

A man in a black coat and a woman in a white dress are embracing. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. They are both looking at each other. The background is a gradient of purple and blue with gold bokeh lights and decorative flourishes.

AYDRA RICHARDS

~ A DUKE IN ~

Disguise

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty One](#)

[Chapter Twenty Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty Seven](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Dedication

To Mama Patti, who is the inspiration for Christine, the Duchess of Davenport.

Thank you for making me one of your 'kids.' It's an honor to be your extra daughter, and I will happily come over for dinner and bring you a bottle of chardonnay whenever you like.

Chapter One

London, England
May, 1830

Abandoning all pretext of etiquette, Alexander Dryden, sixth duke of Davenport, hunched over his glass of whisky and announced to his friends, “I’ve got a problem.”

“Ah.” This, from Grey St. Clair, Marquess of Granbury, preceding a long sigh. “Your mother again?”

“No. Well, yes. But no.” In truth, Alex’s mother was more or less *always* a problem. He had long since attributed this to the fact that the late duke, Alex’s father, had died before Alex had been out of leading strings. In her grief, she had buried herself—along with Alex—in the countryside at the family seat, and had devoted the whole of her attention to him. Presently—and for the past ten years or so—she had been on something of a crusade to see him married. But his general lack of interest in the state of matrimonial bliss had resulted in much wailing and gnashing of teeth, neither of which he had had very much patience or tolerance for. Thus the dowager duchess *was*, in fact, *always* a problem—but she was not *the* problem.

“Well, it *can’t* be the Willoughby chit,” said John Darling, Alex’s closest friend since childhood. “After that...er, *unfortunate incident*, her parents shipped her off to Yorkshire to live with some relative or other until the scandal dies down.”

Alex shuddered. Miss Lucinda Willoughby had pursued him relentlessly all last season. She’d turned up every place he had in single-minded determination to make a duchess of herself. It had culminated in an unpleasant incident wherein she had been discovered naked in his bed and had been thrown out by his staff. The only thing that had saved Alex from an unwanted marriage was the simple fact that he hadn’t even been in *London* at the time, having fled to Cornwall the night before beneath cover of darkness purely to escape her pursuit.

He hadn't, in fact, been aware of any scandal at all until nearly a week later, when his mother had written to tell him London was once again safe and that the redoubtable Miss Willoughby had been routed at last. She, too, had been a problem—but still, she was not *the* problem.

“No,” he said, “it’s *this*.” He fished in the pocket of his waistcoat and retrieved a scrap of folded paper, which he smoothed out and laid on the table before him. The letter had arrived Tuesday last, but he had never been terribly prompt at sorting his correspondence—a fact which had caused his mother no end of misery, given that he’d missed more than a handful of invitations to events at which she would have dearly appreciated his attendance.

It had also not been the sort of missive to which he would usually have given much attention. It had, in fact, languished on his desk for the better part of a week before he had noticed it. It was of plain foolscap, and clearly inferior quality—not at all the sort that would have been used by anyone of his social set, and thus it had gone overlooked. Even the ink had been substandard, creeping across the paper with spidery tendrils, giving the words a slightly blurred and ominous air.

Grey cocked his head and eyed the letter askance, but positioned as he was, and in the relatively dim lighting, he could likely make out nothing.

“For God’s sake,” John grouched. “You always did have a flair for the dramatic. Just out with it, won’t you?”

“It’s a letter,” Alex said. “From one Theo Vance, of Surrey. He writes to demand a reason for the raising of rents on his farm.”

John’s brows drew together. “Surrey,” he said, reflectively. “I’d forgotten you had an estate there.”

In all honesty, so had Alex. Truth to tell, his solicitors were better acquainted with his estates than was he. Being just one man, he had only so much time to devote to his properties, and they were many and vast, scattered all about the country. Which was why he had done the responsible thing and hired land agents to represent his interests and handle the affairs of each of his estates. That simple act of delegation had reduced his obligations down to a mere few hours out of every month. There was very little required of him except to peruse correspondence and instruct his solicitors to dole out funds as

requested for various improvement projects. It had been quite a satisfactory arrangement, which allowed him significantly more time to pursue his own interests rather than becoming overburdened in estate matters.

Or at least, it *had* been satisfactory—until now. “The *problem*,” he said, “is that I have *not* raised the rents. And neither has the land agent over my Surrey estate, Mr. Jennings.” Which was not to say that the man *could* have done so. To the best of Alex’s knowledge—which was, admittedly, lacking—the vast majority of tenant farms upon his properties were under lease agreements. Oh, there might have been a tenant here or there whose lease had come to an end and would have had to negotiate a new lease or else move from the land, but that was a standard part of business. The quarterly reports had all reflected the proper accounting, and as far as Alex could tell not a single shilling had ever come up short.

“Jennings,” Grey said reflectively. “That wouldn’t be *Joseph* Jennings, would it?”

It might have been, but Alex couldn’t be certain. He hadn’t even *met* the man in person; Mr. Jennings had applied for the position through one of Alex’s solicitors, and he’d seemed an amiable enough sort with a reasonable business acumen. Since then, Alex had rarely done more than skim correspondence from the man for the relevant information contained therein. Mr. Jennings’ given name had never seemed to be of any particular relevance.

“I can’t be certain,” he said. “It might be.”

“It *might* be?” Grey parroted. “For God’s sake. How long has he been in your employ?”

“Two or three years,” Alex said. “Or—blast. It could be four. Five?” Certainly no longer than five. Or could it be six? When had his Surrey estate’s former land agent retired? Blast it, keeping track of such inconsequential details was the responsibility of his solicitors!

Clearly not mollified by Alex’s response, Grey cleared his throat and said, “I ask because I seem to recall some sort of to-do surrounding a man of that name. To my knowledge there was never a case brought to court, but as I recall there were a number of fraud accusations that were swiftly hushed up. I found it all quite suspicious, but I suppose few would want it

publicly known that they were taken in by an unscrupulous character.”

“Really?” Alex had heard no such rumors. “When was all this, then?”

“Oh, at least ten years ago,” Grey said, perhaps too casually. Alex would have bet the entirety of his fortune that Grey could have told him not only the exact day that he had obtained this information, but from whom it had originated, and where he had been at the time. He had an excellent memory, bordering on the uncanny. That odd talent had gotten him in no small amount of trouble in the past in various gaming hells, where he had been accused of counting cards—an accusation that Alex had never been certain wasn’t accurate, though Grey had never directly admitted as much to him.

“What am I to do, then?” Alex asked.

“You could recall the man,” John suggested. “Replace him with a new agent.”

“Yes,” Alex allowed, “but this is merely one accusation from a clearly disgruntled tenant. If this claim turns out to be unsubstantiated, it could destroy the man’s career.” To say nothing of the fact that he would then have to replace Mr. Jennings with another land agent, which would necessitate undertaking the arduous process of interviewing applicants.

“Hm,” John mused. “Suppose you conduct a bit of an investigation into the circumstances. When was the last time you visited your Surrey estate? Would you be recognized?”

Never. He’d never visited. Or at least, if he had, he had been too young to recall it. Truth to tell, there were more impressive estates within his holdings, and the Surrey estate—Ivywilde, its fanciful former owner had called it—had apparently come to his father in a card game. It held neither sentimental nor ancestral value and, frankly, it cost more to run than the rents it collected. The only reason he’d not sold it off was because he had quite forgotten it even existed. Still, he had a responsibility to his tenants, even if he’d never bothered to actually visit them in person.

“I wouldn’t be recognized,” he said, absent inflection. “But why should I go myself? I could hire a Bow Street Runner to sort it out for me.”

“You don’t send a thief-taker to sort out an intrigue of this

stamp,” said John. “I’ll be the first to admit they generally get the job done, but occasionally they lack the finesse required in circumstances of this nature. Besides, country folk are an odd lot—insular and protective of their own. They’ll not take kindly to a Runner poking into their affairs. Better to do it yourself, and quietly.”

“And their absent landlord poking his nose into their business will be better received?” Alex gestured to the note that lay on the table between them, the spiky, slashing handwriting an accusation in itself. “Mr. Vance would likely shoot me on sight.”

“No, no,” Grey said. “You go *incognito*, of course. Stay in the village—I assume there’s a coaching inn nearby? Set yourself up as a traveler passing through, declare your love for their quaint little village, and stay on awhile. Meet the locals, get a sense of their situation. Quarter day is coming up, isn’t it? A perfect opportunity to observe the collection of rents yourself.”

“If there’s any chicanery at work, that would be your chance to uncover it,” John added. “If Mr. Jennings *is* somehow cheating the tenants, there ought to be some evidence of it. You’ll want to be stealthy about it, of course—but should worse come to worst and you are discovered, it’s not as if the local magistrate could arrest a duke for breaking into his own property.”

That was true enough, Alex supposed. If Mr. Jennings *was* skimming funds, it was highly unlikely that he would confess to it. If there was evidence to be had, it would have to be acquired surreptitiously—and if there was no evidence, and an investigation of the town revealed only the ravings of a disgruntled tenant, then Mr. Jennings and his career need come to no harm from it.

“There is also the fact,” Grey said, “that the duchess can hardly expect you to dance to her tune and seek a bride if you are not in London to do so.”

And that was it. Alex was leaving London for Surrey. Immediately.

Chapter Two

“**B**enson!” Alex shouted as he careened into his foyer. “Benson, I need you to begin packing for me at once!” He snatched off his hat, shoving it toward the butler, Jenkins, who took it from him.

Mere moments later, footsteps sounded on the landing above and Benson, his valet, peered over the railing, his immaculately styled mustache twitching. “Your Grace?”

“*Packing*, Benson. Immediately,” Alex stressed, wrestling off his gloves. “Sooner than immediately, in fact. I need to be off as soon as possible.”

Jenkins caught the gloves that Alex lobbed in his general direction, cleared his throat, and interjected, “Your Grace, your mother—that is to say, the duchess—”

Alex stifled a groan. “Of course. Mother. For the love of God, *don’t* tell her where I’ve gone.” He had thought, when she had moved into a townhouse of her own a year ago, that his life would develop a bit more peace, but no—still she found excuses to drop in several times a week, so his absence would hardly remain secret for long. He wrenched his coat from his shoulders, offering the cuff of one sleeve to Jenkins, the better to yank it off. “Tell her I’ve gone to Cardiff.” No, that would never do. The duchess had an estate in Cardiff that had been part of her widow’s jointure—she’d simply pack up her household and remove herself to Cardiff in the hopes of badgering him into returning to London for the remainder of the Season. And when she discovered that he was not in Cardiff after all, she would no doubt badger his staff into revealing his location. “No—Scotland.” *Blast*. Even *that* would merely delay the inevitable—and work the duchess into a fierce snit at having traveled the length of England and beyond for naught.

“Your Grace,” Jenkins repeated. “Your *mother*—”

“Is an interfering busybody,” Alex snapped, and Jenkins dissolved into a series of exaggerated choking coughs that

even Alex thought to be a trifle dramatic. “Tell her—tell her —”

“Tell me *what?*”

The delicate feminine voice drew Alex up short. With a sense of unfurling dread he turned to his right. If he had been in a more composed frame of mind, he might have noticed that the drawing room doors had been left open, indicating the presence of a visitor. If he had been in less of an all-fired rush to depart from London, he might’ve noticed the sweet scent of his mother’s favorite lemon biscuits permeating the air.

“Mother,” he said, weakly. “How...lovely to see you.”

“Is it?” The duchess took a dainty sip of her tea, her shoulders set so stiffly that it sent Alex careening back into unpleasant childhood memories of being called onto the carpet to account for some childhood foible or another. “I had not thought *interfering busybodies* were so very much in demand.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said, though of course he had meant it *exactly* like that.

“Oh? Pray tell, is there some *other* meaning to the phrase of which I was not previously aware?”

“Don’t be difficult, Mother. I merely meant that I thought you had an engagement this afternoon.”

“It is a mother’s prerogative to be difficult whenever it so suits her.”

Alex guessed that those occasions must be *forever* and *always*, though he was not fool enough to voice such a thing aloud. The time might have long passed that she could turn him over her knee, but by the flare of ire in her green eyes, he suspected that any further antagonizing just might result in a fierce pinch of his ear.

With one hand, the duchess delicately placed her cup upon its saucer. “I suppose I can assume, then, that you are *not* going to either Wales *or* Scotland. I wonder where it is that you *are* going. You *are* aware that it is your *duty*—”

“Mother.” Alex stalked into the drawing room, cast himself onto the couch opposite the duchess, and said, “Don’t start up again. I beg you.”

“Well,” the duchess said, snapping off a tiny corner of a lemon biscuit with teeth that could have torn a man’s jugular clean apart. “Perhaps I wouldn’t *have* to, did you show the slightest

inclination toward matrimony.” She patted daintily at her perfectly-coiffed hair, which showed not even the barest hint of her advancing years. Alex had long fancied that even the unavoidable effects of aging were reluctant to make themselves known upon so formidable a woman as Her Grace, the Duchess of Davenport.

“Are you so eager, then, to be styled the *dowager* duchess?” Alex asked, swiping a biscuit off the tray that lay at a perfect angle upon the table between them.

“It is the sacrifice one makes, my dearest son, for the privilege of grandchildren.” She poured a cup of tea, which she flavored with a squeeze of lemon and a splash of milk before she passed it across the table to him. “Now. Where, exactly, do you intend to hare off to this time, and why?”

Around a mouthful of biscuit, Alex mumbled sulkily, “Surrey.”

“Surrey,” the duchess repeated. “*Surrey?*”

“I’ve business to attend to at Ivywilde.”

“And your estate manager cannot handle it himself?” The duchess arched one elegant brow, peering at him over the rim of her teacup.

“He might well be the problem,” Alex said. “Recently I received a letter,” he said, patting his pockets until he heard the telltale rustle of paper within. “From a Mr. Vance, concerning the raising of rents. It was...rather excoriating. He made several spurious remarks upon my honor—or lack thereof. If he wasn’t my tenant, I’d have called the fellow out,” he grumbled. He passed the letter over to his mother, who unfolded it and began to read.

“This is from *Theo*?” she said, a twinkle of amusement lighting her eyes. “Dear little Theo?”

Dear little Theo, whose penchant for flowery insults could have rivaled Shakespeare. “I wasn’t aware you had met the man,” Alex said.

The duchess pursed her lips in an effort to hold back her merriment. “The *man*, no. But I certainly did have a passing acquaintance with Theo, many years ago.” She refreshed her cup of tea and stirred in a lump of sugar.

“I wasn’t aware you’d ever been to Ivywilde,” Alex said.

“My dear boy, who do you think managed your estates after

your father passed away? When he first fell ill, he insisted that I learn all he could teach me of estate management. He wanted your inheritance to be safeguarded against unscrupulous men of business, and trusted me to ensure that his legacy would become yours.” She helped herself to another lemon biscuit. “Of *course* I have visited Ivywilde; it was my responsibility to do so. I managed all of your estates until you were of age.”

“Really?” Alex had never known this. “You never told me.”

“You never *asked*.” The duchess shrugged.

“So what do you make of this Mr. Vance?” Alex asked. “Was he as ill-tempered a child as he is a man?”

The duchess took a moment to ponder that, carefully formulating her response. “Theo was...irrepressible, I suppose. A mischief-maker, certainly. To tell the truth, the dear child reminded me a great deal of you at a similar age. But certainly Theo was not given to dishonesty—at least to my best recollection.” She referenced the letter once again, the levity leaving her face. “These are serious charges, my dear. Of course you must approach them with the gravity they are due.”

“That *is* my intention,” Alex said. “I’m going to go *incognito*.”

“Incognito?” The duchess blinked, arrested.

“In disguise, Mother.”

“I *know* what *incognito* signifies, Alexander. I simply wonder why that should be necessary.”

“Well, should Mr. Jennings be involved in some nefarious activity, I can hardly expect him to admit to such, can I? I thought to spend some time in the area and collect information from the tenants, then do a bit of investigation into Mr. Jennings himself while I’m there. I shouldn’t like to ruin an innocent man’s reputation any more than I’d like to provoke a guilty man into disposing of evidence of his misdeeds by announcing my presence.”

The duchess cleared her throat, her face settling into a practiced neutral expression. “And who, precisely, do you intend to masquerade as?”

“Nobody in particular,” Alex said, with a careless flourish of his hand. “Merely a traveler passing through.”

“My dear boy, that will never do.” She pressed her fingers to her temple and rubbed, shaking her head in consternation.

“Travelers *pass through*. How did you intend to explain your continued presence?”

“I—” Alex paused. “I suppose I hadn’t considered that.”

“Hm,” the duchess murmured. “I suppose you also had not considered that the clothing you have instructed Benson to pack for you would hardly be appropriate for a common traveler.” With a sly smile, she added casually, “And perhaps you thought to take your carriage—with the ducal crest—for the journey.”

Damn. Alex certainly had not thought ahead so far. Embarrassment crept over him in a scalding wave, and he slouched in his seat, which ought to have scandalized his mother—except that she was too clearly enjoying her sense of superiority to bother chiding him for his poor posture.

“What would you suggest, then, Mother?” he grouched.

“Well,” she hedged, “far be it from me to suggest your scheme is harebrained on its face.” She paused for a sip of tea, and in the ensuing silence it became clear that that was *precisely* what she was, in fact, suggesting. “But I have long since learned the futility of dissuading you from a given path. You *do* dig in your heels, darling.”

“Mother—”

“Don’t interrupt.” She took another sip of tea. “My dear, you haven’t the slightest idea how to be anything but a duke, but I find the thought of you attempting it vastly entertaining.” A small, self-satisfied smile slipped over her face. “It is plain to see that you desperately require my assistance—which I will be happy to provide, in return for your promise that you will give *serious* thought to the possibility of taking a wife upon the conclusion of your business in Surrey.”

Alex rolled his eyes toward the heavens. “Mother, what makes you think I would find it necessary to make such a bargain?”

The duchess waved an airy hand, brushing off his protestations. “Darling boy, you can be forgiven for your hubris, as you have never been a woman. But as I have some experience with it, allow me to inform you that men never know quite as much as they think they do.”

Chapter Three

In retrospect, Alex was forced to admit that his mother's wisdom had been invaluable. She had not only cobbled together a suitable wardrobe from amongst his oldest and plainest garments—a project that had given Benson a fit of the vapors and had culminated in the formidable duchess quite literally wresting an assortment of garments from Benson's very hands—but she had also managed to commandeer a plain, unmarked carriage of indeterminate origin. The shine of the black lacquer had dulled with age, and it had rolled up with a faintly ominous creaking sound, the origin of which remained undetermined.

It was not at all the sort of vehicle that he would ever have considered for his own personal use, but he supposed the unassuming carriage would make for a passable and suitably nondescript conveyance.

As Alex redressed himself in what clothing his mother had deemed appropriate, he heard Benson fretting outside the dressing room.

“But not even the slightest concession to fashion! No embroidery! Not so much as a single, solitary tassel.” A whimper of distress preceded the low, disconsolate moan of, “And such *plain* buttons.”

“Well, *really*, Benson. A common man could hardly afford better.” This from the duchess, who seemed to be swiftly losing patience with the valet.

“His Grace is not a common man!” There was the snap of fabric, suggesting that Benson had whipped out his handkerchief, presumably to wave it about in distress. “Some of those things are as many as *three years* out of date. I ought to have consigned them to the rag heap ages ago.”

“Thank the heavens you did not, else I could not imagine from whence we might have sourced appropriate clothing.” The duchess heaved a sigh. “Surrey is not so very far from London. Presumably they're abreast enough of London fashion to

recognize a dated wardrobe when they see it.”

A stifled sob from Benson indicated that this was precisely what he had feared. “His Grace has always been known as a man at the forefront of fashion.”

Had he? Truth to tell, Alex had never cared much for fashion—he had relied upon the opinions of his tailor and his valet, and if he had been declared some sort of arbiter of fashion, this was the first he’d heard of it.

“Benson, I’m certain that no one will call into question your skills as His Grace’s valet,” the duchess soothed. “Certainly his lordship’s wardrobe was the height of fashion in years past, which is precisely the point. His Grace must portray a man of modest means—not so humble as to be impoverished, but certainly without the funds to replace his wardrobe every season.” As a concession to Benson’s pride, she added: “You’ve clearly kept His Grace’s clothing in excellent repair.”

Benson whimpered again, and Alex decided that the poor man had been put through quite enough for one day. He stepped through the door and stretched out his arms. “How do I look?”

“Hm.” The duchess tapped the point of one finger to her chin and sighed. “Like a duke masquerading as a commoner,” she said. “But I suspect the townsfolk in Surrey won’t be well enough acquainted with the nobility to recognize your particular brand of ducal arrogance.”

Arrogance? What a fine thing for a mother to say of her son!

Benson’s chin rose a notch as he declared, “Good breeding will out—His Grace would be a duke, even were he dressed in rags.”

“Yes,” the duchess sighed, “that’s rather what I was afraid of.”



“Now,” the duchess said, straightening the lapels of Alex’s coat. “You must write to me, of course. I should like to be kept abreast of your investigation.”

“I expect I shall be quite busy,” Alex hedged. “I might not have the time.”

The duchess gave a gusty little laugh, humming with amusement. “Do you imagine that you can find in the

countryside the sort of entertainments you might find in London? Oh, there might be an occasional country dance, or perhaps a friendly card game—but the village is a farming community, and its people will rise early and retire early. I daresay you'll have time enough to write your mother. Besides," she said, tucking a folded and sealed letter within his coat pocket, "I should like to know how the people have fared since the estate's transition into your hands."

A queer, niggling sense of shame crept over him. Of course he himself did *not* know, since he had trusted the land agent he'd hired to handle the concerns of his tenants.

"I'm certain they're well enough, Mother," he said, uncomfortably.

"My dear, if you were *certain*, you'd hardly be undertaking such a ridiculous scheme, now would you?" She patted his coat pocket. "This letter is for dear Theo. I expect you to deliver it straight away."

"*Dear Theo* is remembered fondly enough to merit a letter?" Alex asked.

"Not to imply that it is any of your business with whom I elect to correspond," the duchess said, "but this is your façade, dear boy. I have acknowledged receipt of dear Theo's letter and sent you to investigate its contents on behalf of the dukedom. I have introduced you as Mr. Alexander Dryden, my solicitor."

"Oh, good," Alex said dryly. "I'm pleased to know that I may keep my name."

"It's always best not to stray *too* far from the truth," the duchess said. "Too many lies muddy the waters until it becomes far too difficult to keep them straight." She cleared her throat and continued, "If asked, you might say you are a distant relation of the duke. I don't expect the townsfolk to be terribly familiar with the family, given that Ivywilde is not an entailed property—and even if they *could* dredge up a copy of *Debrett's*, a distant enough relation is not likely to be listed."

"You must have been a wonder to behold on the stage," Alex said. "You *do* have a flair for the dramatic."

"Where do you think you acquired it from?" she asked, patting his cheek fondly. "Now *this*," she said, tucking a folded slip of paper into his palm, "this is for you. It's a list of eligible young ladies whom you might find appealing. You might consider

calling upon a few of them upon your return to London.”

“*Mother—*”

“Humor me,” she said. “It’s only a list. Now, go—the sooner you leave, the sooner you shall return. And do give my regards to dear Theo.”

There were many things that Alex would have liked to give *Dear Theo*, and not one of them could be accurately termed *regards*. But voicing such a thought aloud would only have given his mother more ammunition, and likely set him up for a lecture in civility. And so Alex instead gave a brisk bow, bussed a kiss over his mother’s cheek, and climbed into the carriage.

He crumpled the list of *eligible young ladies* in his fist and shoved it deep within his coat pocket before the carriage had even cleared the drive.



The trip was relatively short, as such journeys went. Surrey was about two hours outside of London by carriage, and Ivywilde just under half an hour beyond that. And although the journey had not been *long*, neither had it been particularly pleasant. An odd aroma lingered in the interior of the carriage; a sort of damp, musty smell that made Alex wonder from whence the carriage had been sourced and whether it had been used to house several dogs prior to its retrieval for his use. The seats had been upholstered with some sort of brocade that he suspected had once been blue, but had long since faded to a mottled grey and stiffened to the point that Alex was certain that a block of marble would have provided a more comfortable seat. What at first Alex had thought was decorative etching upon the glass windows had revealed itself in the afternoon sunlight to be nothing more than a bizarre pattern of scratches covered in a fine layer of dust.

But for all that, at least there was absolutely no circumstance in which anyone would ever mistake his present conveyance for a ducal carriage. Nor, in his present garments, would anyone mistake *him* for a duke.

He brushed aside the ancient, moth-eaten window curtains to

peer out over the countryside, relieved to see farmland stretching out into the distance. Where the road curved ahead, the grass sloped down into a valley strewn with sprawling, fenced-off pastures in which sheep and cattle grazed, and green stalks of wheat and barley rolled in the light breeze like sea waves. A succession of cottages peppered the land, marking which domicile belonged to which farmstead. Some farms were quite small—mere subsistence farmers who had leased the land to support their families rather than to turn a profit—while others had to be a hundred acres or more.

Though he had received a sort of bare-bones general education in farming—the better to prepare him to gauge the needs of his tenants—he had never had more than a passing interest in the profession. It was the sort of thing one concerned oneself with out of necessity rather than genuine curiosity. He generally left such matters up to the land agent whom he had engaged for such a purpose. But it seemed to him now, upon seeing the village for the first time, a sort of bleak, solitary existence. What did one *do* in the countryside, precisely—except to rise with the sun, work oneself into exhaustion, and then take to one's bed once one's labor had been completed, only to rise and do it all again the very next day? It seemed monotonous at best, and at worst an exercise in futility.

The rising rents in recent years had made farming a less than lucrative endeavor unless one could afford enough land and source enough laborers to make the venture worthwhile. Most of the leases of lands held by the Ivywilde estate were for terms of seven years, which had kept the rents artificially low, but that was hardly a concern to Alex. Though the estate cost more money to run than it brought in, he possessed numerous other estates and business interests that offset the drain—and even if he had chosen not to personally oversee the estate himself, he had no particular desire to turn people off of the land that their families had worked for generations. Though doubtless some leases were near to expiry and the estate would be more profitable were the rents raised, often it was more advantageous to renew the leases for families with whom one had a reliable business history rather than attempting to find a new tenant whose business acumen could not be adequately judged.

In the distance, perched upon the hill at the west side of the valley like a watchful guardian, loomed Ivywilde Hall. Alex had not visited the estate himself, but the expansive Tudor-style manor house could hardly belong to a tenant, and as the lands surrounding the estate comprised some twelve thousand acres, it was unlikely to belong to anyone else. Most of the land would be put to use providing a pleasant ambiance for the manor's residents; follies and gardens, walking trails and woods stocked with game, ponds with fish, and the various trappings of a civilized country residence. Only about three thousand acres, to the best of his recollection, was reserved for tenant farmers.

Rather than continuing up the hill toward the estate, the carriage took a sharp right turn that threatened to upend the conveyance and produced a shrill, unpleasant squeaking sound from somewhere in the vicinity of the right rear wheel as it turned down onto the rougher road leading down into the valley. As he was jostled about in the interior of the carriage, Alex wondered briefly why no funds had been requested for the improvement of the road down into the village proper—though he supposed that perhaps it was possible that it was not so much the condition of the road that made the route unbearable so much as the condition of the carriage itself.

Accustomed to the noise and thrum of the city, the countryside seemed altogether too quiet. As the carriage rumbled down the sun-dappled road, there was only the stilted chirp of birds in the trees, the whistle of wind through the branches, and the crunch of the wheels over stones in what passed for a road. He supposed it might be peaceful, if one were familiar with such an environment, but it only caused a sweeping sensation of unease—as if he had trespassed somewhere he did not, and could never, belong.

Gradually the carriage slowed as it approached a building situated just past a copse of ash trees. A sun-faded sign hung from a post just before the building, its painted lettering paled to grey from what surely must have once been black.

The coachman jumped down from his perch and opened the carriage door. “The Swan and Crown Inn, Your—” He coughed into his fist. “Sir.”

Sir. For some godforsaken reason, the appellation had taken

him aback. He could not recall a time in his life that he had been addressed as anything other than ‘Your Grace’ or, on rare occasions in his childhood by longstanding staff, ‘Master Alexander.’ It might be essential to his ruse, but somehow it was still jarring, as if his very identity had been stolen away from him.

As the coachman set about retrieving Alex’s trunk from the carriage, Alex approached the inn with no small amount of trepidation. The steps creaked beneath his feet, an ominous testament to the age and general state of repair of the building. He hoped it was cleaner inside than without.

The door swung open with a great shriek of protest from the ancient hinges which had clearly not seen a fresh coating of oil in some time. The interior was lit only with the sunlight pouring in the windows on the western wall, and motes of dust streaked through the air, presumably preparing to alight on any available surface.

Whatever hopes he had held out for the potential sophistication of the inn were summarily dashed. The door opened into a large room littered with tables, which told him that this place passed not only for the inn but also the village tavern. Several people were gathered at the tables closest to the windows, quietly conversing amongst themselves, but whatever conversation had been in progress had ceased the moment he had stepped into the inn.

Even with the careful selections that his mother had made of his wardrobe and her efforts to pare it down to only the most essential, least ostentatious garments that she could find, Alex was perturbed to find himself *still* overdressed. His waistcoat might feature only the brass buttons that Benson had wailed over, but there was not a man within the inn that wore any sort of waistcoat whatsoever. Simple linen shirts were prevalent, and if they were not precisely what Alex would have considered *clean*, at least they seemed to be in relatively good repair.

Behind the counter, a matronly woman poured out a couple of pints of ale. The cap which covered her salt-and-pepper hair had been pinned somewhat haphazardly, and threatened to tip straight off her head at any moment. As she delivered the mugs to a pair of men slouching in chairs at the far end of the

room, her gimlet eye flitted to Alex, and he felt certain that she was calculating the contents of his purse down to the nearest sixpence.

“What’ll ye have?” she asked. “Fine gentleman ye are, I s’pose ye’ll be wanting somethin’ a bit more refined than ale. Got some whisky ye might enjoy.” This was punctuated with a fierce flutter of her lashes, which Alex interpreted to be flirtatious.

A snicker went up amongst the patrons. “Come off it, Maudie, you’ve only *just* buried your last husband. Let the lad alone,” an aging gentleman said from his chair in the corner nearest the door.

Maudie turned a sour face to the man, fisting her hands on her hips. “Well, there’s no ‘arm in askin’, I say,” she snapped. “And what’s it to ye, Tom? *Ye’ve* been a widower these past twenty years—”

“And I say I had it right the first time around, and there’s no improving on perfection. Besides, you’ve got more than enough experience for the both of us,” Tom said, and a chorus of laughter rose up amongst the patrons, which was quickly stifled by the killing glare that Maudie leveled at each of them in turn.

Having never been on the receiving end of a proposition from a woman some twenty years his senior, Alex could only clear his throat and attempt to turn the conversation elsewhere. “As it happens, I require a room. I have business here with a local family—specifically a Mr. Theo Vance. Perhaps you could direct me to the Vance homestead?”

“Mr. Theo Vance,” Maudie chuckled. “Well, that would be a wonder, wouldn’t it?” She cleared her throat, sweeping a couple of mugs off a table and onto a tray to cart back behind the counter. “No rooms, sorry to say.”

