clothes.”

“You don’t have your maid here to assist you?” His gaze swept over the small entryway. There was no sign of anyone

else in the home.

“Oh, we don’t have any maid. It’s just Matilda and me.” She opened the door wider to let him in. He removed his hat and stepped inside, then closed the door behind him. Miss Wells gestured for him to sit in the drawing room, if one could even call it that. It was terribly small, more like a cupboard.

Lord, he’d go mad living here with such close walls. His townhouse in London was spacious. His dressing room was bigger than this cottage.

“I’ll be as quick as I can,” Miss Wells assured him before she vanished into a back room.

Arthur took the opportunity to look around a bit. The cottage had a tiny kitchen with no sign of a cook. There were only meager food supplies in the larder, and there were several leaks in the roof where water was being caught in pots.

His scowl deepened as he noticed the threadbare furniture in the drawing room and bedroom as well as a short pile of logs by the fireplace. Surely they had more firewood outside... perhaps hidden by snow. He would have to inquire about that later. Neither he nor Mr. Fulton had any sense of the cottage. They’d simply made an assumption, several in fact, all of which had clearly been wrong.

By the time Miss Wells returned, he had made a list of a dozen improvements he wanted to make on the cottage habitable.

“Please, allow me to carry those.” Arthur claimed the two travel cases when Miss Wells joined him in the small foyer. She was a thin willowy woman, and already breathing hard from her efforts. Whatever illness she suffered from was clearly exhausting her lungs.

“Thank you, my lord,” Miss Wells said with a soft little exhalation. “I’m afraid I can’t carry those, not at the moment.” She put a hand to her chest and drew in a few deeper breaths. Now he was concerned. He would have insisted she not go out into the cold in her condition, but the cottage was nearly as cold inside as it was outside.

He carried the cases out to the carriage, then returned to assist Miss Wells through the snow. On the ride to his home she talked a little to him, but he sensed she was weary and unwell.

“Are you hungry for dinner, Miss Wells?” he asked once they were in the warm house. He wanted to see her eat something, and then she would likely need to go to bed.

“I... oh, I wouldn't wish to impose.”

“Nonsense. I have not eaten yet myself and would be delighted if you would join me. I shall fetch Matilda, but first let me show you to your room where you may freshen up.” He showed her to one of the bedrooms in the east wing. This bedchamber was naturally warmer than any of the others this time of year, according to Mr. Stodgens.

He assigned one of the upstairs maids to help her, then returned to the room he had locked Matilda inside. Hopefully she had calmed down in the time it took for him to return with her aunt. When he opened the door, he found Matilda pressed right against the door and she fell into him. He caught her in his arms with a grunt of effort.

“You cad!” She swung a fist at him, but he caught her wrist, holding her easily. She was adorably small, but curvy, and he was rather delighted by the strength he felt in her arms.

“Now, now, Miss Matthews,” he chuckled. “Your aunt will be downstairs soon for dinner. But first you and I should have a business discussion in my study.”

“What business do you and I have?” she demanded.

He smiled. He'd come to a decision on the ride over, one that would suit them both if she had the sense to agree to it.

“Come with me to my study and we shall discuss it.” He released her wrist and started to walk toward the stairs, knowing she would be too curious not to follow him.



MATILDA STARED AT LORD CASTLETON'S RETREATING FORM for a moment, then rushed after him. She caught up with him at the top of the stairs. They proceeded down to the study in silence until he closed the door and gestured for her to sit in a chair facing his desk. It all felt so formal as he seated himself opposite her. Yet she knew somehow he was going to say something scandalous.

She'd never been alone with a man before. Lord Castleton was tall, handsome, and imposing in an arrogant sort of way that instantly made her dislike him. Yet that arrogance was mixed with a natural masculine seduction—a potent combination that left her on edge. She felt like she was standing beneath clouds charged with a coming storm. The silence between them stretched and yawned until it filled the room, adding to that brewing tempest she sensed was coming.

“Lord Castleton,” she began uncertainly, only to be interrupted.

“After seeing the state of Meadow Cross cottage when I went to collect your aunt, I am shocked to find the cottage is not, in my opinion, properly habitable. Even if I evicted you in five days' time, no other tenants would pay the rent I am asking, not until suitable improvements can be made to the house.” He paused, his eyes locked with hers, and Matilda dared not breathe. He must have seen the pots full of water catching the roof leaks... among other things that she didn't wish to think about.

When he didn't continue, she dared to speak. “What are you trying to say, Lord Castleton?”

He tapped his long fingers on his desk as he watched her. “I find myself trapped here for the holidays, given the weather and the need to see to my new duties. I am used to a level of companionship, and I have no easy way to find someone here.” He steepled his fingers and his gray eyes pierced her.

“Companionship?” she echoed uncertainly. “You mean you wish to have someone read to you or walk with you in the gardens or...”

Oh no, he didn't mean *that*, did he? He was a man, after all, and men had very different ideas of companionship.

Lord Castleton's chuckle was soft, and his gaze made her body flush with an unexpected heat.

"I suppose you could do those things. I certainly wouldn't object to them. But what I would like is a warm, willing woman in my bed." He leaned forward ever so slightly. "Agree to belong to me for the next two weeks, and I shall give you and your aunt an extra five months at Meadow Cross cottage with no rent. That will give me time to make needed repairs and search for new tenants in the late spring."

Matilda's mind halted on the phrase: *a warm, willing woman in bed*. And she wasn't sure she fully understood what he meant. Surely he couldn't mean that he wanted her to be his mistress.

"You want me to be...?"

"My mistress. Just for a few weeks. In return, you would have five more months to live rent free at Meadow Cross cottage. It would give you plenty of time to find a new home, or to come up with a way to pay the rent I've settled on."

Matilda stared at him. The man was seriously suggesting she become a... She couldn't even think the word, let alone say it.

"How *dare* you ask that of me?" She rose from her chair and took two steps toward the door, only to have him block her path so quickly that she gasped.

"I am well aware that you are a lady, Miss Matthews, but you are also in a desperate position—"

"Only because *you* are the monster that put me there with your heartless eviction." She jabbed a finger into his chest. That same fire which had caused her to throw a snowball at his head was crackling to life again.

"All of life is a series of desperate acts to see to our baser needs," he said calmly. "You define your life by the choices you make to survive. I have needs. You have needs. Your

needs can be met by me and mine can be met by you. It would be a mutual arrangement.”

He reached up to cup her cheek in one hand and she tried to pull away, but a spark of something powerful kept her still as he brushed the pad of his thumb over her lips. It felt rather nice when she didn't think about how much she hated him.

“I won't force you to agree. It would be your choice, but consider this—you might spend the rest of your life never knowing a man's touch, a man's kiss. I assume you don't get many suitors out here.”

She stared back at him, just as defiant as she'd been a minute ago. “Who says my life needs a man's touch or kiss to be fulfilled? That's a rather pompous assumption, isn't it?”

His lips quirked as he leaned down, his head now inches from hers. “Aren't you *curious* to know what it's like? To feel the power of a physical release so great that your body bows with it and you scream from the exquisite torture of experiencing too much pleasure?” He was whispering now. “Yes, you would have sold your body and soul to me for a few weeks, but you would never have to wonder, never feel incomplete. You would know what it meant to belong to a man and to experience something not all women do... true passion. That fire and hate you feel for me right now, it makes you burn, doesn't it? I can promise that when you take that feeling to bed with someone like me, it will only ever bring you pleasure.”

He traced her mouth again, and she found herself staring at the sensual curve of his full lips, wondering if they were as soft as they looked.

Pulses of warmth deep in her belly, confusing and unfamiliar, made it hard for her to think. He wanted her body for two weeks. He wanted her willing cooperation in a secret affair. But what did *she* want? That was what she needed to focus on. Ever since she had met him only a few hours ago, she'd found her sensible, rational world turned on its head.

Could she do something like this? Could she give herself over to him to secure a roof over her head and her aunt's a

little longer? She might have said no... except for that dark whisper inside her head that wanted to know what it would feel like to belong to this man. She wanted to feel the answer to the ancient call in her blood, to join her body with his. She knew little of such things, but the desire to learn burned hotter in her by the minute.

I want to know... I want to feel his touch, his kiss... It was as simple as that, and yet she knew it would change her life forever if she agreed. It might even ruin it.

His eyes darkened as he seemed to sense he was winning her over.

“A devil’s bargain,” she murmured, more to herself than to him.

“I never claimed to be a saint,” Lord Castleton replied, then closed the distance between them, his mouth slanting over hers in a fiery kiss.

Matilda was overwhelmed by that kiss. His lips were soft and warm, and not too rough. He kissed her languidly, letting her become used to the sensation, and then she felt his tongue trace the seam of her lips and she opened her mouth instinctively. She gasped in shock as his tongue slipped into her mouth and playfully flicked at hers.

Her knees buckled a little as a stab of pleasure pain shot through her womb. She clutched Lord Castleton by his shoulders and hung on. He deepened the kiss, their mouths molded to one another, and she dug her nails into him, needing something, though she wasn’t sure what.

She became vaguely aware of him moving her and then she was pressed flat against the closed door and he was nudging a knee between her thighs. She whimpered as he rubbed against top of her mound, even though it was protected by her skirts, triggering that secret bundle of nerves there. He moved his leg against her, pressing his thigh over and over against that spot while he kissed her harder and harder. Then he cupped one breast in his hand and kneaded it gently. She screamed against his lips as something came apart inside her, like a star bursting apart in the night sky. His kisses softened

and his hand continued to massage her breast. Her body quaked as she tried to understand what had just happened to her. Her hands fisted in the fabric of his waistcoat as she tried to think through everything she just experienced.

“What... what was that?” she asked as she drew in a shaky breath.

“That... was a taste.”

“Only a taste?” She couldn’t imagine how she could feel more. More of that might kill her.

“Oh yes. It can be so much more than that,” he promised as he pressed one more kiss to her mouth. “Be mine, and I will give you that same pleasure tenfold every night for the next two weeks.”

“I...” She wasn’t thinking clearly, but who could after feeling all that?

He watched her carefully and seemed to know her answer before she spoke, because he smiled slowly, wickedly.

“Y—yes. I’ll do it, but I want it in writing.”

“Writing?”

“The extended tenancy at Meadow Cross. If I’m to share your bed, I want this bargain in writing.”

He kissed her once more, lingering on her lips as if inordinately pleased. Castleton looked at her as if she’d said something wonderfully brilliant, not that Matilda could understand why. Surely anyone would want something like this written down.

“My clever little darling... Are you sure you haven’t dealt with the devil before? You shall have our agreement in writing. Now, shall we go to dinner?”

She wasn’t sure what confused and stunned her more. His calling her *darling* when they were complete strangers to one another, or the way it made her heart tighten and her blood hum.

She had made her choice. She had chosen to be his mistress. She wouldn't second-guess her decision now. She couldn't. She simply nodded and let the devil take her to dinner.

CHAPTER 3



Arthur didn't know what had possessed him to make the offer to Matilda, but he had.

Be my mistress... He couldn't believe he had made such a demand. Back in London he was a declared rakehell, but he had hoped to cultivate a less robust reputation here. Instead, he'd done the opposite. Now he was set to ruthlessly seduce the fiery-tempered woman right under her aunt's nose. Strangely, the thrill of such subterfuge pleased him.

He sat facing Matilda as she did her best not to look at him. Her aunt had joined them for dinner and was apparently unaware of anything going on between him and her niece.

Ignore me all you like, he thought, but we shall revisit that kiss and what followed it later.

"This is such a lovely room, Lord Castleton."

"Please, Miss Wells, call me Arthur," he said.

Miss Wells blushed and took a sip of wine. "Arthur, I always enjoyed our dinners with your great-uncle. He was so kind to us, wasn't he, Matilda?"

Matilda nearly choked on her soup and shot a glance at Arthur, who eyed her smugly over the rim of his wine goblet. Her face turned the color of a ripe red apple. She was reliving that kiss and more in her mind every time she looked at him, he was sure of it. He was as well, for that matter.

She had tasted like the sweetest dream when he'd kissed her. Arthur had lost all rational thought when he held her in his

arms. When she'd moaned and kissed him back, he'd had to hold onto what little there was of his self-control, or he would have tossed her skirts up and taken her on his desk. But that would be far too quick. Too easy. The thrill of all this came from delaying the outcome, the pursuit, the chase. Matilda deserved her first time with a man to be on a soft feather tick mattress where he could make her come apart over and over before finally claiming her himself.

"Did you know your great-uncle well?" Miss Wells asked, breaking through Arthur's stream of wicked thoughts.

"Er... not terribly well. I visited here one week every summer as a boy and sometimes when I was older, but not as often as I should have. I had always thought my father would take the title and that it might not come to me for many years."

Arthur hadn't meant to share something so personal, but it had slipped out.

"Your father is gone?" Matilda asked quietly, speaking for the first time since they sat down for dinner.

"Yes, he died when I was twenty, and my mother died last year. Uncle Bernard was my closest relative."

Matilda's standoffish air melted a bit at hearing that. He could see it in the way her blue eyes softened.

"I'm so sorry, Lord Castleton. I know what it means to lose one's parents."

She was an orphan, like him. Something about that shared history burrowed into his chest, leaving an unexpected ache. He didn't want to feel pity or compassion for her, and he didn't want her to feel those things for him.

Arthur changed the subject, not wishing to discuss their losses. "My steward, Mr. Fulton, informed me that you have lived your entire life at Meadow Cross."

"Yes, my entire life." Matilda met his gaze this time, and her defiance was charming. It was as though she wanted to remind him that he was threatening to cast two helpless women out of their home. *Clever, brave creature*, he thought. He decided to bait her.

“I suppose you were a quaint, well-behaved child?”

Her eyes lit with fire. “Certainly not. I am told I was quite a little terror. I never kept a single dress clean, and every pair of boots I owned suffered such a scuffing that my mother was convinced I had taken up rock scaling.”

“Mattie, dear, did you say *frog impaling*?” Aunt Florence broke in before she sneezed. “Oh dear, I’m afraid my ears are stuffed and I can’t hear a thing.”

“*Rock scaling*, Aunt Florence.” Matilda pushed a glass of water closer to her aunt, who sipped it gratefully.

Arthur wondered if Matilda was aware of how she was taking care of her aunt like a nursemaid. It made him wonder who the devil took care of Matilda when she was ill? He blinked at the uncharacteristically compassionate thought.

Florence coughed again. “I think perhaps I ought to retire. I’m very sorry for being poor company, my lord.”

“Please, do not apologize. Go upstairs and finish your meal. A footman shall bring it up for you.”

Aunt Florence blew her nose into her handkerchief and then quickly left the dining room.

Arthur instructed a footman to collect Miss Wells’s plates and take them upstairs for her.