No rooms? *No* rooms?

“Isn’t this an inn?” Alex asked.

“Only one for miles,” Maudie confirmed. “Still don’t change the fact that I’ve had a great big hole in me roof these past three seasons, and *his bleedin’ nibs* up there at Ivywilde won’t hear of fixin’ it.” She shrugged. “But it’s not *my* property that’s going to ruin—I’ve got only the letting of it. And the rooms don’t make me so much money as does the ale.” A

gusty sigh, and she retreated once more behind the counter. “No, sir, no rooms at all unless you’d sleep in a room without a roof. But I’ll charge just a ha’penny if ye’d like to bed down by the fire tonight. Ha’penny more an’ ye’ll have a blanket of yer own.”

Alex suppressed a shudder of revulsion as his gaze swung toward the hearth in the common room, which looked as if it hadn’t been swept free of soot in at least a half-century. Anyone who had the misfortune of sleeping there would doubtless spend the next month coughing up ash, which was to say nothing of the irreparable damage done to one’s clothing besides.

Alex coughed into his fist and struggled to look appropriately grateful for the offer. “My thanks,” he said, “but I suppose I ought to speak with the Vances first. If my business concludes swiftly, then I need not trouble you further.” He’d find somewhere else to sleep—*anywhere* else, even if it required sneaking about Ivywilde Hall to do it. Failing that, he’d simply have to go back to London, because there was simply no way in hell that he would be sleeping in the common room of a run-down inn.

There was a distinct *harrumph* from behind him. “You’ll be troubling someone, no doubt about that,” said Tom, and the bottom of his mug hit the table in front of him as if to punctuate the remark. “Seeing as your carriage has left without you.”

What? Alex craned his head around to peer through the window only to catch a last glimpse of the carriage he’d arrived in disappearing over the rise and into the distance. In the general clamor of the tavern, he hadn’t even heard it depart.

He supposed that his trunk must have been left outside like so much rubbish, on the surety that someone else would perform the task of carting it up to his room.

The room that he’d been unable to secure. *Damn*, and damn again. No room, no carriage, and no direction—

“I suppose I could take you to the Vance farm,” Tom said, stretching in his chair. “My pint’s run dry, and I ought to be heading home myself. Sam? Heath?”

The two men sitting at his table lifted their mugs to their

mouths and drained them in a long swallow, rising to their feet. “Right, sir,” one of them said. “I’ll bring ‘round the cart.” “You come with luggage?” Tom threw the question at Alex as he stood himself and patted his pockets for coin.

“Yes, sir.” It was surprising how easily the word slipped from his mouth. It was just that the older man had such an authoritative air—somehow, in this inn, in this town, it seemed to quite outstrip even his own carefully-cultivated air of ducal authority.

“Heath’ll see it loaded up for you.” Locating what looked to be a handful of pennies tucked into his pocket, Tom placed them on the table.

“It’s just the one,” Alex said. “I can manage it well enough on my own.” He had never, in point of fact, handled his own luggage before—but the tone of voice Tom had employed had reeked of condescension.

“Lad, you have the sound of a man who hasn’t done a bit of manual labor in the whole of his life. I’d bet my farm on the fact that you’ve got on a clean pair of gloves and that the hands beneath them are just as white.” With no small amount of care, Tom rounded the table, each step slow and precise. And as he looked Alex in the face for the first time, Alex experienced a small sliver of shock.

Looked would have been too generous word. The old man’s eyes were filmed over with cataracts. Tom was blind.



“I suppose I owe you my thanks for your rescue,” Alex said. Or tried to say. It seemed, rather, that the words bounced from his throat, owing in no small part to the roughness of the road. He supposed it would have to be repaired and improved—if a cart broke an axle or lost a wheel, the consequences could be dire.

“Hmph,” Tom said. “That remains to be seen.” He held the reins in his hands, a situation for which neither Sam nor Heath seemed to hold much anxiety, but Alex could not imagine trusting the driving to a man deprived of his sight.

“May I ask an indelicate question?” The words escaped before

Alex could think better of them.

Tom lifted the reins in silent inquiry, and Alex nodded, which earned an amused huff from Sam.

“The damn fool nodded, didn’t he?” Tom asked, craning his neck to toss the question at Sam and Heath, both of whom hooted with laughter. Alex felt his face go red with embarrassment at the realization that he had *nodded* at a *blind man*.

“It takes a while,” Tom said, “to learn to speak where before you might only nod or shake your head or some other such nonsense. Don’t worry over it.”

Hadn’t Tom just called him a *damn fool*? And then in the next breath told him not to worry?

Tom heaved a sigh. “I’ve been blind nearly fifteen years now, lad. And I’ve been making this journey to and from Maudie’s tavern at least three nights a week for more’n twenty. The drive is short, and the horses know the way.” He paused a moment, his lips twitching. “I could make it on my own, but my daughter won’t hear of it. So I take along Sam and Heath. She’s happy to know I’ve got sighted company, I’m happy not to be harangued unto death, and Sam and Heath—they’re happy to have a pint on me.” He lifted the reins aloft once more. “This is more for show than anything else. But it gives an old blind man a sense of being who he was, once upon a time.”

“But you knew my carriage had gone,” Alex said.

Tom snorted. “My hearing’s just fine. Likely better even than yours,” he said. “I’d wager I know the sound of every vehicle in the area—so it wasn’t exactly difficult to determine that yours was the one that had left.”

What a peculiar notion, to accommodate for a lack of sight with one’s other senses.

The horses veered off the main road, and, true to Tom’s claim, he had not used the reins to guide them. But neither Sam nor Heath seemed particularly troubled by the turn, and so Alex surmised that the horses did, indeed, know their way home.

He saw the barn first. It must have once been grand, but now it was timeworn and somewhat dilapidated—not at all the sort of structure that should have any place on a piece of land belonging to a duke. Of course it was not the *tenant’s*

responsibility to maintain the repair of the buildings, but it had clearly been years since any kind of maintenance had been done.

The house that came into view a few moments later fared little better. Alex suspected that the mismatched roofing tiles, too, spoke to the lack of diligence of his land agent. Probably the Vances had had to spend their own money on that—or else they would find themselves in dire straits come a good English rain. The land ran far out into the distance, neat rows of some crop or other stretching out endlessly.

“It’s a bit more than a hundred acres,” Tom said, though Alex had not asked. “One of the largest farms in the area. What business have you with the Vances, if I might ask?”

“Ah, I’m afraid I’m not currently at liberty to say,” Alex said. And then, “Do you know the family?”

Sam and Heath each gave a soft snort of laughter.

Alex scratched at the nape of his neck, a bit embarrassed. In a town so small, probably everyone was acquainted. “I suppose you must. But have you an opinion of them?”

Tom shrugged and said, “I suppose I’ve never given it much thought,” he said, noncommittally.

“In particular, Mr. Theo Vance,” Alex clarified. “I’d very much like to know what sort of man I shall be dealing with.”

“Well, now,” said Tom, above the rising snickers from Sam and Heath. “I suppose you’ll just have to find out, now, won’t you?”

A moment later, the horses slowed to a stop before the house, and Alex immediately grasped what he had been too dense to realize before. Tom had said he’d made this trip thrice a week for years—but why should a blind man have driven the cart to *someone else’s* home?

“You’re Mr. Vance,” Alex said on a groan. “You might’ve told me before I made a fool of myself.”

“And where would be the fun in that?” Tom replied, stepping down from the cart. “It’s not too often we get Londoners here. You’ll forgive an old blind man a bit of amusement at your expense, I’m sure.” He stuck his hand out, and Alex gathered that he was meant to shake it. It was not, as a general rule, a habit that noblemen engaged in.

But he wasn’t a duke here. And he was meant to ingratiate

himself to these people, to discover the depths of his perfidious land steward's duplicity.

And so he grasped Tom's hand in his, and shook it.

Tom's fingers tightened around his. "I hope you've got a touch more forgiveness in you," he said. "Because the whole town's had a bit of a laugh by now, and you'll understand why in a moment or two."

The front door of the house flew open, and a young woman stood framed within it, her hands fisted on her hips and a furious gleam in her eyes. Her hair had been worked into a plait that draped over her shoulder, black as night against the faded yellow of her simple day dress.

"Papa, you were expected back well over an hour ago," she said. "You *promised*."

And Tom ducked his head as if abashed. "Well, now, as it happens I was waylaid," he said. "This gentleman's come all the way from London to see you, though he won't tell me what for."

Alex frowned. "No, you're mistaken," he said. "I've come to see a Mr. Theo Vance."

The woman flashed him an odd look, her head canting to the side. Blue eyes looked him up and down, and he had the oddest sensation that she had measured him in an instant and found him wanting.

The point of her chin notched up, and her annoyance at his unexpected intrusion could not have been made more plain. In a waspish tone, she inquired, "What is it that you want, sir?"

Having never in memory been spoken to with such a clear lack of respect, Alex took immediate offense. "I've a letter from the Duchess of Davenport, for Mr. Theo Vance." He produced it with a flourish.

The woman slanted him a scowl, holding out her hand. "Give it here, then."

"I'll lay it into *his* hands only," Alex snapped back. If the chit was going to be difficult, then so, too, would he.

"Oh, for God's sake. *I'm Theo*, you half-witted popinjay." She took advantage of his surprise to snatch the letter from his fingertips and turned her back on him, muttering something *far* less complimentary than *half-witted popinjay* beneath her

breath.

Sam, Heath, and even Tom roared with laughter. *Naturally.*

Chapter Four

“You’re not Theo,” Alex said, rather stupidly. “You can’t be Theo. Theo’s a man.”

“Not since last I checked,” the woman—it *couldn’t* be Theo, surely?—said absently as she picked at the sealing wax on the letter.

Tom edged his way toward the porch, his steps careful and deliberate. He nudged the porch with the toe of his boots before he stepped onto it. “It’s short for Theodosia,” he offered helpfully.

“Good Lord,” Alex said, taken aback. “My condolences.” Where had his much-vaunted charm gone off to? He’d argued first with this woman about her gender, and then insulted her name. As far as first impressions went, he had likely done himself no favors. Which was not to say she had been predisposed to favor him anyway.

“She’s never cared for it, either,” Tom said. “Been *Theo* and *just Theo* since she was old enough to take me to task for it.” To Theo, he said, “What’s in the letter, my girl? It’s been ages since Her Grace has come to Ivywilde, but I can’t see as to why she ought to be writing to you.”

Her Grace. Oh, that was rich indeed. His mother had known all the while precisely who he would find in the village. It had escaped his notice at the time that she had spoken of Theo only by name, eschewing pronouns—but now he saw it for the deliberate obfuscation that it had been.

His own mother had set him up for humiliation. She’d been laughing at him, the townsfolk in the tavern had laughed at him, Sam and Heath and Tom had laughed at him. Probably Theo, once she recovered her amiable nature—assuming she *had* one beneath the ill-tempered hostility she’d shown him thus far—would laugh at him, too.

And he, a duke who had never fled from anything in his life—with the obvious exception of his mother’s endeavors to coerce him into matrimony—considered for a moment cutting

his losses and leaving. He took a swift step backward, as if to disengage and regroup. The backs of his calves struck wood, unbalancing him, and he stumbled, arms pinwheeling as he struggled fruitlessly to right himself. Instead he tumbled over his own trunk, which had been left by Sam and Heath on the ground just behind him. His head and shoulders struck the ground, and for a moment he saw stars bursting behind his closed eyes.

And then he heard a fresh burst of laughter.

Humiliation. Was it possible to die of such a thing? Alex hoped so.



Theo made a disgusted sound in her throat, rolling her eyes heavenward. “Oh, for—Sam, you know better than to leave things lying around. What if Papa had run into that trunk instead?”

“Now, Theo,” Papa said over the din of Sam and Heath’s delighted laughter, “don’t get yourself into a snit, now. He’ll be fine. Bruised his pride more than anything else, most likely.”

Not that Papa could see to make that assessment, but Theo had her doubts. The gentleman had gone down *hard*, and had failed to rise. She wasn’t certain if he had knocked himself senseless or if he was simply stewing in his embarrassment, but despite his lofty attitude, it seemed a bit too mean-spirited to leave him lying there in the dirt, his legs dangling over the trunk that Sam had placed behind him.

No—though his eyes were closed, the tense set of his jaw and hard bob of his Adam’s apple suggested he was, indeed, conscious, but had not yet determined how to extricate himself from his unenviable position.

Theo didn’t approve of such juvenile sport...but he *did* look as if his pride had taken a beating, and that, she supposed, was good. Though visitors to Ivywilde were on the rare side of things, the ones that came down from London—usually just stopping through on their way elsewhere—were almost invariably insufferable. They’d all had more than enough of

Londoners looking down their long, elegant noses at them, as if country-dwelling folk were just one step removed from sheep. On more than one occasion, she'd been tempted to live down to their estimation, give a vacant stare, and *bleat* at them.

But that was still no reason for her to be so inhospitable. And so she tucked Her Grace's letter into her pocket and strode off the porch, to where Mr.—

Well. She hadn't gotten his name yet.

"Sir?" she inquired. "Are you well?"

He lifted one hand up to rub at his eyes, and she watched as his brows scrunched together, dark blond slashes that suggested a distinct lack of humor over the situation.

"Humiliated," he grunted. "But otherwise unscathed, I believe."

Sam and Heath roared with laughter anew, and she spared a glare for them.

"Shall I help you to your feet, sir?"

"Oh, no, thank you. I truly don't think I could bear the indignity." But as he hefted his shoulders from the ground, he gave a fierce groan and dropped back down, touching the back of his head. The fingers of his glove came away bloody, and he scowled as he snarled, "*Blast.*"

"Ah, hell." Sam shrugged away from where he had leaned against the porch pillar and stalked off into the house. Theo presumed his amusement had run its course and he'd gone off to make himself useful in fetching some clean cloth and water.

"Don't move," Theo urged. Head wounds could be tricky and dangerous, and the only doctor local to the area had a bad habit of drinking himself senseless shortly after noon. "How many fingers am I holding up?" She wiggled them before his face.

Green eyes opened a bit dazed, but swiftly focused. "Three," he said promptly.

"The date?"

"May the second."

"Your name?"

"Alexander William Phillip Henry—"

She snorted. "I haven't got *all* day." The crunch of boots on dirt told her that Sam had returned, and she held out her hand

expectantly, into which he laid a cold, wet cloth.

“—Dryden,” he concluded.

“Dryden?” Her eyes narrowed. “Are you a relative, then, of the duchess?” And therefore also of the dastardly duke, who apparently enjoyed stealing food from the mouths of babes.

Mr. Dryden stilled, his hand still cradling his injured head.

“Son of a fourth son,” he said. “Being a distant relative does not necessarily confer with it any particular advantages beyond a name. Some of us are obliged to seek out professions.”

Mollified, she nodded. “Heath, come help me lift him. Mr. Dryden, I’m afraid you’re just going to have to bear the humiliation.”



A few minutes later, Alex found himself sitting at a table in what passed for the dining room within the house. His head ached abominably, and there was cool water running down the back of his neck and soaking his collar from the cloth he’d been obliged to hold to the back of his head, and he was trying very hard to convince himself that he had not *lied* to Theo, precisely.

He *was* the son of a fourth son—he just had not then gone on to explain that his father had been the only son to survive infancy. And those who had not directly inherited a title *were* often forced to seek out gainful employment—it was just that that particular situation had not applied to him.

But it was clear that Theo in particular, and likely the village as a whole, held no goodwill toward him. His mother, perhaps...but not him.

Theo, who sat at the table across from him, smoothed the letter out on the table before her. There was a little curl to her mouth that suggested something of a memory, and he suspected that she recalled his mother as fondly as the duchess had her. A mischief-maker, his mother had said, and he could well believe it.

She looked tame enough now, but any woman who would berate him without any sense of shame over it surely must

have been a hellion in her youth.

“The duchess writes that you are her solicitor,” she said, “and that she has engaged you to investigate Mr. Jennings, and that she would appreciate our cooperation in this investigation.”

“It was, in fact, your allegation that sparked the investigation,” he allowed, and the dry tone of his voice suggested that he had not been well pleased by the contents of her letter.

If he had expected embarrassment, there was none. “Perhaps if the duke did not choose to neglect his duty to his tenants, there would have *been* no allegations to investigate.”

“Now, Theo,” Mr. Vance soothed from his comfortable chair near the window. “We don’t know that to be the case—”

“No, Papa, there’s no defending him,” Theo flashed. “I can have all due respect for the duchess and still acknowledge that her son is a worthless, useless layabout. Two things can be true.”

Gritting his teeth, Alex snapped, “The duke is a very busy man. He has got a good many responsibilities—”

“Oh?” Theo countered. “And does he tend to them as well as he does Ivywilde?”

And Alex deflated. Because if he had to be honest with himself, there was something that sat uncomfortably close to the truth about her accusation. He had *not* tended to his responsibilities very closely. It was a privilege of power and position to be able to cast those off onto someone else in exchange for a handsome salary, and if the tenants here had suffered as a result, then it was, in fact, his fault.

“So,” said Mr. Vance, presumably in an effort to ease a bit of the tension that had settled. “I expect your investigation is intended to be kept quiet.”

“It is,” Alex replied, unaccountably grateful from the reprieve from Theo’s ire. “I must gather evidence, you understand. I would like to interview the tenants, see if I can piece together what is happening here. It is easier to do so if Mr. Jennings does not know of my presence, for he might be tempted to exert his influence to cover up what crimes he may—or may not—have committed.” He eased the cloth away from the back of his head and delicately touched the wound, pleased to find that the bleeding seemed to have ceased. “Of course, I *had* intended to stay at the inn, but...”

“That’s not likely to happen anytime soon,” Mr. Vance said. “I suppose you could stay here. You’d be as good as invisible to Mr. Jennings—just a new hand about the farm. Of course,” he added, “you’d have to give it a good show. Get your hands dirty.”

Alex was fairly certain there had been an unspoken *for once in your life* hanging in the air on the trail of those words. But they were also a challenge, and he had never been one to back down from a challenge. Still, he wondered what Mr. Vance had seen in him—without benefit of sight—that had called him to issue it.

“I suppose that suits me well enough,” he said. “So long as I have a bed—”

“Hayloft.” Mr. Vance placidly sipped from his cup of tea. “We’ve got but two rooms in this house.”

A goddamned *hayloft*? Alex clenched his jaw. How the mighty do fall. “And where do Sam and Heath sleep?”

“In the comfort of their own homes, I expect,” Mr. Vance said. “They’re subsistence farmers; they tend our fields and their own for a tidy profit.”

“Shall I pay a ha’penny for a blanket?” Alex asked, somewhat acidly.

Mr. Vance gave a bark of laughter. “No need,” he said. “That you can have freely—and meals, if Theo can be prevailed upon to feed another body.”

From the tight purse of her lips, Alex suspected she’d gleefully poison him on the basis of nothing more than his surname. But she made an aggravated sound and rose stiffly, stalking into the kitchen. A moment later she returned with a bowl, a spoon, and a crust of bread, which she plunked down on the table before him, before retreating once again to the kitchen.

He was not certain what to make of it. Chunks of...something bobbed in some sort of brown broth, and he picked up his spoon and nudged the viscous substance around. Carrots, he thought, and onions. Some sort of starchy vegetable; potatoes, he hoped. But the meat—

“Mutton stew,” she cast over her shoulder as she handed a tray of the same off to her father.

“Mutton,” he repeated. Of course he *knew* what a stew was, but he couldn’t say that his cook had ever dared serve it to

him. It smelled decent enough, he supposed, and he doubted he'd find finer fare at the inn. He lifted the spoon to his lips and took a hesitant bite. Far better than he'd expected—there were lingering notes of rosemary, some thyme, the fragrant bite of pepper.

Theo took her place once again with her own bowl. Under the pretext of educating him, she said, "In addition to crops, we also raise livestock. A few dairy cows, chickens. Some sheep." She jabbed her spoon toward his bowl. "That one's name was Margaret."

Alex choked.

Mr. Vance coughed into his hand to disguise a burst of laughter.

And Theo smiled.



While Theo was fetching water to wash the dishes, Mr. Vance lifted himself from his chair and headed for the hallway, where he paused before a door, sliding his hand across the surface to locate the handle. A moment later he'd retrieved a bundle of blankets and a battered pillow, much to Alex's relief. "I hope I don't offend, Mr. Vance, but you seem to get around easily," Alex said.

"For a blind man?" Mr. Vance gave a soft snort. "You learn to make do, lad. I count steps. I feel for walls with my feet."

Alex remembered that little nudge he'd given the porch with the toe of his boot, feeling for the rise of it before he'd stepped up. "Clever," he said. "I suppose it doesn't hinder you as much as it might."

"Well, I've had years to come to terms with it," he said. "My vision was already going by the time Theo was born. It was a slow process. A body can acclimate to just about anything, I expect. Still, there's things I can't do, things my Theo's had to manage on her own." His chest expanded with a sigh. "It's too much work for her," he said. "But she's never complained of it."

Alex suspected his conscription into farm work had had no small amount to do with granting Theo at least a bit of a

reprieve from it.

“We don’t name them, you know,” Mr. Vance said. “The sheep. Theo was just joking. Something about you irritates her, I suppose.”

Yes, Alex thought. *My surname*. And his dukedom, but she didn’t know of that, and thus couldn’t rightly hold it against him. Yet.

Alex gave a small shrug and allowed, “I suppose I was a trifle...”

“Arrogant?” Mr. Vance suggested, thrusting out the bundle of linens, which Alex accepted.

There was that *word* again. Still he gritted his teeth and muttered, “Just so.”

Mr. Vance made a little sound that might’ve been a shred of laughter. “Not to worry,” he said. “Theo’ll cure you of that.”

And damned if he hadn’t made it sound like a threat.

Chapter Five

Somewhere there was a rooster crowing, and Alex had never been so moved toward murder in his life. Did it count as murder if the victim was gamefowl? He supposed it must not, given that he'd consumed enough of it in his life—though he had never been in the position of having to end the life of one before.

Dawn crept through the high window in the barn above the hayloft, wherein Alex had spent a miserable and mostly sleepless night. He'd thought hay would be preferable to Maudie's ill-kempt tavern floor, but it *rustled* with the slightest movement, and there was an *aroma*. There had also been the none-too-quiet nickering of the horses and the lowing of a cow. His pillow had slipped from beneath his head more times than he could count, and he'd awoken with the odd, prickling sensation of hay tickling his nose.

And then he sneezed. And sneezed again.

And he was still sneezing when the barn door opened, and someone walked inside.

"Perhaps you're accustomed to sleeping until noon in London, but in the country we rise early." Theo's voice, already annoyed.

Damn. His mother had warned him of this—the unconscionably early hours. He peeked over the edge of the hayloft and grimaced. Likely she had been up for some time already; she was properly attired—for the countryside, at least—in a blue muslin dress, carrying a bucket in one hand. She stalked over toward the far stall, where a cow stood, chewing upon a mouthful of hay. Theo pulled a stool into the stall, where she sat and placed the bucket beneath the cow and out of sight.

Then came the strange sound of liquid hitting metal, which echoed within the barn, and he suspected that even if he could escape her wrath long enough to catch a few extra minutes of sleep, he would not be able to shut out the racket long enough

to do so.

“Does your employer not require your attendance at his office before noon?” she inquired as she worked.

He cast his gaze heavenward and prayed for patience, swallowing down a sharp retort. “As it happens,” he said, “I am in business for myself. I have only one client, and that is the Duchess of Davenport. It is rare that she requires my services before noon.”

That was not strictly true. There had been some garden parties that she’d badgered him into attending that occasionally took place nearer to eleven.

“Hmph,” she said. “If you care to have breakfast, you’ll need to rise well before then. I’ve too many chores to hold it over for you.”

What he would *care* to have was the information he needed to begin forming an accurate assessment of Mr. Jennings’ character and worthiness as a land agent. But his stomach chose that moment to let out a distinct rumble, and he supposed he’d have to settle for what he could get.

He found the ladder and swung himself over, balanced somewhat precariously upon the topmost rungs. “How might I go about procuring a bath?”

“This time of morning? The stream.” She gestured with one hand in a vague direction, then continued milking.

Christ. “I’m accustomed to bathing every day.”

“*I’m* accustomed to pumping water in the evenings, and I won’t do it twice today so that you can bathe. So you may pump and heat the water yourself, or you may do without.”

She paused in her efforts, and heaved a sigh. “You really do not want to bathe in the morning,” she said, and this time her words were uttered without rancor. “You’ll be filthy again before you can blink. There’s breakfast in the kitchen. Perhaps you could read the paper to Papa while you eat.”



Alex was uncomfortably aware that he was wearing the same clothing he’d worn yesterday—given that he could not possibly have changed his clothing while Theo was at work in

the barn—as he sat down at the table and surveyed the offerings. Not quite the bountiful breakfast that he could reasonably expect to be served to him in his London townhouse, but filling all the same—eggs, rashers of bacon, fluffy rolls, and a dish of butter alongside a jar of preserves.

There was a newspaper folded up at the table, dated a week ago. Surrey was not so very far from London, but he expected it was delivered here rather infrequently. He had already read this issue of the *Times*, but he expected that Theo generally read to her father, who could not read himself.

Mr. Vance had all but finished his breakfast already, but he was pleased enough to sit and let Alex regale him with news of London and beyond gleaned from the newspaper.

“Theo have another go at you?” Mr. Vance asked casually, when Alex had at last surrendered the newspaper to eat in earnest.

“She might have sharpened her tongue on my hide just a bit,” Alex admitted. “I fear I’m not yet accustomed to rising at dawn.”

“She’ll calm down,” Mr. Vance predicted. “She’s having to cook for three now, and it’s left her a bit out of sorts.”

The roll Alex had bitten into suddenly tasted like ashes in his mouth, and he stared down at it, feeling strangely shamed. It had not occurred to him before—it had never *had* to occur to him before now—that there was actual *work* that went into preparing his meals. That someone would have to perform the labor of producing them. Specifically that *Theo* was having to do that work, since they clearly could not afford to keep a cook or even a maid. But nevertheless she had both prepared breakfast and then served it, though she had not asked for the task. Nor had he expressed to her any gratitude for the service, because a duke never *had* to thank *anybody*. Things were simply done *for* him, either because he had engaged a servant for that particular task or because they wished to ingratiate themselves to him.

And while Theo labored in the barn and beyond, she had invited him to take a leisurely breakfast with her father, reading.

He didn’t think he could manage another bite when the weight of an unpleasant surge of guilt had settled in his stomach like

lead. But neither did he know what he was meant to do with himself now.

“Do I—shall I clear the table?” He had a vague sense that this task was one he might be able to handle, though his plates had always been handled by his serving staff.

“Well, now,” Mr. Vance said speculatively, after a slow sip of tea. “Have you ever cleared a table?”

“I—I—” He didn’t know why it was that he felt the heat of embarrassment scalding the back of his neck. Perhaps it was the subtle insinuation that he was unsuited for a simple task that Theo likely managed multiple times a day. “I am not so destitute that I must clear my own table,” he said at last. “I employ a valet and a serving maid”—more like seven maids, in addition to four footmen—“a scullery maid”—three at last count—“and a cook.” Just the one there, but he was a Frenchman who commanded an outrageous salary.

“Hm,” said Mr. Vance, noncommittally. “Well, we *are* that destitute. Best leave the plates to me. Can’t afford the broken crockery at the moment, you understand—not with quarter day coming up.” His lips compressed into a flat line, and there was a wealth of worry scrawled there.

Alex tried not to take umbrage to the fact that an old, blind man was, out here in this simple country village, imminently more capable than himself. It occurred to him rather suddenly that while he was considered accomplished at a great many things, very little of those accomplishments would be judged of any use anywhere but London. Being able to read Latin and Greek was unlikely to impress. He doubted anyone would be hosting a fox hunt, or that riding was undertaken for any purpose related to enjoyment. He disbelieved that there was a piano to be found within the village, and doubted still more that the townsfolk would find it anything more than a waste of time to listen, besides.

To these people, he had no useful skills, nothing remotely valuable to offer. He had never pulled a weed, never cooked a meal, never washed so much as a goddamned dish. God help him if he was asked to milk a cow; he wouldn’t know how to begin.

“Incidentally,” Alex said, eager to cast his mind away from the various inadequacies he had never before needed to consider,

“I would be interested in learning about the collection of rents. I was given to understand that the rents have been raised?”

Tom pulled a face, his mouth turning down into a deep groove of anger. “You might say that,” he said. “Our lease holds with the payment of seventeen shillings per acre, per annum.”

“Reasonable enough.” For the amount of land that the Vances had leased, the sum would be perhaps a little over twenty-three pounds per quarter. Not a vast sum by Alex’s standards, but very much in accordance with what they could expect to pay elsewhere, to the best of his knowledge. Of course, for such a sum they could also easily expect the roads to be maintained, and repairs to their buildings to be made as needed.

“Mr. Jennings has been charging thirty,” Tom said, in a gritty growl that sounded as if it had been chewed and spat from between his teeth.

“*Thirty?*” Alex repeated, aghast. “But that’s—that’s over a hundred and sixty pounds per annum.” And nearly double what their lease had specified; an exorbitant sum for a tenant farmer. Certainly it would cut into a significant portion of whatever profits they might have made of their crops.

Tom’s glower deepened. “Mr. Jennings said His Grace would be gracious enough to forgive the payments we’d *already shorted*”—this, with a disgust in his voice that spoke of his ire at the temerity of the statement—“provided we paid the *proper amount* going forward. And he had a hulking behemoth of a bailiff at his side to ensure we did.” A snarl curled his lips. “Couldn’t see him, of course—but you can hear it in a man’s stride. Fairly crumbled the very earth beneath our feet, that stomp.”

“And how long has this been going on?” Alex inquired. “Has it been just since Lady Day?”

“Lady Day two years past,” Tom replied. “This isn’t the first time Theo’s written of it. It’s just the first she’s garnered a response.” The pointed expression he flung at Alex ended up somewhere over Alex’s left shoulder instead, but the shame it evoked struck anyway.

No wonder Theo’s dresses looked like they were several years out of date, worn and faded beyond even what a tenant farmer’s daughter could expect—like as not there had been no funds for frivolities like a new dress when every shilling they

earned had gone to pay the rents.

Alex scraped his hands through his hair, and came away with a piece of straw he hadn't even noticed had clung there. "So for two years now you've paid an exorbitant amount in rents—even though your lease says otherwise?"

"Funny you should mention that," Tom said. "Our lease has since gone missing. Right out of Theo's desk drawer." He nodded across the room to a small writing desk tucked away against the wall. "Of course, we *know* what we signed—we've been paying seventeen shillings for years. But Mr. Jennings came with a copy of our lease that Theo said had *thirty* shillings per acre, and he threatened eviction if we didn't pay it." He gave a shrug, palms up. "What were we to do? There's not many a landowner who'll offer a new lease for a blind old farmer with only a daughter to help him. But what little funds we have are steadily draining. Soon we'll have no choice but to leave."

Though there was little enough inflection in the man's voice, Alex sensed a certain desperation seething below the surface. The twist of Tom's lips suggested a kind of helplessness that the man no doubt resented. What was he to do, when confronted with such unscrupulous actions? To whom could he apply for relief?

Well, there was his landlord, of course—except that Alex had been content enough to leave the management of his estates in other hands that he had, at the time, considered to be more capable. If there *had* been other letters from Theo, he'd not seen them—or worse; he might have ignored them altogether. It was easy enough to ignore his responsibilities to his tenants from London, having never met them. But here, confronted with the realities of his neglect?

The breakfast he'd eaten—prepared by Theo, who had no doubt risen before the sun and had gone to no small effort to feed another person thoughtlessly thrust upon her—sat in his stomach like lead.

"I suppose there are other families," Alex said slowly, "that have similar stories." Maudie, with the hole in her roof that had gone unfixed for who knew how many seasons, unable to rent out rooms to travelers. Like as not the whole village had experienced a similar strain to their finances.

Tom gave a short nod. “I’d say any family that looked like they might be prosperous enough to merit squeezing a few extra coins from,” he said. “Possibly a few of the subsistence farmers have been left alone.”

“I’ll have to ask around, you understand,” Alex said. “Conduct a proper investigation.” But the next quarter day was more than a month away—there was time, after all, to gather the information he would need to render a verdict. Still... “If I can substantiate these claims, I will see to it that all monies paid in excess of your lease will be returned to you. To *everyone*.”

Tom canted his head to the side, crossing his arms over his chest. “Can you promise that, son? That money has got to come from somewhere—will the duke agree to it?”

“I can promise you that he will.”

A low laugh, rife with amusement. “You know his character well enough to make promises on his behalf, then?”

And Alex stared down at his half-eaten breakfast in the wake of his shriveled appetite. “I do,” he said firmly, and then, beneath his breath, he muttered, “Though perhaps not as well as I once thought.”



Alex found Theo in the barn, bent over at the waist, mucking out stalls with a shovel. He narrowly missed a stray clod of excrement falling onto the toe of his boot as she tossed a scoopful of the rank-smelling stuff into a wheelbarrow.

He positioned himself well away from the line of fire and cleared his throat, earning little more than a hasty glance over her shoulder, her dark brows slashing annoyance across her face.

“Haven’t you anything better to do than to bother me?” she snapped.

He really *hadn’t*. He’d been instructed to make himself useful about the farm until evening, when Tom, Sam, and Heath would take him into the village once again to start his investigation with the folk who frequented the tavern.

He took a step forward, and his right boot squished straight

into something unpleasant that he intended to strenuously avoid thinking about. “I suppose I could handle mucking out a barn,” he offered. He had never done it before, but it didn’t look particularly difficult.

“Could you?” Theo turned, plunked her left hand on her hip, and dug the point of the shovel into the dirt as she balanced the handle with her right. “Have you *ever*?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Give me your hand.” She held out her own, palm up. And when he hesitated a fraction too long, she prodded, “Well? Give it to me.”

Feeling like a fool, he set his hand in hers. Her hand was dwarfed by his, slender fingers all but obscured beneath his gloved palm. She pinched the glove at the tip of his index finger, and with a firm tug, it came sliding off his hand.

“This,” she said, “is too fine by half for farm work. It’ll be ruined in half a moment.” She slapped it over her shoulder and grasped his hand once more. Her fingers were cool as they slid over his, but already he could tell the difference between them—her hands had developed a layer of calluses to protect her against the pressure of the wood handle in her hands.

With a muted sound of aggravation, she let his hand drop. “I doubt you’ve lifted anything more arduous than a quill pen in your life,” she said, rolling her eyes. “How, exactly, do you intend to *help* me?”

Alex opened his mouth to tell her that he was considered a proficient horseman, an avid pugilist, and a quality fencer besides, but it snapped shut again as he realized that none of these things would be of any interest—or use—to her. One could not muck a barn with a foil, after all.

She slapped his glove back into his palm and turned. “Here,” she said, reaching for a shepherd’s crook hung upon the wall. “I suppose you might manage herding the sheep into pasture easily enough.”

Herd *sheep*? Like a damned *shepherd*? He caught the crook as it was thrust into his hand. “How—why—”

That long, black plait bounced over her shoulder as she resumed shoveling. “Move them into the clover pasture,” she said. “The lambs will frolic straight there once you open the gate, but some of the rams and ewes—you’ll need to

encourage them with the crook.” Another *plop*, hay and worse breaking up across the pile forming in the wheelbarrow.

All right, then. Sheep. He could manage sheep. How difficult could it be? If *she* could do it, so could he. He had four or five stone over her, after all. And how challenging could a sheep be, really? He turned on his heel to go in search of the sheep pen, determined to prove himself more capable than she imagined—and his boot landed wetly in a pile of excrement he had not noticed, which made such an unpleasant sound that his stomach turned with it. He risked a peek down and shuddered. The boots were a lost cause. Thank the good Lord they were the oldest and plainest he owned.

Behind him, he heard a soft snicker, which was followed by a pointed, “You’d do well to watch your step, Mr. Dryden.”

Alex resisted the childish impulse to wield the shepherd’s crook clutched in his fist like a foil and shove Theo face-first into the refuse she was shoveling—not because every gentlemanly virtue his mother had crammed into his head had prevailed against so base an urge...but because he had the distinct impression that Theo would find a way to make him pay for it.

Chapter Six

“You know that boy isn’t who he says he is, don’t you?” Papa said as Theo scrambled about the kitchen in the service of cobbling together something passable for luncheon.

“Mr. Dryden?” Theo inquired, grabbing a hunk of bread leftover from breakfast from the larder. “But he had a letter from the duchess—”

“Simple enough to forge a letter,” Papa said, feeling for the back of the chair set near the table, and pulling it out to sit.

“Yes,” Theo said, “but it had the ducal crest pressed into the wax, and it referenced...” Well, it had referenced things that only the duchess would have known, from their brief acquaintance years and years past. It *had* to be from the duchess. But what purpose would she have to lie about the identity of the man she’d sent? “Who do you think he is, then?” she asked. “Should we have thrown him straight off the farm at once?”

“Oh, now, I don’t think that’s necessary,” Papa said as she placed a plate before him, laden with thick slices of bread, salted ham, and a wedge of cheese. “I doubt there’s any harm in it—and you could use an extra pair of hands around the farm.”

Theo suppressed a snort. Some help Mr. Dryden would be, with his soft hands and his polished boots. Even supposing he *could* make himself useful, Theo did not doubt that he had never worked a farm in his life, and like as not he would simply make more work for her in the end.

“As to *who* he is,” Papa said as he felt for the knife that Theo had placed above his plate, gripping the handle carefully, “I have my suspicions, but I can’t see the lad, so you’ll have to describe him.”

“Irritating,” Theo grumbled without thinking. Of course, it wasn’t precisely Mr. Dryden’s fault—she likely would have found fault with anyone who had arrived on the duke’s behalf. For two years now he’d ignored letters, neglected his

responsibilities to the townsfolk—and *now* he and his mother had sent a man and expected their cooperation? How very like a privileged aristocrat to shirk his responsibilities and then leave it to *her* to facilitate his investigator's assignment.

"Theo," Papa chastened lightly.

"He called me a *man*!"

"He did not. He only assumed as much because you sign your letters *Theo* instead of *Theodosia*." There was the scrape of the knife across the surface of the bread as Papa deftly slathered butter upon it.

"Theodosia is a stupid name," she said crossly, as she began assembling a plate for Mr. Dryden. At Papa's continued silence, she added, "I don't know what you want me to say. He's got blond hair and green eyes." And a square jaw, good teeth, and a cleft straight in the center of his chin. His nose was somewhat less than straight, and probably it had been broken at least once, but she thought it suited him better—made his face less unbearably patrician. "In fact, he looks remarkably like—like..."

The duchess. He looked like the *duchess*. His features were more severe, it was true, but he had the same eyes, the same hair. But how could he so resemble the *duchess* and bear the surname Dryden? Her Grace had married into the family. Unless—

Unbidden, a memory traipsed through her mind—of the duchess holding her by the hand, drying her tears, and coaxing her out of the heavy rain and into her waiting carriage. "*You know*," the duchess had said, "*you remind me of my Alex*."

Oh, Lord. She had a damned duke playing at being a laborer on her farm. A duke who had disguised himself as a solicitor to investigate his own land agent's negligence.

"He's the damned duke, isn't he?" Theo gritted out between clenched teeth. "How in the world could you have guessed it?"

"Well, now," Papa said. "I'm blind, not feeble-minded." He took a long sip of milk. "You can watch faces to see a lie, my girl, but I can hear it in a voice—and that boy is not a good liar." He gave a small shrug, settling back in his seat. "I thought to myself, what kind of man would come saying he's someone he's not? Likely someone who knows he wouldn't be welcome if he showed his face to the people he's wronged."

Theo allowed that it was a reasonable assumption. Already her hand had curled around her carving knife as if imagining wielding it as a weapon against the duke who had allowed the village to be fleeced into penury through his neglect. She'd been prepared to take Mr. Dryden's head off simply for acting as the duke's *representative*—little wonder he'd come disguised.

"So," Papa said, skillfully capturing a bit of salted ham with his fork, "Are you going to run him off, then? I suppose it ought to be up to you to decide what you want to do about him."

Do about him? There were a great number of things she wished to *do* about him, and most of them would result in her swinging at the end of a rope. "No," she bit out gravely, and with some effort managed to convince her hand to surrender the knife clutched in it. "I'm not going to run him off—I am going to give him *hell*."

Papa sighed. "You know you could lose us our farm, my girl." "What difference does it make?" Theo asked, her voice flat. "We're going to lose it anyway." Because the next quarter day—Midsummer—was a little less than two months away, and Theo knew—*knew*—they wouldn't have the funds to pay the rent. Her stomach did a strange little flip of anxiety, and she swallowed down a lump constructed of every worry that had accumulated in the last two years. What would they do? Where would they go?



"Go, damn you," Alex muttered, prodding a particularly recalcitrant ewe with the shepherd's crook, and receiving only a blank stare in return. There were some fifty head of sheep left to be driven to pasture, although the lambs had swiftly gone gamboling off, bouncing eagerly toward the field designated for grazing.

A ewe bleated at his side and leaned in for a nibble of his shirt, its teeth clamping around the fabric and yanking it out from where it had been tucked into his trousers.

"No," he said, attempting to shove its sweet-looking black face

away, which only succeeded in ripping through the flimsy linen. “*Bad sheep,*” he hissed. “Away with you.” A gentle poke of the shepherd’s crook availed him nothing. The ewe stared up at him, its vacant gaze distant as it chewed upon the hem of his shirt.

An aggressive bleat from somewhere behind him—then the quick plod of hooves upon the ground. Before he could turn, something hard and heavy shoved itself straight into the small of his back and he went stumbling forward, catching himself only by sheer dint of will before he went tumbling over a cluster of ewes. He turned to see a ram prancing about behind him as if excessively proud of itself, its nose titled skyward in delight.

Damned if he was going to let a herd of sheep get the better of him. He grasped the shepherd’s crook in his fist, reached out, and snagged the ram about the neck. With a firm yank, he twisted to direct the ram toward the gate.

The ram solidly resisted his attempts to herd it. Instead, a chorus of bleats rose up around him. A passel of sheep crowded toward him—he had never expected it was possible for sheep to look *menacing*, but there was something undeniably ominous about their slow approach.

“Back,” he said, brandishing the crook, swinging it out in a slow arc. The sheep did not so much as flick an ear, and he found himself taking a swift step backward, nearly tripping over an ewe that had positioned itself behind him. “*Back, you lot—oof.*”

His breath fled his lungs on a great *whoosh* as one of the ewes charged forward, planting her skull firmly into his stomach. The crook went flying, and so did Alex, tumbling straight over the sheep behind him, landing with a *thump* straight onto the ground.

Damnation. Felled for the second time in as many days.

A long, low whistle split the air, and, incredibly, the sheep began to move. Like a tide they swept around him, emitting a number of sullen-sounding bleats as they strolled out of the gate. Alex lifted his head from where it rested upon the ground to find his worst fears realized—of course, Theo hadn’t even required the crook to compel the sheep to move. She held a plate in one hand and had the other settled upon the wooden

fence, and the sheep simply moved past her in a loose line, wending their way toward the frolicking lambs that bounced with glee some distance away.

Alex dropped his head back and prayed for a swift death lest he be forced to endure the sharp slash of her tongue.

“Mr. Dryden,” she said, in that clear, crisp, faintly-mocking voice, “are you aware that you’re sitting in a pile of sheep droppings?”

Well, he certainly was *now*. Gritting his teeth and keeping his eyes fixed upon the sky, he snapped, “Go ahead and laugh. I know you want to.”

She didn’t. How or why she had resisted, he had no idea—but still there was a skein of satisfaction threaded through her voice when she said, “I suppose even sheep herding is beyond your meager abilities.”

“Forgive me for having so little experience,” he said irritably, levering himself up to climb to his feet. At least the sheep droppings were more or less a pellet-like mass; nothing like the wet clumps of cow excrement he’d stuck his boot in earlier. “Not a lot of sheep in London.”

Her blue eyes scored him; measured and found wanting in less than half a moment. “I haven’t the time to coddle you,” she said, and balanced the plate upon the fence. “Here’s your damned lunch; eat it and find something useful to do which will *not* result in me cleaning up your messes. It has taken you the better part of an hour to *fail* to take the sheep to pasture—a task I completed in less than a minute.”

It was perhaps the first time he’d been chastised by anyone other than his mother; a uniquely shaming experience. “It’s hardly *my* fault,” he snapped, embittered by the fact that she had seen him humiliate himself too often of late, “that I have better things to do in London than to move livestock from one location to another.”

“Where *exactly*, Mr. Dryden, do you think the wool for your trousers comes from? Your eggs, your milk, your cheese—the meat and vegetables your cook prepares for your dinner? Do you imagine these things simply pop into existence at your slightest thought? *Someone* must produce them. They must tend the fields required to grow your food, raise the livestock bound for your dinner plate, and shear the sheep to provide the

wool that becomes your fine clothing.” Her voice rose from a seething whisper to into a crescendo of fury. “Of course *you* have *better things to do*,” she snarled. “But your *better things* are built upon the backs of those doing every small thing you consider to be beneath you. You owe the softness of your hands to every man, woman, and child who has ruined theirs in the service of ensuring that you and your ilk never have to consider from whence these things come. That they are simply *there* when you require them.”

The heat of fury combined with embarrassment fled as quickly as it had come, and Alex let out a breath. It had been so *easy* to let his temper control his tongue...but he *had* lived an inordinately privileged life. Of course he had never had to consider any of those things; he had funds enough to ensure that he had never had to work a day in his life.

But Theo *had*. Even if she had come out here simply to gloat over his inability to perform what she doubtless considered a simple enough task, still she had brought him a meal she had prepared herself, because the Vances did not have the means to secure the services of a cook. It had taken time from her, this simple act—time she could ill afford to spare, because she was running the farm practically alone.

“You’re right,” he said. “That was thoughtless of me. I apologize.” It was humbling. A duke never *had* to apologize. The last time he’d been driven to proffer one had been some years ago, when he’d propositioned the wrong woman. Surreptitiously, he brushed his fingertips over the bridge of his nose, and the telling bump where it had been broken.

“As well you had better.” Theo didn’t know to whom it was that she spoke. She simply stood there, chin held at that imperious angle, eyes flashing blue fire. She seemed taller, somehow, as if she were held aloft on the winds of her righteous indignation. Not only did she not *like* him; she *loathed* him—as if he were personally responsible for her situation.

Which he was.

He could not recall another time in his life he’d felt so low, so horribly inept. Failure was not a condition with which he had much experience—and he did not intend to make a habit of it.

The sun was high in sky, and he’d accomplished little enough

this day except to avail himself of Theo's hard work and embarrass himself. Surely there was *something* he could manage. He reached for the plate she had left perched upon the railing and said, "My thanks for this. If you could tell me what else I ought to do—"

A scathing sound left her throat as she fisted her hands on her hips. "You can finish your investigation, Mr. Dryden, and then *leave*." Her long braid nearly whipped him in the face as she wheeled about. "Other than that, you may *stay out of my way*."



The *nerve*! Theo stomped back to the house in a fine snit. As if she had the *time* to hold his hand through each and every chore that required doing! Perhaps His Grace was *accustomed* to someone standing at the ready to wipe his bloody arse for him, but damned if *she* would fill that position.

Already her list of daily chores stretched longer than her arm, and they could barely afford to keep Sam and Heath on for the season. Her only saving grace at the moment was that Papa's blindness prevented him from seeing how bad things had truly gotten. How many things she had had to let slip, owing to the fact that they simply could not afford the necessary repairs or supplies. How turnips would dominate the harvest simply because they grew quickly and easily and required little enough care. How very *late* those turnips would be harvested, besides. How they could no longer afford the labor required to farm more than half the land that had been theirs since Papa had first leased it years and years ago. And how what labor they *could* afford would strain their meager finances when the time came to harvest.

The anger fell out of her all at once as she caught sight of the rear garden that Papa had tended these many years. It had become his passion as his eyesight had begun to fail him, and he'd learned its neat rows and borders by heart. He had never, to her knowledge, tread upon so much as a stray vine. Each day he meticulously paced its rows, plunging his fingers into the soft dirt to gauge its moisture. Each day he pumped water into buckets and tended the plants that grew so well in the

attention and care that he devoted to them.

It was because of his attention to this garden that they had more to eat each day than eggs and mutton and turnips. It was because of his careful cultivation that Theo could preserve pickles and beats, make her own jellies, and even sell some produce to Maudie at the inn. It was Papa's fine array of herbs that flavored their suppers with wild marjoram and sage, dill and thyme, rosemary and garlic.

"That you, Theo?" Papa inquired, his face turning toward the sound of her footsteps, though his eyes drifted past her, unseeing.

"Yes, Papa," she said, striving to cut free the tension from her voice.

A grin split his craggy features. He fished through a nest of leaves near where he knelt, locating a vegetable on its vine and lifting it for her inspection. "Look how well the cucumbers are coming in. We'll have a fine harvest in a week or so, I expect." She summoned a smile, despite the fact that he could not see it, hoping that he might hear it in her voice instead. "I see," she said. "It's wonderful, Papa. You've done a fine job this year."

And as he grinned down at his beloved garden, Theo fought a surge of grief, knowing that soon even this small pleasure would be lost to him.

Chapter Seven

It was nearly dusk by the time the duke returned to the house, and he knocked politely at the back door, awaiting admittance. Theo had not the time to humor his pretensions toward politeness, given that she had been slaving away over dinner preparations.

“Papa, could you...?” she said as she pulled the spit from its position over the fire and grabbed a knife to gently nudge the chicken that had spent the last hour or so roasting onto a wooden carving board.

“That’ll be our Mr. Dryden, I expect,” Papa said as he shoved himself up from his chair, where he had been whittling a figure from a block of wood while he waited. He maneuvered his way around the room toward the door, and felt for the latch and then the handle.

“Wipe your boots,” Theo cast over her shoulder. “I know exactly what kind of mess you’ll bring in with you otherwise.”

“Theo,” Papa chastened gently, returning to his seat at the table.

“Alex will do fine,” the duke said, and Theo heard the sound of boots being scraped wiped clean—or at least, clean *enough*—just outside the door. “I expect there’s a bit more familiarity in the countryside than in the city. I shouldn’t like to stand out too much.”

Theo snorted, and her fingers flew as she chopped some leaves of chard and endives for a salad, added in a sprinkling of watercress for a snap of flavor, and then tossed it into a bowl to be dressed. With the knife she gestured to the door. “Wash your hands, Mr. Dryden. This may be the countryside, but we still wash up for dinner,” she said. The chicken was resting, but the potatoes still had to be mashed, and she reached for the saltcellar and pepper after dropping a heaping spoonful of butter into the pot.

She heard the squeak of the pump, followed by a long, low hiss. “I don’t suppose,” Mr. Dryden said, “that you have any

bandages?”

Bandages? Theo glanced over her shoulder to find Mr. Dryden staring at his hands in something very like dismay. “Why?” she inquired suspiciously, abandoning the pot of potatoes and wiping her hands upon her apron. “What have you done?”

“I fear I might’ve overextended myself,” he said, and held out one of his hands for her inspection. “I helped Sam and Heath mend a fence earlier in the day—” He caught himself and paused to reevaluate. “*Helped* might be a strong word, however I am reasonably certain I did not actually hinder their work. I was simply unaware that digging fence posts could be so...arduous an activity.”

Good Lord; he’d worked his fingers bloody. His fingernails were ragged, and still caked with dirt besides, but there were several places, palms included, where the rough wood of the shovel handle had rubbed his skin quite raw. “Papa,” she said, “the salve and bandages.”

“I can fetch them,” Mr. Dryden said, with a glance to where her father was seated at the table. “If you’ll tell me where I might find them.”

Theo tossed him a severe look. “Papa can find anything within the house, and a good number of other places besides,” she said beneath her breath. “He’s not an invalid.”

The chair legs scraped against the wood floor as Papa rose to his feet, heading for the cupboard where they kept the medicinal supplies. Farming-related injuries were simply a matter of course, though it had been some time since Theo had had to patch up something quite so dire.

The duke patterned his tone after her own, pitching his voice low so as not to be overheard. “My apologies. I meant no offense. I only meant—” He took a swift, pained breath as Theo grabbed one of his hands to better examine the extent of the damage. “I didn’t wish to cause more trouble than I already have.”

“Mr. Dryden, if this is you trying *not* to cause trouble, I’d hate to see what it looks like when you *are* trying.” Theo swept her arm toward the table. “Sit. There. *Not* in Papa’s place.” Dinner would have to wait—unfortunately, there were more pressing things to attend to. Specifically, a duke’s ruined hands.

Papa returned a few moments later, a swath of bandages

clutched in one fist and a pot of salve in the other. “What’s happened?” he asked as he sank back into his chair.

“Mr. Dryden,” Theo said, her voice clipped, “has ruined his hands while he was out with Sam and Heath repairing fences.” She lifted the lid from the pot of salve as she sank into her own chair, gesturing for Mr. Dryden to present his hands to her. “I *told* you that your gloves were insufficient. We have extra gloves going spare; you only needed to ask.”

“I didn’t know to ask,” he said, and heat climbed high into his cheeks.

And she hadn’t precisely told him, because she had been too furious for anything but ridicule. “Well, you won’t be going into the village with Papa this evening,” she said. “You’d be laughed straight out of the tavern.” She spread a thin layer of salve over the worst of the wounds on his right hand and began the tedious process of wrapping them.

“In the interest of honesty,” he said, “I’m not entirely certain I could manage it even if we did go. I might doze off at the table at this point.” To his credit, he *did* look rather exhausted. But then, the sort of work he’d been doing was the backbreaking kind. There were smudges beneath his eyes, and his whole face looked quite—drawn. And perhaps a touch sunburnt.

Of course, he hadn’t an appropriate hat, either.

“Broke the skin?” Papa inquired, folding his arms over his chest.

“A bit, in several places,” Theo confirmed as she surrendered his right hand and reached for his left. “He’ll be lucky if he doesn’t take an infection.” To the duke, she confided: “The only doctor for miles is rarely sober and his bedside manner isn’t what anyone would call comforting.”

The duke flexed the fingers of his right hand experimentally as she worked on his left. “I suppose I should try to avoid requiring the services of a doctor,” he said idly.

“You should,” Theo said, and a wince chased across his face as she whisked salve over a particularly gruesome-looking broken blister. “Especially given that we haven’t the means to pay for those services.”

“Bandages will need to be changed at least twice tomorrow,” Papa said. “You ought to stay close to the house.” His face changed incrementally, brightening. “There’s herbs that need

picking and drying. We'll need them come winter, when it's too cold to grow fresh."

In all likelihood they wouldn't be here come winter, but Theo supposed the duke couldn't make too much of a mess with the herbs—and neither was he likely to injure himself further on a bundle of thyme or marjoram. "Yes," she said. "You do that. Are the bandages too tight?"

"No, not at all," Mr. Dryden said as she surrendered his left hand. "My thanks."

Papa chuckled. "You aren't the first man my Theo's patched up. I doubt you'll be the last."

Theo doubted it would even be the last time she would patch up the duke, given his propensity for disaster. "Keep your hands clean and dry," she said as she shoved back her chair and headed back into the kitchen for the pot of potatoes yet in need of mashing. The chicken still wanted carving, but she'd been interrupted already and it would take a moment to pick up the rhythm of cooking once again. She selected a sprig of rosemary and pinched her fingers around it, crushing the leaves as she sheared them free and tossed them in with the potatoes, and then rooted around in the onion basket until she located a stray head of garlic, from which she peeled two cloves to pound into a paste.

"Garlic?" The voice came from directly over her shoulder and Theo jumped in alarm, whirling to find the duke standing just behind her.

Her heart still in her throat, she lifted the mallet in her hand. "I could have taken your head off!"

"It wouldn't be the first time." His bandaged fingers drifted over the bump marring the straight line of his nose.

"What are you doing?" she asked irritably. "There's little enough room for one."

"Observing." His interested gaze slid over the countertops, taking in the tools arrayed there, the food assembled on the counter, the ingredients yet to be used. "If I'm to be useless about the farm until my hands heal, I suppose the least I could do would be to learn what I can."

For some reason, the bland response stirred a swirl of guilt in her chest—because it sounded honest, sincere. As if he genuinely wished to learn from her. She had been prepared to

paint him in her mind as a dissipated nobleman, spoiled and ungrateful for his position in life...and perhaps he *had* been. But she was forced to allow that perhaps he had simply never had the opportunity to be better.

“Good luck, son,” Papa said, with a snort. “Theo rules her kitchen with an iron fist.”

That was because the last time Papa had tried to cook, he’d sliced his hand open on a kitchen knife that she had left carelessly sitting upon the counter. Theo had never forgiven herself for the misstep. Nor did she wish to risk his safety on something so simple as cooking.

Theo whacked the garlic cloves with a kitchen mallet, pulverizing them into a paste, which she scraped into the pot of potatoes. “We eat simply here,” she said, aware of the defensiveness creeping into her voice. “Papa grows the majority of our herbs and vegetables. We use what we have to make a simple dinner palatable.” The potatoes steamed as they broke apart beneath her pounding, the savory scents of garlic and rosemary permeating the room. “Here,” she said, shoving the pot into his hands. “You can bring this to the table.”

Dutifully he removed the dish as she cracked an egg into a bowl and whisked it with oil and a dash of vinegar, flavoring it with a pinch of salt and pepper and a sprinkle of dried herbs leftover from last harvest, to pour over the salad of leafy greens. The skin of the chicken crackled beneath her knife as she separated the joints and arrayed them on a platter, but by the time she turned to remove it to the table, the salad and its dressing had already been laid out—and the rolls that had been baking in their pan above the fire had also been carefully removed and placed in a basket.

And when she peeked through the doorway, the duke was just sitting down at the table, laying a napkin out over his lap and snatching up the bread basket to offer Papa a roll.

“Bread at three o’clock,” Theo cast out. “Meat at noon; vegetables at nine.” It was a pattern of dish arrangement that they’d long since grown accustomed to, and it helped Papa to find his preferred dishes without trouble.

“Of course,” the duke said, and set to work at rearranging the dishes upon the table to suit, gauging the position from her father’s seat.

“Theo, let the boy alone. He’s trying to make himself useful,” Papa said.

The designation of *boy* had clearly rankled with His Grace, for his brow furrowed—but he held his silence as he rose once more from his seat as Theo approached with the platter of chicken, which she set down at the table.

Theo shot him a baffled glance. “Do you need something?”

“A gentleman never sits when a lady is standing,” the duke said, as if in rote repetition of something that had long ago been drilled into his head.

“Nonsense. You were sitting a moment ago,” she said.

“But you were in the kitchen.”

“That’s ridiculous. I could see you all this time through the door.”

“But you were not *in the room*.”

“Theo,” Papa said. “Humor the lad. He’s *trying* to be polite.”

Papa slid his hand up the table toward the nine o’clock position until he found the salad forks Theo had laid out beside the bowl, and adroitly maneuvered a serving onto his plate.

Daft Londoners, with their ridiculous rules. Theo settled into her chair, and the duke slid into his own only after she had taken her seat. He waited, she noticed, until she and Papa had served themselves, and then he noted the position of the serving utensils and returned them to their proper positions, so that Papa would be able to locate them easily.

Perhaps he truly *had* been trying merely to be helpful instead of patronizing. Papa had often accused her of being too touchy, too willing to take offense where none had been intended—but she had suffered enough of the opinions of those who didn’t understand their situation and yet *still* felt called to make judgments upon it to have much patience with it.

“This is good,” the duke said, his brows lifting in surprise as he bit into a forkful of chicken.

Papa cracked open a fresh roll, inhaling the steam that billowed forth. “Theo took over the cooking two years ago. We ate burned biscuits every day for a month, but she got the hang of it eventually.”

The duke helped himself to a portion of salad and spooned a generous amount of dressing over it. “I’m ashamed to say that

I have never before considered the effort that has gone into my meals. But there's a certain skill involved, a precision—almost like a dance. There's an art to cooking that I hadn't expected."

"Yes, well, it's one I've had to acquire, given that we had to let Maggie—our cook—go when we could no longer afford to pay her for her services," Theo said, stabbing her fork into her potatoes. The tang of garlic and rosemary soothed her senses, blunted the sharp edge of her anger. She supposed that the duke had been, after a fashion, trying to pay her a compliment—but it had gone unappreciated, given that *cooking* had become simply one more chore upon her ever-increasing list due to his poor management of his estates.

It seemed that he realized that too, for he occupied himself with the food on his plate for a long, awkward moment, until he finally broke the uncomfortable silence that had settled over the table. "Do you suppose I might trouble you for ink and paper?"

Papa threw a gesture behind him, toward the writing desk tucked up against the corner. "You're welcome to whatever's in the writing desk," he said. "Can't promise the quality will be what you're accustomed to. Then again, I've not had a need for any of it in more years than I'd care to count."

"I'm sure whatever you happen to have on hand will be more than sufficient," the duke said as he buttered his roll. "I'd like to begin a preliminary report for the duke," he said, and Theo resisted the childish impulse to snort, "and I suppose I might as well start here with the farm. I've noticed some things—"

Noticed some things? In a sudden panic, Theo lashed out beneath the table, and her foot connected solidly with the duke's shin, provoking a grunt of pain and disbelief. His green eyes widened, and his jaw dropped in surprise and shock. "Did you just *kick*—"

Theo coughed into her fist, straining to cover his words. She gave a severe shake of her head, indicating that he should let the matter drop, but his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"What things have you noticed?" Papa asked, helping himself to another serving of salad.

The duke delayed a moment before he responded, and the full weight of his gaze fell on Theo, as if he might divine her intentions through whatever expression happened to be resting

upon her face—which was something akin to desperation at the moment, she suspected. He could ruin her carefully-constructed house of cards in an instant if he chose, and every lie she had told Papa to alleviate the worry that had carved such deep grooves into his face would be revealed.

“This and that,” the duke said at last, evasively. “Some things the duke’s land agent ought to have had repaired long before now.”