“I’ve sent for the doctor, and he should be arriving soon if the weather doesn’t hold him up,” he said to Matilda.

“Thank you...” The fire in her eyes had faded. “Perhaps I should go see to her now.”

“She will be fine. Sit and finish your own food. It looks as if you’ve barely eaten.”

Matilda glanced down at her food as if surprised to see her plate full. Was she used to restraint when eating because she and her aunt were forced to economize and stretch their food supplies to last? The thought made his frown deepen.

“Please,” he said again. “There is plenty of food, and my cook would be wounded if she believed you didn’t like what

she had prepared.”

“I wouldn’t want to hurt Mrs. Beasley’s feelings. She’s such a dear woman,” Matilda said, and focused on eating more.

Arthur watched Matilda, thinking. It was clear that she knew his household staff better than he did, which wasn’t that hard, he supposed, because he didn’t know most of their names aside from his butler and his housekeeper. Mr. Stodgens explained that old Bernard had invited Florence and Matilda to Castleton Hall every week to satisfy his need for companionship and conversation. Strangely, Arthur found he rather understood this. He was miles from other homes and more than a day’s ride from London. A social man would be damned lonely here if he never went to London.

The door to the dining room opened. Stodgens entered and discreetly approached him.

“My lord, Dr. Danvers is here to see Miss Wells.”

“Thank you. Please send him upstairs to her chambers. I would like to speak with him once he is done examining her.”

“Yes, my lord.” The butler slipped out of the room and when he was gone, Matilda looked at him with a silent question in her eyes.

“I suppose I really should go then—” She rose, but Arthur held up his hand.

“Sit, *please*. Finish your dinner. When the doctor is done with his examination, we can speak to him.”

“Oh...” She hesitated before she sat back down, but continued to stare at the door.

“*Matilda*,” he said softly. “Please eat. She will be better tended to if you aren’t caring for her on an empty stomach.” He could actually hear her stomach growl from where he sat, and that bothered him more than he cared to admit. He kept picturing the empty larder at the little cottage and all of those pots full of icy rainwater. A frown tugged at his lips. At that moment, he decided that he would have some men from the village hired tomorrow to fix the cottage, weather permitting.

Finally Matilda returned to eating once more, and Arthur relaxed a little. They managed to talk about things, and he found that she painted a rather amusing picture of country life. Her eyes lit up when she talked about the fat white geese that always chased the butcher down the street in a large flock, honking and hooting, or the way the young blacksmith had eyes for the girl who worked in the milliner's shop and accidentally shod the wrong horse when he was watching her take her daily walk one day. He found he was learning more about the people of the village in one hour with her than he had on his own since his arrival.

And if anyone would have told him such stories, he would have been bored to tears, but seeing the world from Matilda's eyes changed it somehow, making it far more entertaining than he imagined possible.

"Are you planning to return to London after New Year?" Matilda asked as the final course of plates was removed from the table.

"Most likely. My life is there. My desire is to have the estate here settled and then come visit every few months, but I admit I feel the need to breathe country air."

"You've lived your entire life in London?" Matilda sipped her wine and Arthur leaned back more comfortably in his chair.

"I have. And you have lived yours here," he reminded her.

"Yes, I've only ever been as far away as Merryvale, which is three miles from here."

"What a dull life that must be," he said.

Her eyes narrowed on him. "It isn't as though I had much of a choice."

"You could have married. You're not quite a spinster yet. Why not settle down with some husband? Marry that poor besotted blacksmith you mentioned."

He could see the girl bristle at his words.

“I shall only ever marry for love, and there is no one I’ve met I’ve felt any stirrings for. I’ll remind you that Robert is in love with *Lucia*, the milliner’s assistant.” She paused before adding a barb of her own. “And if you think me a spinster, you must be positively ancient.”

“I’m twenty-seven, so yes, I am your elder, child. And you’d do well to treat me with the respect an ancient man like me deserves,” he replied, pretending to be quite serious about it. For a moment, however brief, she almost smiled. He saw it in her eyes and the way her soft lips twitched before she frowned at him.

“My lord?” Stodgens popped his head in the door of the dining room. “Dr. Danvers is ready to speak with you.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Stodgens.” He stood and Matilda followed him into the hall.

Doctor Danvers, a man in his late forties with silvery blond hair, was pulling on his cloak when they met him. He nodded to Arthur in greeting.

“Er, Lord Castleton, I presume? I’m glad to meet you.”

“Good evening, Dr. Danvers. Thank you for coming out in this weather. What do you think of Miss Wells’s condition?”

“I’d say she has a rather nasty cold, made worse by a drafty living environment. I visited her once at Meadow Cross cottage when she had a cold similar to this a few years ago.”

“Our cottage is a bit drafty,” Matilda admitted, shame coloring her tone. For some reason, that made Arthur angry. *She* hadn’t put the holes in the roof. It wasn’t her fault. The cottage was old, and for some reason, his uncle hadn’t thought to make any repairs. Had Miss Wells and Matilda been too embarrassed to mention the cottage’s condition, or was his great-uncle too proud to admit it needed work?

“Miss Wells will be staying here for at least a couple of weeks,” Arthur informed the doctor. “What should be done to help her recover while she is here?”

“I recommend hearty soups and bed warmers, as well as plenty of rest. I’ve taken the liberty of instructing the maid in

her room of this already. I hope that is acceptable to you, my lord?" the doctor asked.

"Yes, of course. Thank you for thinking of it," Arthur assured him. "Have your bill sent to me, and I will see it handled. You are welcome to remain here tonight as well. We have just finished dinner, but the cook will send up whatever you would like to eat in your room."

The doctor smiled in relief. "Thank you. I wouldn't mind waiting out the storm."

"Stodgens, show the doctor to a room and have his dinner brought up."

"Yes, my lord." Stodgens gestured for the doctor to follow him up the stairs.

"I should see how my aunt is feeling," Matilda said once they were alone again. She started to leave, but Arthur caught her arm.

"Return to my study when you are done, Matilda. I will have our agreement drawn up for your review and signature."

A blush stained her cheeks, likely because of his continued use of her given name, as well as the knowledge of what the agreement would say.

"Very well, my lord."

"Arthur," he corrected.

"Arthur." The way she said his name, soft, almost dreamy, gave his stomach a little tumble of excitement. Oh, this would be fun.

He watched her go up the stairs, unable to keep his eyes off her bottom as it swayed with the feminine move of her hips. Only when she was gone from his sight did he return to his study. He had a lengthy agreement to pen.



“AUNT FLORENCE?” MATILDA ENTERED HER AUNT’S bedchamber and found her propped up in bed, a bowl of broth on a tray on her lap. She looked better, despite her reddened nose.

“Come in, Mattie dear.” Florence held her hand out to Matilda, who came over to the bed. She curled her fingers around her aunt’s and gave her hand a squeeze.

Matilda perched on the edge of the large bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. I’ve got a nice bed warmer under my feet and it’s pleasantly warm here. The maid said his lordship set aside the warmest room for me. Can you believe that? I thought he might be rather rude given the letter we received this afternoon, but I think he’s far more pleasant than I expected. Perhaps the notice we received was sent in error. What do you think, Mattie?”

“I think... he’s arrogant, but he does seem to have streaks of kindness.” She thought of his offering the doctor food and a place to stay. Then she thought about the devil’s bargain she’d agreed to. “However, I fear that letter was not sent in error.”

“Oh dear...”

“Don’t worry. I am... negotiating for more time.”

“Well, that’s something,” her aunt said gently. “Perhaps we ought to give Lord Castleton the benefit of the doubt. It must be quite a burden to suddenly have this estate to deal with. I imagine he has a lot on his mind.”

I think he has me on his mind, Matilda almost said aloud.

“You should go to bed, dear. It’s been a long day and we should enjoy these rooms while we can.”

Matilda couldn’t agree with her aunt more. At the cottage, she and her aunt shared a bedchamber with a narrow bed on either side of the room. Tonight, she would have a large bed to herself, unless Lord Castleton insisted on starting their agreement right away. Part of her wanted to start tonight. Despite the guilt she felt at letting herself be used this way, she

wished to experience what he promised and hopefully remove her fear of the unknown in such intimate matters.

“Good night, aunt,” she said and kissed her aunt’s forehead before she left. At least she had no added worries about her aunt’s health for now. Florence was in a far better environment in which to recover.

Matilda made the long walk back to the earl’s study downstairs and knocked on the door with a shaky hand.

“Enter.”

She slipped into the study and stood in front of Arthur’s desk. He rose from his chair and slid a sheet of paper on the desk toward her.

“Read this, all of it. Take your time. Sign on the line above where I’ve written your name.”

She swallowed hard and took the paper so she could read the agreement line by line. It was lengthy, but straightforward. He defined the word companionship as “activities agreed upon by both parties.” Nowhere did he mention a bed or carnal acts, but she knew what she was consenting to and would never claim otherwise.

“I won’t agree to anything that will hurt or degrade me. Can you add that?” she asked bravely. She would not allow, even if it meant she would be cast out into the snow this very night.

Arthur took the agreement back and carefully added the words she wanted, and then he came around the desk and held out his palm to her. She placed her hand in his, not sure what he meant to do. But he simply held her hand.

“I may have a black heart, but even villains have their pride. I would be a poor lover if you could not enjoy yourself in my bed, and being a poor lover would prick my pride far too much.” His thumb made slow, soothing circles on her palm, and her eyes were held in trance by his. “There may be some discomfort when we first come together, but it won’t hurt again after that first time.”

“When do you...when do we start this...?” She glanced to the paper on his desk.

“I suppose that tomorrow evening is soon enough,” he said.

“Tomorrow?” She wasn’t sure why that made her even more anxious.

“You’ve had a busy day,” he said, then looked at her slyly. “Do you *wish* to start tonight?”

“No, it’s just...” She bit her lip, too mortified to say more.

“Matilda, what we will do together, it’s important that you speak freely to me, tell me what you’re thinking and feeling at all times. Being a good lover to you means I must listen to you and answer your questions. Be brave. You threw a snowball at a titled lord. Speaking your mind should be far easier than that.” He was teasing her, but she sensed he meant every word of what he had said.

“I’m anxious. I wish to do this quickly, to know if I can stand it or if I will hate it. It’s not knowing which that has me worried,” she confessed.

He didn’t laugh or sneer, didn’t do any of the things she expected him to. Instead, he took her hand, he still held in his, and raised it to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to her palm.

“Then we shall start tonight. I will ease your fears. Wait for me in your bedchamber. I will come for you in an hour.” He leaned down and brushed his lips over hers in a faint kiss. It sent heat rolling through her, reminding her of how she’d felt earlier that evening in his study when he’d made her come apart with frightening pleasure.

She nodded to herself, as if trying to convince herself that she hadn’t gone mad.

“I’ll sign the agreement.”

He gently let go of her hand, then moved a quill pen and a bottle of ink closer to her on the desk. She dipped the quill in ink and signed her name beside his.

It was done. She had signed herself over to the devil's keeping, and tonight he would come for what was his.

CHAPTER 4



Matilda was practically vibrating with anxiety by the time a full hour had passed. She half expected a path to be worn clear through to the wood floor beneath the fine carpet of her bedchamber due to her pacing back and forth. She actually jumped when she finally heard a soft knock on her door. She frantically smoothed her skirts, held her head up proudly and opened the door. The earl was in the corridor just outside, his tall, imposing figure dwarfing her. She wasn't particularly short, at least not compared to most women, but Castleton stood well over six feet.

His gray eyes locked with hers and he tilted his head ever so slightly, as if thinking over what they were about to do. "Are you still willing to—"

"Yes," she hastily whispered and stepped into the hall with him. The last thing she wanted was him voicing their agreement aloud. Servants heard everything in the house. It was their job to move about practically unseen. The last thing she wanted was the staff, who she respected for their kindness to her and her aunt, to see her as some sort of common trollop.

Castleton's lips twitched. He began to walk back down the corridor, and she rushed to keep up with his long strides. When he paused in front of a bedchamber only one doorway away, she blinked in surprise. He was staying close to her room? That was a relief. She could flee back to her chamber when he was done with... well, whatever he planned to do to her tonight... and the short distance reduced the chances of anyone seeing her.

He opened the door and gestured for her to enter ahead of him. It was another room that faced the wintry sea like hers did. It was not the room that Bernard, his great-uncle had slept in. She knew that Bernard had preferred a room facing the front lawn and the woods beyond. Bernard had often said that when he was in his bedchamber, he could see her and Aunt Florence arrive at the house whenever they came to visit.

This room was as she expected, deeply masculine with a heavy cherrywood bed, armoire and a washstand. There were two chairs faced a warm fire in the room which made the entire encounter darkly carnal. She spun to face Arthur as he closed the door. He had removed his coat between the last time she had seen him in his study and now. Matilda held her breath as they stared at one another. She blinked first.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” he offered quietly, breaking the silence.

“Yes,” she admitted. A little wine would calm her nerves.

He poured two glasses, and walked over to the bed and leaned back against it, his legs crossed at the ankles as he took a drink. His eyes swept over her slowly from head to toe, and she felt quite clearly his appraisal of her body as though he was imagining what she looked like beneath her clothes. She glanced away and took a deep sip of her wine.

“Do not drink too much,” he said.

“Too much?” she echoed.

“Yes. I want you to be relaxed, but I do not want you in any position where you do not possess the ability to tell me to stop. It is important that this is mutual between us.”

“Oh...” She took another drink and then with a trembling hand set her wine goblet down on the small table between the two armchairs. She wanted to get this over with. She needed to know she could handle him and his passion. Any further delays were only increasing her fear.

“Would you like me to undress or...” she asked uncertainly. She’d never been in this position, being a man’s mistress, and wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do.

His lips curved up in a crooked grin as he quirked a finger at her, beckoning her to come to him. When she stopped a mere foot away, he lifted one of her hands to his lips and kissed the tips of each of her shaking fingers.

“I admit, I am a heartless man to enjoy your trembling, but it’s only because I know you will soon feel so much pleasure that you will no longer fear the unknown.” His gaze trailed over her body again. “Turn around and I will undress you.”

Matilda gave him her back and drew in a quivering breath as his hands unfastened the hooks of her gown. When the fabric gaped around her body, she tried in vain to hold it up as a shield, but with one tug, Arthur let the gown fall into a graceful puddle at her feet.

“I think we’ll have new gowns made for you, ones of silk and satin. They will whisper against your skin when you move,” he murmured. His warm breath fanned against the back of her neck. He bent and pressed a feathery kiss on her neck, and the sensation of his warm lips on her skin made her suddenly dizzy. She’d never felt such a sharp and sudden bolt of desire shoot through her entire body before.

“You don’t need to do that,” she insisted through the haze of her growing desire.