Papa gave a low, wry chuckle. “Been an age since we could get more from Mr. Jennings than his assurances that he would pass along our requests to His Grace.” He shook his head in aggravation. “I don’t need to tell you that *assurances* hardly mend a broken fence or patch a damaged roof.”

“Not to worry,” the duke said, his jaw tightening as he speared a shred of chicken on his plate. “I am certain the duke will want to rectify these matters at once.”



Somewhere beneath him, a cow lowed. Of course, it was difficult to see—the sun had long since set, and the barn was thick with shadows. Alex had never before considered how much *light* there was in London, even in the depths of the night. Some balls did not let out until the sun had begun to rise—there was always someone either coming or going, and he had grown accustomed to the ready availability of street lamps.

Alex shifted to his back, and the hay scrunched beneath him, bunching up beneath the cover of the blanket at his back. For all that he was exhausted, for all that he ached in every conceivable muscle—and ones he could *not* conceive of—his brain was awake and alert, cycling through an endless litany of as-yet-unanswerable questions. How, exactly, had he been so derelict in his duties that he had not known how poorly things had been going for his tenants at Ivywilde? How long had Mr. Jennings been fleecing him, and how, precisely was he meant to acquire proof of it?

What had Theo been keeping from her father, and why?

He bit off a curse and shoved his arm beneath him and

attempted to beat the hay into something approximating a pillow beneath his head. Perhaps he could requisition some proper bedding, because if he was going to be in town long enough to resolve the issue of his neglectful estate manager, he might as well do it comfortably.

For that matter, perhaps he ought to prioritize the mending of Maudie's roof—certainly he would be more comfortable in the inn than he would in the Vances' hayloft. Hell, he was a damned *duke*; he could prioritize the *whole* of it, if he so chose.

Although he suspected that a legion of workmen descending upon the small town would likely draw no small amount of attention from those at Ivywilde—particularly Mr. Jennings. And if he suspected his scheme were about to be discovered, there was every possibility that he would destroy any evidence of his crimes that might exist before it could be used against him.

No—if Mr. Jennings had, indeed, defrauded not only him but the people who depended up on him, then the man deserved to swing in the wind. He could not, in good conscience—

Something rustled in the hay. Something small, something quick. He could not see it, of course, but he felt its presence close by his thigh, scurrying up the blanket. A mouse? A *rat*?

He would not scream, he *would not* scream.

Tiny claws pricked his shirt as the creature scrambled up his chest. The beast began to growl—*growl*? Did rodents growl? In a breathless panic, Alex swept his hand down his chest in the hopes of dislodging the beast, but his fingers landed upon soft fur.

A minuscule *mew* pierced the night, and green eyes glinted in the scant light of the moon coming in through the window. That growl redoubled itself, only—it wasn't a growl at all. It was a *purr*.

Alex dropped his head back onto the cushion of hay. A cat—a damned *cat*. Well, a *kitten*, if the size of it were any indication of its age.

“Off, you,” Alex said, and grasped the kitten about the middle to pry it up, but it only curled its claws deeper into the linen of his shirt and gave a plaintive meow. More rustling rose up, as of *several* small creatures bouncing over the hay. Something

landed upon his thigh, while another tiny body bounded across his stomach. In only a few moments, three other kittens had joined their sibling, taking up positions around him.

In the darkness, a larger shape appeared near his shoulder, slitted eyes peering down at him. A tail thwacked him full in the face. The mama cat, he assumed.

“I don’t want them,” he said. “Take them back.” Kitten claws needled his skin at his side, kneading with fierce determination.

Mama cat gave a long, slow, indifferent blink—and then padded away toward the rear of the hayloft, leaving her kittens as his charges.

Alex closed his eyes with a groan as a chorus of purrs drifted around him. At the very least, cats were preferable to rats.

Chapter Eight

Dawn broke *too damned early*, and with it came the crowing of that misbegotten rooster. Alex woke with a start, which strained every muscle in his body, the vast majority of which ached like the very devil.

He had also startled the kitten that had been sleeping atop his head, and with a yowl of displeasure, it sank every single one of its needle-sharp claws directly into his scalp. Alex swore vividly, struggling to disentangle the screaming kitten from the nest it had made of his hair, while the mama cat stretched lazily beside him, flicking her tail into his face with a complete lack of concern. Her sleek grey body moved in a sinuous, exaggerated arch, as if to criticize Alex for disturbing her slumber.

Just as the kitten went scampering away to join its brethren, who were curled up around Alex's knees, the barn door opened and there came the sound of a metal bucket hitting the ground, followed shortly thereafter by the odd twang of milk hitting the inside of it in rhythmic streams.

"Why does the countryside have to be so bloody *pastoral*?" Alex muttered to himself, though not quietly enough—there was a distinct cough from beneath that led him to believe that Theo was likely less than pleased with his criticism.

"You're already late, Mr. Dryden." She said it in such a cool, snide tone that Alex was certain there was a certain subtext lingering in the air after it.

You'll not last the week out.

Damned if he wouldn't—too often he'd been accused of a penchant for melodrama lately, and he would *not* tuck his tail between his legs and make for London simply because farm life was clearly anathema to him. Besides, Mother's smug superiority would know no bounds—she'd issue that most hated of all phrases: *I told you so*.

And then he'd be obliged to give serious consideration to taking a wife, just as he'd promised.

Alex scraped the straw from his hair—along with a fair amount of kitten fur—and dragged himself upright, though every sore muscle in his body protested the movement. Better men than Theo had tried—and failed—to get the better of him. Actually, any man was a better man than Theo, considering Theo wasn't a man at all. Then again, Alex knew a great number of men that hadn't half of Theo's competence. He had a feeling that she ruled the *farm entire* with an iron fist—and likely had been doing for some time.

As he slowly peeled himself off the bed of hay, Alex noticed that at some point, his trunk had been brought up to the hayloft—probably by Sam or Heath. Possibly both, since by Alex's estimation, it was rather heavy. With a ginger kitten dangling from his boot—because the wretched little creature could not possibly have known that one did not *dangle* from a duke's footwear—Alex stomped over to the trunk in search of clean clothing.

He could dress himself. Of *course* he could dress himself. He was a man, after all, and even if he'd had a valet to do it for years and years, it didn't mean he couldn't handle the task on his own. But as he pawed through the clothes packed neatly within, what gripped him most was a sense of encroaching panic.

Good *God*. Theo had been running an entire damned *farm*, and *he* couldn't even determine what he ought to wear. Selecting a handful of garments at random, he nudged the kitten off his boot and carefully navigated the ladder down to the lower level of the barn, only too aware that his clothes were in what had to be the worst condition they had ever endured.

Perched upon a small stool a few feet away, Theo rested her cheek against the cow's side, her arms extended beneath its belly as she milked. There were at least three other cows in the barn—did Theo milk all of them?

With his fresh clothes tucked beneath his arm, he turned toward Theo. “How often must these creatures be milked?” he asked.

“Every morning,” she replied tersely, as if the answer to his question ought to be self-evident.

“And you do this yourself?” Fascinating. “How long does it take?”

“About an hour.” She cast a censorious glance over her shoulder, as if to chastise him from distracting her from her task. “Papa does his share of the milking.” And then, almost defensively, she added, “He’s quite capable, you know.”

Of course he knew. “I never intended to imply he wasn’t,” he said. “But he hasn’t been out these past two mornings.”

“No,” Theo said, a bite of annoyance in her voice. “I thought it best to do it myself until I could be certain you hadn’t made a mess of the barn.” The milking ceased at last, and Theo rose from the stool, pulling it and the bucket away from the cow. “We keep things in a particular order. Deviations from that order can be dangerous for Papa.”

Ah. Because the man felt the ground with his feet and counted his steps, anything Alex might’ve inadvertently moved or carelessly discarded in an improper place could spell disastrous consequences for a man who could not see and was accustomed to a certain routine.

“I’ll be careful,” he said, watching her nose crinkle in distaste as she moved to pass him with the bucket of milk and the stool on her way toward the next stall. “I meant to ask—”

“The stream is that way,” she said, jerking a thumb over her shoulder. “Perhaps a fifteen minute walk.”

Could she read minds, also, then? “How did you know?”

“You have a certain...odor.” To her credit, she managed to utter the sentence without inflection, but still Alex did not think he had been more humiliated in the whole of his life.

“How could you possibly tell?” he snapped. “We’re in a barn!”

“Yes, well, the barn is mucked out daily,” she shot back, her chin lifting with a haughtiness that would have done any noblewoman of his acquaintance proud. “Which is more often than *you’ve* been cleaned lately.”

“You—you—” How was it that he was lost for words? He was *never* lost for words. “You don’t like me at all, do you?”

“Not particularly, no.” Her plait slid over her shoulder, a long, thick rope of jet, and despite the pugnacious tilt of her chin, she simply looked—tired. Perhaps her father couldn’t see it, and perhaps she had taken pains to ensure that he didn’t even hear it, but...the effort she expended to keep the farm running had taken a toll. A severe one, if the shadows beneath her eyes were any indication. “I’m certain you’ll do as you like, Mr.

Dryden, but remember that with every moment you let slip by, you are gambling with lives. Many families will not survive past the next quarter day unless you can conclude your investigation—families that have lived here for generations will be evicted from the only homes they have ever known. You can always go back to London, but where will *they* go when Mr. Jennings has bled them dry?”

“It won’t come to that,” Alex heard himself say. “If everything is as you’ve said—which I’ve no reason, at this moment, to doubt—it won’t come to that.”

Theo gave a disdainful little sniff as she took up her position in the next stall. “You’ll forgive me if I find it difficult to place my trust in you,” she said. “Actions speak louder than words, sir—and neither of yours have particularly impressed.” She turned her head, bending once again as she sat upon the stool, and resumed her milking. “Best you were going; breakfast is likely already cold.”



If Benson, Alex’s valet, only knew that his employer had tossed a bundle of what once had been carefully-pressed and packed clothing down onto the grassy bank of the stream in which he intended to bathe, Alex was certain that his poor valet would have immediately succumbed to a fit of the vapors.

The stream wended its way through the countryside, a slice of silver far into the distance as the valley slid down to the east. In the west sat Ivywilde, atop its lonely hill; a benevolent guardian, its shimmering windows looking over the village below like dozens of blinking eyes.

Well. Perhaps not *so* benevolent. Not if Mr. Jennings were holed up somewhere upon the estate, counting the ill-gotten gains which he had wrested from the hands of a town already on its last legs. He could easily imagine the man—or at least, his imagination eagerly conjured up the image of a long-legged, spindly sort of man with a sly smile and a thin mustache. The sort of fellow given to slinking and gossiping, to partaking a bit too freely of his employer’s spirits.

As the land agent, Mr. Jennings would be entitled to a residence on the estate itself—but Alex pictured him residing within the manor proper, the ivy-adorned façade like a veil draped over the towering house hiding what evil lurked within. But then, Mother had always accused him of a penchant for melodrama.

It seemed odd, bathing out of doors, where anyone might stumble upon him—which he allowed was unlikely, given that the Vance farmstead stretched for acres in either direction. But the air was cool and crisp, and the sun just hanging over the lip of the horizon, and the vibrant pink sunrise streaked the sky, and his only company appeared to be the birdsong emanating from a few trees not too very far in the distance. Alex discarded his clothes, unwrapped the bandages wound round his hands, and waded into the icy stream.

Soap. He ought to have brought *soap*. And a towel—but the realization came far too late, and he had little desire to endure a tongue-lashing from Theo should he walk the quarter of an hour back for it only to abscond once again. The rocks at the bottom of the stream had been worn smooth over time, and he sank himself up to his shoulders, dunked his head, and scrubbed at his hair, avoiding the tender spot at the back of his head. It had scabbed over at least, that minor cut—but it seemed he'd acquired a bit of a goose egg, and the slightest pressure made it throb.

His fingers ached with the effort to scrub his scalp clean. They weren't *dreadful*, he supposed, glancing down at them—they were merely *awful*. Worn raw in places and blistery in others. But the icy water of the stream relieved a bit of the pain, and the water ran clean and clear. How long did it take to develop calluses?

Surely he wouldn't be in Surrey *that* long.

He'd meant to start on a preliminary assessment last evening, but he'd just been so damned *tired*. And he was still tired—how, exactly, did these people manage day after day, performing the grueling labor of running their farms? And how had they continued to do so long after their absent landlord's neglect had made itself known in the condition of their homes, their roads, their fields and fences and barns and stables?

He'd managed to assist Heath and Sam in the arduous task of repairing fences yesterday, but that was just one task among dozens that no doubt needed to be completed. And except for whatever hours her hired hands could spare from their own homesteads, Alex was certain that Theo had been managing it more or less alone.

And that she'd been carefully concealing the true state of the farm's affairs from her father. He could even understand it, in a way—what point would there be in telling the man how derelict the barn had become, how the roof of the house badly needed mending, how they'd likely lost more sheep than they could afford to the patchy fence work? There was nothing Mr. Vance could do for any of that. She would only be heaping unresolvable worries upon his shoulders.

So instead she'd borne them upon hers alone.

Tonight, then. Tonight he'd write up a note to send round to his solicitor, and he'd go into town no matter *how* badly he ached or *how* exhausted he was. He had the luxury of time—but if the Vance farm was any measure, his tenants did not.



“You grew all of these yourself?” Alex asked, looking out over the garden as he flexed his fingers, which were newly wrapped in fresh bandages applied by Tom, who had offered up only a few low mutterings of *foolish Londoners*.

“I did,” Tom said, his craggy face splitting in a grin that made him look ten years younger. “Had to do something with myself, and I wasn't made to spend my days sitting indoors. Since Theo gets the meals on the table, I do my best to make certain she's got her pick of vegetables to make it of.” He bent to run his fingertips along a leafy cucumber stalk. “Theo's a wonder with pickling and preserving—but then, she's had to be. Not to worry; we've plenty to eat and more besides. There's a village lad who comes up once a week to bring any extra vegetables into the village to sell. It doesn't bring in much, but it's food that isn't going to waste.”

Alex glanced down the neat rows, marveling at how spacious the garden was, how easily Tom navigated its neatly-laid rows.

He had never before considered that anything that ultimately ended up on his plate must, of course, first be *grown*, and thus it seemed as if he had wandered into a foreign land when he laid eyes upon a series of tall plants with thick, jutting leaves, revealing several artichokes clustered toward the middle, nearly at eye-level. Down another row grew heads of cauliflower, their curling green leaves cradling puffed white heads. There were long stalks of what Alex assumed to be spring onions, and some root vegetables poking their fronds out of the ground. Long green cucumbers were tucked protectively within their twisting vines, followed by a row of short, squat plants upon which dangled plump strawberries. Still more plants had been newly sown or had yet to reach ripeness—but Tom seemed to have an infallible sense of which were ripe, and which needed more time before they could be plucked from their plants.

“Cucumbers and radishes make good neighbors,” Tom explained as he dropped to one knee, felt the stems of a few plants, and then plucked a brilliant red radish from its home in the ground. “Cucumbers and potatoes are not, which is why I have the potatoes growing over there.” He indicated a bed some distance away that had been raised and fenced in with a border of wood. Another raised bed beside it seemed to have an abundance of herbs growing from it in lush profusion, though Alex found he could identify precious few of them. Probably he could by taste, but there was a significant difference between the growing herbs and the minced leaves that would end up flavoring his food.

“I see,” Alex said. “It’s a sight more impressive than the average kitchen garden, I’d wager.” Or so he assumed—he’d never actually *seen* one, though he knew his own staff must keep such a thing, since growing one’s own herbs was a common enough practice.

“It ought to be,” Tom said. “I’ve spent years perfecting it. I can’t see it, of course, but I can feel it—the life in the ground, the leaves, the vines, the flowers. Always had a way with plants.” He dug beneath a tangle of vines and extracted a ripe cucumber from beneath them. “You might have noticed we have particular ways around here.”

If by *particular* Tom meant that dishes and utensils were laid

out in a precise order upon the table and that Theo had taken over the entirety of the milking, not trusting Alex to keep the barn safe and free of clutter for her father's sake, then yes, he'd noticed. "I have noticed some...particularity."

"Planting's like that around here, too," Tom said. "We reserve a space for each type of seed, so that I don't mistake them for one another by the feel of them. Seeds from herbs especially are so small, it's a simple matter to confuse them by feel. So I sort them carefully, and put each in their proper place, and I've not confused them yet."

"Clever," Alex said. "I'm certain I'd be hopeless if I lost my sight, but you—you've developed systems I could never have dreamed of."

Tom chuckled, his hands cradling a fragile blossom, tucking it back into place. "I've had to," he said. "Theo was still just a mite when her mum left us, and my vision was going even then. Would you lie down and die over a little thing like losing your sight, if you had a daughter who needed you?"

"No," Alex said. "I suppose not." Though in truth, he couldn't say *what* he would have done—but he suspected that his will was somewhat lacking in comparison to Tom's. Or Theo's. He curled his hands into fists as an uncomfortable prickle of inadequacy skittered through him, and then winced as the motion aggravated his blisters. "Well," he said briskly, "Ought I assist you in harvesting whatever's ripe?"

Tom laughed—a full belly-laugh, all amusement. "No, son. Nobody touches my garden but me." He gave an absent gesture to the porch behind Alex. "There ought to be a stack of wooden bowls there; you see them?"

There they were, a half-dozen of them piled up beside an aged chair whose varnish was patchy and scratched. "I see them."

"Grab a couple of 'em and come sit here beside me. Got some peas that are ready to be harvested."

Alex picked up a set of bowls and took a step off the porch. "I thought you said—"

"Oh, you won't be picking them," Tom said jovially. "You'll be shelling them."

Chapter Nine

By the fourth—or was it fifth?—bowl of peas, Alex's fingers had grown almost numb. Though his knuckles ached with the repetitive motion of snapping open the shell and sweeping out the rows of peas lining either side from it, it was, in some small way, rewarding to see his efforts produce a heaping mound of fresh green peas piled into the bowl.

Tom chatted as they worked, and Alex forced himself to remember to make the occasional sound to confirm he was still listening, since the man could not see a nod, and Alex was loath to make the same mistake twice.

"Theo'll dry about half this amount to preserve them for winter," Tom said, plunging one hand into the bowl of peas to gauge its level. "You'll pardon me, but I wouldn't trust you with the task just yet. We'll see how well you do with the herbs and the butter."

"The butter?" Alex stilled, his hands curled around a peapod.

"Milk won't keep indefinitely, son. Figured you might handle churning." Tom tossed another handful of freshly-plucked pods into Alex's bowl with incredible accuracy. "We haven't got an icehouse here. The cellar keeps cool enough for most things—root vegetables, Theo's preserves, and such—but milk won't last long even in the cellar. Spoils too quickly, so we churn it into butter."

"How long does that usually take?" Alex inquired.

Tom gave a low laugh. "Depends."

"Upon what?"

"Whether or not you've the strength and stamina to finish the job." Tom jerked his head back toward the porch. "You see a barrel over there? Got a handle on one side? That's the churn. You pour the milk in the top and then crank the handle, and the paddles inside beat the cream into butter. Taxing job for some." His tone suggested some doubt that Alex would be able to manage it. "Don't worry; we'll give you the loan of some work gloves."

Because his hands were too fine and soft to manage without. It was enough to make a man cringe in shame. He was perhaps the most desirable man in London, for a multitude of reasons—ladies aimed to become his duchess and gentleman desired his friendship, his goodwill, his business. Here, he was useless—*worse* than useless, given that he had acquired the distinct impression that Tom had slowed to match *his* pace, lest in his speed he overwhelm his clumsy, inept assistant.

He'd be held in even less esteem if they knew his true identity. As Alex grabbed up a fresh pod and cracked open the green shell, he asked, "What is your impression of the duke?"

"Don't have much of one," Tom said. "Hasn't come round here before. The duchess was right pleasant, though, for so great a lady. Took a liking to my Theo."

I'll just bet she did, Alex thought sourly. She seemed precisely the sort Mother *would* like—surly and ill-tempered, stubborn, prideful. A woman capable of holding her own, of putting even a *duke* in the place she had assigned to him, and damned if he hadn't stepped right into it on her orders.

"Met the late duke a time or two," Tom said.

"Did you?" Alex's hands clenched around the peapod, and he nearly scattered the peas all over the row. "Had you...an impression of him?" His father had died long ago—so long ago that he had scarcely more than a shred of memory of him, like a painting that had been left sitting in the sun too long, washing away all of its color. It was possible—likely, even—that he only *wanted* to remember; perhaps the few impressions his mind yet clung to were less *memory* and more *invention*.

"Kind fellow," Tom said. "Sober. Responsible." Another few pods were tossed across the open space between them, landing neatly in the bowl in Alex's lap. "Won the estate in a card game, if you can believe it, but he arrived just as the old owner was leaving, and he took the time to come down into the village with his land agent, meeting the townsfolk and marking down everything that the old owner had left neglected due to lack of funds. And sure as the sunrise, the duke sent teams and teams of people down from London to fix it all up." The lines in his face looked even more pronounced as he turned his head toward Alex. "I had hoped his son would be of the same mold of man."

So had Alex, and he was deeply grateful that Tom could not see the flush of shame burnishing his cheeks. "I'm going to recommend some immediate repairs to the current duke," Alex said. "To that purpose, do you think you might be amenable to a trip into town this evening? I'll need to post a letter."

"Son, I think the better question is, will *you* be amenable to a trip into town? You've got peas to shell, herbs to dry, and a gallon or better of milk to churn into butter."

"How much would Theo have accomplished today?" Alex asked.

Tom snorted. "Son, she'd have been done by noon at the latest." And then, as a conciliatory gesture, he added, "Don't compare yourself. She's had all her life to learn. You'll improve, given time."

Alex thought of Theo's impertinent sass, the condescending tilt of her head, the blue eyes that heaped coals of shame upon his head, the snap of her black plait as she had dismissed him. The supercilious air that she had about her that suggested that she found him lacking in every conceivable regard.

"I'm going to do it all," he decided. Maybe it would take him all the day long, but he *would* make it through. On sheer determination alone, he would prove that he wasn't the gadabout she thought him to be.

"Good," Tom said. "We're grateful for the assistance."

They weren't, really, because he'd done precious little that was actually useful as of yet. But it was kind of Tom to say so just the same.

Alex redoubled his efforts, cracking open peapods and scraping out the peas contained within in a sort of rhythm that eventually had become second nature; a motion his hands simply remembered and performed almost autonomously.

A few minutes later, the back door of the house swung open, and Theo emerged with a washing basket perched upon her hip, which she set down on the porch. Studiously ignoring Alex, she stalked to one side of the porch, unwound a rope that had been rolled up there, and stretched it across the vast expanse of the yard opposite the garden and attached it to a hook that had been hammered into the side of the house.

"Washing's going up, Papa," she said. "Mind your head."

And Alex was forced to bear yet another indignity as Theo

reclaimed the abandoned basket and strung up his smallclothes to dry in the open air.



Theo stalked into the house late in the afternoon, the freshly-dried laundry folded in the basket she carried with her. The house smelled overwhelmingly of basil—*scorched* basil, but basil nonetheless. That damned fool of a duke might well have burned through half the herb garden’s worth of the stuff. Resisting the urge to mutter something uncomplimentary beneath her breath, she dropped the basket by the door and peered into the kitchen.

Papa was seated on a stool near the counter, crushing dried basil into flakes with his hands, which he scooped into a jar to be packed away in the cellar. The duke—the *damned fool duke*—was standing near the hearth, a pair of kitchen tongs in his hand, turning the herbs laid out in bundles on a pan over the fire.

Much too close to the flame.

“For God’s sake,” she snapped, striding forward. “You want to *dry* them, not *burn* them.” No wonder the air reeked of scorched basil! His *moronic* Grace hadn’t the first inclination of how he was meant to perform such a task. God alone knew why Papa had trusted him with it.

The duke’s brows winged up as she approached, but his jaw had gone taut, his shoulders setting as if preparing to do battle—and as she reached out to adjust the pan, his hand flew up and snatched her wrist, the rough abrasion of the bandages wound round his palm scratching her skin.

She scowled, yanking at her hand. His eyes sharpened, glinting like chips of bottle glass, but his fingers only closed more firmly around her wrist—a strong, unbreakable grip. Neither moved for a protracted moment, locked into a silent and fierce battle of wills.

She didn’t doubt that he was accustomed to people bowing to his. Probably he was used to throwing around the weight of his name, his rank, and had simply grown to expect people to accede to his wishes.

Theo was certain she would rather die than give a single inch to this puffed up, vexing nobleman. She drew in a sizzling breath, her lungs burning with all of the recriminations she wished to toss at his head. “How—”

“Don’t scold, Theo. The lad’s got to learn somehow,” Papa said, and the sound of crisp leaves crackling beneath the pressure of his fingers singed her ears.

Somehow, *somehow*, she had quite forgotten Papa’s presence. She forgot all else in the duke’s presence, it seemed, as if the depth of her fury forced consideration for anything else straight from her mind. She tugged at her wrist again.

The duke said, “The pan is hot.”

“What?” she inquired, her shoulders drawing back.

“The pan is *hot*,” he repeated, as if she were quite stupid—a child who had not yet mastered her native tongue. “My apologies. I didn’t want you to burn your fingers.” Slowly he released her, his fingers uncurling a degree at a time, as if he suspected she might make another rash grab for the pan when he did.

Theo felt an obnoxious blush of embarrassment rise to her cheeks. Of course the pan was hot—he’d positioned it just a few inches above the flames. And yet she had reached for it anyway, too pigheaded and determined to find fault with him that she’d damn near scorched her fingers on the hot metal.

“Of course,” she said brusquely, reaching for a towel to wrap around her hand. Carefully she repositioned the tray, sliding it into its rack a great deal higher. “The pan must rest here,” she said. “You’ve singed the herbs enough already.” She held out her hand for the tongs, but he refused to surrender them, holding them close to his chest as if they were something precious.

The crisp sound of herbs being crushed to flakes ceased, and Papa sighed. “Theo, my dear—you know as well as I that we’ve more basil than we need. Mr. Dryden must learn the same way you did—through trial and error.” A slice of a smile sheared through his wrinkled cheek as he said to the duke, “Theo scorched a whole tray of coriander once, and we had none reserved.”

“The *one time!*” Theo snapped back, mortified, and then tossed out to the duke defensively, “I was *seven*.”

“Seven, and you thought you knew everything there was to know,” Papa chuckled. “Still does, I’d wager,” he said to the duke. “A manager, my girl. Got to have her fingers in every bit of the farm work.”

“It’s got to be done, and it’s got to be done *right*.” She hadn’t the *time* for this nonsense argument, really. There was still supper to be made, clothes to be mended, livestock to be fed, fields to be tended, plants to be watered—the labor never ceased, and anything missed could prove disastrous to the running of the farm.

“Theo. It’s only basil.” Papa slid his palm across the countertop until he came across the glass jar he’d placed there. His fingers curled around it, lifting it for her inspection. “There, you see?” He dipped a finger into it to gauge its contents. “Half a jar at best. Now—I think shepherd’s pie tonight. How about it?”

“I can’t possibly cook under these conditions,” she said. “Mr. Dryden has got shoulders like an ox.”

“Shoulders like an *ox*?” The duke flapped the tongs about like a handkerchief, looking for all the world like a scandalized maiden.

“You *know* what I mean!” Theo gave a vague, flippant gesture to—*all* of him.

“I *really* do not.” The duke punctuated this with a sharp snap of the tongs.

“You’re monopolizing my damned kitchen with your...*you!*”

Papa chortled, covering his mouth with one hand. “Language, my girl.”

Exasperated, Theo threw up her hands. “I’m going to fetch some potatoes. *You*”—she jabbed a finger at the duke—“will vacate my kitchen before I return.”



“I haven’t got shoulders like an *ox*,” Alex said, perhaps a bit sullenly, as he plucked the remaining bundles of basil from the pan. Scorched—just as Theo had accused. He could see it now, the difference between the crackly green-grey herbs he’d toasted before and the fresh ones here.

“I really couldn’t hazard an opinion,” Tom said as he slid his hand toward the row of empty jars near the rear of the countertop. He gave an approving hum deep in his throat as the fingers of his other hand closed upon the nearest bundle of basil, and Alex surmised that this newest batch of basil had been judged acceptable enough to merit a fresh jar so as not to get mixed in with the scorched batch. “We’ll head on to the tavern after supper,” he said. “And don’t let Theo get to you, son—she likes to have things *just so*, you understand.”

“She’s a termagant,” Alex muttered beneath his breath, clicking the tongs in an anxious rhythm. “An ill-tempered harpy—a nagging, vexatious harridan—*ouch!*” Something struck the back of his head and dropped to the floor with a *thunk*, and he was made uncomfortably aware that the wound he’d sustained upon his arrival at the farm had not yet healed. Theo stood a few feet behind him, her face a stormcloud of fury, a potato hefted in her hand, wound up for a second throw. Another potato—which he assumed to have been the missile that had hit him in the head—rested on the floor near his boot. “By all means, continue,” she invited in a sibilant hiss, and even armed with only a root vegetable she looked like an avenging angel come to earth for the express purpose of carving strips out of his unworthy hide.

“You...you *threw a potato* at me?” Alex asked incredulously. *And I’ll do it again*, the wrath in her eyes suggested. The stubborn jut of her chin challenged him; her arm remained poised to let fly with her remaining missile should he speak unwisely.

“What?” Tom asked, equal parts disbelief and amusement. “Theo, you didn’t.”

“I most certainly did,” she said, without so much as a hint of regret, nor a shade of remorse—but more than a little pride.

“My girl, you can’t go about bashing gentlemen’s heads in with vegetables,” Tom said, stuffing dried basil into a jar as he spoke. “I’ll remind you that we—the whole town, in fact—have a need of Mr. Dryden presently. It wouldn’t do to run him out of town before he’s finished his investigation, now, would it?”

“Yes, *Theodosia*,” Alex said snidely as he prodded gingerly at the sore spot on the back of his head, even knowing that the

use of her full name would only provoke her further. “You *need* me.”

“Careful, son,” Tom warned. “She’s got impeccable aim.”

“Ah, but my connection to the duke—”

The second potato hit him in the solar plexus with the weight of a stone, thrown with an accuracy and a force that belied her middling height and slight frame, forcing the air from his lungs with it. “You’ll mind your manners, or you’ll suffer the consequences,” Theo snapped. “I don’t give a damn *who* you are.”

And as Alex wheezed, locking his knees to avoid toppling straight to the floor, he fancied he might have fallen anyway. Just the tiniest bit, in love.



The cart rumbled over the ruined roads toward the village proper, and with each uneven stretch the wheels hit, Alex was jounced around so severely that he had to grip the seat simply to ensure he did not fly straight out. There was a corked inkwell in his pocket, and a quill pen tucked within the sheaf of papers rolled in his left fist. He *should* have been composing questions in his head, for Tom had assured him that there would be at least a few townsfolk to interview...but all he could think of was Theo’s flushed face, her dark brows drawn at sharp, slashing angles, the cold blue flame of her eyes.

He didn’t *love* her. Of course not—that would be *ridiculous*.

It was only that—that he *admired* her. She might be a wretched battle-axe of a woman, the shrew to end all shrews, but she was nonetheless *admirable*. She ran the day-to-day workings of an entire farm more or less on her own, and yet somehow she had still managed to do the washing—including *his*, unfortunately—and the cooking, and the numerous other chores he hadn’t enough experience with yet even to name.