“Let me spoil you... That’s half the fun for me. I like to see a woman’s eyes sparkle when she opens a box of new jewels, or when she shows off a new gown.”

He unfastened the laces of her stays and she shimmied out of her petticoats, which made him chuckle from behind her. The place between her legs throbbed in response to him as if her body knew and understood something her mind hadn’t yet learned.

“Remove your boots, stockings and chemise,” he said. She bent and removed her worn, black boots and peeled down the thin stockings before she held her breath and lifted her chemise over her head and let it drop to the floor. She could feel his eyes on her body from behind, like a tangible caress.

“You ... are ... *beautiful*,” he murmured. She peered at him over her shoulder at the sound of awe in his voice.

“I am?” she dared to respond.

Arthur’s gray eyes were dark with passion as he gestured for her to face him. She did, but blushed as she realized her breasts and her lovely body were bared to him.

“Absolutely stunning,” he assured her. He reached out, almost hesitantly, to brush the backs of his fingers over one of her nipples. That same bolt of desire shot through her again and he groaned softly, as if sensing how that single caress had made her feel.

“Making love to you may kill me, Matilda, but I can’t seem to find the will to care. What a way to die.” He seemed mesmerized by her naked body, and a strange little thrill of feminine power replaced much of her fear.

Unsure what to do next, she gasped in surprise as he lifted her up by the waist and placed her on the edge of his bed. Her new height brought her mouth to the same height as his own. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her softly, almost sweetly, but there was a hint of wickedness to it by the way he used his tongue. She was vaguely aware of his hips moving between her parted thighs, opening her further. After a moment she calmed and simply enjoyed the kiss.

“That’s it, just relax and lay back,” he encouraged when he finally lifted his head from hers. He pressed a gentle palm on her shoulder, urging her to lie down on the bed.

“Are you going to—”

“Not yet,” he replied, seeming to sense her question, and he was quick to reassure her. His continual efforts to put her at ease surprised her.

“Lie back and keep your legs open for me, darling.” He spoke so soothingly that she could relax, even though she closed her eyes in the silly, childish thought that it would hide her from him.

His large hands settled on her knees, his palms warm on her skin. “Just breathe and enjoy when I’m about to do.” It

was her only warning before he bent between her thighs and his mouth kissed her lower belly, making a searing path down to her mound.

“My lord...” She groaned helplessly as his lips sucked on the tight bundle of nerves that she’d only ever dared to touch herself when alone. His laughter was soft and hot against her wet flesh.

“Hmmm,” he almost purred. “I like it when you call me my lord.” His lustful words made her bite her lip to keep from making a sound of protest or encouragement.

He flicked his tongue against the folds of her sex before licking her deeply and she let out a shriek as that frightening pleasure began to build. Arthur laid one palm flat on her stomach and slid it slowly up between her breasts to lightly hold her down on the bed when she tried to sit up. She arched her back, her breasts jutting up as she thrashed her head back and forth on the bedspread.

He continued to torture her with his mouth until she couldn’t stand it anymore. The climax exploded out of her as though a cannon had fired in the room. Her very world rumbled with the sheer force of it. She collapsed back, limp and exhausted, on the bed as he pressed more kisses up her body. Then she felt his lips tug on one sensitive peak as he nipped her lightly with his teeth. Matilda forced her eyes open and glanced down the length of her body to see Arthur sucking at her breast. His long, dark lashes fluttered as he suddenly looked up at her. Their gazes locked as he continued to suck. Her womb clenched in a fresh spasm of desire at watching him. How could her body recover from the first time so quickly?

He released her nipple with a soft pop of his lips and then he stood, still positioned between her thighs. He removed his clothes quickly, letting her enjoy the view of his body as he bared it. He was sculpted to perfection, with muscles rippling in places she’d never imagined someone could even have muscles. And he was so very large. His height, his limbs, his muscles and even that male part of him... She felt dwarfed by his size.

“Easy, darling,” he chuckled. “Don’t be frightened. You’ve come this far... We can go a little farther if you trust me. Do you trust me?”

Did she? She had no rational reason to, but strangely in this bed with him now, she did. He lifted her so she was sitting up, and he kissed her. Soon she was lost in that kiss, completely forgetting her fear until she felt something thick and heavy nudge the folds of her sex. She started to pull back to see what it was, but Arthur made a soft humming sound at the back of his throat and gripped her neck, holding her so he could continue to kiss her. And then she really felt it, the pressure, the thickness of his shaft pushing into her tightness. She squirmed, not liking the burning feeling deep inside her. He exhaled against her lips, and then she shrieked as he thrust deep. He held very still then, cradling her against his chest gently, and made soft sounds of comfort as he told her the worst was over. The burning pressure inside her eventually eased and Arthur cupped her face in his hands and peered deeply into her eyes.

“Are you still hurting?” he asked. “I had to do it quickly to get it over with it.” His eyes were, despite their passionate haze, full of remorse for hurting her.

“It doesn’t hurt, not as much...” she confessed. Matilda shifted experimentally and the little role of her hips made his cock move inside her. The pain faded and other, far better sensations began to ripple through her. She lifted her eyes to his, full of wonder at the feeling.

“Wh—what does it feel like for you?” she asked and then blushed wildly as she realized she’d asked him something sinful and far too intimate.

“I imagine it’s the closest to heaven a man like me can ever get.” He nuzzled her nose with his and then kissed her again before he gently eased her back onto the bed.

“Watch me take you, Matilda. Watch me fill you,” he murmured, his voice slightly rough.

She lay back and when she looked down the length of her body, she saw his large cock sliding out of her. She whimpered

at the sudden, strange sense of loss but a moment later, he was easing back in. She felt sore, but the pressure and pain were gone. His hands slowly lifted her legs up and letting her ankles rest over his shoulders. He gripped her thighs with his hands, holding her as he penetrated her deeply. It felt incredible and she couldn't stop from giving a soft little gasp.

“Fuck,” he cursed softly as he fully seated himself inside her and his hips bumped up against her bottom and the back of her thighs. “Touch yourself, Matilda,” he commanded. “Touch those beautiful breasts for me,” he growled.

Her hands went to her breasts and she cupped them, pressed them together, and then he pumped into her again.

“Yes, play with yourself, darling, let me see you enjoy this.”

She did what felt good to her body and played with herself, and he seemed to enjoy it. He gripped her legs harder, his touch almost bruising as he began to thrust into her harder and harder until the slapping of their bodies filled the room.

For the first time in her life, she felt like a wild creature out in the woods being claimed by its mate. She let go of her inhibitions and fell deeply into every pounding rhythm of their lovemaking. Her body bounced from the force of their passionate collision. She had to grip the sheets to keep from sliding up the bed. Arthur was ruthless in his mating, never letting up even when he could tell she was close to coming again. Soon she was soaring, her mind separating from her body as the purest, deepest pleasure she'd ever felt simply took her over. She opened her mouth, but she could only gasp for breath as her blood roared in her ears.

Arthur pounded against her for a few heartbeats longer and then he shouted, loud and harshly before he relaxed, and for some reason the sounds he made caused her to smile. He rocked deeper into her, his body tensing a second as he groaned softly. He cupped her bottom with one hand, giving it a light, reassuring pat. Then he smiled down at her as if pleased with her. He was breathing hard, but that smile he wore was so honest, so real that it confused her and dazzled

her. It wasn't the cold, arrogant smile she expected after what they'd just done. It was intimate, private, almost sweet.

"You survived..." he said between breaths. "Was it as awful as you feared?"

"No... in fact... it was rather nice," she admitted. She would have told him how much she loved it, if she hadn't been certain it would increase the size of his sense of self-importance.

"Rather nice? Hmm... challenge accepted. I will endeavor to do better next time." He chuckled.

Arthur stroked his fingertips up and down her thighs soothingly, and it made her body clench around his shaft in response with the secondary post-climax rippling of her inner walls. "That feels good, do that again," he said.

Matilda squeezed her inner walls around him, and he groaned. Then with a little sigh of regret, he withdrew from her body and walked over to the washstand and wet a cloth in the white and blue china basin. She tried to close her thighs, suddenly embarrassed. Now that they weren't intimately connected, some of her sanity was restored, and her shame.

"Now, now, do not turn into a prudish creature on me," he teased as he cleaned between her legs with gentle hands. "You deserve to enjoy pleasure. You deserve to enjoy sex."

He pulled back the covers of his bed and she sat up, her body weak as she tried to stand. It was clear he wished to sleep, and she was being dismissed. She bent to retrieve her clothes and attempted to lift her chemise over her head when his warm body came up behind hers and his hands settled on her shoulders.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Umm..." She turned around to look at him. "I assume you're done with me, my lord?" He tucked his fingers under her chin and lifted her head up to meet his gaze.

"Call me my lord when I'm buried deep inside you. I rather like that. But when we're like this, call me Arthur. Now why would you think I would let you escape?" he asked.

“Because you... you took me and now you’re done, aren’t you?”

His deep laugh was a rich sound that sent a delicious shiver through her.

“I’m done for tonight, only because I do not wish to hurt you. That was quite a lot for your first time with a man. I meant to be far gentler, but I lost enough control. You will likely be sore tomorrow, and I don’t wish to hurt you further. I do want to enjoy being with you and I want you to enjoy being with me, and that means holding your naked body in my arms tonight while we sleep.”

“Oh...” She blushed again when she realized they were standing there completely naked and talking. “You want me to get in the bed now?” she asked, hoping he would let her hide beneath the covers.

“Yes.” He scooped her up in his arms, set her on the bed, and then climbed in beside her. The lamps still glowed in the room, but he seemed not to care. He tucked her into the groove of his body as he resettled beneath the covers.

“Go to sleep. Stop thinking and worrying.” He pressed a kiss to her ear and let out a sigh and his body relaxed. She blinked in the dim light and wondered at the strange fact that she was in bed with the Earl of Castleton. He’d made love to her and made her feel the most amazing things. She was half-worried, half-excited about what tomorrow would bring. She was so exhausted after what they’d done, yet somehow she found peace and sleep in the devil’s arms.

CHAPTER 5



Arthur wasn't sure what woke him, but he reached instinctively for the warm female body in his bed. She wasn't there. He blinked blearily and looked around. It was close to dawn, and pale light was filling the room. He heard a soft rustle of cloth and saw a feminine figure standing near the windows, its pale light making her a silhouette.

“Mattie?”

The woman at the window turned toward him in surprise. Neither of them knew each other well enough for such an intimacy, but he wanted a pet name for her, something that tied him to her, at least while she was here. He spent most of his life living cavalierly but when it came to mistresses, he always had a bit of a soft spot for them. He enjoyed spoiling them, being sweet to them. It felt good.

“Why are you out of bed? Are you feeling all right?” He'd been than a little excited last night, more than he had meant to be. He hadn't been rough, but he hadn't been gentle either. Perhaps he'd caused her more harm than just soreness?

“I'm sorry. I always get up this early. It's a habit. I thought I should return to my chambers before one of your servants noticed that I'm missing from my bed.”

“I have two questions.” He sat up and ruffled a hand through his hair. “Why are you used to being up early, and why do you care what my staff think?” The thought of getting out of bed before midday usually gave him a headache.

She walked toward the bed, the silhouette turning back into a flesh-and-blood woman. She had donned her chemise and put on his banyan robe. It was strangely adorable to see the way the fabric dwarfed her, the cuffs rolled back on the sleeves several times so her hands weren't covered. He had never allowed a woman wear his robe before. There was something primally pleasing about knowing she was wrapped in his clothing.

Matilda tied the collar of the robe closed at her throat in a way that reminded him that she had been a virgin until last night. He would have to find a way to encourage her to relax around him when they were in private.

"I'm used to being up early," she shared simply, as if it made all the sense in the world that she should be up before a normal person would. "At Meadow Cross, it's only my aunt and myself. We have to rise early to light the fire in whatever room we plan to spend the day in, then cook our meals and bring in freshwater from our well. Then there's the chopping of wood, when I can find any, that is, and walking to the village to buy food..."

He stared at her in stunned silence. He hadn't given much thought to what she'd have to do without any servants. He'd simply noted it and moved on with his own selfish thoughts.

"And I care about what your staff thinks because I do not wish to be thought of as a trollop."

"A trollop," he repeated flatly. "You know... many men have mistresses. It's not such a terrible thing to be. It's even considered respectable in certain circles—"

Her eyes flashed with a fire that surprised him. "You may tell yourself whatever makes you feel better about your abuse of power. That doesn't make it any better for me or how others might see me. It's perfectly respectable and even expected for men to indulge in their hedonistic natures, but not women." She softened her voice a little. "Please treat me with a modicum of respect? At least in this one matter?"

He patted the spot on the bed next to him. "Come here."

She sat, hesitantly, and he cupped her chin, not from any need to force her to look at him, but because he enjoyed touching her. She leaned into him, and encouraged by her response, he stroked her cheek with his thumb.

“You are right. I am a hedonist and enjoy it thoroughly. But you are also right that I should respect you. You are no trollop. You are a lady, however poor in means, but a lady nonetheless, and I shall endeavor to treat you as such when not in bed.”

Her brows knitted in puzzlement. “And in bed?”

“Liking pleasure does not make you a trollop. In bed, you and I do what we like, act as we like, enjoy one another without shame. What do you think of that?” It was oddly one of the more honest conversations he’d had with a woman, and it felt rather freeing to discuss the matter so forthrightly.

“I... I think that would work.”

“Good. Now return to your room and take a hot bath. Soak as long as you like, then join me for breakfast.”

“I really should check on my aunt.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Do as you will.” He shoed her away and it was only when he sat alone in his bed, still aroused, that he smiled ruefully and shook his head. He’d had every intention of making love to her again when he’d urged her to sit on his bed, but then he’d found he’d focused on their conversation more and lost track of his own plans to seduce her. Then he’d worried about her concerns. How odd...

He rose from his bed, stretched, and retrieved another robe from his armoire before he rang for his valet, Jordan Lee, to help him dress. Lee had come with him from London. Proper help was worth its weight in gold, and he was damned if he’d stay in a place like this without a proper valet. Besides, he and Lee were of a similar age and similar nature, which made for a good match in master and servant. An older valet might have tried to act as Arthur’s conscience, and he had no desire to be lectured to every morning.

The valet greeted him with a smile as he entered. “Good morning, my lord.” Draped over his arm lay a clean white shirt, newly repaired with a bit of needle and thread. Lee could sew better than half the tailors in London.

“Morning, Lee.” He allowed his valet to dress him. As the man was finishing, Arthur cleared his throat. “I need your help with something of an intimate and delicate nature.”

“I will help in whatever way I can, my lord.”

“Good. I have taken Miss Matthews as my mistress for the next few weeks. She’s a sweet girl, and I do not wish ill things to be said of her once the staff learns about our arrangement. As I understand, the staff like her and I do not wish for that to change just because I’m a heartless rake.”

“The staff do adore her,” Lee said honestly. “They talked at dinner last evening about how they wished your great-uncle had been able to take better care of the cottage so that she and her aunt wouldn’t suffer.” Lee looked away as if realizing he’d said too much.

“Did they say why he didn’t?” Arthur asked, his tone quiet. It had been plaguing him, this worry about his great-uncle’s carelessness with the estate.

“Er... as I understand it, the late earl was beginning to... er... lose his sense of self at times. He was growing forgetful. Miss Matthew’s father had always handled so much of the estate’s affairs. When he passed away, your great-uncle was at loss, and as he aged it grew worse. I don’t think he was quite aware of how dire the situation at Meadow Cross had become, and the ladies themselves were too embarrassed to ask for help.”

“Ahh...” Arthur felt a strange twinge of guilt in his chest, thinking of old Bernard puttering around the house, lost and forgetful. No wonder he’d clung to Matilda and Florence for company.

“Are you... upset... my lord? The staff were only... talking. They are fiercely loyal to this house and protective of Miss Matthews and Miss Wells.”

“I’m not angry, Lee. Be honest with me. Now, will you champion the girl if anyone speaks ill of her?”

His valet nodded.

“Good. And you may tell the staff during the next meal that you heard directly from me that I will be working on repairs the cottage. It is why Miss Matthews and her aunt will be our guests for the holidays.”

“I will, my lord,” Lee assured him as he finished with Arthur’s sleeve. “Is it true that the women are still to be... evicted?”

“Tell them no for now. I haven’t decided yet what I wish to do.” Arthur didn’t want his staff poisoning his food for being a heartless bastard.

“I will spread word to the staff.”

“Good.” Arthur retrieved his favorite pocket watch from a box, checked the time, and wound it before he slipped it into his waistcoat. Then he proceeded to the dining area downstairs, where he found breakfast waiting for him. He ate alone, reading a copy of the *Morning Post* and was finishing when Matilda appeared in another old green gown that looked thin enough to blow apart in a stiff breeze.

“Ahh, there you are. Was your bath nice?” he asked.

Her face turned a brilliant shade of red, and she glanced at the footman hovering near the sideboard full of breakfast dishes.

“Yes,” she whispered as she chose a seat close to Arthur. He doubted it was out of any desire to be near him, but rather to keep their conversation from being overheard.

“Good. Are you sore?” He kept his voice low to protect her from further embarrassment.

“A little, but... but not in a terrible way.”

“I’m glad to hear that. You may request a bath whenever you wish. I want you to suffer no discomfort while staying at Castleton Hall. Now, eat and keep me company while I finish my paper.”

She arched a brow. “You really are used to having everything and everyone at your beck and call,” she murmured before filling a plate of food. He was glad to see she was eating more this morning.

“So,” he began as he folded up his paper. It hurt his eyes to read too long, and he didn’t want her to know that. She eyed it with hope, and after a moment he passed it to her. She all but snatched it up and eagerly opened it.

“So,” he began again. “I must dig through the attics and work on inventory for the estate today. You are free to do as you please. This evening I should like to dine with you, of course...” He left the rest of his desires unspoken. Her gaze lifted from the paper and she answered with a slight nod of agreement.

“Good.” He drummed his fingertips on the table as she ate and read the paper without giving him another glance. She seemed quite engrossed in it.

“Are you an avid reader of the *Post*?” he asked as she finished a slice of marmalade toast.

“What?”

“The paper. I take it you enjoy it?”

“Er... yes. Aunt Florence and I... we can only afford to buy the paper every few months or so.”

Arthur frowned. “Is the income my great-uncle paid the only means you and your aunt truly have to live on?”

She swallowed hard. “Yes...”

“Christ,” he muttered. Her face reddened again, and he wondered if she ever felt light-headed from her constant blushing.

She finished her breakfast and folded the newspaper with such reverent care that something twisted sharply in Arthur’s chest. He waved a footman over.

“Please put the paper in Miss Matthew’s room.”

She reluctantly let the servant carry the paper away, then turned to Arthur. “Did you say you were planning to investigate the attics and prepare an inventory?”

“Yes.” It was not something he looked forward to. “I need to know if there is anything of value stored upstairs that Uncle Bernard forgot about.”

“I... Perhaps I could help you. I have nothing better to do and am not used to being idle.”

He hesitated a moment, then stood. “All right. Come with me while I fetch some paper and ink.”

Her eyes brightened with a joy he hadn't expected. Who could possibly be excited about digging through old trunks? He certainly wasn't, but he would enjoy some company in the task.

Once armed with paper, quills and a bottle of ink, they made the lengthy trek up to the topmost floors of the house, past the servants' wings. Arthur navigated the old, rickety staircase to the central attic first, lest the boards break. Once convinced it was safe, he waved Matilda to follow him up. A single small window allowed light into the dusty space.

“Right...” he muttered as he put his hands on his hips and studied the space, trying to figure out where to begin.

“Perhaps we should start at one end and work our way across?” Matilda suggested.

“Fair enough.” He dragged a large trunk toward her and then picked her up and set her down on the closed lid. She squeaked in surprise at being manhandled by him, which made him chuckle. He settled the paper and ink in her lap.

“You record the inventory. I will call out what I find.”

She daintily wiped dust off the trunk and settled, then set her bottle of ink down and dipped her quill into it.

“I'm ready.”

He worked through the trunks on the left side first, working his way toward her, calling out the clothing and various keepsakes of his ancestors and whether he wanted to

keep the item, sell it or have it disposed of. He then found half a dozen portraits of noble men and women, and wondered aloud why they wouldn't be hanging up in the portrait gallery downstairs.

“Perhaps they have scandalous pasts,” Matilda suggested.

“It's possible. Perhaps someday, some young fellow will be up here again and find my portrait among the rest,” Arthur chuckled. “Poor devil. I wouldn't envy him the task.”

He also uncovered several old gowns from sixty or seventy years ago that had been perfectly preserved in the airtight trunks. When Matilda saw the dresses, her eyes grew wide. It gave him an idea.

“I don't suppose you could use these? Cut them up and use the cloth to make new gowns?” he offered. “For now, I mean. I plan to have a dressmaker come soon.”

“Perhaps only some minor alterations might be required to make them wearable again,” she said. He gathered up the silk and satin gowns and set them in an empty trunk by the stairs for later. Then he returned to his inventory.

By the time they were done, all that remained was the trunk Matilda was sitting on. She rushed to move off it before he could pick her up again. They knelt side by side as he opened the chest. It was full of letters bound with blue ribbons. He picked up one packet and stared at the ink, which had faded to a light brown.

“These have the seal of Devon Brynnwood, Bernard's grandfather.” Arthur recognized the seal from old land records when he and Fulton had reviewed the papers in Bernard's desk last week.

“If they've been kept, perhaps they are important?” Matilda suggested.

“Perhaps.” He thumbed through the nearest stack of letters and sighed. “I'll read them later and have a footman collect the trunk of gowns and letters.”

They stood and he closed the trunk before he collected the remaining paper and ink. When they came back downstairs, it

was late afternoon. They'd completely missed luncheon. Miss Wells sat in the drawing room, looking much better, and Arthur excused himself to let Matilda tend to her aunt. He had his great coat brought down, along with his hat and gloves, and called for his horse to be saddled. It was time to see what the local villagers were capable of when it came to cottage repairs.



MATILDA RETRIEVED THE NEWSPAPER FROM HER ROOM AND discussed several articles with Aunt Florence that afternoon. She'd been told that Arthur had ridden into town, and she found herself both relieved at his absence and yet a little disappointed. It had been interesting and even amusing spending much of the day in his company when he wasn't singularly focused on seducing her. She'd found him to be very clever, and he liked not only to laugh but to make her laugh as well. It was not at all what she'd expected from a man who'd been so coldly arrogant upon their first meeting.

By early evening her aunt, feeling tired, had gone up to bed and said she would take dinner in her room. Matilda was expecting to dine alone and thought perhaps she'd still be alone until Arthur walked into the dining room a few minutes later.

"My apologies," he said as he took his appointed seat at the end of the table. A footman was quick to serve him a bowl of soup.

"Please do not apologize. I'm sure you had important business in the village." She ate her soup primly, feeling more than a little annoyed at herself for actually missing him... a little, she quickly amended.

"I did, as it turns out," he declared with pride. "I've found several workers to start repairing the cottage tomorrow."

She stilled, her spoon half raised to her mouth. "So soon?"

"Yes, I thought perhaps it would be good to give the local men some employment this time of year. It turns out I was

right in thinking they needed work. I thought I should be here to supervise at least the start of the repairs while I am here. Of course, I won't pay them anything above the going rate for labor. I'm not so charitable as that."

"Does that mean the cottage will be repaired much sooner than the spring?" That gave her a flash of hope. If they could avoid the winter drafts in January and February, she and Aunt Florence might avoid any other illnesses.

"I believe so, if these men I've hired are halfway decent in their skills."

"Oh, I'd like to thank you for the paper this morning," she added. "My aunt and I enjoyed reading it. I like to keep up with the latest financial reports and economic discussions, and she enjoys the discussion of the plays and the operas currently playing, not that she has ever seen one."

Arthur's brows rose. "I'm glad to hear that. You are welcome to the paper every day, once I am through with it." He eyed her over the next course of food. "Pray tell, what interests you about the financial section?"

"I follow the consols, and enjoy researching new investment opportunities. I have no money, but I enjoy pretending that I invest in things and then track their outcomes."

He leaned forward. He'd never heard of a woman speak about consols before. He knew what they were of course, the consols were short for "consolidated annuity bonds" that the bank of England issued. To hear a woman discuss financial matters was rather fascinating.

"Oh? And how are your pretend investments doing?" He seemed genuinely curious and not patronizing.

"Quite well. I've been focused on textiles. Cotton is growing rapidly due to the expansions of the mills in the north. I suspect soon it will dominate our exports in England."

"Is it? I should pay more attention to such things."

For the rest of dinner, they discussed everything from investments to the arts. Matilda asked him all manner of

questions about London, from the museums and galleries to the bookshops and theaters. He even told her about a charming place called Gunter's Ices that he enjoyed visiting in the warmer months.

Once they had finished dinner, Arthur offered to escort her to the library to collect some books to read that evening, which she readily agreed to.

"Did my great-uncle ever lend you books?" he asked as he held the library door open for her.

"Oh yes, but I always felt terrible about asking him to."

"Well, do not feel terrible about asking me. Come here anytime and choose whatever you wish." They walked toward one end of the library where a servant had lit a fire in the tall marble fireplace. "I don't suppose I shall be making much use of them."

"You don't enjoy reading?" she asked.

"I used to, when I was a lad." Arthur looked wistfully around at the shelves. "I should let you enjoy your night and rest before we... continue our relationship, but I admit I feel rather envious of these books right now."

"Then spend the night reading with me," she suggested.

"I..." He hesitated, thinking of how much his head would ache. "It's... not easy for me to read for a while... not without..."

"Not without what?" she asked.

He frowned, not wanting to admit it, but damn her, she had a way of making him speak truths he'd rather keep hidden.

"Without my spectacles."

"Oh... Well, then fetch them so we can read and then perhaps, after that, we could retire to your room and do things that do not require spectacles. I may not be as sore as I was this morning." She sensed he was embarrassed by having to wear spectacles but she thought it was rather charming.

He grinned roguishly. “Well, in that case, I’m quite ready for that.” He left to retrieve his spectacles and when he returned, he walked over to peruse the shelves and she joined him. She selected Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* while he chose a lurid gothic novel that made her laugh and roll her eyes when he waved it under her nose. After a few minutes, they both settled down by the fire and read in companionable silence while the flames crackled and popped on the logs.

Normally Matilda could get lost in almost any book, but sitting so close to Arthur on the cozy settee, she kept replaying over and over how it felt to be with him last night. She’d spent far too long in her bath that morning stroking her hands over her body, discovering it as if for the first time. She’d been sore, but not in a bad way. It was as though she’d been awakened in some way by Arthur’s touch, and she wanted more.

She lowered her book a few inches from her lap and peeped at Arthur out of the corner of her eye. He seemed to be completely absorbed in his novel. His dark hair fell into his gray eyes, and something sinful fluttered in her lower belly.

“If you *want* me, you need only say so,” he said softly, his eyes still focused on his book.

She was still for a long moment, debating whether she was brave enough to ask him for what she wanted. She slowly closed her book and set it aside. He continued to read his own tome and seemed to be paying no attention to her, yet the room felt charged with a tension so thick it made her body hum with excitement.

Matilda got up and stood in front of him. She leaned over, removed his novel from his hands, and lifted his spectacles off his face, setting them on the little side table nearby. He leaned back in his chair and spread his legs slightly so she could stand between his knees. She brushed his dark hair back, and he gazed up at her with gray eyes full of lust and fire that made her feel so alive. She didn’t know how to seduce a man, but in that instant, she wanted to try.

Arthur continued to sit there, content to let her control this encounter, which empowered her in some undefinable way. She eased down on his lap and lifted up one of his hands, examining his powerful fingers as she massaged his palm. His lashes lowered as he relaxed at her touch.

Feeling impish and wanton, she sucked the tip of his index finger between her lips. She didn't know if this was something she should do; she only knew that she wanted to, and perhaps that was reason enough. He watched her, fascinated, as she drew a second finger into her mouth, sucking lightly on them until he shifted restlessly beneath her.

“The things I could teach you...” he groaned.

Matilda, lost in the moment, dared to ask, “What things?”

“I'm half afraid to tell you. You might faint dead away.” He was teasing, but only partly. She knew that this was the moment she could choose to embrace her passion, or turn away from it and simply endure the next two weeks. She was tired of enduring, tired of resisting, tired of letting the rules of others dictate her life. If she wanted to be a wanton creature, then she should give herself that freedom. It wasn't as if she had a reputation to ruin. She'd already been deemed by most as a lost cause, a woman with no real chance at love because the world had closed its doors to her. Now she was beating them down, come what may.

Arthur pushed his fingers back into her mouth and stared at her lips as he spoke.

“I placed my mouth between your legs last night. I sucked on that little button so crucial to your pleasure, and I licked you.” He spoke the wicked words so softly, huskily, that she trembled and her tongue flicked reflexively against his fingers as he gently pushed them in and out of her lips.

“A woman can do the same to a man. She can take his shaft between her lips and suck. It feels almost as good as being inside her.” He slid his other hand up her skirt and between her thighs to cup her sex, which throbbed in anticipation.

She wriggled, widening her legs so he could slip a finger into her. It felt so wonderful to have him touch her, to stroke and tease her into a state of excitement. She was so close, so close to coming apart. She stilled his hand between her legs and then slid off his lap.