He couldn’t remember ever having been served shepherd’s pie before. It was simple fare, comprised of minced lamb and an assortment of herbs and vegetables, all covered over with a thick layer of fluffy mashed potatoes and then baked until the

crust had turned golden. His cook would no doubt have gone straight into conniptions to see everything crammed together into one pan—a meal on its own—rather than turned into separate dishes, sumptuously dressed and seasoned and sauced.

It simply wasn't the sort of meal he ate. Most especially because he could well afford a good deal better than minced lamb and whatever vegetables happened to be in season at the moment. But he could not remember a meal he had enjoyed better—although he was unsure whether or not that was owed to Theo's exemplary cooking or to the strain of manual labor.

He rolled his shoulders, feeling the muscles pull tight. Churning butter had *not* been the simple task he had thought it would be—though Tom had assured him that it was a good deal easier than it once had been, he'd failed to mention that the thicker the cream got as it was beaten with the paddles inside the barrel, the harder it would become to turn. At least he *had* successfully churned it—although all of that work had been done to churn out a clump of butter that had scarcely filled his cupped hand; just a misshapen blob of it in the end. But he had been strangely *proud* of that misshapen blob, because he had produced it himself. Even Theo had begrudgingly admitted that she'd seen worse.

She had rewrapped his hands—which were healing nicely—in clean bandages after dinner, while Tom had gone to catch Sam and Heath before they had left for their own homesteads for the evening to have them hitch up the cart. Most of the blisters had popped, and after she'd scrubbed at his hands with soap and water, slathered salve over the remaining wounds, and wrapped them back up again, he'd been relieved to find that worst of the pain had eased. But his hands still tingled where she'd touched them.

It had to be the salve. Perhaps there was something in it that disagreed with him. Certainly it couldn't be *Theo*. Ridiculous. The very *thought*.

“The very thought of what?” Tom inquired, from his place in the driver's seat, and Alex realized he'd mumbled it aloud.

Good Lord. If Tom had even the *slightest* inkling of what had been running through Alex's mind, he'd shove him straight out of the cart and leave him to make his own way to the village.

Alex would find himself not only *persona non grata* at the Vance farm, but likely every other homestead in the village as well. What self-respecting father would house a relatively unknown man who admitted to lusting after his unmarried daughter?

Which reminded him...

"I was simply wondering," he said, "if there was any particular reason Theo hasn't married yet. She's of an age, isn't she?" There were at least a hundred other families in the vicinity, probably closer to two, and surely several of them would have sons of her age, or thereabouts.

"Five and twenty last winter," Tom confirmed. "It's not that she wasn't asked a time or two," he said with a sigh. "She's not *said* as much, mind you, but...well, the lads that came calling, they've got farms of their own to manage, and Theo won't hear of leaving me." He gave an awkward shrug of his shoulders, gripping the reins tightly in his hands. "Heath was one of those lads, you know."

Of course he hadn't. How could he have? But now that he knew it, it roused an uncomfortable sensation in his chest—not *quite* jealousy, but something dangerously close to it.

"Of course, that was going on four years now. The summer after Theo refused him, he married the butcher's daughter, Peg. Theo never said anything of it in my hearing, but she did mope for a spell." Tom cleared his throat, swiping at his face with one hand. "The fact is, Theo's too loyal and too stubborn to set out for herself. She's wasting her life looking after me."

"I'm certain she doesn't see it that way," Alex hastened to say.

"Don't matter if she sees it that way or not," Tom said. "It's how it is. I get around just fine—anyone can see that much—but it's no secret that most of the running of the farm falls to Theo. It'd fall down around our ears if she weren't managing what I can't."

There was little doubt of that, but that had more to do with gross mismanagement and neglect on Alex's part than on theirs.

"Of course, before Mr. Jennings up at Ivywilde was rifling through our pockets for every bit of coin he could scrounge, we could well afford the extra help," Tom said. "Things weren't always so dire. We had a cook to manage the meals,

and we could afford to hire out the extra labor for the harvest.” A bitter sigh squeezed through his throat. “I’m guessing we’ve got half our fields unsown,” he said. “Don’t see how she could have managed more. And when it comes time to harvest, perhaps we might manage half of that. You tell me, son—how close am I?”

Alex still had a sore spot on his shin where Theo had kicked him beneath the table, and he rubbed it absently, considering. Clearly she hadn’t wanted her father to know how dire their situation was—but putting it off would do neither of them any favors.

“Fairly close,” he admitted.

Tom bit off a curse. “We won’t make the rent on quarter day,” he said. “Even *if* we can get a good price for the produce. We’ll have to sell off some of the sheep—”

“Quarter day’s a ways off, yet,” Alex interrupted. “There’s no sense in worrying about it now.” In the glow of the setting sun, the tavern came into view at last. “Who manages the mail in town?”

“Maudie does,” Tom said. “Comes three times a week—goes out tomorrow morning, in fact.”

“Good,” Alex said. “Good—I’ll write up an initial proposal this evening, and it’ll go out with tomorrow’s mail. If you could make the introductions to any locals that happen to be at the tavern this evening, I’d be much obliged. I’d like to include as much information as I can—I’m certain the duke will want to put this village to rights as soon as possible.”

Chapter Ten

“**Y**ou certain you want to be drinking?” Tom asked as Maudie plunked down two tankards of ale upon the table between them. “Farm work isn’t easy on its best day; you sounded fair exhausted at supper.”

Exhausted would have been preferable to whatever it was that Alex was. If there was something *beyond* exhausted, Alex was sure he’d reached it by noon at the latest, and had blown straight past it by evening. Still, he was well aware that his tasks today had been on the easier side of farm work—he had not, after all, been expected to spend all day in the blistering sun. Neither had he mended fence posts, or herded livestock, or any one of a dozen other things that were more strenuous than churning butter or drying herbs.

Shelling peas seemed like a task better suited to a young child than to a full grown man—but he’d done it anyway, because he was hardly knowledgeable enough for better just yet.

“I’m fine,” Alex said, somewhat gruffly, as he lifted the tankard to his lips and drained half of it in a single gulp. “And I’ll pay for it myself, besides—and anyone who cares to join us for a bit of conversation.” This deep in the evening, there were only a few people about. Two men about his age who looked like they’d been rolling about in the dirt all day, and another man of some forty years, grizzled about the jowls, who had his back to the fire in the hearth.

“Hear that, Maudie?” Tom raised his voice, slapping his palm on the table—an action that drew every eye to them. “Mr. Dryden here is buying tonight—for anyone who cares to sit and talk awhile.”

“Mr. Dryden, is it?” Maudie inquired, one brow arching toward her hairline, mouth twisted in rank suspicion and not a little distaste. “Ye any relation—”

“Distantly,” Alex said, and forced himself upright in his chair, as if Maudie’s sudden hostility did not bother him.

With a disagreeable sound deep in her throat, Maudie plunked

one hand upon an ample hip. “Well, I don’t know that I like putting up His bleedin’ Grace’s kin in my tavern,” she said, tilting her nose toward the ceiling—which Alex noticed was more than a little water-damaged. “And you can tell ‘im I said so—”

“Maudie, you were willing to marry him on sight just days ago,” Tom drawled, earning himself a chuckle from the other patrons. “All the lad wants is a drink. Fact is, Mr. Dryden here was sent down from London by His Grace.”

“Oh, was he, then?” Maudie’s lip curled in disdain, and Alex gripped his tankard all the harder, half suspecting that did he not maintain his tight hold upon it, he might well end up wearing the ale contained therein.

“I was,” Alex said. “The duke has been made aware of your complaints; I was dispatched to investigate.” He coughed into his fist. “Your discretion would, of course, be appreciated. If news of my presence—or my purpose—were to reach Ivywilde, it would interfere with my process. It’s imperative that I collect evidence of Mr. Jennings’ alleged wrongdoing if charges are to be leveled against him—”

“Alleged?” This came from the grizzled man, as he kicked himself out of his chair near the hearth. “*Alleged?* He’s bleeding my family for an extra five shillings an acre!”

“Just five?” The disdainful sniff came from one of the two men sitting at an adjacent table. “It’s nine for me—I’d count my blessings, were I you.”

“Six for me,” said the remaining man, hunching over his drink. “And I’ve got three little mouths to feed, who’re outgrowing their clothes faster than I can replace them. My little Cora’s seams can’t be let out any more than they have already.”

His companion snorted. “My wife’s already taken down the curtains to make a new dress for our Nancy.”

“Well, here now,” said Tom, slapping his palm upon the table once again. “One at a time, and Mr. Dryden will jot it all down. And Maudie—you tell anyone that comes in that they’re welcome to stop by the farm and speak to Mr. Dryden personally.”

“Quietly, mind you,” Alex added. “Testimony is all well and good, but evidence would be better—and if Mr. Jennings’ suspicions are aroused, then there is every likelihood that he

will dispose of any evidence in his possession. While I'm certain the duke will make you all whole"—a whoop went up round the tavern—"we'll need more than that to put Mr. Jennings where he belongs."

It was meant to imply *in jail*, but if Alex had his way, it would be swinging in the wind. There was a special place in hell reserved for men who preyed upon those they were tasked with protecting, men whose avarice tore lives apart and ruined who families for the sake of a handful of shillings.

And quite a bit more, besides.

Still, the fault ultimately lay with *him*. *He* had placed Mr. Jennings in their midst, given the man the power to lay waste to their lives and livelihoods. He had mismanaged his responsibilities, heedless of the harm that had been done without his knowledge.

As the gentlemen pulled up chairs around the table and began to rattle off various tales of woe, Alex laid out his paper, ink, and quill. "Maudie," he said over the din, as the men surrounding him began to rattle off their woes in rapid-fire succession. "Another round, if you please. And keep them coming, if you would be so kind."

He had a feeling he was going to need it. How many other stories would he gather in the coming days? They were no longer his nameless, faceless tenants to be pawned off upon someone else. They were Jim and his daughter Nancy, for whom Sarah's kitchen curtains had been sacrificed for a dress. They were Charles and his daughter Cora, whose seams could not be let any further. They were Benjamin and his wife, Helen, who had been reduced to taking in the washing and mending, despite her arthritis, just to make ends meet.

And Maudie, whose aged tavern was falling down about her ears. The tavern had stood for a hundred years or better so far, and with the strain the village had fallen under, it was the one ease left to a town which had fallen beneath a pallor of despair—and even it was dying by inches, killed by both the neglect of the building and by the fact that fewer and fewer every day were there men who could part with the coin for a tankard of ale.

He was going to have to fix it—to fix *all* of it. He owed it to these people—these *good*, salt-of-the-earth people whom he

had left to the dubious mercies of Mr. Jennings. And so he sat, and he drank, and he listened to their problems, and he wrote—and he drank more—and by the time Maudie closed the tavern, he folded up a letter, passed it off to her, and obtained her promise to see it safely off to London on the mail cart come morning.



“Easy, now, son. I can see to myself well enough, but you’re a mite too big to carry. My back isn’t what it used to be.”

Papa. Theo shot out of bed, grabbing for the ancient wrapper that hung from her bed post. She had long since retired for the evening, but sleep had been the furthest thing from her mind—not when Papa had gone haring off for the tavern, accompanied by the odious duke. It had to be nearing ten at least, and she had never known Papa to stay past nine.

She belted her wrapper about her waist, shoved her feet into her boots, and carried the candle that had burned low upon her bedside table down the hall to cast open the front door. “Papa, have you any idea of the time?” she asked as she strode onto the porch.

“Course not,” Papa answered. “Couldn’t read a pocket watch even if I carried one, my girl. Don’t fuss; I’ve still got the horses to unhitch, and Mr. Dryden—”

The duke chose that precise moment to sling his leg over the side of the cart, hefted his not-inconsiderable bulk in an alarming lurch in an effort to climb out, and instead fell unceremoniously to the ground. A pained groan broke from his throat as he rolled himself to his back.

Theo pressed her palm to her mouth and rolled her eyes heavenward.

Papa smothered a snicker. “Damned fool boy fell out of the cart, didn’t he?”

In the glow of candlelight, Theo saw the duke flop one hand about. “Go ahead and laugh,” he said, his voice a wheeze. “Unfortunately, I’m growing accustomed to it.”

“Theo, I’ll need you to help Mr. Dryden while I unhitch the

horses,” Papa said, and gave a dismissive wave when she protested. “The difference is, my girl, that I can do it well enough in the dark. But I can’t assist him *and* mind my steps.” Swallowing down a raw sound of annoyance, Theo stepped down off the porch and stomped over to the duke, who was lying rather contentedly on his back, gazing up at the sky. She nudged him with the tip of her boot to attract his attention.

“Have you ever seen so many stars?” he inquired, a little hiccough trailing the end of his words, which were somewhat slurred. “I swear there aren’t half so many in London.”

Oh, Lord. “How much, precisely, did you have to drink?” she asked.

“More than he ought to have,” Papa snorted as he worked the straps tethering the horses. “We had some company at the tavern; he was good enough to buy drinks for the men there. Listened well to their troubles, wrote a fair bit, and gave a letter to Maudie to send off to London in the morning mail.”

“And what was *in* this letter?” Theo asked, nudging the duke in the ribs.

“Instructions,” he groaned. “For my—for the *duke’s* man of business. Can’t very well begin setting things to rights without the proper tools, now, can I?” He slapped one hand over his eyes and swallowed audibly. “Still got to find the proof of it all, or the worst that Mr. Jennings can expect is to find himself abruptly unemployed.”

Begrudgingly, Theo allowed that her respect for him—which, in all honesty, had been lower than nothing—rose incrementally. Just the smallest smidgeon, really. Barely measurable, when it got right down to it. “I’ll believe it when I see it,” she said, and bent to offer her hand to him. “Now, get up—unless you’d like to spend your night on the ground.”

“Thank you, no,” the duke said, and nearly unbalanced her when he clasped her hand in his and pulled himself to his feet, where he swayed, less than steady. “The hayloft wreaks havoc upon my back as it is. Did you know there are kittens up there?”

“Barn cats,” Theo said. “The mama’s name is Frederica. She keeps the rodents at bay.” He gave a shiver of distaste, and she hoisted one of his arms around her shoulders when it looked as if he might pitch forward onto his face. “Step carefully, now. If

you go down, I'll let you."

"You *would*," he said peevishly as he found his footing once again and made the first step onto the porch. "I cannot understand your antipathy toward me. People *like* me. I am *likeable*. Amiable, genial, affable—but *you*. You do *not* like me. I don't understand it."

Theo made a scathing sound in her throat as she maneuvered the duke through the door.

"I like *you*," he said, and hiccupped in her ear.

Theo nearly dropped him. "You do *not*." How could he? She'd been particularly unpleasant to him. *On purpose!*

"I do, though." He banged his shoulder on the door jamb and swore vividly. "That's the worst of it; I *do* like you. I don't *want* to—you're excessively irritating when it pleases you to be—but I *do* anyway. Probably," he said, as he stumbled on his own feet, very nearly taking her down with him, "because you remind me of my friends' wives. They would like you, too."

Theo made some noncommittal noise in her throat, struggling to right them again.

"I've only got two of them, you know," he said.

"Two of what?"

"Friends." A chair leg fell victim to the clumsy maneuverings of his feet, and it scraped across the floor with a rough, harsh sound. "A family name like mine carries with it a great deal of power and influence. But the thing of it is, you never can tell whether someone likes you because of *you* or because of what they believe you can do for them. You can't trust in anyone else's intentions."

"Well, you needn't worry there," Theo said, grunting with the effort to usher him through the house. "I don't like you at *all*."

"I know," he said. "Perhaps that's why I like you. You *don't* like me, but at least you're honest about it." He gave a little chuckle, and he flashed her a disarming, drunken grin. "John's been my friend practically my whole life," he said. "He's more a brother than friend, really. But Grey—I only met him a few years ago. He broke my nose, and that's when I knew we would be friends. Because he didn't care about offending me."

That explained the bump in his otherwise flawless nose, then.

"What did you do to make him break your nose?"

A sheepish expression flitted across his face, and he lifted a shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. “I might have propositioned his wife.”

“You *what?*”

“In my defense, I thought she was a whore.” His brows pulled together. “That’s not a very good defense, is it?”

“Not particularly, no.” The kitchen door—she had only to reach the kitchen door and then she could wash her hands of the duke for the evening.

“She wasn’t his wife yet, you see,” he said. “And I did Grey the glorious favor of not marrying her myself. Serena’s a lovely woman—most of the time—but I didn’t want to marry her so much as Mother wanted me to marry her. It all turned out for the best.” He smothered a yawn in his palm. “I suppose I’ll have to get myself one at some point or another.”

“Get yourself what?” Theo asked, only half-listening, as she set the candle on the kitchen counter and swiveled, stretching out her fingers to fumble with the lock on the door.

“A wife,” the duke said, chewing up the word and spitting it out as if it were something unsavory. “Mother says I’m *on the mantel.*”

“The *mantel?*” The door swung open with a creak, and Theo seized the candle once again, the quick motion threatening to tip His Grace straight off of his feet once again.

“Well, a man can’t very well be *on the shelf*, now, can he?” The duke gave a flippant gesture of his hand, which Theo supposed she was meant to interpret as condescending. “Grey and Serena have got a daughter, now, and John and Violet likely aren’t far behind. I suppose I feel...rather left out.”

Theo snorted, stepping sideways through the door and half-dragging the duke on her heels. “You can’t marry a woman simply because you feel *left out*,” she said.

“Of course I can,” he said. “But I’d have to take into account whether or not she’ll get on with Serena and Violet.” He tripped over the threshold, stumbling onto the rear porch behind her. “If I have got to have a wife, she might as well be well-favored. And trustworthy, and loyal—I couldn’t wed a woman whose intentions were in doubt, clearly. Too many women of the *Ton* flit from bed to bed like bees after nectar. I’d prefer it if my wife did not stray.” He turned his gaze on

her once more. “I don’t suppose you’re in the market for a husband, are you?” he asked.

It took a moment for the question to penetrate—and when it finally *did*, she swallowed a gasp of fury.

“Are you *mad*?” Indignation was a bright, burning spot in her chest, searing away everything but a roiling, churning anger. “I *hope* that was a joke.” And even if it *had* been, it was in exceptionally poor taste.

“Well, you’re honest and loyal and well-favored. You’re of an age to be married, and I *do*—for some reason unknown to me—actually *like* you.” That green gaze fell upon her with an assessing weight, as if he were trying to pick out her flaws to present to her. “You’ve got a temper like a cat caught in a trap, but, then, so do Serena and Violet, so I imagine you’d get on with them quite well. I could do worse for a bride.”

How Theo resisted the overpowering urge to strangle him, she would never know. “You don’t need a *wife*; you need a *puppy*.” She released his hold on his arm, and he staggered back a step, unbalanced, but thankfully held to his feet. “I hope your next prospective wife gets a prettier proposal than that. *I* wouldn’t have you if you were the last man in the whole of England.”

At last, it seemed to sink into the duke’s thick skull that his proposal—such as it was—had been rather more insulting than he had perhaps intended it to be. He splayed out his hands before him in a gesture of entreaty. “Wait, I didn’t mean—”

But Theo didn’t particularly care what he had meant. She stretched out one hand and pushed at his shoulder—and that was all it took. Unsteady on his feet enough as it was, the small shove unbalanced him entirely. His feet caught upon the rim of the copper tub that Theo had set out an hour or so earlier, in an effort to be at least the *tiniest* bit obliging. Of course, the water she had heated for the bath had cooled considerably in the intervening time, and so it was into a washtub filled with lukewarm water that the duke went tumbling, with an outrageous splash, fully clothed.

His legs hung up around the lip of the tub, he scraped water out of his face and spluttered an incredulous, “What the *hell*?”

Theo gave an exaggerated, obsequious curtsy. “The bath you requested. I wish you all joy of it.” And she turned on her heel, stalked back into the house, and locked the door behind her.

“*Goddammit, Theo!*” The roar fairly rattled the windows. “Just for that, I’ll—I’ll—I’ll *name all of your bloody barn kittens!*” As she stomped off toward her room, Theo wondered what it said of him that *that* was the greatest threat he could muster.



As water dripped down his chin and his sodden shirt wafted up around him, Alex allowed that he had perhaps imbibed too much this evening—and that there was nothing quite so sobering as a dunk in an unexpected bath.

He dragged his shirt over his head and let it fly across the porch, where it landed with a wet *plop* upon the wood. Less than a foot away from where it had landed, the mama cat—Frederica, Theo had said—sat upon her haunches, fixing him with a judgmental stare. Her green eyes flashed in the darkness, which was relieved only by the candle that Theo had left behind. Frederica’s tail flicked; a sharp, cutting gesture which Alex imagined contained no small amount of remonstrance.

“Nobody asked your opinion, Frederica,” he said. “Haven’t you got kittens to mind?”

Frederica lifted herself to her feet and performed an elegant stretch, arching her back and flattening her ears. Alex interpreted this to mean something like, *You’re a damned fool, and you’re lucky an unexpected bath was all you received.*

Of course it was *true*, but that didn’t mean he had to be *happy* about it. He levered himself up in the tepid water and seized the toe of his leather boot. Water spots dotted the surface of it—Benson would have had conniptions. It took more effort than he cared to admit to wrestle the boots off and then an awkward wiggle to relieve himself of his trousers, which were even worse off than his shirt.

“I asked her to marry me, didn’t I?” he grouched, as Frederica padded softly across the porch toward the tub, silent and slick as moonlight. “It’s the first proposal I have ever tendered, mind you.”

Frederica paused, then sat down and bent her head to lick one dainty paw. *If you can call that a proposal.*

And, really, she had him there. In retrospect, it had been clumsily done indeed. It was just that she was the first woman he'd met to whom he wouldn't *mind* being married—despite her sharp tongue. Hell, Mother would *love* her. She'd be a duchess unlike any other, and she would take the *Ton* by storm just as his mother had when she'd attained the position.

Frederica flicked an ear and curled her tail round her feet. *In the future, you should perhaps attempt not to insult your intended bride.*

“To be honest, I didn't *know* I was going to propose—it just *happened*.” After all, Grey had snapped up Serena swiftly enough, and John—well, John had had to convince Violet that their marriage was a worthwhile endeavor, but even he had managed it in the space of just a few weeks. He was reasonably certain that Theo was not out to make a duchess of herself—given that she didn't *know* he was a duke—and he *had* to take a wife at some point, so it might as well be a woman he could trust and respect. She had fit all of his requirements quite neatly, and with the added benefit of the fact that Mother would no doubt be over the moon about it. It had seemed like a logical progression at the time. Meet a suitable woman, marry a suitable woman.

Frederica extended her leg over her head in a graceful motion and then licked herself in a most inappropriate manner. *You'll forgive me if I do not deign to explain to you why a poorly-planned proposal is also often poorly-received.*

“She could have just said *no*,” Alex muttered, his shoulders slumping. “She didn't have to push me into the bath.” His fingers knotted in the laces of his smallclothes, and he hesitated—of course, Theo would not want him bathing *inside* the house, where she and her father resided. But neither was he overly accustomed to bathing out of doors.

Well, he *had* bathed in the stream—but that was a fair walk from any particular home, with little chance of being stumbled upon. He gazed out into the stillness of the night and realized he could see—very little. Beyond the small halo of light provided by Theo's abandoned candle, there was only the vegetable garden stretching out into the inky blackness of the night. The only way he could differentiate the land from the sky was the glowing sliver of the moon hanging above him,

surrounded by thousands upon thousands of glimmering stars. For all that the countryside was oppressively bucolic, it truly did have some spectacular sights. He couldn't remember the last time he'd noticed the stars over London—nor could he recall the last time he'd truly *looked*. Perhaps he never had. But here, the sky was ablaze with them, sprinkled across the velvety night like a fortune in diamonds carelessly tossed about. He could pick out whole constellations—something he'd not done since his days in school—and for a moment he simply rested his arms along the side of the tub and watched them sparkle.

As he considered them, he lifted his hand to his face and rubbed his chin, which had grown rather bristly in the days since he'd last shaved. Damn—Benson usually handled that aspect of his toilet. He'd never had to strop a razor, or whisk up his own shaving soap.

Soap—*soap*. He peered over the edge of the bath, searching for some, and came at last upon a small jar, next to which lay some fresh, dry toweling cloth. Frederica butted his hand with her head as he reached for the jar as if to say, *You know, Theo went to no small amount of effort to prepare this bath for you.*

Of course she had. She'd had to pump the water, and to heat at least a few cans to produce a passable bath; though the water had grown mostly tepid, there still lingered enough heat to suggest that, at least at one point in time, the bath *had* been hot. She'd labored to give him the bath he'd requested—probably even the soap was a product of her labors. It wasn't the finely-milled bar soap that he kept on hand in his London townhouse, which Alex doubted would be readily available in the village, and prohibitively expensive even if it *could* be had. Instead it was a simple soft soap, faintly scented with rose extract.

“Frederica,” he sighed as he used two fingers to scoop out a sparing amount of the soap to rub into his hair. “You are a terrible burden upon my conscience. But you're right—I must do better.” And he reached out and gave her head an affectionate scratch, at which she purred vigorously.

At least there was *one* female in the immediate vicinity who might prove fond of him.

Chapter Eleven

“Might I lend some assistance?”

Theo screeched, knocking the top of her head against the low ceiling of the hen house, and startling several of the more finicky hens into agitated flutters. For the love of God—the sun had barely risen, and she’d fully expected His Grace to be snoozing away in the hayloft for at least another hour yet. Instead, he’d managed to sneak up upon her and surprise her as she gathered the eggs.

Rubbing the top of her head, she muttered, “I sincerely doubt it, but you’re welcome to try.”

She had expected him to step back and wait for her to exit the cramped hen house, but instead he wiggled through the low door and shoved all of his considerable bulk in alongside her, until she pressed her back against the far wall merely to gain some distance. He had to bend to manage it—the ceiling was low enough for Theo to knock her own head, if she weren’t careful, and the duke had some inches over her—but somehow he managed the awkward position with more grace than she would have expected.

Doubtfully he surveyed the row of nests, and the some dozen hens who lingered protectively over them, fluttering their wings in apprehension. She’d lured most of them out already with the promise of corn sprinkled upon the ground in the coop, and only the most peevish of hens had remained behind. Theo was a frequent visitor, of course, and most of them had grown quite accustomed to her forays into their nests to retrieve the eggs, but the duke was another matter entirely, and several of the hens peered up at him in rank suspicion—if chickens could be said to look suspicious. Heads bobbed, wattles quivered, and a chorus of clucks rose up that made the lot of them sound like so many gossipy women that Theo had to suppress a chuckle.

The duke eyed the hens suspiciously right back. He pressed his lips into a firm, flat line, and his head canted slightly to the

right as he considered the task at hand. His keen gaze darted from the hens, to the basket of eggs at Theo's feet, to the empty nests from which she had collected them.

"How does one go about collecting eggs?" he asked, as he fixed the nearest hen with a firm stare.

With a sigh, Theo gestured for him to back up a bit, then shifted forward, slipped her hand underneath a hen, and withdrew a fresh egg to show him, which she set carefully in the basket. The hen gave a warbling cluck, but settled back into her nest with a minimum of fuss.

"All right." He said it firmly, as if bracing himself for a Herculean labor, and then approached the next nest. "Good hen," he said softly as he stretched out his hand toward the hen, who fluttered her wings and gave a shriek of a cluck. "Nice hen—*ouch!*" He withdrew his hand abruptly, staring down at the back of his hand. "She pecked me!"

"You tried to take her egg," Theo said.

"Aren't I *supposed* to?"

"Yes, but she doesn't know you like she knows me." Also, that particular hen was a cantankerous bird under the best of conditions. "Here," she said, and scooped a handful of feed out of the pocket of her apron, pressing it into his hand. "Distract her with the feed before you try to get at her nest. Most of the hens will leave the coop for breakfast, but these ladies in particular guard their nests closely. They require gentler handling."

"You might have told me," the duke grouched, slowly extending his cupped hand toward the ornery hen. As she craned her neck forward to peck at the feed in his hand, he deftly slipped his other hand beneath her, feeling around for the egg. A grin split his face as he withdrew it, holding it aloft with something like pride.

"Experience is the best teacher," Theo muttered, annoyed with herself that somehow she hadn't the heart to crush his pride by informing him that gathering eggs was a *child's* chore—a task that a babe just out of leading strings could have accomplished without much difficulty. She captured the egg, perhaps a bit more swiftly than had been necessary, and laid it atop the others in the basket as the duke made his next attempt, luring another finicky hen with the remaining handful of seed and

slipping his fingers beneath her while she pecked at it.

There was naught else she *could* do, given that she was all but held hostage for the moment; there was not enough space to squeeze past him. The duke's face was drawn in intense concentration as he worked, handling each hen with precision, swiping each egg with an odd sort of determination, almost as if he had made up his mind to meet with success and would countenance nothing less.

Then again, Theo supposed he'd succeeded at little else thus far.

The sun rose over the horizon, the peachy tones of early sunrise lightening the sky, and sunlight flooded into the hen house, striking His Grace straight in the face. Blond whiskers stubbled his jaw, glinting in the light.

"You need to shave," Theo blurted out.

The duke paused in the process of reaching for a new nest, retracted his hand, and rubbed his palm over his cheek. "Yes, I suppose I do," he said. "My valet usually handles it. I suppose he must have packed me a razor, but I haven't unearthed it yet." Carefully he filched yet another egg and placed it in the basket. "I only wish I had had the time to find it last night before I was so abruptly introduced to my bath."

Even as Theo bristled with indignation, he turned to face her, a sheepish grin clinging to the corners of his mouth. "I overimbibed evening last," he said. "I do apologize for offending you. It wasn't my intention."

"Then what *was* your intention?" she inquired stiffly, though she resisted the urge to lift her head and fist her hands on her hips, because such an action would surely have put her at risk of another blow to the head. The air of unassailable dignity she might have hoped to contrive suffered for it, perhaps, given that she could not truly affect the imperious pose she had hoped for, but her crisp tone was enough to send a brief expression of panic chasing across the duke's face.

For a moment he struggled to formulate a response, likely not having expected his intentions to be questioned. Theo supposed it was possible that few *did* question them—quite probably the status of his birth conferred with it some sort of authority which would naturally preclude such a thing from most people.

Of course, plain Mr. Dryden could not expect the same privilege.

At last he cleared his throat and offered, "Sometimes, the workings of one's inebriated mind are a mystery even to oneself." Affecting a look of concentration, he reached for a new nest. "I have been thinking about our problem with Mr. Jennings," he said.

Although she recognized it for the diversionary tactic it was, Theo accepted the change of subject gracefully. "Have you?"

"At the tavern last evening, I met and spoke with gentlemen from three other families—and your father promises that there will be more to come. He's extended an invitation for these families to come round and give an accounting of what Mr. Jennings has extracted from them and what he's failed to do for them so far as his duties as land agent go." He wrested free another egg from yet another recalcitrant hen, without getting himself pecked in the process, and set it gently in the basket. "It occurs to me, there must be—what? Roughly two hundred families in the area?"

Theo had never exactly *counted*, but it sounded about right. "Something like that, yes."