“Mattie, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you. We don’t have—”

She silenced him when she knelt at his feet and pushed his thighs wide as he’d done to her last night. Then she fumbled with his trousers. He groaned and brushed her hands away as he freed himself. She stared at his shaft, more than a little intimidated now, but she wanted to try. She leaned forward and flicked her tongue against the tip. Arthur cursed, and his hands gripped the back of the settee as he spread his arms wide. She repeated the small lick, then opened her mouth and attempted to take him as deep into her mouth as she felt comfortable. His hips jerked and he groaned helplessly.

“Bloody hell, Mattie...” he gasped. “I won’t last. I...” He seemed to come to his senses and pushed her back.

“Was I not doing it right?” Matilda asked. She was mortified and wished for a chasm to open up and swallow her so she didn’t have to face him.

“Not doing it right?” Arthur’s voice was raw. “You’re *too* good at it.”

Before she could ask him why he stopped, he was lifting her up and setting her on her knees on the settee so that she faced the back of it. Kneeling behind her on the cushions. He wrestled with her skirts, shoving them up past her hips. He dipped his hips lower, bent her forward and then thrust into her from behind. He slid in easily; she was already wet and excited from the teasing she had done to him. This new angle of penetration was so different from last night, and it made her whimper and moan.

“Arth—My lord... oh...” She rested her head on her hands at the back of the settee, breathing in hard as new, harsher pleasures dominated her senses. Arthur seemed determined to

exact a sensual revenge on her—and she wasn't complaining. She wanted to beg him to go faster and harder.

He fisted a hand in her hair, pulling her head back toward him and he kissed the shell of her ear, his hips continuing their slow thrusting.

“I'll go slow and take forever... unless you tell me you wish for something else,” he warned, and then kissed and nibbled her neck. “You like this, don't you, Mattie? To have me bucking against you?”

Matilda quivered as bolts of desire burned her from her head to her toes, changing her forever into a woman who knew she loved pleasure. And she refused to feel shame in it.

“Harder, my lord,” she ordered, but it came out as more of a breathless plea.

“As you wish,” he replied and began to thrust in earnest. His hips slapped against her bottom as he held her by the hair. He breathed harshly against her neck and slid his other hand from her hip down to the front of her body, stroking a finger over that sensitive bundle of nerves.

Then he drove into her even harder and faster, filling her so completely she couldn't tell where she began and he stopped. The climax seemed to strike them both at the same instant, their cries coming together. In that moment, his arms around her, his body behind hers, Matilda was overcome with a strange flood of feeling. It wasn't physical, it was deeper, coming from a well of something so pure that all she felt was awe and wonder.

As she caught her breath and came back to herself, Arthur was kissing her neck and whispering soft things that only deepened that thrilling and frightening feeling inside her. Was she falling in love with him? She couldn't... Yet she feared that she was.

They stayed joined a long moment until, with one last kiss to her cheek, Arthur let go of her and withdrew. Shaken by the experience she'd just had, she wasn't sure what she should do next.

He fixed his clothes and then helped her when her hands trembled too much. “Come upstairs with me.”

“For more?”

“To sleep,” he said. “I want to hold you. You’ve become quite an unexpected treasure, Mattie.”

The way he said *treasure* made her heart clench, especially when it came with that softer, sweeter smile that seemed so intimate and only for her. It was probably a terrible idea to accept, but she wanted to be held by him.

Arthur offered her his hand, and she let him lead her upstairs. His gray eyes were like winter clouds full of lightning, and she felt herself in that freefall that could only be love. She was in trouble, but at that moment she couldn’t find it in herself to care.

CHAPTER 6



The days blurred together in a seamless flow of excitement and wonder for Matilda. She and Arthur fell into a rhythm of waking, exploring the world and then at night dining together, falling into bed and exploring each other. There were moments of exquisite clarity where Matilda realized that in another life, she might have met and married someone like Arthur and enjoyed this every day. She knew she was building castles in the sky, and someday they would vanish like the clouds they were built on, leaving only her memories. But until that day, she planned to enjoy every moment they had together.

She had plenty to distract her from thoughts of the future. She sat astride a lovely horse, one of Arthur's, and they stood together facing Meadow Cross cottage. A dozen men trudged through the snow carrying boards and tools. Arthur dismounted and tramped through the snow to instruct the men. Matilda's heart caught each time the breeze tugged at the coat draped around him. He cut such a dashing figure on a winter day like today.

She was comfortably warm in her new cloak and riding habit that the local dressmaker had brought to Castleton Hall a few days ago. Arthur had made good on his promise to have a wardrobe created for her. She had been living at Castleton Hall for ten days and now had a complete set of lovely clothes.

Rather than be prideful and refuse the clothing, she had gratefully accepted it, on the condition that her aunt be given a new wardrobe as well. It was the least Arthur could do given

that he had not changed his mind about the cottage. He had praised her for her negotiation skills and agreed to give Aunt Florence whatever she wished before he had tumbled Matilda back into bed, covering her with kisses until they'd both dissolved into laughter. He made it so easy for her to forget her uncertain future.

Aunt Florence was finally feeling better and had taken on a secretarial role by assisting Mr. Fulton with estate business whenever he visited from London. Everything felt *perfect*, perhaps too perfect.

Arthur called out to her. "Mattie, come and see this."

She slid from her horse and came to join him at the entrance to her home. Arthur was grinning boyishly.

"I was thinking of adding a second bedchamber and some stables. Perhaps a little yard for a milk cow and chickens?" He gestured for her to follow him into the house. It felt so different already. The old, faded wallpaper had been removed and a new pale rose satin wallpaper put up. He'd even had all the watercolor paintings that Aunt Florence had done rehung on the walls.

"I'm thinking we should also expand the kitchen," he continued. "I've outlined some plans, but I would like your thoughts, of course." He led her to a table laden with several blueprints and tapped a finger on various new additions.

Matilda's head was spinning. "Arthur... this is wonderful, but Aunt Florence and I can't afford any of this."

Arthur's boyish excitement changed to a soft seriousness. He clasped one of her hands in his and escorted her to the bedchamber she shared with her aunt. With all the workers around, it gave them a moment to be alone.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and studied her. "I've been thinking. "When I first came here, I could see only the debt this place was generating. And in my frustration and haste to correct what I saw as a huge oversight, I did not think clearly. However, I have more than enough of my own money and more than enough time to turn this estate around. I'm

thinking more clearly now. I wish to uphold my great-uncle's stipend to you and your aunt, and I will be doubling the amount. I wish for you to stay here. Meadow Cross cottage is your home. I want to rebuild it for you. Make it a place where you can live a fuller life in."

She was stunned by his generosity, and yet she hated herself for daring to ask the question that was on her lips.

"And me? What role do you see that I play in this new plan for you?"

"I am returning to London after the holidays. My life is there, as are my friends, but when I come here to visit... I would like to see you." His fingers on her shoulders tightened slightly, as if he wished to pull her into his arms. "I am making no demand of you, Mattie. You can refuse to see me when I visit. Your decision will not change the stipend or the renovations. Your home is here. Your life here is safe. Do you understand?"

She nodded. Ten days ago, that would have felt like such a victory. But now her throat felt as though she'd swallowed broken glass. Her home was safe, her life was safe, but her heart wasn't. This carelessly handsome, hedonistic rogue had claimed it and seemed not to even know he possessed it. He must own a thousand hearts of poor women like her.

"Thank you, Arthur," she managed to say.

His smile broadened with relief. "Shall we go home now?" he asked.

Home. How one word held so much power, Matilda would never know.

"Yes, let's go home," she agreed.



ARTHUR WAS PLEASED. HE HAD FOUND REMODELING THE cottage to be highly rewarding, as well as engaging his interest in design. He hadn't known he had a talent for it until he'd run his plans by one of his architects and they'd agreed the new

design would give the cottage a fresh feel. It would also increase the value and the use of the property, of course, but he wasn't as concerned about that as he'd once been. Instead, he was pleased with the idea that Matilda would have a cozy house, a stable, a place to have a dairy cow and chickens, even her own bedchamber. It was not everything he wished he could give her, but it was a start.

He could not treat her like his other mistresses, move her to a quaint love nest in London and drape her with jewels and gowns. She was not the sort of woman who would have endured that life, let alone thrive. While she had agreed to the terms of their arrangement, their affair was private, something between only the two of them. But if she joined him in London, the beau monde would learn of her. She would feel the weight of her own embarrassment as his mistress as a unbearable burden.

Arthur didn't like the thought of that. Yes, it was the way of the world for men to have mistresses and suffer no consequences, but it bothered him to think of the women in such positions. Hunger and financial desperation and dependence were not sins, yet men readily painted women as wicked for doing what they had to in order to survive.

Arthur could not change his own past, nor could he change the sort of man he was, a man with passions. But he could change his treatment of the women he spent time with. And it would start with Matilda. She would have her home back, with no fears of rent or eviction. In return, he would enjoy these last few days with her and give her back her freedom. He just wouldn't let himself think of that future day when he left. No, he wouldn't think of it at all.

As he and Matilda reached the road that led to the hall, he was stunned to see a number of coaches pull into the driveway at the front entrance of his home.

“Arthur, who is it?” Matilda asked.

“I honestly don't know.” He rode his horse to the front steps ahead of her and spotted several men and women already clustering in the entryway of Castleton Hall. He was about to

call out and ask what the meaning of this was when a familiar voice boomed.

“There you are, Brynny!” Ezra Cowper, one of his friends from his London set, charged down the steps to greet him. Ezra was in his early thirties and built like a prizefighter despite his life of leisure. Arthur dismounted and met him with a hearty handshake.

“Ezra, what the devil are you doing here?” Arthur asked.

Ezra’s brown eyes sparkled with mischief. The man was his friend, but he was also a notorious gambler and rabble-rouser. Wherever he went, some form of trouble followed.

“We all agreed London was no fun without you, old boy. So we came here for Christmas, since you offered.”

“What are you talking about? I never—”

Ezra slapped his shoulder. “You said, ‘You really should visit sometime,’ and went on and on about how dull this place was going to be. So we took you at your word, and we’re here to rescue you from your dreary fate.”

“How many of you came?” Arthur asked, a little worried. His usual London set was a fast group of ladies and gentlemen who flitted from one social adventure to the next like butterflies.

Ezra chuckled. “Only half a dozen of us this time.” His eyes then strayed to something behind Arthur, and Arthur turned to see Matilda sliding out of her saddle and giving the reins to a waiting groom. “Well, well. Who is that charming creature?” Ezra asked him, his eyes devouring the sight of her.

“That is my tenant, Matilda Matthews. She and her aunt are staying in my home as guests while I renovate their cottage.”

“Tenant? You have a tenant, Castleton? How quaint.” Ezra’s gaze narrowed in a predatory way on Matilda. Arthur put a hand on his arm.

“Leave that one be, Ezra. She’s a gentleman’s daughter and lives with her aunt. She is not for the likes of you,

understood?”

“Oh fine,” Ezra grumbled. “You are losing your bit of fun now that you’ve been landed with that title of yours.”

“Trust me, my friend. I’m still fun.” Arthur thought of all the wicked things he and Matilda had done last night in his large copper tub. He had enjoyed bathing with her and making love to her in the hot water. There had been something wonderful about cradling her in his arms and stroking her with a soapy sponge. He found her ticklish spots and tortured her with his fingertips until she’d begged for mercy. The mere memory made him have to hide a smile.

“My lord?” Matilda spoke. His body tightened instinctively, since she usually only called him *my lord* when he was buried deep inside her.

“Matilda, allow me to introduce my friend, Ezra Cowper. Ezra, this is Miss Matilda Matthews.”

Ezra bowed and kissed Matilda’s hand. She shot Arthur a questioning look. He mouthed the word “later” to her when Ezra wasn’t looking.

“I suppose I had better introduce you to everyone,” Arthur said, and escorted her inside. The entry hall was filled with his friends from London, and he made all the necessary introductions. Matilda blushed and excused herself to change out of her riding habit, wanting to visit with her aunt before dinner. Arthur was relieved, not because she was gone, but because she wasn’t there for his friends to openly admire. Ezra wasn’t the only man in the room with hungry eyes, and for some reason that worried Arthur. He wasn’t normally a jealous man, and while he wouldn’t say he was jealous, he did feel... protective toward Matilda.

A willowy brunette swept toward him, blocking his view of Matilda’s retreating form. The woman wore a dazzling blue carriage dress that clung to her form, leaving little to the imagination as to the shape of her feminine assets. Della Cowper had not lost any of her enticing good looks since he’d last seen her a month ago, yet she wasn’t as appealing as she used to be. There was something... false about her that he’d

never noticed before. Everything she said and did, even the clothing she wore, was a calculated decision. There was nothing real or spontaneously sweet about her, not like with Matilda.

“Brynny,” she greeted warmly, using his old London nickname before he’d become Earl of Castleton. He kissed her hand and smiled at her.

“Della,” he chuckled. “I assume you’ve missed me too?”

“Of course I have.” Della laughed. “London is no fun if you aren’t there.”

Arthur highly doubted that. His set of friends were wild, even the women. They roved from one party to the next, pausing only to eat and sleep between their bouts of mischief.

“What made you all come here? I don’t have the house ready for guests. I—”

Della placed a gloved fingertip on his lips. “Hush, Brynny. Just have your maids dust off a few beds and we’ll be fine. What on earth are you doing all the way out here for the holidays?” she demanded. “It must be so very dull with nothing to do and no one to see.”

Arthur sighed. “I’ve been busying managing an estate, Della. It’s been quite enough to keep me occupied.”

“Oh, good. I wouldn’t want to think you’ve been so *bored* as to dally with anyone out here. Country girls are positively provincial, aren’t they?”

Arthur didn’t respond to the baited comment. Della had had her eye on him for years, hoping he’d someday decide to marry, but as much fun as she could be, he couldn’t trust that she would stay loyal to their marriage bed. She liked her fast life too much, and he would prefer not to wonder if the children he raised were actually his.

He would see his guests settled and then go upstairs to see how Matilda and Florence fared. At the moment, they were better company than this wild lot.



MATILDA THANKED THE MAID WHO HELPED HER CHANGE INTO an evening dress for dinner. When she rose from her vanity table, she found Arthur standing in the open doorway. He closed the door and came toward her.

“Mattie, I’m so sorry about today. I had no idea they were coming.” He pulled her into his arms and she sighed, laying her head on her shoulder.

“Perhaps I should stay with my aunt and keep out of your way while you entertain them.”

“I don’t wish for you to hide.” He kissed the top of her head. “But take care with the men, Mattie. I mean it. They are my friends, but they are also reckless. They live with a little too much *entitlement* and they aren’t above seducing innocent young women.”

“Like you did?” she asked with a chuckle.

“Yes, like me.” But he didn’t laugh with her. “I will see if I can convince them to return to London sooner rather than later.”

“As you wish,” Matilda replied.

He rested his chin on the top of her head. “I was enjoying having you all to myself,” he said with obvious regret. Then he released her and stepped back. “Are you ready for dinner?”

She nodded, though she felt far from ready. She had never attended a dinner like this before and didn’t know any of his friends. But she would find a way to survive. It wasn’t as if she would have to face these people again once they left Castleton Hall.

Dinner was a boisterous affair. The men laughed as they shared lewd jokes and the women twittered scandalous stories to one another as the courses were brought out. Matilda spoke only when someone addressed her, which thankfully wasn’t often. Most of the men shot her curious and appraising looks and the women conversely eyed her with disdain, but she

didn't care. These people were not important to her. They were just a string of strangers that she'd never have to face again.

Once dinner was over, the women and men did not separate by gender as she'd expected. Instead, they proceeded en masse to the drawing room, insisting on playing parlor games.

"Castleton, let's play Beast of Burden!" someone shouted.

"No, how about Pet the Pussycat?" another man volunteered, and that suggestion was met with loud guffaws.

Matilda hovered by the doorway, hoping to slip out into the corridor. Arthur's face reddened as the group converged on him, all throwing out ideas for games that Matilda had never heard of in her life and, given Arthur's face, were likely not games polite people played.

"We shall play Beast of Burden!" Della announced, taking over from Arthur, who clearly had no desire to choose a game. "Arthur, you must be the beast," the woman said in a commanding tone and pointed an imperious finger at him.

"No," Arthur replied coldly. "I will not play that."

Della stared at him. "But you used to love this game."

Matilda wanted to ask someone how the game was played but dared not call attention to herself. She suspected it was not a game that any decent woman would want to play.

"I'll be the beast," one of the gentlemen volunteered as he leered playfully at Della. "But only if you're my burden."

Della affected a false blush and nodded. The man got down on the floor on his hands and knees, while Della primly sat on his back as though she were riding a horse sidesaddle. The remaining gentlemen in the room all rubbed their hands in glee and laughed, all except Arthur.

"Who shall be first?" Della asked the men. The man on his hands and knees began to crawl around the room, and each time he stopped in front of another man, the man would grasp Della and kiss her soundly while his hands roamed over her body, cupping and groping in places that made her squeal with

false scandalized laughter. The moment Della stopped in front of a frowning Arthur, Matilda knew she'd seen all she'd needed to and fled. This was the wild life he led in London. Kissing women in drawing rooms after dinner. It was not a life she could ever live, not even if she loved him... which she knew now that she did, and she was damned for it.

She rushed from the room and headed for the stairs.

"Mattie! Wait!" Arthur caught up with her as she reached the middle of the staircase.

"I'm going to bed," she told him and tried to turn away.

He caught her hand, staying her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm just tired."

His eyes softened. "Will you... will you wait up for me?" Arthur dared to ask. She could only stare at him. He truly expected to take her to bed after... after what she'd seen tonight?

"I... No. Not tonight." It would be the first time they hadn't shared a bed, and she wanted to change her mind, but she didn't.

He nodded as if he understood. He still held her hand. "I don't want to play any of those silly games," he whispered. "I would rather spend my evening with you, even if we don't..." He glanced away. "I just want to spend the night with you, damn my bloody uninvited guests."

Until he'd said it, she hadn't realized how much she needed to hear that. She tried to smile, but it withered on her lips.

"But you can't leave your guests. An earl doesn't do that. Even if they are... scandalous, you must be better than they are," she said sagely. He sighed heavily and let her go.



ARTHUR RETURNED TO THE DRAWING ROOM AND SURVEYED THE chaos his friends had created. Friends. The word had never

seemed so hollow until now. These people made him feel nothing. He'd never realized that until he'd met Matilda and she'd made him feel... everything.

"She's more than just a tenant, isn't she?" Ezra asked as he joined Arthur who leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

"Who?"

"The chit. I saw you follow her out there. She's warming your bed. Well done, old boy." Ezra smiled. "Never took you for a fellow who liked spoiling innocents. Fun, isn't it?"

Arthur's frown deepened. "Please do not speak of Miss Matthews that way... or at all." Despite the fact that he'd used the word please, it wasn't a request.

"I'd be possessive over a pretty peach like that too if I could sink my co—"

Arthur grabbed Ezra by the throat and pinned the man against the wall, leaving him gasping for breath.

"Miss Matthews is under my care and protection. Say another word to dishonor her. I dare you," Arthur growled, and meant it. He would throttle the man if he breathed another noxious word against Matilda.

"Arthur dear," Della's voice called. "Leave my silly brother alone and come kiss me."

Arthur could think of nothing he wanted to do less. He released Ezra. The man coughed and then fixed his clothes, glaring at Arthur.

"Not tonight, Della." *Not ever*, he added silently. Everyone in the room stared at him in surprise at his show of violence. "My apologies, everyone, but I am weary and feeling unwell. I think I shall retire. Please enjoy the night." He left the drawing room without another word. He doubted that they cared he'd left, and now he realized so many things he'd been too blind to see until now.

He was done with that fast crowd. He was done playing silly games. He had other desires, deeper ones. Ones that lay

in the soil of the snow-covered lands outside and the stones of this house. He had responsibilities now and he'd come to cherish them.

Arthur stopped outside of Matilda's bedchamber door, his hand raised to knock. Then, deciding against giving her a chance to send him away, he simply opened the door and stepped inside. She was still dressed and sat on her bed, a book in her hands as she read.

“Arthur, what—?”

“I'm staying with you tonight, Mattie. I'm not going back down there. I'm finished with the lot of them.”

She set her book aside, her beautiful eyes studying him, as if peering deep into his soul. Her lips formed a tentative smile as she seemed to find the answers she was looking for. Then she held out a hand to him and, with a grateful sigh, he closed the door and came towards her. She was the only thing he needed tonight.

CHAPTER 7



Matilda did not come down for dinner or any other meal for the next two days. She took her meals with Florence in either her aunt's room or her own. She saw little of Arthur each day because he was forced to play host to his guests. He would come to her room each night and gently rouse her from sleep to make love to her before cradling her against him and falling asleep next to her.

When the men rode out on horseback the day before Christmas, Matilda ventured downstairs, hoping to borrow some books from the library. She tiptoed past one of the sitting rooms but halted when someone addressed her.

“Miss Matthews! We'd given you up as a ghost. Do come in and join us.” Della stood in the doorway, staring expectantly at her. She was clearly in charge of the women who had descended on Arthur's home. The other two ladies always looked to Della to speak first on almost everything and sought her opinions in their conversations.

“Oh, I don't wish to intrude, Miss Cowper.”

“You simply *must* join us,” Della repeated. It was clear it was not a request, but a command. Matilda would have defied this woman, but she did not wish to upset Arthur by being rude to his guests. The women were harmless enough, even if Della had been a bit cruel in her words. It was the men she wished to avoid. Even without Arthur's warning, she sensed these gentlemen were not to be trusted. They were wild and seemed to think all the world was theirs to indulge in as they saw fit.

Matilda reluctantly entered the room. “I suppose I could join you for a short while.” The other two women were playing cards together by the window. Della waved a hand toward a chessboard.

“Shall we?” Della asked as she settled down in a chair on the opposite side of the board from Matilda.

“One game.” Matilda took a seat, but she was not a fool. Della likely had every intention of beating her at the game. Games of skill were not her forte, but she had learned at a young age that being good at games did not always reflect one’s intelligence. There were other ways to prove oneself, but she would play Della’s game to be polite.

As they began to methodically move pieces, Della spoke.

“It’s such a quaint thing to have Arthur let you live here while he repairs that little shack. He’s such a dear, isn’t he? He’ll take in any stray cat off the street, no matter how pathetic it is.”

Matilda bristled more at Meadow Cross being called a shack than she did about Della calling her a stray cat. She might never have been to London, but she was no stranger to mean women. Even in the village, there seemed to be an innate need to be petty to a woman who was seen as competition.

“When I am mistress of Castleton Hall, I shall insist that Arthur tear down that old shack. He should build up something better in its place. Perhaps a romantic folly or a gazebo or—”

“Oh! Has Lord Castleton proposed to you? I send you my heartfelt congratulations if he has,” Matilda said with an open smile. Arthur had laughed last night when Matilda warned him Della had set her cap for him. He’d told Matilda quite clearly there was no woman he would be *less* likely to marry than Della. Matilda hadn’t known until then how much she had needed to hear him say that. By the way Della’s pouty mouth pinched, Matilda knew she had successfully called the other woman’s bluff.

Ezra’s sister leaned forward to whisper. “You think you have him, that you’ve won. But you’re just some provincial

little tart. A distraction, nothing more. You won't have him in the end. You've already lost the game." She was in a clear position to checkmate Matilda, but Matilda spoke before the other woman could declare her victory.

"You are mistaken, Miss Cowper. There is only one person at this table who has lost, and it is you, because I am not even playing the game." Then she stood and exited the room, the king chess piece untouched.

She passed a window by the front of the house and spotted a group of men riding up the drive, Arthur in the lead. She leaned against the window, admiring his approach. His horse left a clear path in the freshly fallen snow. She would never have him, not as a husband. He was too wild to ever settle down.

But for now... for now she had him as a lover. She had his laughs, his smiles, even his frowns and growls. She had all of him as hers for just a little while longer. As much as she hated to admit it, he had been right. She was glad she'd agreed to his bargain. She would have the memories of him for the rest of her life, even if she never married. She knew what it meant to feel his touch, his kiss, to give herself over to him and her own passion.

The men outside dismounted and once they had their horses taken back to the stables, they tramped inside, shaking off the snow. The scent of winter woods and northern breezes blew inside, along with deep laughter as they shared a recent story from London.

"Do you remember his face when you won that hand of Faro, James?" one of the men asked, and the others laughed. "I thought Lord Weatherby would *die* of apoplexy."

Arthur removed his cloak and caught sight of Matilda hiding in an alcove. He shot her a wink, and told the men to meet him in the billiard room. The others proceeded that way without looking back at him. Arthur glanced about and, when he was certain he was unseen, he joined her in the alcove and captured her in his arms, kissing her soundly. His lips were soft, but his kiss was a little rough with excitement. She felt

the same. They'd seen so little of each other in the last few days. She dug her hands into his hair, which was still chilly from the outdoors and dusted with rapidly melting snowflakes. Matilda never wanted to forget this simple stolen kiss and how it made her feel.

"How was your ride?" she asked as she stroked his cheek with her fingertips. He caught her hand, playfully kissing each finger.

"Well enough, but I wish you had been with me." He tipped her chin up to see her eyes. "Tonight is Christmas Eve. Will you join us for dinner? Please? I will endeavor to keep my friends on their best behavior," he begged. Then he kissed her deeply, convincing her with his wicked tongue to agree.

She sighed and nuzzled his chest, taking in the scent of the woods he carried with him. "Oh, very well."

"Good." He kissed her forehead. "I had better go." He still didn't leave, so she gently prodded his side with her fingertip.

"Then go. I'll see you tonight."

He dropped his arms and stepped back reluctantly. His lips curved in a lazy smile that made her think of those splendid mornings they'd shared in his bed. Her heart ached as she watched him walk away.

Hold onto this memory, she told herself. Hold on, and it may not fade.



"COUNTRY LIFE SUITS YOU," JAMES EDWARDS SAID AS HE handed a cue to Arthur.

Arthur took the cue and sipped his brandy. "You think so?"

"I have never seen you so at peace."

"Peace? Lord, James, you make it sound as if I'm dead, or put to pasture like an old stallion who's done with stud life."

Ezra and the other man in their party, Basil Roverton, chuckled at that as they poured their own glasses of brandy on the opposite side of the room.

“That’s not what I meant.” James leaned lightly on his cue as he watched the other men. “We’ve lived at a fast pace, and sometimes, well, I have the desire to slow down. To breathe. But men like Ezra, they drag you along and you can never catch your breath.”

Ezra raised his glass, a grin on his face. “Yet you cannot deny that it’s a wild ride.”

Arthur considered James’s words. There was certainly some truth to them. All of the hectic nights, the free-flowing wine, the women so numerous their faces had begun to look the same... Somewhere along the way it had ceased to be amusing and had become just another day of chaos. James was right about Ezra and Della. The wild pair were driving all of them to the brink. And Arthur, at least, was done.

“I think you may be right,” he sighed. He began to think seriously now about spending less time in London. It wouldn’t be a quick transition, but he could start making plans. Besides, if he spent more time here, he would see Matilda more often. That was certainly a strong motivation.

He and James played billiards with Basil and Ezra until it was time to change for dinner. With each passing hour, he felt more and more excited about the idea of spending more time here at Castleton, and with Matilda.



DESPITE THE FACT IT WAS CHRISTMAS EVE, NO ONE WAS behaving at dinner. The bawdy songs and scandalous stories had become more intense than ever. Matilda was certain that her face stayed permanently red while she ate. Ezra, sitting beside her, continued to plague her with all manner of questions about life in the country and everything she said seemed to amuse him, even the things she knew weren’t all

that amusing. But she bravely kept up her side of the conversation until dinner was over.

“Ladies, let us retire to the drawing room,” Della said, acting as hostess of Arthur’s home.

“And the men shall dine on port and cigars,” Ezra proclaimed as he shot the ladies a charming grin.

Matilda reluctantly followed the women into the drawing room, but was there for perhaps only ten minutes when a footman delivered her a private note from Arthur asking to meet her in the library. She excused herself and quickly went to the library, but it was empty. He must be having a difficult time leaving his friends. She contented herself by retrieving a book and sitting down on the settee to read. Matilda lost herself in the story and only looked up when she heard Arthur come into the room.

“Arthur—” She turned to beam up at him, but her smile faltered. It wasn’t Arthur. It was Ezra.

He bowed to her. “I beg your pardon, Miss Matthews. I only came to get a book to put me to sleep. Port has a dreadful way of keeping me awake. Please, do not let me disturb you.” He walked toward one of the shelves and examined the books while muttering to himself. “Dull... long... long *and* dull.”

Matilda returned to reading, until Ezra finally chose a book and slowly wandered in her direction.

“Arthur seems quite content,” he said after a moment. “He’s a good friend, and I’m glad to see him so pleased.”

Matilda held her breath. Did he know that she and Arthur were lovers?

Ezra sat beside her on the settee. “I always expected him to marry Della, of course. She is so well matched to him.” After a moment, he reached out, placing his palm on Matilda’s knee. “I would like to be a *pleased* man, too. I can pay generously for your favors. More generously, I assure you, than Arthur pays for his women. How much will it cost to have you?” His gaze held Matilda’s, and she felt very small, like a rabbit in front of a large snake.