"To my knowledge, the amount due to be collected for rents has never come up short. It's always been exact; a precise accounting of exactly what each family owes and has paid. And he's taking different amounts from different families—my guess is, he's extorting them for what he thinks they ought to be able to pay." He held out his hand for another portion of feed, which Theo extracted from her pocket and poured into his cupped hand. "Six shillings from one family, nine from another. That sort of thing."

"I see," Theo said, although she didn't quite understand where he was going with it.

He turned slightly to face her. "I'll admit I was only middling at maths in school," he said. "But could *you* do it in your head? The various sums to ensure that you calculate what is owed by each family, *and* what you are fleecing them for, so you know exactly how much to send on to your employer? And could you keep these sums straight for two hundred families, give or take?"

Theo felt her mouth drop open in surprise as the realization

finally struck home. “He’s got to have a ledger.”

“*Two* ledgers,” the duke returned. “One for the correct amounts—in case the duke should ever put in a request for it—and one for his *own* records.”

“There’s proof,” she whispered. “Somewhere, there *is* proof.” And for once, when the duke slanted a satisfied smile in her direction, she found it *dazzling* instead of tiresome. She had been content to write him off as a vapid nobleman, but he had surprised her with a moment of brilliance.

“There *is* proof,” he said. “I haven’t a clue how we’re going to acquire it just yet—but when we do, Mr. Jennings will receive his due.”



Alex was dismayed to find that the clump of butter he’d spent half the afternoon yesterday churning would last only a few days. Apparently, he’d done a poor job of squeezing the moisture out of it, and it would spoil rapidly unless used. Theo had done a creditable job of showing him how to perfect the process in the future, but although he had been fascinated by the lesson, it had only served to remind him that *someone*—likely Alex himself—would have to churn fresh butter in the near future. Since he could not yet be trusted with much else.

He was lucky he’d woken this morning in the grey pre-dawn light to a tiny ginger kitten chewing on his ear, or he’d likely have slept through the morning chores.

He scrubbed his palm over his face, scratching at the bristle of whiskers that had grown over the past few days. Benson would have had a fit; they were decidedly *not* in fashion. And though Alex had seen more than one man in the village sporting a thick beard, he had a feeling it was due more to the time constraints of running a working farm than to any particular personal grooming choice.

He was going to have to swallow his pride and ask Tom for shaving advice. He’d not attempted it himself in *years*—and on the infrequent occasions he had in his youth, he’d had little more than a few downy hairs to manage that couldn’t begin to compare to this—this undignified *scruff*.

The smell of frying bacon wafted through the kitchen window to greet him as he approached the house, and his stomach gave a betraying grumble. It just so happened that one worked up quite the appetite while performing manual labor—even *if* that labor amounted only to collecting eggs at dawn.

“Theo’s in a mood,” Tom cautioned as Alex strode through the kitchen door.

“*Papa*,” Theo bit out in a warning tone, bending over the pan she was tending, a pair of tongs clutched in her fist.

“I didn’t say it was a *bad* mood,” Tom said, though by the way he wiggled his brows in Alex’s direction, a smile twisting his mouth, Alex guessed that he was meant to assume it was precisely that.

Blowing a stray lock of jet hair away from her face, Theo snapped the tongs out sideways, flicking them toward the counter. “Razor’s there,” she said. “You’ll have to whisk your own soap. I haven’t the time.”

A silver razor rested upon the countertop, atop a folded bit of cloth toweling and beside a small bowl containing a generous dollop of soap and a brush. “Thank you,” Alex said, surveying the items doubtfully.

“Stropped the razor myself,” Tom said, and he patted the top of the table at which he said. “Theo thought you might struggle with it.”

The sizzle and crackle of ban in its pan filled the room, and Alex pitched his voice low, confident that Theo could not hear it. “I must confess I haven’t really done this before,” he said. “The last time I tried to shave myself, I was at school—and I took half my face off along with what few whiskers I possessed.”

“Figured as much,” Tom said. “You did mention a valet. I suppose anyone who’s got a valet has little need to learn to shave themselves. Bring me the bowl, son—Theo’s good enough to help me shave most days, but I can still whisk up the soap.

Alex took a sniff of the soap as he collected the various implements and brought them to the table, making sure to leave the razor where it had lain across the towel, so that Tom’s hand wouldn’t inadvertently come into contact with it. “Smells like roses,” he said, as he passed the bowl across the

table until it touched Tom's fingers.

"Not as fine as what you might get in London," Tom said. "But the women around here enjoy it. Theo makes it herself, you know."

He might have guessed as much. Was there anything around here that Theo *didn't* do herself? Alex suspected the answer was *not much*.

"Papa," Theo said severely as she waltzed in from the kitchen, a platter of bacon in her hands. "Don't gossip."

Alex took the platter from her hands and set it out upon the table, at noon from her father's perspective, and within easy reach. Though her brows lifted, plainly surprised that he'd remembered, rather than remark upon it she simply fisted her hands in her apron and turned back into the kitchen. Shortly thereafter, he heard the sawing of a knife through day-old bread, and the *plop* of it going into the pan for a quick fry.

"In a *mood*," Tom whispered, as he felt for the brush and then cupped the bowl in one hand and began to whip the soap into a froth. "Couldn't say why."

Alex could. Probably she was still holding on to some lingering resentment over his poorly-concocted proposal. He imagined that, being so skilled at nearly everything else, Theo was likely more than proficient at holding a grudge.

"Here you are," Tom said, handing the bowl of soap back to him. "Ought to be done enough by now. Theo likes to add a touch of oil; she says it softens up the whiskers. There's a mirror just over there," he added, jerking his head to the left. "Hasn't got much use since I lost my sight, but it should serve you well enough."

Normally such an activity would have occurred in his dressing room, but he doubted that either Tom or Theo had one in so small a house. He might've bathed last night in the open air on the porch, but somehow shaving seemed by far the more intimate activity.

The mirror that hung on the wall was dusty—it truly had been a good number of years since it had gotten much use—but it had a small table nearby upon which Alex could set his shaving implements, and he used the cuff of his sleeve to rub away the worst of the dust. With the brush, he smeared the frothed soap upon his face, peering this way and that to ensure

he'd coated his whiskers, and picked up the razor with no small amount of trepidation. How was it that Benson held it? He'd so infrequently paid attention.

He brought the blade to his cheek and tried to emulate Benson's careful handling, scraping carefully—and nicked himself immediately.

Tom must've heard the curse he'd muttered beneath his breath. "Son, you have to *wait* for the soap to soften the whiskers."

And then, as he dabbed at the dot of blood on his cheek with the towel, he heard something far more humiliating: the clatter of plates to the table, and Theo's aggravated voice as she said, "Papa, you go ahead and eat. I'll assist Mr. Dryden before he bleeds to death all over our floor."

Christ. Alex resisted the urge to groan as she dragged a chair before the mirror, snagged the razor straight from his hand as if he could not be trusted to wield sharp objects, and commanded, "*Sit.*"

He sat. What else was there for him to do? His shoulders struck the back of the chair, and she lifted his chin with one finger, inspecting the job he'd done of slathering his face in soap. Clearly displeased, she seized the brush and began to correct it. In this, she concentrated just as intently as she seemed to do upon everything else—her draw brows drew together, the sunny blue sky of her irises pointed, intense.

It occurred to him only as she at last grasped the silvered handle of the razor that she could gut him like a pig and make it look like an accident. And still he sat, spellbound, as she angled the blade against his cheek and drew it down.

"You hold the blade like so," Theo said, and turned to wipe it upon the towel. "Unless you've got an exceptionally guilty conscience."

He *had* actually, but she wasn't to know such a thing. "Why do you say so?"

"I can't think of another reason why a man would attempt to carve off his own face like you were about to."

Over the screech of silverware and the crunch of toasted bread as Tom ate, Alex thought he heard a snicker. "I beg your pardon. I employ a valet, who generally oversees such tasks."

"And does he wipe your arse for you, as well?"

In spite of himself, Alex grinned. "Not generally. Do you think

I ought to expand his duties?" The self-deprecating rejoinder had the unexpected benefit of coaxing forth what might have been a smile, had Theo not clearly bit the inside of her cheek and cleared her throat in an effort to avoid it.

Her smallest finger traced his cheek as she slowly and steadily drew the razor down. "I wouldn't recommend attempting to make me laugh," she said. "It could prove fatal at this juncture."

"Just for once, it might be nice to have you laugh *with* me instead of *at* me," he said. "This must surprise you, but in London, it's quite rare to find myself the butt of anyone's joke."

"In fact, it *does* surprise me," she murmured, preoccupied, as she tipped his chin up even more and maneuvered the blade across his chin, nearing his throat.

"Easy," he said, as his Adam's apple bobbed. "You've got my life in your hands."

"Please," she sniffed. "If I wished to kill you, you can be sure I would not do it in my own home, where I would be tasked with cleaning up the mess of it." He heard the scrape of the blade, the swipe of it over the towel, and then at last she laid down the razor. "Eat your breakfast, Mr. Dryden. Work waits for no man."

Alex scraped his palm over his jaw. Damned if she hadn't managed a cleaner shave even than his valet.

Chapter Twelve

Over the past few days, Theo had to admit that if the duke had not made himself precisely *useful*, then at least he had not made himself entirely *useless*. While she wouldn't have hired him as a laborer if he had been seeking a job, every day he seemed to grow a little more proficient.

This morning he had been coming from the hen house as she had been going to it, and he had slanted her a smug grin and prominently displayed the basket which hung over one of his arms, a dimple flashing in his freshly-shaven cheek. He'd nicked himself again, of course, but still he had managed to shave himself without slicing off the better portion of his face. Still, she had had little enough hope that much of anything else would come of his interference—that was, until Heath had come up to the farm in the afternoon, after he'd taken care of his own small plot of land, beaming from ear to ear.

"Maudie's in a state," he said, as he caught up with her on horseback along the border of the farthest field. "Seems that whatever it was Mr. Dryden wrote to the duke worked like a charm. He's sent down workmen from London, and they're working on that blasted hole in Maudie's roof even now."

Damn. It was almost disappointing—she had wanted so badly to hold onto that righteous fury that burned in her chest, but it was so *hard* when her expectations of him were subverted. It would have been so easy to write him off as a worthless fribble; a boorish, apathetic nobleman who cared more for his London diversions than his tenants. But despite her efforts to drive him away, somehow, for some reason, he had *stayed*. He had stayed through an unpleasant cold rain, even though she supposed that the barn, in its state of disrepair, was sure to leak upon his head.

He had stayed through her jibes and taunts; he had even laughed along as if her general antipathy were a joke that he shared in. He had stayed though he'd blistered his hands and cracked his head and nicked his cheeks with a razor. He had

stayed, muddling through every unpleasant task she laid before him, and he had never complained of it—at least in her hearing.

“He’s not Mr. Dryden,” she said slowly. And she was sure of it now, having received the duchess’ confirmation only yesterday.

“He’s not?” Baffled, Heath’s heavy brows drew down over his eyes.

“Well, he *is*,” Theo said. “But that’s not *all* he is.” She blew out a breath and wheeled her horse about. “He’s the *duke*, Heath.”

“What duke?”

Rolling her eyes, Theo gestured vaguely at *everything*. “*The* duke,” she stressed. “*Our* duke. The one who owns Ivywilde and everything around it. Our damned *landlord*, Heath.”

Shading his eyes against the sun, Heath let out a long, low whistle. “You’re certain?”

“As certain as I can be,” Theo said. “Papa had his suspicions, so I wrote to the duchess. She said he’d come in disguise.” Actually, she had said that the duke would be *devastated* if he knew that his ruse had been discovered. He’d gone to great lengths to maintain it, after all.

A corner of Heath’s mouth twisted into half a frown, as if uncommitted to it. “The damned fool—what was he thinking? Half the village might’ve strung him up if they’d known.”

“I suppose that’s why,” Theo said, but her eyes flitted toward where the house lay, far distant from these grazing fields. She glanced down at the smattering of clover littering the ground, her mouth firming as she considered that the reason that there was so little of it—the reason that the livestock grazed primarily upon turnip tops—was that His Grace couldn’t be bothered to manage his responsibilities to his tenants. “I wrote him a letter,” she said.

“Oh?”

“Several, in fact.” She coughed into her fist. “They were...not complimentary.”

“Don’t see why they should have been,” Heath said.

“Yes, well, I might have used language I’m not even meant to *know*,” Theo said, her cheeks burning at the admission. The duchess had remarked upon *that*, as well, in her letter—though

Theo fancied that the phrasing had suggested more of a teasing bent than a recriminating one.

Heath snorted, pulling his hat down over his eyes. “Somehow,” he said. “That doesn’t surprise me in the least. At least it captured his attention at last, hm? So the ends justify the means.”

Theo had to agree; there was no end to what creative language she might employ provided it would save a village that languished beneath its landlord’s neglect. But she had to admit—at least to herself—that she had judged the duke too harshly. While many noblemen left their estates foundering in a state of benign neglect, at least *this* one had been swift to rectify his mistake, once he had at last become aware of it.

“I suppose I’m to keep it quiet?” Heath asked. “About Mr. Dryden, I mean.”

Theo hesitated. “He truly *is* here investigating Mr. Jennings,” she said. “We’ve yet to concoct a plan to acquire proof of his misdeeds, but he’s convinced me that there *must* be some. Do you suppose there’s anyone who might betray his purpose here?”

“A week ago, had I known his identity, I’d’ve strung him up myself—Mr. Jennings be damned,” Heath said, shaking his head. “I didn’t dare hold out hope that anything would come of his *investigation*, but he’s proving to be a man of his word. I can’t think anyone would jeopardize that now.”

So the duke’s secret would remain safe from Mr. Jennings, at least.

“Still,” Heath said, “knowing what I know now—it does my vindictive side good to think of him struggling like he has.” He smothered a chuckle in his hand. “Can’t think of him tripping over his own trunk without laughing.”

“You should have seen him try to herd the sheep to pasture,” Theo crowed. “And then he fell over one, straight into a pile of —” She let the words fall away into silence as a thought—a wicked, shrewish, contemptible thought—occurred to her. “*Mr. Dryden*,” she stressed deliberately, “doesn’t wish for anyone to know his true identity. But now that he’s no longer in danger of being drawn and quartered, I don’t see any reason why the village ought to remain in the dark...and rob them of their opportunity to get a little of their own back. He couldn’t

hold them responsible for not giving him the respect he is due when they're not meant to know he's the duke, now, could he?"

Heath gave a long, low whistle. "Remind me never to get on your bad side," he said, though an irrepressible grin slid across his face. "All right—I'll spread the word. I imagine a fair few villagers will be pleased to give His Grace a proper welcome."



"You'll be pleased to know," the duke said to Theo, with far more than his fair share of smugness, as he collected the inkwell and quill, and set himself down at the table, nudging the dishes leftover out of the way, "that the duke was *thrilled* to begin work immediately."

Instantly needled, Theo folded her arms over her chest. "You've had a letter from him, then?"

Taken aback by the swift response, the duke stammered for a moment. "Well—no—but—"

"How, then, could you know his mind?"

A dull flush settled in his cheeks. "I'm well-acquainted with His Grace," he said. "We are relatives, after all."

"*Distant* relatives."

"What?"

"You said you were *distantly* related. How close could you be? Certainly not close enough to venture a guess as to His Grace's state of mind." She buffed her fingernails upon the bodice of her dress, studying them absently.

"Only you could make *His Grace* sound like the basest of curses," the duke muttered beneath his breath. And then, louder: "Haven't you heard? He sent workers down from London!"

"I've heard," Theo said. "However, I've noticed he did not come *himself*. Do you know how long he's held Ivywilde? Since before I was born. He's never been down to visit—not once."

Slouching in his chair, the duke muttered defensively, "He's a very busy man." His fingers fiddled with the quill pen, tattering the feathered end. "Besides, he received an

exceptionally rude letter—from *you*, mind—that no doubt led him to believe that he would not be welcome.”

“Well, he *wouldn't* have been,” Theo said, fisting her hands on her hips. And then, just to be obnoxious, she added, “He’d have to be a complete and utter *fool* to show his face around here.”

The duke’s mouth opened—closed—opened again. At last he made an aggravated sound in his throat and scraped his hands through his hair, no doubt in a fret about how he ought to proclaim himself *not* a fool whilst still maintaining his disguise.

Satisfied with herself, Theo began to clear the dishes from the table, removing them to the kitchen. As she prepared to do the washing up, a knock resounded upon the front door. “You’ll have to answer that,” she called, rather enjoying the thought of a duke answering his own door.

The legs of his chair scraped across the floor, and then moments later there was the muffled hum of voices in the next room. She heard Papa’s boisterous laugh, followed by what was surely a sulky tone from the duke, and then the *thunk* of boots plodding across the floor.

The duke poked his head through the doorway. “Might I trouble you for some tea?” he inquired, fingers curled around the door jamb.

Elbow deep in dishwater, Theo turned to upbraid him for his temerity, lifting the dishrag in one hand in a manner that suggested she might cast it at him.

He cleared his throat, gaze shearing away from hers. “Or—perhaps if you could direct me to the kettle, I could do it myself?” he suggested. “It’s just that the Johnsons have come to call. I thought it would be gracious to offer them some refreshments.”

Oh. Well, that was another matter entirely. Of course, now that word had spread around the village that the duke was setting to rights what had long been left to molder away, more families would take up the invitation to have their grievances addressed.

“There,” she said, indicating the kettle tucked beneath the counter with one hand. “Fill it with water and hang it—”

“Over the fire,” he said. “And the tea?”

She nodded to a cabinet on the far wall. “There’s a tin in there,” she said, as he retrieved the kettle. “Have you ever prepared tea before?”

“No,” he said, too cheerfully. “But I suppose I might as well learn.”

Good Lord. He was going to scorch the leaves and serve the Johnsons terribly over-steeped tea. She simply *knew* it. “Never mind,” she said, wiping her hands dry upon a rag. “I’ll do it.”

“No, no,” he said. “Just—if you would direct me, so I don’t make a mess of it.”

Skeptically, she narrowed her eyes. “You wish for me to teach you to make tea?” she asked, as he filled the kettle and hung it up over the fire.

“You know how to make it, don’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then, yes.” Relieved of his burden, he turned to face her once more, the full weight of that sharp green gaze falling upon her. “I know how to do a great many things, very few of which are helpful to me here. I am willing to learn, and I bow to your superior wisdom. Please teach me how to make tea.”

No one asked for her opinion, or her guidance; even those men of the village who could most assuredly have benefited from it. There were even those who had looked down upon her for taking so active a role in the running of the farm—as if there had been any other choice. But the duke seemed *sincere*.

He truly wished for her assistance, and he had humbled himself enough to *ask* for it. Perhaps the last week had left more of an impression upon him than she had thought.

Something inside her—some wretched place fraught with misery and worry, which had been wound tight into a twisted mass of frustration and righteous indignation—began to loosen. He had passed some crucial test of character, and she had underestimated him—or else she had *overestimated* his perceived callousness, his indifference.

She had, she allowed, been *hoping* for him to fail. She had made up her mind about him long before he’d had the nerve to show his face, decided to tar him with the same brush as Mr. Jennings sight unseen, character undetermined. She had simply judged him and found him wanting, and then dismissed him.

But here he was, rooting around in her cabinets for cups, to serve tea to the Johnsons, a family so poor they ought to be well beneath his notice. A queer sense of shame squeezed her chest tight, and the flame of the grudge that had burned within her chest, and which she had fed each day with tiny, hoarded resentments, at last guttered out.

He had asked for her help. And it had been a sincere request, because she possessed the knowledge that he lacked, and he was willing to learn. He was not resentful, or sulky, or petulant—he did not perceive her knowledge as a threat to his pride. He has simply...asked for her help.

Jerkily, she took a step toward the cabinet that held the tea canister, but he waved her back with an absent, “No, no, allow me. Just—talk me through it.”

And so she repeated the steps aloud, and he followed each diligently—down to pulling a pocket watch from his pocket to gauge the steeping time—and at last poured five perfect cups of tea, one of which he painstakingly sweetened with a lump of sugar and passed to her, expression more somber than she’d ever seen it.

She took a sip. *Perfect*. In every way. It was such a small thing to prepare tea, but he had treated it as if it were of the utmost importance. For some ridiculous, unknowable reason, this utter fool of a duke valued her opinion and desired her approval. “It’s good,” she said at last, past the strange lump in her throat.

He turned away, but not before Theo caught a flash of the beaming grin that split his face. As he collected the teapot and the remaining cups upon a tray to carry them into the front room, Theo felt her heart give a betraying *thump* in her chest. Oh, no. Oh, *no*.



Making tea had been a tiresome bit of business, but given that every family that had visited this evening had drunk what they were served without complaints, Alex supposed he must have done a fair enough job of it.

While Theo’s praise of his efforts could not have been said to

be particularly *warm*, neither had it been the blistering condemnation he'd expected. In fact, in retrospect, Alex supposed that even *she* had looked surprised to not have had any major complaints about it. Still, though he had prepared no less than three full pots of tea this evening, Theo had been kept running herself, fetching snacks to serve their guests, or else another handful of those wretched-smelling tallow candles once full dark had fallen and Alex had had trouble seeing the page laid down in front of him—and the people who had come calling.

There were so many more people yet to interview, but Alex could already see the lay of the land, and it had taken everything in him to remain impassive as the families that had come calling had recited a list of their various grievances. Three families this evening, and already the notes he had made had amounted to three full pages—and if the rest of the town had suffered so much beneath Mr. Jennings' neglectful watch, it would likely take *months* to put the village to rights once again.

Today he had learned that six families—mostly subsistence farmers—had packed their things and left in advance of quarter day, knowing that they would not be able to scrape together the next rent payment from their meager savings. Four had left information by which they might be contacted by their friends and family who remained in the village, but the remaining two might prove difficult to track down.

While Tom had gone out front to see off the last of the visitors, Alex sat in the dining room and braced his elbows on the table, scrubbing at his face. Though he'd yet to check the time on his pocket watch, he couldn't image that it would be much past ten. He'd long been accustomed to staying out until the early hours of the morning, and yet he found himself already several shades past exhaustion. Bone-tired, Tom had called it—but it wasn't *just* about the various aches and soreness he'd acquired through the day; it was the *mental* exhaustion.

All he wanted was to crawl back up to his unpleasant hayloft bed and sleep until noon—or autumn, if such a thing were possible.

But though the village was abuzz with delight over the crew of workmen than had arrived to begin the arduous work of

restoring what Mr. Jennings had allowed to lapse into disrepair, Alex knew it was merely a drop in the bucket as far as repairs went, and there was simply too much work for one small crew.

He would have to call others down from London.

There was the low sound of something sliding across the table, and he jerked as something cold touched his forearm near his elbow, just below the sleeve that he'd rolled up to avoid staining his cuffs with ink as he wrote.

A plate had appeared there, with a thick slice of apple pie steaming gently upon it, topped with a flaky golden crust. Theo was bending to set a fresh cup of tea down beside it. For once, her sharply-point chin expressed neither approval nor disapproval, and she didn't even cross her arms across her chest in that forbidding manner she so often employed.

Instead she asked, "What will you do?"

He sighed. "There's no help for it—I'm going to have to hire more workmen."

Her head canted just a bit to the right, and she pulled that damned plait over her shoulder, fiddling with the end of it just beneath the threadbare blue ribbon she'd used to tie it. "The duke won't be well pleased by that, will he?"

"At the townsfolk? Don't be ridiculous. It's hardly their fault that the buildings have gone to rack and ruin. At Mr. Jennings? Absolutely." He shuffled the pages and tapped them into a neat stack, hoping that his voice sounded less affected than he felt in the moment. "It was his *job* to maintain such things. I'm certain he's sent a number of requests for funds for various repairs that don't look to ever have been completed." Which meant that the man had simply been pocketing the funds that Alex had sent to him for such things. "He earned a generous wage for precisely that purpose, but I can find no evidence that he's done anything but sit up at Ivywilde, lording his power over the townsfolk."

Theo snorted. "That's because that's precisely what he does. In fact, he only comes to town on the occasional quarter day. Most of the time he sends his bailiff to collect the rents." She chewed her lower lip. "However—"

"Yes, I know," he said, dragging the fingers of his right hand through his hair. "More workmen will almost certainly be

noticed. There's also the unfortunate fact that Maudie's tavern won't have room to house all of the men we'll need." He flicked through the pages once more, searching for the information he needed. "But, as I understand it, there are currently six vacant homesteads, is that correct?"

Theo gave a short nod.

"So we'll house the workmen in them," he said. "It will take some time to track down the families that have left, and to offer them the opportunity to return to their land. We'll have the workmen fix them up—and perhaps hire out help to tend the land, if any abandoned crops can be saved—until we hear from those families affected."

Theo's stiff posture eased. She placed one hand on the back of the chair beside him, her lips pursing as if to hold back a question. And when he did not speak to fill the silence that stretched tightly between them, at last she voiced it: "You want to find them? The families that have left?"

"At the very least, they are owed the value of what Mr. Jennings has stolen from them," he said. "It's possible that their families have worked that land for generations. I don't like that they've been forced from it, and—" He heaved a sigh, picking up the fork that Theo had left near the plate and carving out a bite of the pie. "This—*all* of this—is the duke's fault," he said around a mouthful of warm, sugary apples. "It's his responsibility to make it right. I assure you, he understands that. He'll want to do whatever it takes to restore the village to its proper state."

Some strange expression flickered across her face for a fraction of a second, revealed by the low light of the candle. Doubt, maybe, or confusion—no, closer to curiosity. The slight lift of her brows, the pursing of her lips, the cheeks that were not, at last, hollowed with barely-restrained hostility. She said, speculatively, "You—I mean to say, the *duke*—would truly go to such efforts? For people he's never met?"

"That *is* why I'm here," he said. "Er—why the duke sent me." He disguised the fumble with another bite of apple pie, which was crisp and sweet, tart and buttery, and melted in his mouth. "The fact of the matter is that you were right, and I'm certain the duke knows it. I'm sure he can only be thankful that you took him to task for his poor stewardship when it was needed.

Perhaps he'll come down to visit one of these days, when the people have not such cause to hold him in so much enmity, and tell you as much in person." And then, because she was staring at him as if he was some strange and new breed of animal that she had never before encountered, he mumbled, "Good Lord, what have you put in this pie? It's incredible."

"It's the nutmeg and cardamom," she said, as her fingers drifted along the back of the chair, and she twitched her plait over her shoulder. Airily, as if it were simply an idle suggestion, she said, "Perhaps tomorrow I could teach you how to make a pie."

His fork paused, suspended in the air, halfway to his mouth. "Truly?"

She shrugged. "If you like."

"I would like that." He didn't know quite *why* he'd said it. He'd never had even the slightest inclination to bake a pie in the whole of his life. And given his earlier efforts to make tea, the likelihood was high indeed that he would be more of a hindrance than a help in the kitchen.

Even knowing the possibility existed that he would prove himself an even greater fool than he already had, still there was an odd flutter in his chest—exhilaration, he thought, that perhaps Theo did *not* loathe him quite so strenuously as once she had.

That she would offer her time and tutelage at her own behest instead of at his pleading. That something subtle had shifted between them, something he couldn't name or identify or determine a cause for—but he would snatch at it anyway, because for some godforsaken reason, he desperately wanted her approval.

The front door opened and closed, and Theo jumped at the advent of the sound. "Oh, Papa—you gave me a fright," she sighed. "There's pie left in the kitchen if you want it."

"None for me," Tom said, hanging up his hat so precisely that Alex could only assume he knew the exact placement of the hook through longstanding habit. "You ought to be to bed, my girl," he said, bussing a kiss to the top of Theo's head. "And you, too, son."

"Of course." There had been nothing illicit about his presence unchaperoned in the dining room, Alex knew, but he'd spent

so long assiduously avoiding even the mildest illusion of impropriety—because only a few moments alone with a marriageable woman could get a fellow leg-shackled—that it had become second nature to circumvent any situation in which such an impropriety might occur.

But he hadn't taken any such precautions with Theo. Of course, the stakes were lower here; the strictures of decorum less rigorous. Theo was profoundly uninterested in making a duchess of herself, though in all fairness she did not know there happened to be a duke about. And yet, even though neither Theo nor her father could have a reason to maneuver him into marriage, had Tom come storming in upon them playing the outraged papa and demanding recompense, Alex would have—

He'd have married her.

The realization settled over him like cloak, bringing with it a queer sense of buoyancy, as if he'd gone lightheaded.

He'd have married her, and he wouldn't even have sulked about it. He, who had avoided more potential marriage traps than any one man ought to be forced to suffer, would have married Theo without a qualm.

Despite his attempts to frame his ill-advised proposal as a result of too much drink, he suspected that he might...actually *want* to marry her. Not because she was well-favored, or because she'd get on with Serena and Violet, or even because he would eventually have to marry *someone*—but because he wanted to marry *Theo* in particular.

At least a little. Enough that the thought was titillating instead of terrifying. Enough that instead of fleeing into the night, he collected his papers, murmured his *good nights* to both Tom and Theo, and took himself off to the hayloft in the barn.

Where he lay awake for several hours pondering his situation as a cluster of kittens gamboled over him, and Frederica's steady, knowing eyes peered at him through the darkness.

Chapter Thirteen

Theo ought to have been alarmed by the suspicious grunting sounds emanating from the barn as she approached it. The duke had developed a recent habit of rising earlier—to her surprise, and somewhat begrudging respect—but generally he was up and about by now, either plucking eggs from their nests or invading the kitchen for a pot of tea. Twice now she'd even caught him at pitching hay into the feed troughs for the cows.

Still, the noises seemed...rather more exasperated than distressed.

"Mr. Dryden?" she called, one hand ready at the barn door to fling it open should the need arise. "Are you well?"

Another grunt followed. "Thought I'd try my hand at milking," he called back. "But this *stubborn beast* doesn't seem to wish to cooperate. I forgot the bucket—could you please hand it to me?"

Satisfied that she wouldn't barge in upon him in a state of undress, she threw the door open. "They're not *stubborn beasts*," she said as she reached for the bucket hung up upon the wall. "They're simply not yet familiar—"

Oh. Oh, dear. He'd gotten himself wedged into a stall, with the aforementioned *stubborn beast* positioned with its head down over the feed trough, placidly munching upon a fresh heap of hay. And that wasn't even the worst of his troubles.

"I'm stuck," the duke said, abashed. "But it's no matter—this ought not take too terribly long, and how much can she truly eat anyway?" He held out his hand for the bucket, stretching as far as he could that she might pass it to him. "At least I have the stool already," he added.

The bucket dangling from her fingers, Theo pressed her lips into a firm line to stifle the laughter that wanted to erupt. "Mr. Dryden," she began, struggling to string together a sentence without doubling over from amusement.

"Alex is fine," he said, and made a gesture with his

outstretched fingers that she assumed was meant to hurry her into surrendering the bucket. “You call Heath and Sam by their names; you might as well call me Alex.”

But she’d practically grown up alongside them, and besides, neither of them was a damned duke. Still, she gave a short sigh and said, “*Alex*, then. Have you noticed that this particular *beast* is not in possession of an udder?”

His blond brows drew together. “I don’t suppose I looked,” he said. “Why?”