“He isn’t paying me and we aren’t—”

“Nonsense. He told me all about you, even bragged to me and the others. The way he talked, it makes a man jealous. And jealous men are willing to pay to get what they want.” His hand tightened on her knee. She reached down and gripped his wrist, trying to pry his fingers from her leg.

“Let me go, Mr. Cowper. *Now.*” She didn’t yell, but her voice was firm.

“Name your price,” Ezra whispered, his hand slowly starting to pull her skirts up.

Matilda dropped her book. Before he could stop her, she slapped him. *Hard.* The crack of her own hand hitting his face made her palm burn, yet Ezra barely flinched.

“I offered to pay you far more than you’re worth, and this is your reply? If you won’t take my money, I’ll just have to *take* what I want.”

He gripped her by the throat and shoved her down on the settee, pinning her beneath his body. Matilda couldn’t scream—no air could escape her lungs.

Candlelight swirled above her as she thrashed. Her fingers clawed at anything to free the grip of her throat. Black dots closed in on her vision and her lungs burned as though she’d inhaled fire.

Suddenly, glass broke somewhere nearby. Someone roared and she wondered dimly how a lion had found its way into the library. Then the heavy weight crushing down on her was gone and she could breathe, but those first few inhales were agony. So much so that she leaned sideways and was sick on the library floor. She wiped her mouth and tried to bring her blurry vision into focus.

The sounds of two creatures fiercely battling drew her attention. As the shapes formed more clearly, she realized they were Ezra and Arthur. The two men threw fists and slammed each other into the nearest bookshelves, causing dozens of beautiful, gilded books to topple to the ground. Matilda clutched her throat, coughing violently as she tried to speak or

call for help. Arthur's face was a mask of rage as he swung a punch that landed solidly on Ezra's jaw. The man's head flew back and he slumped to the ground, landing on the scattered books, and didn't move again.

Arthur stood there, panting. His shoulders rose and fell for a long moment before he turned to face her. She stared back at him, seeing a stranger with the bloody nose and a split lip.

"Mattie..." He started toward her, but halted as Della and the others burst into the room, having heard the commotion. Della rushed toward her fallen brother.

"Ezra! What did you do to him, Arthur?"

Arthur stared at Della and then looked to his other friends. "Della, you will see your brother home tomorrow morning. The rest of you may stay if you wish."

"But it's Christmas tomorrow," Della whined. Ezra groaned on the ground but didn't move. Arthur came toward Matilda and before she could protest, he had scooped her up in his arms and was carrying her down the hall. He met Stodgens on the way.

"I know it's Christmas, but send someone for the doctor."

Matilda blinked back tears from pain and embarrassment as Stodgens went to send a footman to fetch the doctor. She heard someone else approach.

"Is she all right?" James asked, and though he had always been polite to her, the fact he was one of Ezra's friends made her flinch in response.

"I don't honestly know. He was on top of her, his hand around her throat," Arthur growled. "If she's not all right, I'll bloody well kill him. I never want to see the man again."

Matilda coughed and pressed her face to Arthur's chest, closing her eyes. When they reached her room, he set her down on the bed. His hands moved gently over her arms and legs as he looked for other injuries. He was careful not to touch her neck.

"Does it hurt anywhere else?" he asked.

She shook her head and winced at the pain caused by the movement.

“Christ...” He sank down on the bed beside her, his hands shaking. “I’m so sorry... I am...” He seemed to choke on his words. “That never should have happened.”

Matilda stared up at him, pain filling more than just her throat.

“You told him,” she said in a raspy whisper. “You told him about us.” She blinked away fresh tears. “He treated me like a...” She swallowed down all of the terrible words she could think of that should never be applied to any woman.

Arthur stared at her in horror. “I didn’t tell him. I only warned him to stay away from you. I told him you were my tenant and under my protection. That was all I ever said.” The truth shone so clearly in his eyes that she couldn’t help but believe him.

Arthur wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and saw blood streaked over his skin and the cuff of his shirt. He stood and crossed the room to the washstand and dampened a cloth in the basin before he cleaned blood from his face and hand. Then he returned to her, sitting on the bed at her side.

Matilda wanted to ask why Ezra thought he had a right to take her, but she knew why. Arthur might not have told Ezra of their arrangement, but he had guessed, and he had guessed correctly. She had traded her body for more time at Meadow Cross cottage. Men like Ezra saw women as objects, things to be owned, played with, and discarded. He was a man, and men ruled women. She wished more than ever that the world worked differently. But she was a pawn in the chess game of life, and she hated that... and hated herself so violently at that moment that something fractured inside her.

“Mattie?” Arthur touched her shoulder, but she flinched away from him.

“Please leave me alone,” she rasped and rolled to face away from him. She felt the bed lift slightly as he stood, and a moment later she heard the door click close as he left. Only

then did she dare to cry. Each sob tore at her bruised throat, reminding her of what had happened in the library, how the world saw her, and how she saw herself.



ARTHUR PACED THE CORRIDOR OUTSIDE MATILDA'S bedchamber until Dr. Danvers arrived. He explained what he witnessed in library, and the doctor's face paled.

"I will examine her and come back to you." Dr. Danvers stepped into the room with a sad look at Arthur before he closed the door. Stodgens joined Arthur in his silent vigil outside the bedchamber.

"Should I tell Miss Wells yet? She does not know of the incident."

"Yes, please tell her at once." Arthur felt like the worst sort of man. He had completely forgotten about Florence.

Arthur clenched and unclenched his fists as he waited. When Dr. Danvers emerged from the room, he spoke quietly.

"I do not think he was able to... take advantage of her. But he bruised her trachea, and it will take some time to heal. Speaking may be painful for a while. I fear the hardest part may be the emotional pain of such an attack. I have no solutions for that, I'm afraid."

"Thank you, doctor. It's late. Stodgens will see your usual room prepared."

"Thank you. It seems I'm quite the frequent visitor, aren't I?" He chuckled, though there was no mirth in the sound.

When Florence appeared at the end of the hall, she picked up her skirts and sprinted straight toward him.

"My lord, is she—?" Florence began when she reached Arthur.

"She's all right. She's inside," Arthur said. "Dr. Danvers just saw to her."

The doctor nodded. “Miss Wells, if you’d like to see her now, I can speak to you in the morning about how best to help her.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Florence clenched her hands tightly together in obvious anxiety.

“Andrew, please call me Andrew.” Dr. Danvers’s face reddened slightly.

Florence nodded and blushed at the doctor before ducking inside. Dr. Danvers took his leave while Arthur eased himself down onto the floor in front of Matilda’s door. He knew she didn’t want to see him, but he wasn’t about to leave her unguarded, though Ezra would be in no condition to do anything more to her. So he would spend his Christmas Eve protecting Matilda’s door.

As he stared at the window at the far end of the corridor, he glimpsed a star that shone far brighter than the rest. A Christmas star... one bright enough to guide a lost man home, if the man was only brave enough to follow.

CHAPTER 8



Matilda woke early as she always did, and for a moment she didn't remember why her throat hurt or why her aunt lay beside her on the bed. Touched her neck, she flinched at the pain, and the memories came flooding back. Matilda felt strangely hollow inside, like an old tree split by lightning that had cracked down the center but had somehow stayed standing, only it would never grow leaves again.

Slipping out of bed, she crossed the room to the window. She looked out at the brilliant green-blue sea, whitecapped with waves. The windows were frosted with a brilliant wintry glaze, and a breeze whistled against the panes of glass. After a moment, she turned back to the room and walked over to her bedchamber door. When she opened it, she nearly tripped over a body stretched out across the doorway. It was Arthur, asleep. He must have been sitting next to the door, but at some point had slumped to his side. Had he slept there all night?

Matilda retrieved a spare blanket from the bed and draped it over his body. He didn't stir. Lifting her skirts, she carefully stepped over him. She paused at the top of the stairs, just out of sight, and eavesdropped on the servants below as they whispered to each other.

"Christ, I'm happy to see that bastard gone. He should be dead for what he did to Miss Matthews," a footman said.

"I'm glad they *all* chose to leave," an upstairs maid replied.

“Bloody *swells* and their pompous behavior,” said another, which shocked Matilda a little, but the first maid seemed to agree. She hadn’t heard anyone called a *swell* in a long time, but Arthur’s friends were certainly far more wealthy and conceited than most people who lived near Castleton’s estate.

“They were so demanding all the time. It’s nice when it’s just Miss Wells and Miss Matthews here. His Lordship was right to kick out those dreadful Cowpers.”

Matilda sagged with relief. She had been afraid of being in the same house with Ezra, but Arthur had thrown him out. Seeing Arthur’s brutality last night, she’d been terrified, but now she knew he would never hurt her. He had come into the library roaring like a lion and defended her. Saved her.

“Mattie?” Arthur’s voice croaked from behind her. She turned around and found him sitting up, his hands gripping the blanket at his waist. He stared up at her, his gaze worried.

Rather than speak, she came over to him and knelt on the floor. He opened the blanket up for her and wrapped her in his arms as she settled in his lap. Arthur let out a sigh, and the tension in his body bled away. Neither said anything for a long moment.

“It’s Christmas,” he murmured into her hair before he pressed a tentative kiss to her cheek.

“Is it?” She’d forgotten after everything that had happened.

“Maddie, I’ve been thinking. I want you and Florence to *own* the cottage, not simply live there. It’s not entailed, so I can transfer a deed to you.”

She lifted her head to stare at him. “You would do that?”

“I would. The past few days have reminded me that I... I’m not a good man, and I want to do better. But it will take time. I need to return to London and make some changes in my life, but I do not wish to leave with you worrying about what the spring might bring.”

He was leaving. She expected it, yet it didn’t erase the sting or make it hurt any less.

Arthur cupped her face in his hands. “You’ve helped me make this decision, Mattie. You’ve made me want to be a better man. Never forget that. Being hit by your snowball was the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

This was the beginning of his goodbye. She felt it in every bittersweet word.

She climbed off his lap and blinked away tears. “You were right too... I’m glad to have known your touch, Arthur. I have no regrets.”

Arthur got to his feet, catching the blanket before it fell and holding it out to her. She took the blanket, accepting his sad smile that accompanied it before she watched him walk down the corridor to his own room.

Matilda entered her bedroom, closed the door and woke her aunt up by gently shaking her shoulder.

“Are you well?” Florence asked. She looked younger, more vulnerable than Matilda had ever seen her aunt look.

“Yes,” she replied, but in truth she felt weary. A weariness that ran deep in her bones.

“I was so frightened last night,” Florence said. “I should have protected you. I should have—”

“It’s all right,” Matilda said. “You couldn’t have known.”

Her aunt seemed to want to say something more, but Matilda gave her a hug. No words were needed. She knew how the other woman felt.

“I think it’s time we go home to Meadow Cross.”

Her aunt nodded. “I think you’re right.”



ARTHUR SAT IN HIS STUDY, STARING AT THE STACK OF LETTERS from his ancestor Devon Brynnwood that he and Matilda had found while clearing out the attic, remembering how such a tedious chore had been enjoyable in her company.

Stodgens arrived and stood in the doorway. “My lord... Miss Wells and Miss Matthews have returned to Meadow Cross cottage.”

Arthur sat up, pushing the letters aside. “What? Already?”

Stodgens shifted on his feet. “Yes, they thought it was best, given everything that has happened.”

“But the cottage is not ready. It still needs more repairs. They’ll have no—” Arthur halted hesitated and then made a decision. “Please send over at least a month’s worth of coal, firewood and food at once.”

“I’ll see it done,” his butler reassured him.

Arthur sank back in his chair. He felt listless, devoid of hope. He had hurt Matilda by letting Ezra get to her. He never should have allowed his friends to stay here. He never should have done a lot of things, and it had cost Matilda dearly. He had come to care for her more than he wished to admit. Hell, he might even love her, and he had no bloody idea what to do about it.

He stared again at the letters on the desk, desperate for a distraction from the pain in his chest, he pulled the stack toward him. He opened the topmost letter and began to read.

I AM A WICKED MAN. MY APPETITE SEEMINGLY KNOWS NO bounds. There is an emptiness within me that no amount of indulgences can fill. I came to the Castleton Hall to find peace, to find myself. That is when I met her. An innocent woman who knows nothing of the man I was. She saw only a gentleman. A kindhearted stranger with no title or state, simply a man staying near her quaint little village. I have begun to court her, to woo her as though I’m in the first blush of my youth and not a seasoned rake of two and thirty. For the first time in my life, I’ve been able to redefine the man I wish to be.

People can change. I never thought I could, but love makes anything possible. I’ve chosen to leave the rake behind and offer marriage to the woman who stole my heart. I wrote this

letter and the series of letters after it to tell my future sons and daughters of our courtship so that they can learn how I won the heart of their mother. She is my guiding star. I hope that our future children will be so lucky as to follow such starlight.

- *Devon Brynnwood, the Reluctant Rake*

ARTHUR READ THE LETTER A SECOND TIME, HIS HEART pounding. Could he be as brave as his ancestor had? Could he break away from the old patterns, the old friends, and marry Matilda? It would mean monumental changes to everything in his life. But the alternative... living a life without her... made his future seem bleaker and bleaker by the minute.

“Follow the starlight,” he said to himself, thinking of that star he had seen last night. Had Devon seen the same brilliant star when he’d written this letter?

Arthur opened the top drawer of his desk and dug through the papers and other objects until he found what he was looking for: a small, green velvet jewel box. He set it on the desk and used a small key to unlock it. When he lifted the lid, the heirlooms and gems of a century of Brynnwoods glittered in front of him. He carefully sorted through the priceless pieces until he found his mother’s ring.

The gold band held a sapphire stone surrounded by tiny diamonds. He smiled to himself as he remembered seeing it on her hand. She’d told him once that she would like him to give it to his wife someday. A young boy then, he had laughed at the idea of marriage. But his mother had been right. He was going to give this ring to Matilda and tell her all that lay in his heart.

He pulled a sheet of clean paper toward him and dipped the quill in ink, the sapphire and diamond ring sitting on the desk, twinkling in the light. He wrote every thought that came to him, every silly, hopeless romantic thing, but every word was true. Then he called for Stodgens to have his horse

brought round. He had one more thing to deliver to Meadow Cross cottage.



MATILDA WRAPPED HER HEAVY WOOLEN SHAWL TIGHT AROUND her shoulders as she stepped inside Meadow Cross cottage. So many repairs had been made to the house in such a short time that it felt almost new. Florence followed her inside and gasped.

“Oh Mattie, the wallflowers!” Her aunt pointed at their newly reframed paintings. They had called the art pieces “the wallflowers” because they were flowers quite literally hung upon the walls, but they also reflected the lives of people like herself, those unchosen shy girls who clung to the edge of the ballrooms when no one asked them to dance.

Her heart twinged with a deep, bittersweet ache. For two weeks she had not been a wallflower, but a rose blooming in the center of a wild garden. She had lived in the midst of the beautiful world that was Arthur Brentwood’s charmed life.

“Oh Mattie, look here!” Florence’s voice pulled her toward the kitchen. A new stove had been brought in, and even as they spoke firewood was being unloaded by two men in the back garden. Florence waved at them through the small window that overlooked the garden.

“It’s Jeremiah and Daniel from Castleton Hall,” Florence observed.

The two footmen paused to wave back before they continued unloading wood. Arthur had been so thoughtful to send them firewood since the repairs weren’t completely done yet and he wanted to make sure they weren’t cold. Matilda tried to smile, but her lips wavered. Arthur had changed, that was certainly true. He had abandoned that cold arrogance and need for pleasure at any cost. But because of those changes, she feared he would likely spend less time here, especially if he took his new position in the House of Lords as seriously as he was taking running the estate.

She sat down in a chair by the window in the drawing room and watched the woods. Snow was falling, thick flakes gliding through the air in a wintry dance. A hand touched her shoulder, and she looked up at Florence, a gentle smile on her face.

“You love him, don’t you?”

Matilda stared at her aunt in surprise.

Florence squeezed her shoulder. “I was ill, but I was not blind. You did something to convince him to let us stay here, and in the process you fell in love with him. I should have protected you better, from all of it, even him.”

“Don’t say that,” she said. “I have no regrets about loving him. It’s just...” She couldn’t finish. Her lips trembled, then she covered her face in her hands and wept.

“Oh, my poor darling.” Florence wrapped her arms around Matilda as though she wished she could become a barrier against all of the hurt in the world. But it was too late. Matilda had experienced life outside of Meadow Cross. She’d fallen for a man who didn’t wish to marry. It had begun as an act of necessity, even desperation, but that didn’t change what it had grown into. And it didn’t erase the pain.

“I’ll go make some tea. That always cheers you up.” Florence kissed the top of her head and left for the kitchen.

Matilda returned to staring at the snow, but couldn’t focus on anything but Arthur. Her memories of him wrapped themselves around her like a cloak. She was lost so deep in her own thoughts that she failed to notice the figure approaching the cottage. She jolted at the sound of the door knocker and then slowly rose, moving toward the door as though she were in a dream. When she opened it, she found a letter on the doorstep. There was no sign of the letter’s deliverer.

She retrieved the letter and stepped back inside. The parchment weighed on her, as though she carried a heavy burden in her hands. What could be the meaning of this? She broke the seal and stood there by the door, reading.

MATILDA,

I am many things, but I never thought a coward to be one of them. Yet that is what I have been. I've avoided marriage, I have avoided love. And even now I am a coward because I find I cannot say these words to you in person, but I beg of you not to hold this against me.

I did not know how much it would hurt to see you go until I lost you this morning. I had imagined the rest of my life without you would be livable, but it's not. You gave yourself to me for two weeks and I, ever the fool, thought it would be enough. You stole my heart and took it with you and now I find it hard to breathe. I am but a shell of a man when I don't have you, Mattie. I love you.

That's what this coward wishes to say. I love you to the point of madness. You have been gone only a few hours and already your loss is like a chasm inside my chest.

Come back to me. Come and make an honest man of me. Be my Countess, my wife. Be the other half of my heart as I wish to be yours. I will take you and Florence to London and show you all the things you've longed to see. And when you are ready, we shall return here and stay at Castleton Hall as long as you wish. Let me live again by your side. Come home to me.

- *Arthur*

MATILDA TRACED THE LETTERS OF HIS NAME, HER HEART pounding.

“Mattie, who was at the door?”

She passed the letter to her aunt. Even though Arthur's words were private, she wanted her aunt to read it and understand.

“Well...” Florence folded the letter and stared at her expectantly.

“Well, what?” Matilda asked.

Her aunt rolled her eyes. “Well, what are you waiting for? Chase the man down! He can’t have gotten far!”

Matilda wrenched open the front door, but paused as her aunt grabbed her arm.

“Don’t forget your gloves and a cloak!” Florence said, thrusting the items at her.

She kissed her aunt’s cheek and then dashed out into the snow, pulling the cloak over her head and donning her gloves as she ran. She saw a distant figure disappearing down the path in the woods that led to Castleton Hall.

Matilda got close enough to recognize Arthur, only to realize he was mounting his horse to leave. She called out to him, only the wind had picked up, drowning out her cry.

As he settled in the saddle, she bent over and gathered a hefty handful of snow into a solid ball, then wound back her arm and threw the snowball at him.

It hit Arthur in the back of the head. But he hadn’t yet secured his feet in the stirrups, and so he slipped off the saddle, falling to the ground with an *oof*.

Matilda gasped and rushed over. She had only wanted to hit him in the back and get his attention. Arthur staggered to his feet and brushed the fresh snow off his body.

“Bloody hell, woman!”

“I’m so sorry!”

His gray eyes burned as he swept his gaze over her. “A snowball? Again? What am I to do with you?”

Matilda, her heart racing, looked into his eyes, smiling past her tears. “You can marry me, you coward.”

His lips curved into a rakish grin. “I suppose I’ll have to now, won’t I?” He got down on one knee in front of her, and she covered her mouth with the back of one hand to keep herself from crying.

Only he didn't offer her a ring. Instead he quickly packed a snowball in his gloved hands. Realizing what he meant to do, she spun to race back toward the house, only to be walloped in her bottom with the solidly thrown ball.

“Who's the coward now?”

“Oh! Why you—!” She turned back to face him, arming herself with another snowy projectile, and retaliating. Arthur took to the trees for cover while he rearmed himself, filling the crook of his arm with several balls he could fire in rapid succession.

It didn't take long for the two of them to exhaust themselves. In the end, they lay side by side, battered, beaten, and laughing.

When he had caught his breath, Arthur got up on one knee again. Only this time, he reached into his coat pocket and produced a ring. A beautiful sapphire ring surrounded by diamonds. She got up as he reached for her hand.

“You have beaten me fair and square. Here's your ring, you silly, *wonderful* woman.” He removed her glove and slipped the ring on her hand, then put the glove back on.

“Life with you will never be dull, will it?” she said softly as he stood and held her hands in his own.

“I rather hope not. We have so much living to do, don't we?”

She nodded, her eyes brimming with tears. “Kiss me before I cry again,” she commanded.

Arthur pulled her into his embrace, and their lips met in a blur of burning fire. She felt a flame grow between them, one so strong it would never burn out.

This was the second time in her life she had received a letter that had changed everything. But today was *Christmas*, a day of miracles, a day of second chances, a day of love.

“Shall we go fetch Florence? We could be home in time for Miss Benson's Christmas pudding. I'm told it's quite

something,” Arthur said before he kissed the tip of Matilda’s nose, making her laugh.

“We certainly wouldn’t want to miss that,” she said, and slipped her arm through his as he retrieved his horse and walked back to the cottage.

“I don’t want us to miss *anything*,” Arthur said. His words burrowed deep in her heart, taking shape in the form of a future so bright, it filled her body with a beautiful warmth that glowed like starlight.

EPILOGUE



Five years later...

The Christmas Eve balls at Castleton Hall had become legendary. The best of London society and all the local villagers mingled on the dance floor. Matilda had flourished as the new Countess of Castleton, and the tall, dark-haired gentleman at her side had eyes only for her. In the last five years, Arthur had proven that at least *some* rakes could be reformed into better husbands.

Tired of dancing, Florence pulled her husband, Dr. Andrew Danvers, out of the ballroom and into a secret alcove. Nestled behind a tall potted plant, she kissed the man who had stolen her heart, the doctor who had seen to her care when she and Matilda had first come to stay at Castleton Hall. She told him she wanted to check on the children.

“Do you wish for me to come with you?” he asked.

“That’s all right. Stay here. I shall return and be ready for another dance, once I’ve rested my feet.”

She crept up the stairs to the nursery where her son, a miracle child she’d been blessed with at the age of three and forty, was sleeping next to Matilda and Arthur’s two children. She and Andrew had moved into Meadow Cross cottage after Arthur had finished his renovations, which had nearly doubled its size. The village had expanded as well over the past few years, and the small little world that she and Matilda had both felt so trapped in was becoming a bustling small city.

This transformation had partially been due to Matilda's shrewd investments in local businesses, though where the money for those investments came from had been a bit of a surprise.

Arthur had listened to her investment discussions and secretly put money into the various schemes she'd wanted to participate in, then revealed the truth on their first anniversary when the accounts began to swell with money. Florence smiled as she remembered the look on Matilda's face at breakfast that morning, staring at the account statements from the banks in London.

"It's yours now. It's the fortune you would have made, had you been able to," Arthur had said. "Do with it as you wish."

Matilda decided to become a silent partner in several shops that the village needed in order to grow, and Arthur had agreed it was a splendid idea. And those investments had paid off just as well as those that had been made in secret.

So much had changed in their small part of the world in the last five years. So much had changed in London too. Arthur had convinced Matilda to press charges against Ezra Cowper. Justice wasn't easy to achieve when it came to matters against peers of the realm and their children, as Ezra was the grandson of a powerful earl. But they'd successfully put him in prison for two years. Everyone at Castleton had slept much easier knowing Ezra couldn't hurt any other women, at least for a time.

Florence eased the nursery door open and crept up to the little bed that held her son. He was four years old now. Every day, she thanked the heavens for the miracles life had given her. A husband and a son when she'd thought she'd be alone the rest of her life. She kissed his forehead and then turned to the cradle that held the future Earl of Castleton, who was only six months old.

"Sweet dreams," she told the sleeping babe, then turned at last to the bed of Matilda and Arthur's eldest child. But the bed was empty.

“Emma?” Florence whispered in the darkness. Growing worried when she heard no response, she went back out into the corridor. Emma had a way of escaping the nursery to go exploring. Or, as she said her tiny little voice, “to have adventures.”

“Emma?” Florence whispered again. The girl giggled somewhere nearby and after a long minute of searching, Florence found the dark-haired child peering down the stairs at the late-coming guests as they headed toward the ballroom.

Florence chuckled and picked up the four-and-a-half-year-old girl. “Emma, you little scamp.”

“Mama and Papa are dancing?” she asked.

“Yes, I imagine they are, or soon will be. You should be in bed.”

“I want to see them dance,” Emma insisted.

“Oh, very well.” Florence carried the girl downstairs. They hid at the edge of the ballroom where she knew they wouldn’t be seen and watched Matilda and Arthur dance at the center of the lively crowd. Florence held one of Emma’s little hands and rocked her in circles as though they were waltzing, just like the people on the dance floor. When Emma’s head fell against Florence’s shoulder as she drifted to sleep, Florence grinned. It worked every time to put the little darling to sleep.

“I see so much of your parents in you,” she whispered. “You’re always off on adventures.” She made her way back to the nursery, but stopped at the top of the stairs when Emma’s father called out to her.

“Let me take her, Florence,” Arthur said.

“Oh, I don’t mind.” Florence assured him.

Arthur’s gray eyes twinkled as he climbed the stairs. “Please. I only have so many years left before she grows up.”

Florence passed the little girl to Arthur. He nuzzled the child’s hair and kissed her forehead. He smiled down at the child, though she was fast asleep.

Matilda appeared in the corridor. “Arthur, where did you go?”

“Up here. Our little one snuck out of bed again, darling.”

Matilda chuckled as she joined him at the top of the stairs. “Oh? She takes after you with her penchant for getting into trouble.”

“And she takes after you,” Arthur said. “She hit me with a snowball this morning. I think she throws harder than you do.”

Matilda laughed and stroked Emma’s dark curls back from her face before she kissed her daughter’s forehead.

“Thank you for finding her, Florence.”

Florence smiled. “She wanted to see you dance.”

“Oh?” Arthur chuckled and cuddled the sleeping child closer against his chest. Love shone in his eyes as he looked at Matilda. “Perhaps we should dance with her in the ballroom tomorrow. Show her how mama and papa waltz.”

Matilda stood on tiptoe and kissed Arthur on the lips. “I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

Florence shook her head at the lovebirds. “I really don’t mind taking her to bed. You two have guests to visit with.”

“Nonsense. No one will notice we’re gone.” Arthur held out his free hand to Matilda, and the pair disappeared into the nursery.

“Are you all right, my love?”

Florence turned to the sound of her husband.

“Oh yes.” She slipped her arm in Andrew’s and they returned to the ballroom.

“Up for one more dance?” he asked.

“With you? Always.” She laughed as Andrew swept her into the current of swirling dancers.



ARTHUR HELD HIS DAUGHTER EMMA IN HIS ARMS, TAKING IN the sweet scent of her. She let out a tiny sigh and snuggled deeper into his embrace. Then, with the regret all parents feel, he laid her down on her bed to let her sleep while Matilda tucked the blankets up to her tiny chin.

“She’s not allowed to grow a day older,” Arthur said defiantly. His wife leaned against his side as they stared down at their daughter.

“She will grow up though, darling. It’s what they do.”

Arthur pulled his wife into his embrace when her voice trembled with the same bittersweet ache he felt inside. That was the thing about being a parent. He loved his children and wanted them to be this small and sweet forever, but he also longed to know what their futures might hold and who they would become as adults.

He turned his attention toward the crib where their son, little Robbie, lay sleeping peacefully. At least he was still a babe, but he too would grow up.

“Let’s have another,” Arthur whispered in the darkened nursery.

Matilda stroked her fingertips over his cheek and traced the line of his jaw. Her eyes glowed in the pale milky light reflecting off the snow outside.

“I can’t believe that you, such a *wicked* seducer, could be so obsessed with having babies.”

He leaned in to kiss her, knowing just how to make his lovely, intelligent and passionate wife moan with longing.

“I think my favorite part is the *making* of them.” He wagged his eyebrows and Matilda laughed.

“You are incorrigible.” She took his hand and led him out of the nursery and down the corridor to their bedchamber. All thoughts of their guests and the Christmas ball were forgotten.

They’d spent so many nights like this, yet he treasured each and every one. Five Christmases ago, he had learned that his wife was the most wonderful gift he could ever receive.

Matilda had saved his soul and stolen his heart, and all he had to do was follow the starlight she cast as she guided him home.

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING *SNOWFLAKES AND Wallflowers!* Please check out the rest of the Christmas Wallflowers series by an amazing set of authors!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Smith is an Oklahoma attorney by day, author by night who pens adventurous and edgy romance stories by the light of her smart phone flashlight app. She knew she was destined to be a romance writer when she attempted to re-write the entire *Titanic* movie just to save Jack from drowning. Connecting with readers by writing emotionally moving, realistic and sexy romances no matter what time period is her passion. She's won multiple awards in several romance subgenres including: New England Reader's Choice Awards, Greater Detroit BookSeller's Best Awards, and a Semi-Finalist award for the Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley Award.

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