She coughed delicately into her hand, valiantly resisting the urge to laugh. “That is Harold. Our bull.”

Slowly his hand retracted, dropping to his side. His head whipped back toward the bull, who gave a low, almost derisive snort as he continued chewing. A look of dawning horror crept over Alex’s face, and he dropped his face into his hands and groaned. “I don’t suppose,” he inquired feebly, “that you might be convinced to keep this between us?”

“Oh, absolutely not,” Theo said cheerfully. “But I do commend you for your effort. Luckily for you, Harold is quite docile—some bulls are terribly territorial.” She patted Harold’s rump gently, and the bull shifted sideways in the stall, flicking his ear as if to grant permission for His Grace to vacate the premises now that he’d been roundly humiliated. “Just imagine if you’d remembered the bucket.”

Shuffling out of the stall with his shoulders slumped, Alex muttered, “I’d really rather *not*, if it’s all the same to you.”



“Heard you tried to milk old Harold this morning.”

Because the jibe was delivered with a good-natured grin and a hearty slap on the back, Alex found himself unable to take offense to having his misstep cast up into his face. Instead he gave a sheepish grin and said, “Regrettably, I’ve not had much experience with cows.” Wiping the sweat from his brow with one hand, he lifted a hammer in his other. “I’m surprised I was entrusted with manual labor.”

The man—whom Alex was reasonably certain was named Henry—snorted in response. “You’re an extra set of hands,”

he said, pressing another handful of nails into Alex's palm. "We need all of those we can get around here, and that's a fact."

Alex supposed that was true enough. Though significant progress had been made in restoring Maudie's tavern, the rotted wood and portions of the roof had had to be stripped away, and in the doing, the workmen had discovered that the damage to the tavern had been more extensive than they had initially thought. With the weather bound to turn rainy again soon enough, time was of the essence—the roof had to be fixed before the water damage to the interior of the tavern could be repaired, or the problem would simply compound itself.

Which was how Alex had ended up here, perched precariously upon the roof, alongside several other village men. The workmen that had come down from London with carts full of building materials barked out orders as they placed beams and assembled a lattice of battens across the bones of the rafters. The able-bodied townsfolk that had turned out to assist all seemed to have some sort of essential knowledge that Alex himself lacked; some cultivated skill in general repair that enabled them to fall in with a crew of trained builders in order to work swiftly and neatly.

While Alex—Alex had been consigned to affixing slates to the battens. The sun beat down overhead as he worked, layering slates in a precise pattern, overlapping the tiles so that the inevitable rain would run off of them rather than between them.

Luckily, this had been explained to him before he had been entrusted with the task. The workmen—whom *he* had hired, if in a roundabout fashion—had taken one look at him and instantly assumed that he had never before laid roofing tiles. The fact that they had been correct in their assessment had not eased the sting of the somewhat condescendingly-delivered explanation, which to Alex had felt rather like directions that one might have provided to a very small child.

Or to a very large idiot.

Probably his enthusiastic—if misguided—attempt to milk a *bull* had not done him too many favors. Still, being trusted with a tool of *any* sort was a sight better than being relegated

to fetching eggs or to shelling peas. It bespoke at least a begrudging faith in his competence. And while that competence might, by countryside standards, reach only the bottommost rungs of the ladder, still it was a sight better than that which had been assumed of him when he'd first arrived in town.

Theo had offered to teach him to bake a pie, which at the very least suggested that she thought he must now be *capable* of it. His stomach gave a betraying gurgle as he began laying a new row of slates out, carefully creeping along the ruins of the roof as he did. God help him if he fell off; he'd never live it down. Assuming he *lived*.

"We'll break for luncheon in a few minutes," one of the men—whom Alex remembered as Andrew—called to him above the sound of pounding hammers. "Maudie said the least she could offer was a meal in exchange for our assistance."

God, a meal sounded like heaven just now. He'd barely had time to shove a measly crust of bread into his mouth this morning before he'd been swiftly shuffled out the door. Still, he'd have to see that Maudie was fairly compensated for her efforts. And arrangements would have to be made for the workmen—neither he nor they had anticipated the extent of the damage, and the tavern would be unsuitable to house them until the roof and water-damaged floor and walls had been repaired.

And these new men from the village—he'd have to take the opportunity to hear their complaints, take down their stories, and revise his notes once again. When he had a clearer picture of what each family was owed, he could send for the funds necessary to see each family repaid.

By the time a break was called for lunch, Alex had developed a dreadful knot in his neck, mild friction blisters on his palms, and what felt like the beginnings of a sunburn. He felt dreadful—sweaty, rumped, and sore in places both mentionable and unmentionable.

But as he and the other men collected around a cluster of tables that had been shoved together in the middle of the tavern, for once he felt he was—something *other* than a duke. He endured gentle chiding, a few hearty slaps on the back, and a tankard of ale that was something just a cut above rotgut

quality—but it was *real* and *honest*, without the bowing and scraping that came with his title.

For once, he was simply *Alex*—inept, but learning. Clumsy, but determined. Unknowledgeable, but capable of growth. They did not hold his lack of experience against him, because despite that lack he had borne their good-natured jabs and worked alongside them anyway. And if he had not made himself quite so useful as they, he had contributed *something*.

But it had felt—*good*. *Good* to see the slates of the repaired roof forming beneath his efforts; *good* to be included amongst their tight-knit group, as if he had been accepted at last into the fold that naturally shunned outsiders to their ranks; *good* to do something meaningful.

He'd slipped into a life that did not belong to him...and God help him, but he was beginning to *enjoy* it.



Alex was exhausted by the time he'd finally been returned to the Vance farm, but he'd come away with more than a few new bruises and blisters—he'd managed to entrust Maudie with a handful of letters to send off to London. Within the week—provided his mother and solicitors followed his instructions promptly—new workers would arrive, and so would enough funds to begin the process of repaying those tenants with whom he had already spoken.

Beginning with the Vances, whose ready coin had dwindled to an alarming state. Twice this week he'd been tasked with a journey into town to purchase bacon from the butcher, and to pay the farrier for his services, but Theo had parceled out the coin necessary as if each shilling she dropped into his palm were precious—and it hadn't taken more than a brief glance at the purse from which she'd removed the coin to see that it contained little more than a handful of coins.

The Vances were growing desperate. Hell, the whole *village* was growing desperate.

Despite his assurances, still Theo worried. It was easy enough for him to tell her *not* to, when he was not the one whose meager savings was steadily depleting. He'd made little

enough progress in routing Mr. Jennings, and though he knew that the man would be replaced one way or another, *Theo* couldn't possibly know that. She knew only that the next quarter day—Midsummer—was fast approaching, and she fretted over whether or not she would have the means to pay the rent that would be due.

Whether *he* would do his duty to the village, as he'd promised. And he didn't want her to worry any longer. He didn't want her to count out pennies and shillings into his hand as if she could hardly bear to part with them. It went beyond the duty of a landlord to a tenant, and perhaps it *should* have been alarming, but instead it merely felt *right*. As if nothing could matter more than Theo's security and happiness, and he thought—he thought perhaps he had gained a small sliver of insight into Grey's mind on the occasion that he had attempted to bully Alex into marrying Serena, believing she deserved a duke for a husband.

That he would have sacrificed anything to see her safe and comfortable and happy. That he would have borne any unhappiness himself if it would have benefited her.

Those thoughts churned around inside his head as he pushed open the front door, which seemed to have been left unlocked for him. He had not expected to find Theo home, since she spent the vast majority of the day out on the land, seeing to various aspects of the farm, but he knew that Tom was still at Maudie's tavern with Sam and Heath, and so the soft sounds from the kitchen could only be Theo bustling about.

She had a sack of what he assumed to be flour held in her arms as he came through the doorway, and she deposited it upon the counter, arranging various other ingredients and cooking utensils as she hummed an off-key melody. Dried apples in a bowl, tiny jars of spices, butter, sugar—

Of course. The pie.

He must have made some small sound, something that had caught her attention, for her head jerked up, the surprise that had briefly crossed her face giving way to something else, something like pleasure—before she had the good sense to tamp it down.

“Oh, good,” she said, clearing her throat and tucking a stray lock of inky black hair that had had the temerity to escape her

plait back behind her ear. “You’re home. Here,” she said, “put this on.” And she tossed an apron toward him, which he caught with one hand, more on reflex than actual attention to the task.

Home. It wasn’t true, of course, but for some reason his grand townhouse had never felt quite as *homey* as did this tiny, dilapidated domicile. In his entire adult life, *he* had never felt as much *at home* as he did here. And for just a moment—just one perfect moment, before she had collected herself and shut it away, she had been *glad to see him*.

His exhaustion fell away; the aches and pains he’d acquired laboring over Maudie’s tavern roof suddenly inconsequential. The fact that he truly had no interest in baking a pie merited no consideration whatsoever—if it meant he could spend just a few minutes in Theo’s company, he would have agreed to have teeth pulled...or wear an apron with appalling little pink frills of fraying ribbon sewn along the sides.

He simply...wanted to spend time with her. Because he *liked* her. Maybe even *loved* her, on some level—whatever that entailed.

As he tied the apron round his waist, muttering beneath his breath at the sheer ridiculousness of the garment, he heard a muffled laugh, and glanced up in time to catch the skirl of amusement that chased across her face, leaving a crooked little smile hanging there at the corner of her mouth. Just lingering there at the right-hand corner, irrepressible.

She was laughing at him again, of course, as she always did, but still—his heart performed a strange stutter-step in his chest, and he realized he’d be quite all right making seven kinds of a fool of himself, provided it continued to amuse her so.

He was going to have to write several more letters. Grey and John could always be counted upon to provide sound advice. That was, of course, when they’d finished laughing at him.



“How did I do?”

Theo opened her mouth to answer the question, and then

paused to assess the state of the kitchen. The flour sack lay on its side upon the counter like a fallen soldier, a shower of flour surrounding it like scattered entrails. The sugar had been similarly violated—the cinnamon, nutmeg, and cardamom, too, had not escaped His Grace’s clumsy culinary efforts.

To his credit, he had mixed dough and cooked the dried apples in a mix of water, cream, and melted butter until they’d plumped up again, and if more of the filling had ended up on the counters and floors than in the pie itself, well, she considered that one of the hazards of learning to cook. She’d left the kitchen in a right state many times in her earlier efforts. Simply slapping on a beribboned apron did not make of one a chef.

The pie was a sorry excuse for a dessert; its crust somehow both over *and* underdone. He’d forgotten to prick holes in the top crust as she’d instructed, and the filling inside had ruined the messy crimping on the edges, escaping over the sides as it had bubbled over. She was going to have a devil of a time ahead of her, scraping the sticky-burned mess of it off of the pan.

And yet—she got the distinct impression that he was *proud* of his work. Like a puppy seeking praise for performing a trick, he bristled with energy. Somehow, he had ended up with flour streaking not only his shirtsleeves but his face and hair as well, and his fingertips tapped on the countertop, impatient and hopeful.

“Well,” she sighed, retrieving a fork and a knife to cut a slice, carving off a forkful. “Based on looks alone, I don’t think the baker will be approaching you to apprentice with him.”

His face fell in disappointment. His fingers stopped their frantic tapping, his shoulders slumped.

She took a bite, chewed thoughtfully. A little heavy on the cinnamon, but then it was expensive stuff and she used it perhaps more sparingly than she ought. The nutmeg and cardamom were—well-balanced. It was buttery and creamy and the apples cooked to soft perfection, and if the crust was a bit blackened, it didn’t overshadow the rest of the pie. “*But*,” she said, with a flippant little gesture of the fork.

He seized on that like a fish to a hook. “But?”

“It’s good.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” His jaw hung agape, and the astonishment in his expression coaxed a laugh from her. “Here, try.” She scooped up another bite, and held it out for him, expecting him to take the fork from her hand—but instead he bent down and ate it straight from the tines. The casual intimacy of it made her stomach do a little flip.

“It’s good.” His eyes went wide, and there were tiny flecks of gold scattered through his green irises. “It’s *good!*” He let out a whoop of elation, and all of that restrained energy spilled free. His hands landed on her waist, and he pulled her straight off of her feet, whirling her in an exuberant spin.

She nearly stabbed him with the fork in the process of bracing her palms on his shoulders to stabilize herself. And then, as he realized that his enthusiasm had manifested in what amounted to something less-than-appropriate—very nearly an embrace—and slowly lowered her back to her feet, she reached out and swiped a streak of flour from his cheek.

“Sorry.” The word emerged a squeak, several octaves higher than her normal voice. “You—you had some—flour. Just there.”

“I did?” He touched his cheek where she had, like her fingers had singed him.

“And, er—there.” She gave a feeble gesture.

“That’s all of me. You can’t just gesture to *all* of me.”

“Well, you’ve got flour on *all* of you!”

Doubt etched his features as he jogged toward the doorway in search of the mirror, and a moment later a disconsolate sigh preceded him as he walked back into the room, somewhat more abashed than he had been. “You should have told me.”

“I *did* tell you. Just now.”

He gave an aggravated little motion with his hands. “I’m covered in flour!”

And cinnamon. And nutmeg. And Theo was reasonably certain that the gritty substance streaked across his throat was sugar. And a gooey clump in his hair was likely the apple filling, though she had no idea how it had ended up there. All told, he’d probably gotten more of the ingredients on himself than he had in the pie.

All she could do was to cough discreetly into her palm and

murmur, "I've noticed."

"How do you do it?" he inquired, scrubbing his floury palms on the front of the apron still tied about his waist.

"Cooking just requires practice—"

"No; how do you do *all* of this? The cooking, the churning, the laundering, the farming—how do you do it?" He jabbed a finger at the pie resting upon the counter and added, "Producing *that* required more concentration and effort than I'd care to admit to, and it's only a *pie*. If I had to produce an entire meal, I'd quite likely go mad—and you do it three times each day, in addition to almost everything else. *How?*"

"Someone's got to do it," Theo said. "Needs must when the devil drives." Still, his question provoked an anxious feeling in her chest—like a small, frightened animal scabbled there, backed into a corner, only aware that it was far too late to escape a trap that had already sprung around it. He thought more of her capability than she deserved, when she had already let so much slip through her fingers. When every day, her tenuous hold on the farm loosed just a bit further.

No. She was not going to dissolve into self-pity and melancholia. Not here, not now. It was the least productive use of her time, anyway. Papa was counting on her to hold everything together.

She would see it all through until the bitter end—even *if* it came sooner than she would have preferred—if it killed her. And she would do it with her head held high in public, and save her weakness for whatever spare private moments she managed to gather for herself.

She cleared her throat of the hard lump that had risen there and even managed to paste something resembling a smile on her face as Alex plucked at the bits of apple that had gotten stuck in his hair, and said, perhaps a tad too brightly, "Perhaps you could benefit from a bath."

Chapter Fourteen

Alex lay awake, absently stroking the soft fur of the kitten that had snuggled up beneath his chin. He couldn't see it in the dark, but he assumed it was the one he'd named Ted—a tiny ball of ginger fur whose favorite hobbies included jabbing Alex in unmentionable places with his needle-sharp claws and chewing on Alex's fingers with his sharper teeth, and of whom Alex had grown unreasonably fond.

The bath had gone a good long way toward soothing his sore muscles, but even as he'd lazed about in it until the water had gone quite cold, he'd been plagued by guilt that it was simply one more task with which he had burdened Theo, and so he'd kept close while she had undergone the preparations—heating the water, fetching towels and toiletries. Learning, so that in the future he could do it for himself and spare Theo the labor of it.

She had been quiet through dinner, offering little conversation and answering questions posed to her with stilted, monotone replies, as if she were off in her own little world, venturing down with them long enough only to give a brief reply when addressed directly, and then popping off once again, miles away in an instant.

It had bothered him, that vague, distracted air she had worn—though her voice, when she had spoken, had been calm and collected, there had been a certain tightness about her eyes, a pinched look to her mouth. It occurred to him that she had perhaps grown accustomed to modulating her voice to keep her concerns from leeching into it, which her father would undoubtedly have heard—but she had grown less than adept at managing her expressions. There was no need for it, after all, since Tom could not read her anxiety upon her face. It had only solidified Alex's opinion that she'd been hiding a great deal from her father.

He shifted onto his side, eliciting a shrill *mew* of discontent from Ted, who found himself unceremoniously absent his cozy

perch. It hadn't yet begun to rain, but the scent of it was thick in the air along with the mist that had rolled through the valley, and Alex found himself glad that the barn roof was not in quite so much disrepair as it had appeared, or else he might be in for quite an uncomfortable night.

As he twitched Ted's tail away from his nose and squirmed about, trying to find a slightly less uncomfortable position on the bed of hay beneath him, he heard the quiet groan of the kitchen door opening. It was one more reminder of how dire things had become here, that even the door hinges had not been properly oiled in some time—but for the moment, at least, he was glad of it.

It could only be Theo walking out into the depths of the night. Alex gently shoed Ted back toward Frederica and the cluster of kittens tucked around her, shook the hay out of his discarded shirt, climbed down the ladder, and slipped out of the barn. He blinked into the darkness, peering out over the fields until—*there*. A circle of light bobbing along in the distance, and the vague shape of a woman receding into the endless dark.

And without so much as a twinge of conscience over intruding upon what was clearly meant to be a private moment, Alex followed.



Setting the lantern down upon the dry earth, Theo crouched among the tidy rows and rubbed the furled green edges of a turnip top between her fingers. It would be a miserable winter this year—assuming she could keep hold of the farm through winter—with little but what vegetables she could manage to preserve and the turnips to get them through. Turnips did not fetch a high price at market, but they were simple enough to grow, and the livestock could graze upon the tops through the autumn and whatever turnips they reserved from sale for winter. Root vegetables were much slower to spoil, and could be stored through seasons.

Between their efforts, she, Sam, and Heath had managed to sow only a few acres of wheat—and she didn't know if she

could hold the farm through Midsummer, much less through Michaelmas, to see the wheat harvested. And even if she *could*, they hadn't enough hands between them to harvest everything. Each season, there were fewer laborers to perform the work, and fewer coins still with which to pay them.

Even with less than half of their land properly utilized, Theo still could not predict how much of what she had sown would even see harvest. How much of her efforts would go to waste, rotting in the fields. It was as if she could feel the land slipping through her grasp, just as the leafy green frond she held sifted through her fingers—

“What are you doing out here so late?”

Theo swallowed back the shriek that lodged itself in her throat, twisting abruptly to see who had intruded upon her—and overbalanced, sprawling backward as her legs twisted beneath her.

A quiet chuckle, quickly stifled, emerged from the darkness to her left. There was the soft sound of footsteps over the dirt, and then a nebulous form taking shape where the lantern light faded into the misty night, growing closer every moment, looming—

She blew out a breath as the light revealed at last the damned *duke* standing before her, hand outstretched to offer to her, a curl of amusement still lifting the right corner of his mouth, that ridiculous dimple starkly outlined by the lamplight.

“Now that the shoe's on the other foot,” he said, “I can admit to finding some humor in it.” He wiggled his fingers expectantly, and, grumbling something terribly uncouth beneath her breath, she slapped her hand in his and allowed him to help her to her feet.

“Thank you,” she muttered, wiping the dirt from her hands.

“But you needn't linger. I'm simply assessing the fields.”

“So late at night?” Alex asked, doubtfully.

“Yes.” She stooped to retrieve the lantern, grateful that she hadn't upended it in her clumsiness.

“In the *dark*.” Again, disbelief laced his words.

“What part is difficult for you to understand?” Though she had meant to issue the question airily, as if his suspicions were unmerited, somehow it came out snappish instead—defensive, even. A lump of frustration rose into her throat, and she turned

away, brushing at her skirts to avoid looking in his direction before she could collect herself once more.

“All of it. It seems to me that daylight would be more conducive to surveying crops.”

“And of course your knowledge of farming far outstrips mine,” she tossed out caustically.

“Well...no, but—” A sigh followed, heartfelt, troubled. “My knowledge of farming might be lacking, but even I can safely guess that, in normal circumstances, one doesn’t wait until the deep of night to *assess the fields*. So—”

Some frayed, fragile thread within her snapped with a *twang*.

“When *else* would you propose I do it?” she bit off. “What other possible time could I devote to it? Between the milking, and the cooking, and the laundering—” A sob caught her unaware, and she pressed her palm to her mouth, horrified by the sound which seemed to echo around her; an accusation, a taunting reminder of how each day seemed less productive than the one that had come before, how her failures compounded by the hour, growing ever closer, looming over her.

“Theo.”

“I’m sorry,” she choked out, and the words were muffled behind her hand—but she couldn’t bear the kindness, the understanding in that one word. It would be the end of her.

“That was—terribly unfair of me.” Oh, God—she closed her eyes and prayed he would just *leave* before she embarrassed herself any further. “Please; I only wanted a few moments to myself. I thank you for your concern, but it is entirely unnecessary.”

“I don’t think it is,” he said softly. “You could have got a few moments to yourself in your room. But instead you came here, in the dark.” Slowly he moved closer, and the lantern light flickered over his hair, painting shining streaks over the disheveled gold strands. His hands flexed at his sides, like the impulse had struck him to reach out to her, and he had restrained it—barely. His voice lowered to a whisper, though she couldn’t imagine who else would possibly have overheard.

“How bad is it?”

The question—*the* question—struck not just her ears, but landed upon her shoulders with the weight of a boulder,

devastating in its intensity. That lump in her throat built of unending anxiety, of broken hopes and crushed dreams, threatened to choke her. The lantern shook in her trembling hand, wobbling precariously until he reached out and plucked it from her grip.

She wilted to the ground once more, her legs folding up beneath her, and tried in vain to smother the wretched, anguished noises clogging her throat. The humiliation of it was the worst of it; she had been fending off the encroaching panic for months, years—only to lose her iron grip on her emotions at the most inopportune moment, with the most inconvenient person to bear witness to her weakness.

But he had asked *the question* that everyone else studiously avoided, like a loose floorboard that they'd all gotten accustomed to skirting around. The answer was clear enough to everyone with enough experience. To Sam and Heath, who had seen fewer and fewer laborers hired each planting and harvest season. To the shopkeepers, who had seen Theo's customary orders halved, and then halved again.

They'd all been polite enough not to mention anything of it in her father's hearing—but it could not be kept from him for much longer. Not when they teetered on the precipice of ruin.

"Theo," Alex said again, and his hand cupped her shoulder. She'd been so lost inside her own head that she hadn't noticed him drop to his knees beside her, concern etched into his face, cast into relief by the flickering lamplight.

The warmth of his palm over her shoulder seared her skin even through the fabric of her dress, and it sent a shiver careening down her spine. Theo swabbed her sleeve across her damp face, struggling to cobble together something approximating a calm she did not feel and had not felt for too many years. She wasn't even certain she could adequately remember what calm *was*. "We're going to lose the farm."

A curse pierced the air between them. "No, you're not," he said. "I promise you—"

"It doesn't matter." Her breath escaped on a ragged little sound—not quite a laugh, but some strange sound made of pain and shame and strife. "Maybe we were always going to lose it. Maybe the—the duke's neglect merely hastened things along." God, the farm had been dying in bits and pieces for years now.

The duke had been a convenient excuse for it; a scapegoat to whom she could assign all manner of foul deeds and ill intent, a monster to blame for all of her problems.

But those problems had always existed, and if the farm was to be wrested from them by the villainous Mr. Jennings, it had only been because it had been foundering for years already. They had been kept afloat only by the once-reasonable rents, decent prices for their crops, and Theo's tireless efforts.

Except prices for produce had been falling season after miserable season, and Theo hadn't been *tireless* in years. She couldn't recall the last time she'd done more than fall into bed, exhausted from the day's labors, only to rise before dawn and do it all over again.

"I'm so tired." It was the first time she had admitted as much aloud, to anyone. And he just *let* her do it. His cheeks hollowed as if he'd bitten back his own words, and instead he only waited in silence, as if expecting that she might be tempted to fill it. His free hand lifted from its position at his side and hovered so close to her face that she could feel the heat of his skin. Gently as a butterfly alighting on a blossom, his fingers brushed the curve of her chin. The pad of his thumb slid over her cheek, swiping away a stray tear.

Her fractured heart broke a little more. Probably to him, her worries seemed so very small and petty; hardly worth the effort of listening to. She had only her tiny corner of the world, after all, just these acres of farmland, while he—men like him had the whole world at their very fingertips.

So perhaps his shoulders could bear the weight of her worries as well.

"Even if Mr. Jennings is removed," she said, "and even if we could afford to pay the rent...the farm is failing. It has been for years." The words tasted bitter, fouled from so many years rotting at the back of her mind. "The truth is of it is, I'm *not* capable. Each day there is some new task to attend to, something which requires repair, and there simply aren't enough hours in the day to manage everything." Her breath broke on a shattered sob. "I don't know how much longer I can keep the farm running. I don't know what we're going to do, or how to tell Papa I lost it." How badly she wanted to turn her face into the warm cup of his palm, to relax the muscles

that strained to hold herself upright and fall into his arms, and—just this once—let someone else hold *her* together.

Instead she forced herself to turn away, scabbled for every bit of strength left to her to smooth her expression of its misery, and drew in a deep breath to force the dread that clogged her throat back down to the very bottom of her soul where they belonged. “I’m sorry,” she said, striving to produce a mien of composure. “You need not concern yourself; it’s of no importance—”

“*Christ*, Theo.” His voice sliced through the silent night like a knife, and she jerked as if it had cut her as well. “Of course it’s bloody *important*. You—you—” For a moment he struggled with words, the beginnings of a scowl tugging at the corners of his mouth. The hand that cupped her shoulder loosened, shifted, wrapped around the back of her neck, and then pulled. She tipped forward with a startled squawk, unbalanced, too late to put her hands up to catch herself—and landed with her nose crushed to his shoulder, hands grappling for his arms to achieve the leverage to right herself once more. Her fingers clutched at his forearm just as he kneaded the tight muscles at the nape of her neck, and it felt so perfectly wonderful that it was all she could do simply to turn her face to the side enough to breathe properly. Which was a mistake, because he smelled like the hay he slept upon in the barn loft; earthy and soothing. “You take care of everything and everyone,” he crooned, his breath stirring the hair near her ear. “Who takes care of you?” Theo’s fingernails scraped across his shirtsleeves, steeling herself against the compassion in his voice. “I don’t want your pity,” she bit out, because anger was by far preferential to despair, and she had danced too long upon the cliff of that great gaping chasm that threatened to swallow her up. If she should tumble over, she might never find her way out again.

“You think I pity you?” There was a wealth of incredulity in the words. “Damn it all, Theo,” he swore when her abrupt shift backward succeeded only in tangling his fingers in her hair, jerking the strands painfully. “Would it absolutely kill you to simply *be still* for a moment?”

Affecting a mulish expression, Theo gave a resigned sniff, holding herself stiffly. Instead of disentangling his fingers from her hair, he plucked at the bit of ribbon she’d bound

round the end of her plait until it came free, and then he was shaking out the tight twists until the whole mass of it fell loose around her shoulders.

“Black as night,” he murmured, rubbing a lock of it between the fingers of his right hand, while his left—instead of extracting it from her hair, he burrowed it deeper, finding her nape once more, and she shivered at the sensation. Her scalp tingled, the pressure of her tight braid alleviated; her skin burned beneath the careful pressure of his fingers.

The night pressed in around them, the mist cocooning them within it. Aside from the breeze whisking through the field and rustling the leafy stalks of the turnip tops, the world was quiet and still, as if it had narrowed to just the two of them sheltered here within the corona of lamplight.

And all at once there was a tension that had nothing to do with the stress of her endless days, and everything to do with the feeling of his hands in her hair and the glass-green glimmer of his eyes in the muted light. The solemn curve of his mouth, strangely inviting.

Dear God. She wanted to *kiss* him.

Horrified with herself, she cleared her throat and said, brusquely, “I realize my problems must seem trivial to you—that it’s just a small farm, just—”

“It’s your *home*,” he said. “Quite honestly, I’ve never had to worry about whether or not I could pay the rent on my home, or put food upon my table. I can’t imagine many more serious problems than those.” The pad of his thumb brushed her chin, stroked her cheek. “Don’t judge yourself so harshly for failing to achieve an unattainable goal. You *haven’t* failed, Theo—it’s simply too much for any one person to manage, and you’re only human.”

Frustration caught and ripped at her from every angle, and she wondered—*could* a person be pulled apart at the seams like a flimsy gown? “It doesn’t matter whether or not it’s attainable,” she said, her clenched teeth producing an odd hiss as she gritted the words through them. “I *must*—”

His fingers pressed over her lips, muffling her words. “*Stop*, Theo. You’re not going to lose the farm. I won’t let that happen.”

She pried his hand away from her mouth. “You can’t promise

me that! You can't—" Abruptly she fell silent as it occurred to her that he *could*, in fact, promise her just that. He owned the land they leased, after all.

And yet, the thought that he might make certain *concessions* for them did not rest easily within her. "What are you saying?" she asked uneasily. Would he at last confess his true identity? She had poured her heart out to him—it seemed fair, that.

Instead, he said, "I'm saying you're going to save the farm, and I'm going to help. And failing that, I'll apply to the duke. Given the circumstances, I'm certain I can convince him to make allowances."

Theo shoved down the flair of annoyance that he'd practically demanded her secrets and yet held tightly to his own. "We couldn't possibly accept—"

"There's a time and a place for pride, Theo, and being on the verge of losing the only home you've ever known is *not it*." He softened the severity of the words by tweaking a lock of her hair, but this time the strands caught on his fingers. Shoving his hand toward the light of the lantern, he peered down at his hand. "Would you look at that?" he asked in a tone of wonderment, extending his hand to her. "Calluses. I've got *calluses*."

He sounded so absurdly pleased—almost proud. Of *calluses*? It beggared belief. "I suppose you do," she said, though she couldn't have said why that fact had struck him with such significance.

"I don't think I've ever had a callus in my life," he mused. "I don't want you to have the impression that I have ever looked down upon laborers, because I have not—but it would be more accurate still to say that I haven't thought about them with any degree of frequency that would merit having formed an opinion." A twist of regret tugged at the corner of his mouth, outlined harshly in the lantern light. "I realize I have been here only a few short weeks, scarcely enough time to have made myself useful—"

Theo could not stifle an irreverent snort.

"All right, *all right*—so *useful* might have been too strong a word." He tempered this with an abashed grin, unoffended. "My point is that I have great respect for you and your father, and all that you have accomplished. There's nothing wrong

with needing help, and certainly nothing wrong with accepting it when it is offered. You simply say *thank you*.”

An ominous rumble of thunder overhead disguised the small, emotional sound that emerged from Theo’s throat, for which she found herself profoundly grateful. “Thank you,” she choked out, somehow, dashing at her damp eyes with the back of her hand.

“As it happens,” he began, as he worked to wiggle one knee free from the dirt beneath him, planted his foot down, and extended one hand to her, “you wouldn’t be the first woman I have extracted from an unenviable situation. One might say I’ve become rather proficient at it. What are friends for, after all?”

Startled, Theo placed her hand in his and allowed him to pull her to her feet once more. “You—you consider us to be friends?”

A flicker of lightning from somewhere behind her flashed light across his eyes, and for a moment—just a moment—she thought perhaps she’d surprised him almost as much as he had surprised her. But the brief glint of shock faded with the flex of his jaw, the draw of his brows.

“Of course,” he said, as if this were a fact she ought to have gleaned for herself before now.

“But—but I’ve been dreadful to you.”

That dimple appeared once more in his cheek as the corner of his mouth lifted in a faintly mocking smile. “So you have,” he said, and gave a patronizing pat to her hand clasped within his own. His voice took on a lofty, supercilious air. “But you’re a simple country girl, and I am prepared to be forgiving of certain slights against my character—*ow*.”

Theo lifted her heel from the toe of his boot.

“I’ll concede that was probably a bridge too far,” he allowed, wincing as he flexed his foot.

Despite herself, Theo felt an incredulous laugh trickle up her throat, and it sounded so strange and unfamiliar to her ears. How long had it been since she had last laughed in honest amusement? How long had it been since the edges of her world had not been shadowed in desperation and fear? “You’re ridiculous,” she said, and chewed at the inside of her lip to stifle the smile that wanted to emerge.

“Yes, well, I’m told it’s one of my better qualities,” he said brusquely, and Theo began to suspect that he had merely contrived to behave that way in an effort to distract her from her melancholy. To make a fool of himself simply to make *her* feel better. It was...strangely affecting.

His hand squeezed hers. “Now,” he said. “It’s late, and I can feel the rain in the air. When it does arrive, I’d prefer not to be caught standing in a field of—what *is* this a field of, anyway?” He squinted into the darkness at the turnip tops rustling in the breeze that had only grown stronger in the past several minutes, stirring the mist into odd whirling patterns.

“Turnips,” Theo offered as she bent to retrieve her lantern.

“*Turnips?* Ugh.” He pulled a face of disgust, recoiling.

“How dare you malign the noble turnip!” Theo gasped, shoving at his shoulder with her free hand.

His momentarily dumbfounded expression ceded to a snort of amusement, which, to his credit, he gave an honest attempt at stifling in his palm. But he couldn’t cease the shaking of his shoulders with the force of his mirth, and Theo had to concede that being laughed at was aggravating indeed.

“You can stop laughing at any time,” she grumbled sourly.

“I’m *trying*,” he managed between snickers.

“Oh, you’re *extremely trying*.”

His breath escaped on a delighted hum as he swallowed down the last dregs of laughter. “My apologies. I’ll refrain from disparaging certain root vegetables in your hearing.”

“You had *better*, or you’ll find them on your plate more often than not.” But her sulky threat only managed to provoke another wheeze of laughter from him. It was an utterly preposterous argument, but a part of her—the part that hadn’t entertained any sort of frivolity or merriment in so very, very long that she had almost forgotten what it felt like—wanted to hold on to these few moments of levity. To seize them tightly in her fist, lest they scrabble away into the night and never return. But the rest of her agonized, riddled with guilt.

Those newly-callused fingers touched her chin, brushing away a few flyaway strands of hair. “I’m not in the habit of breaking promises,” he said, and offered a comforting smile. “It’s going to be all right, Theo. Just...put your worries aside for a while.” Though her breath did an awkward little hitch in her chest,

somehow she managed a feeble nod. Desperation was a strange beast indeed. She so badly wanted to believe in him.

“Good.” It was imbued with approval, decisively rendered, as if he considered the matter closed. He had decreed that she ought not to worry, and thus it was so. “Now—you should be safely inside. And perhaps you should keep the nighttime excursions at a minimum in the future. It’s not proper.”

Proper? A startled laugh burst from her throat. “I’m five and twenty, hardly in need of a chaperone. This isn’t a London ballroom governed by some arbitrary rules of propriety, and Papa trusts my judgment.”

His hand cupped her shoulder, and his voice was tinged with exasperation when he spoke. “Some rules remain constant, no matter the location—*not* being alone with a man to whom you are not related is one of them.”

“Have you gone mad? I can promise you, no one thinks anything of it.” She followed when he turned back toward the house, lifting the lantern to guide her steps through the rows of turnips stretching out into the distance.

“*I* think something of it,” he tossed over his shoulder, frustration bleeding into his voice, as if she ought to have inferred some hidden meaning in his words, and had grown annoyed by her incredible ignorance. He muttered something beneath his breath, and even though he was half-masked in the darkness at the very veil of the misty night which swallowed the light of her lantern, she saw him give an irritated shake of his head.

“I’ll remind you that *you* followed *me*,” Theo said, and the curt rebuke had him wheeling about once again, the flickering of the lantern light lending him an almost rakish air as it caressed his face. In the distance behind him, the clouds above them were just a nebulous, shapeless mass writhing across the sky, but the brief lashes of lightning within them made them glow with an almost unholy light. A prickle of unease lifted the tiny hairs at the nape of her neck.

Still she lifted her chin, unwilling to back down. But her voice wavered, just a bit. “I have no reputation to speak of,” she said, and it came out less argumentative and more placating. “It’s—it’s not as though I could be compromised, in the strictest sense of the word.”

“Yes,” he said. “You *can*.” The dry earth crunched beneath his boots, and Theo tried to cast her mind to how badly the ground needed the coming rain instead of the vaguely threatening tone his voice had carried across the scant space that remained between them. Which he swiftly breached, though she refused to yield any further ground to him. Because she was not a coward.

Theo managed to produce a tinny laugh that verged on the deranged. “No one—no one would be foolish enough to think —” She forced an inelegant snort, as if the thought of it was too bizarre to contemplate. “To think that you—that *you* would —”

But her faux-amusement fell flat between them, because he did not share in it. Instead, he asked, “Why? Why is it foolish?”

“Because you don’t—you wouldn’t—” She faltered when his hand came up, felt it fall once more upon her shoulder, but it wasn’t the comforting touch he’d employed before. His thumb found the edge of her neckline and slipped beneath it, sliding over her collarbone.

It shouldn’t have been a particularly provocative touch—and yet it was. Because it was *him*? No; he was a damned *duke*. And dukes did not entertain interests in provincial nobodies. So it had to be a taunt, then, or else she had misinterpreted, because he couldn’t possibly mean anything by it.

Silence stretched out, and there was just the sigh of the wind to cool her hot cheeks, the mist swirling in the air, and the cool promise of rain. Rasping breaths escaped her in short, fierce puffs as his warm fingers toyed with the neckline of her gown, tracing a path across her wind-chilled flesh. She could have smacked his hand away and delivered a fierce set-down. Boxed his ears. Stomped on his toes. Probably she should have done. Probably he *expected* her to do.

“It’s not your judgment that is in question,” he said, finally, when it became clear that she would not be the one to break the silence. “It’s that I’m not feeling exceptionally...principled at the moment. A man has his limits.” The wind rustled through his hair, and a muscle ticked in his jaw. “For your own sake, you had best go inside.”

But she didn’t. Instead she heard herself ask, “I thought you

weren't feeling exceptionally principled?"

"If I were any *less* principled, I would take that for an invitation." His palm curled around the nape of her neck, and he moved closer still, almost unconsciously, until only inches remained between them. And still he watched, and waited, until she closed that last, crucial gap with a small step, and lifted her hand to his chest. A touch as soft as a whisper, smoothing from just below his shoulder, across the swath of linen, to the button just beneath his collarbone. She could see the pound of his pulse in his throat, watched it leap as she trailed her fingertips over the skin revealed just above his shirt collar—and hooked her index finger beneath it, just as he'd done.

Some wretched sound of mingled satisfaction and aggravation rumbled in his chest as he dragged the lantern from the loose grip of her fingers and set it upon the ground once more. His arm was warm at her back, and his palm, splayed between her shoulder blades, banished the chill of the mist that had begun to seep through the thin material of her dress.

Her breath backed up in her chest as he settled her there, secured in the crook of one arm, and for a dizzying moment every thought fled from her head but for how new and strange and lovely it was to be held like this—by *him*.

His free hand framed her face, tilted her chin up, and it felt like an eternity had slipped by as he bent his head until she could feel the shimmer of his breath across her lips. Her fingers curled into his shirt front to anchor herself.

"Everything is going to change, you realize," he murmured, and there was just the tiniest brush of his lips right at the very corner of her mouth; practically her cheek, really. It held the tenor of a warning, a caveat—as if proceeding would bespeak her *agreement* to this vague, ill-defined *change* to which he had referred.

Her lashes lowered, shying away from the intensity of his gaze. "Nothing—nothing has to change," she said, and found herself lifting onto her toes when he pulled away a fraction of an inch.

He gave an entertained hum; his thumb stroked across her cheek. "Oh, Theo. Of course it does." His nose brushed hers in an affectionate rub. "I've changed—you changed me. Do you

really think you're immune?"

She could feel the amusement clinging to the curve of his lips as they touched her own, and wondered if the lightning in the distance hadn't somehow struck her. Her skin tingled as little skirls of sensation shimmered through her veins, straight down to her toes.

She *wasn't* immune. Whatever madness had caught him in its grip, perhaps it was catching—she was thinking of nothing beyond the tightening grip of his arm at her back, the linen of his shirt whisking across her fingertips as she slid her hands toward his shoulders. Still she murmured, "It's not *real*." It couldn't be; not *really*. It was just a moment out of time, and she wasn't fool enough to risk her heart on something as ephemeral as a duke posing as a laborer on a farm. Was she?

"Hmm." It was a low, subtle sound, faintly mocking—like a grin that had lodged itself at the back of his throat. As if he knew something she didn't, but did not care to share that secret with her. But whatever annoyance might have risen up in her was vanquished by the soft, teasing brush of his lips on hers.

How simple it had once been never to let herself want when she hadn't known what it was she'd been missing. She had never been tempted to such an indiscretion with any of the boys—men—whom she had grown up alongside. She shouldn't have been tempted into it with *him*.

Something cold and wet landed on her shoulder, soaking through the sleeve of her dress. But instead of pulling away she burrowed deeper into Alex's arms, relished the minute tightening of his fingers in her hair, the splay of his hand on her back.

"Theo." He murmured her name into her mouth. "It's raining."

"I don't care." Her fingertips found the ends of his hair; probably a touch longer than was fashionable, owing to the fact that he hadn't a valet out in the countryside to keep it neatly trimmed. But it was still soft and sleek in her hands, cool blond strands with just a hint of curl to them. She sank her fingers into his hair, and he groaned into her mouth, his kiss turning rough, demanding.

Tension ebbed and flowed in her limbs, which strained toward him and the broad expanse of his chest, the plundering heat of

his mouth. She didn't know when last she'd drawn a breath, but heard her own voice breaking in needful sighs, strange little sounds that she had never imagined to hear herself make. Alex might not be particularly skilled at farm labor—but she had the suspicion that he was more than proficient at *this*. He wielded a hammer clumsily, but his tongue traced the seam of her lips with an unerring precision, a kind of mastery she could hardly understand. The insistent pressure of his hand at her back was balanced with the delicacy of the fingers stroking her cheek. She didn't know if she owed the shudders that trembled down her spine to the encroaching storm or to the artful stroke of his tongue on hers.

A magnificent flash of light burst beyond her closed eyes, and for a moment she thought the crackle that followed was simply an invention of her imagination, the result of too much sensation roiling over her starved flesh.

But the sky opened up at last in a tumultuous downpour, and Theo gasped at the shock of icy water pummeling down upon her. No matter how badly the crops needed it, she could only feel resentful that it had arrived at such an inopportune moment—the chill seeped into her skin the moment he retracted his fingers, let fall his arm, and moved a step away. Just a step, but it might as well have been a mile.

The candle hissed and sputtered in the glass enclosure of the lantern. Alex swiped his palm over his jaw, which did precisely nothing to vanquish the rivulets of rain that soaked his hair and ran down his face. But his hand had trembled, just a little.

“Go,” he said, his guttural voice barely audible above the rain, and slightly muffled by the hand he held over his mouth.

But she didn't want to. Even as her skirts plastered themselves to her legs, her only move was to take the tiniest step forward, closer to the warmth of his chest, his arms.

His opposite hand flexed at his side, as if he had only just prevented himself from reaching for her. “Theo,” he hissed, in an intractable voice. “Go.”

Another crackle of lightning split the sky, growing ever closer—and it offered enough light to see what his voice had failed to convey. How his jaw clenched with a peculiar kind of strain; the burning fire in his vivid green eyes. How very close

he had come to the edge of what he could bear. How much it had cost him to order her away.

Her stomach performed a somersault, and she found herself reaching for the lantern, hooking her fingers through the handle, and jolting her freezing legs into an ungainly sprint across the fields back toward the house, stumbling toward safety in the darkness.

But she chanced the slightest peek back as she ran and saw him outlined against the flickering sky—a lonesome figure in the distance, his head tipped back toward the rush of the rain. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she felt—
Changed.

Chapter Fifteen

“You,” Alex said, clacking a pair of tongs in Theo’s direction as she poked her head into the kitchen the next morning. “Back to bed. *Now.*”

To his surprise, with a little squeak, she turned tail and fled, and he choked on a laugh as he turned back to the task at hand—frying up pieces of toast in the pan that had just recently contained rashers of bacon. Which had come out perhaps a little crispier than he had intended, but still edible. He hoped.

“How is the tea?” he asked, laying out the plate of bacon—at noon, from Tom’s perspective—upon the table before him.

“I’ve had better,” Tom said, though he’d gone through two cups already and was working on a third. “It’s a touch over-steeped. How did you manage it?”

“The usual way. I forgot how long I was meant to steep it—”

Tom’s gritty chuckle interrupted him. “No,” Tom said, feeling for the plate of bacon with one hand. “I meant sending Theo back off to bed. Never could manage it myself.” He gave an exasperated shake of his head, a fond smile curling his mouth.

“Like as not, *she’d* send *me* off instead.”

“Ah.” Alex slid into his seat across the table from Tom and snatched a piece of toast—blackened, but then, he was still learning—from the plate he set upon the table. “Honestly, I didn’t truly think she’d listen.” But he was gratified that she had. “I saved some breakfast for her, but I can’t imagine she’ll enjoy it. The toast is nearly inedible,” he said, collecting a few strips of bacon.

“Luckily for you, Theo likes her toast burnt,” Tom said.

Alex blinked. “Does she, really?”

“Likely not *this* burnt,” Tom said, and tapped his piece of toast against his plate, resulting in a rather ominous *thunk*, and sending a shower of black crumbs skittering across the table.

“But she’ll appreciate the effort nonetheless. Which begs the question—why are *you* going to that particular effort?”

Even though he *knew* the old man couldn’t see him, still Alex

felt a guilty flush rise to his cheeks. “She works too hard,” he said. “She rises too early, manages too much. Something had to be done.”

“By *you*?” Tom took a bite of bacon, the crunch and crackle shredding the air between them.

“Yes. By me.” Alex’s gaze flicked to the tiny hallway just a short distance away, to the door through which Theo had retreated only minutes ago. Considering the possibility that she might overhear if he were not careful, he pitched his voice low. “I intend to marry Theo,” he said at last, and watched surprise make Tom’s bushy brows shoot toward his hairline.

Clearing his throat, Tom set his cup of tea back down upon the table, flattening his palms on the scarred surface. “Does Theo know that?”

“Not yet,” Alex said. “But she will. I’m asking for your blessing first.”

A self-deprecating smile pulled Tom’s mouth upward at the right corner. “Son, if you can convince her to agree, consider yourself so blessed.” His fingertips drummed upon the tabletop. “But she won’t.”

“Perhaps not *immediately*,” Alex allowed. “But given time, and proper consideration—”

Tom shook his head, his face settling once more into grave grooves. “She won’t leave me,” he said. “Fact is, she might have married Heath, when he came calling—if she didn’t consider herself duty-bound to me.” His shoulders lifted and fell in a shrug that seemed nearly crestfallen. “But it would have meant leaving the farm, if only a half-mile to the east. She won’t leave me, son, even if she ought to.”

Alex could hear the regret in his voice, the guilt that he wore like a cloak over his shoulders. “Because you’re blind,” he said, hoping it did not feel like an accusation.

Tom gave a short shrug. “Can’t blame her, you know, for not wanting to leave me on my own. Though I get around just fine, you know,” he said, almost defensively.

“You get around better than fine,” Alex assured him.

“I can cook for myself, if Theo were willing to surrender control of the kitchen. I can clean, and shave, and garden—” Tom’s voice wobbled into silence, and Alex wondered if Tom weren’t the smallest bit more sensitive to his situation than he

let on. “But she runs the farm, and we both know it. I do have *some* limitations.” He heaved a sigh, dragging his fingers through his salt-and-pepper hair.

“She loves you. Of course she wouldn’t want to leave you.” And Tom wouldn’t want to leave his farm. It had been their home for more than twenty years. He’d counted out the paces of his property, knew every inch of the place. To try to bring him up to London, to the smoke and the grime and the unfamiliarity of a place he’d have to map out again in his head would be—unworthy of consideration.

“Comes a time when a daughter should be having a family of her own,” Tom said flatly. “My Theo’s wasted enough of her life, and—damn it all, I’d like to have some grandchildren eventually.” He splayed his fingers out in entreaty. “But she won’t, you understand. She’ll break her back trying to hold onto this farm. She’ll sacrifice the best years of her life taking care of me. If you *can* convince her, son, I’d be that grateful to you.”

“I think you do the both of you a disservice by assuming Theo has ever seen you as a burden to bear.” She had only been devastated that her efforts had failed to secure the farm that her father loved. That their home might be ripped from their grasp. “Truth to tell, *I* wouldn’t much like leaving you to run a farm of this size on your own, either. It’s far too much for any one person to manage. Unfortunately, I spend most of my time in London.”

“Unfortunately?” A sly grin touched Tom’s mouth. “Thought you didn’t care much for the countryside.”

“It’s growing on me. *Not* enough to move here, mind you. I do enjoy my creature comforts.” Like baths drawn by servants well paid for the service, and beds that were not comprised of densely-packed hay. “Please don’t mistake my meaning, but... have you ever considered seeing an oculist?”

Tom snorted. “Son, the nearest doctor is five miles away by carriage, and a drunk besides. The closest we’ve got is Maudie’s daughter, Becky, who acts as a midwife to women in the family way. And even if I *did* have cause to get up to London one of these days, I doubt fitting me for spectacles would do much for my sight—and you must know we haven’t got the coin for it, besides.”

“Let’s say money is no object.” It was as close as Alex wished to come at the moment to confessing his true circumstances. “Oculists have made great strides in restoring vision to those afflicted with cataracts. Of course, I’m not qualified to make an assessment myself—but would you be willing to see an oculist who *could*?”

Tom scraped a hand over his jaw. “I never thought it would be possible,” he said, half to himself. “I’m used to being blind. But if I weren’t—Theo’d have no reason to set her own life aside for mine any longer,” he mused. “Even supposing we lost the farm—”

“You’re not going to lose the farm.”

“But supposing we *did*—”

Alex rolled his eyes skyward and muttered beneath his breath, “There’s not a Vance alive that listens to a word I say.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my hearing, son,” Tom said sourly, and took—in Alex’s opinion—an unnecessarily loud bite of his toast, as if to punctuate Alex’s inept efforts at producing an edible breakfast. “You’d think a prospective son-in-law would show a bit more respect.”

“I suppose I can safely assume Theo gets her temperament from *your* side of the family,” Alex drawled, sipping his tea, which was, of course, over-steeped to a queer bitterness.

Tom gave a short huff of laughter, the brackets lining his mouth twitching with mirth. “That she does,” he said. “Looks just like her mother, though,” he added, his smile fading a shade. “Last I remember, anyway.”

It had been years, Alex realized, since Tom had last *seen* his daughter. His vision had been going since Theo’s childhood—could he even picture the woman she had become? Had his memory paled over time, until all he had were fading images, more a wish of a memory than an honest recollection? How long until even those slipped away from him?

“Tom,” he said. “You’re not going to lose the farm. You’re not going to lose *Theo*, and Theo is not going to lose you. Assuming I can convince her to marry me, there is no possibility that exists in which you do not have a place in our lives, irrespective of whether or not you regain your sight.” He wished they were not having this conversation in hushed voices, over a pitiful breakfast of burned toast and scorched

bacon. “I haven’t asked you to see the oculist because I wish to be rid of you. I’ve asked because—because I would like you to be able to see your daughter on her wedding day.”

A heavy silence fell between them, and Tom bowed his head over his tea—but not before Alex caught sight of the peculiar glisten of his eyes. At last, clearing his throat of the emotion that had clogged it, Tom managed to say, gruffly, as he extended his hand across the table, “I’ll see your damned oculist, then. Just—don’t tell Theo just yet. I don’t want to raise her hopes if it turns out that there’s nothing that can be done.”

“We’ll keep it strictly between the two of us, then,” Alex said, and caught Tom’s hand in his to seal the bargain.

Tom’s fingers tightened around his own. “But you’re a mutton-headed fool if you think I’m leaving you alone here with my daughter.”

Alex laughed. “Not to worry,” he said, “I called in the cavalry days ago.” Though his reasons for doing so had been unrelated, he couldn’t imagine that ensuring that Theo had an appropriate chaperone would present much of a problem. “Unless I’m much mistaken, they should be arriving presently.”



Theo awoke to a bright splash of sunlight pouring over her face and the insistent roar of her stomach. She tumbled out of bed, groggily pulling on a clean dress, and wondering how it was that she could have spent so very much time sleeping and *still* be so very tired. It seemed somehow a cruel twist of fate that she could sleep hours longer than she ever had only to rise more exhausted than she had been when she had risen at first light. All those wasted hours, since she’d fled like a startled rabbit when Alex had ordered her back off to sleep—she would be working until well after dark just to accomplish everything she’d missed this morning.

The gentle hum of light conversation floated down the hallway, and she plaited her hair into its usual braid as she headed toward the kitchen, baffled by the soft, feminine laugh

that trickled through the air.

She peeked around the door jamb, but neither her father, nor Alex were anywhere within. Instead, two women had invaded her kitchen—one minding something in the pan over the fire, and another with a child cradled in her arms; a little girl by the looks of it.

The child's tiny fists flailed over her mother's shoulder, and her cheeks plumped up as she gave a wide, gap-toothed grin to Theo, who could only blink back in stunned astonishment.

An ear-splitting shriek from the child, whose face puckered into a frown as she kicked her feet and stretched her grasping hands toward Theo, attracted the mother's attention—the woman turned, the travel-wrinkled fabric of her skirt swishing about her feet.

"Oh, hello," she said. "You must be Theo. I hope we didn't wake you."

"No, I—I really ought to have been awake well before now," Theo said, inanely. "I beg your pardon. Who are you and what are you doing in my house?"

The woman tilted her head back and laughed, which turned into a grimace as her child caught a loose lock of blond hair in her tiny fist and yanked, working up to a squall of fury. "She wants you to hold her," she told Theo. "Would you mind?"

And then the child was tumbling into her arms, issuing a delighted chorus of giggles.

"Lunch is nearly ready," trilled the woman by the stove. "You'll forgive me for the presumption, of course. I couldn't let you eat *that*." She gestured toward the counter, where rested a plate piled with blackened bits of what Theo assumed had, at one point, been food.

"What *is* it?" she asked, stepping closer to counter for a better look. Toast, she thought. Probably it was toast. *Probably*.

"I think it was intended to be your breakfast," came the reply.

"Alex implied as much. He was quite insistent." A little frown creased her brow. "If that is what he has left for you, I can only assume that you must have displeased him terribly."

Often, and she'd enjoyed it perhaps a little too much. Theo could only shrug as the child in her arms began to gnaw on the neckline of her dress, cooing her pleasure in garbled baby sounds.

“My daughter,” supplied the blond woman, wiping at the copious drool that coated the child’s mouth with the corner of her sleeve. “Lady Mary Helena St. Clair. But usually we just call her Mousie.” She smoothed the child’s plentiful curls away from her face. “Unfortunately, she’s teething at the moment.”

“Serena, the plates,” the woman hovering over the pan called absently, with a little flick of her hand, and as the blond woman turned to retrieve them, Theo realized at last who these women must be—Alex had mentioned them, weeks ago. Serena and Violet.

“You’re the duke’s friends,” she blurted out, and all motion in the kitchen ceased—except for Mousie, who, oblivious to the sudden tension, rested her cheek against Theo’s shoulder and let out a sigh as she began to doze off to sleep.

Serena and Violet shared a speaking glance between them.

“Well,” Violet hedged, tapping her tongs against the pan, “Mr. Dryden—”

Serena tightened her fingers around the stack of plates in her hands. “That is to say—”

Theo canted her head to the side and waited, but nothing more was forthcoming.

At least, Violet gave a beleaguered sigh. “You mustn’t tell him you know,” she said at last.

“He’d be *devastated*,” Serena added. “He was so very proud of his ruse.”

Theo snorted. “The whole of the town knows by now,” she said.

“Really?” Serena eyed her doubtfully as she set the stack of plates on the counter near Violet’s side. “But—everyone has called him Mr. Dryden thus far.”

Violet scraped several pieces of what looked like rarebit from the pan, arranging them upon the plates. “I’d have expected a bit more deference to a duke, honestly.”

“You wouldn’t if you’d been gouged for every last bit of coin his land agent could shake loose from your very pockets,” Theo said, and swayed lightly as the baby in her arms stirred to the sour note in her voice. “He’s made some promises to us all, and it remains to be seen whether or not he’ll keep them, but—” She pursed her lips against the words, but they spilled

forth anyway. “He’s not as bad as we wanted to believe. Of course, some of the townsfolk are putting him through penance—”

Violet’s shoulders shook with laughter as she slid the plates across the counter. “Is that so? I suppose that explains it, then.”

Carefully peeling her sleeping daughter out of Theo’s arms with a look of abject gratitude for the brief reprieve, Serena handed off a plate to Theo and said, “Some gentlemen—from the village, I can only assume—came by an hour or so ago for Alex. He practically *begged* Grey and John to accompany him. Sit, eat,” she urged.

“Oh, I can’t,” Theo said. “I’m so sorry; I do appreciate the consideration. It’s only that I’ve got so much to do.” She’d left a basket of laundry undone yesterday, and the cows needed milking, the eggs gathering—

“No, you haven’t,” Violet said, and jabbed the tongs in the direction of the table. “Alex was up before dawn, and though his efforts in some areas leave something to be desired”—this, with a pointed glance at the charred remains of what had once been toast—“by and large, it’s all been done.”

It couldn’t *all* have been done.

“We helped,” Serena said softly, cuddling her baby in her arms. “Just a bit. There are things dukes simply don’t think about, you know. But,” she added, retrieving a folded slip of paper from her pocket, which she proffered to Theo. “We wrote up a list for him.”

Theo accepted it, unfolding it to read, written out in clear, precise script, instructions coupled with a list of so many things she’d let slip by her for so long now. When she lifted her head, she noticed for the first time that the floor had been swept, the carpets beaten, the shelves dusted, and the counter polished to a shine. On that counter, neatly tucked into a corner, rested a basket of eggs, and through the window—the *sparkling* clean window—she could see the laundry hanging upon the line, drying in the fresh air and sunlight.

“Oh,” she said, and the wave of relief that swept over her was staggering in its intensity. “Thank you. You truly didn’t have to go to such trouble—”

“It was no trouble,” Serena said.

“Well, *hardly* any trouble,” Violet said, and jerked her head toward Serena as she carried her own plate toward the table.

“This one *likes* doing chores, can you imagine?”

“Well, we had to do something,” Serena said irritably as she took a seat, cradling her baby in one arm and swiping her rarebit from her plate with her free hand to take a bite. “Would *you* have trusted Alex with the linens?”

“Oh, absolutely not.” Violet patted the space beside her. “But I think I would have liked to see him try. Theo, come sit. I want to hear *everything*.”

And Theo found herself sliding into her own chair, and settling into the pleasant rhythm of conversation effortlessly. Almost as if she belonged amongst them.

Chapter Sixteen

“Now, you’ve got an unfair advantage, really,” Grey was saying to Tom. “No one expects a blind man to play cards. You could bilk half of London out of a fortune, all the while letting them think *they’re* the ones cheating *you*.”

There was the soft *whoosh* of cards being shuffled, the patter of a hand being dealt, and then a careful silence as Tom reflected upon his cards, carefully feeling the edges for the marks that Grey had etched into them. “Two sevens, a three, an eight, and a...nine?”

“Perfect. You’ve got it exactly,” Grey said. “Those cards are yours to keep. I’m to be your escort to London, so I thought cards might be a good way to pass the time.”

Tom gave a delighted cackle of a laugh. “But now I can cheat, can’t I?”

Grey chuckled. “Ah, but you’ll have to cheat better than I can, and that’s a task in and of itself.”

Lord above. Grey was going to make an inveterate gambler of Theo’s father, and Theo was going to *kill* him for it, Alex knew.

But he hadn’t the stamina to protest. Instead he groaned as the cart rumbled down the road, managing to hit what felt like every rut and ditch on the way. The heavy rain yesterday had only worsened the problem, and he was certain by the time they arrived back at the farm he was bound to be black and blue all over. If every day passed in a manner such as this one had, he would certainly have to have the roads improved as soon as possible. He doubted he could bear the misery of another ride home like this one.

Though he’d begged the favor of Grey’s and John’s company, it seemed that the townsfolk—still wanting for the extra hands of workmen who had yet to arrive from London—had saved for him the worst, most laborious tasks. He’d pounded nails until his hands had gone numb, carted stacks of ruined floorboards and laid fresh ones, while John had largely

supervised, and Grey had kept Tom entertained with stories and lessons in the proper reading and utilization of marked cards.

The end result had been a freshly-appointed room for John and Violet to take up at the tavern—at least until tomorrow, when Tom was due to leave for London with Grey and Serena—and a level of exhaustion that Alex could not remember ever before having experienced.

And while John and Grey remained, more or less, fresh and clean, Alex *reeked* of the day's labors. Grimy, filthy—his shirt clung to his skin, where his sweat had soaked through the linen. His hands were coated in a thin layer of sawdust that thus far he'd been unable to remove. Even his hair fell lank and flat, as if it, too, had completely given up the ghost. Though he had not eaten since afternoon, he was certain that he was too tired even to be hungry. All he wanted was to crawl up into the hayloft and sleep, but he harbored serious doubts over whether or not he'd make it up the ladder.

And he thought—this must be what Theo felt like *every day*. This wrenching, crushing exhaustion that felt as if it had etched itself into his very bones, wrung him out straight through to his soul.

John nudged Alex's sprawled legs with the toe of his boot. "Pull yourself together. We're nearly there."

"It's no use," Alex said on a groan as he attempted to heft himself into a seated position. "Just go ahead and bury me."

"Well, then," Grey said, and there was the sound rustling paper. "You can hardly expire of humiliation if you've already expired of exhaustion, now, can you? It just so happens I've brought down your letters—"

Alex vaulted upright so swiftly, he nearly toppled right over again across John's knees. "You damned conniving bastard," he snarled, swiping for the letter held in Grey's hand, which Grey dangled just out of reach. "Give that to me!"

"But this one's my favorite." Grey tilted the letter to the burning amber of sunset over the horizon, and recited in a simpering tone, "*Dear Grey. How do you know if you are in love?*"

Tom let out a bark of startled laughter. "Lord. And the rest?"

"That's it. That's the entirety of the letter." Grey tucked it back

into his pocket, snickering.

Alex sank back with a mortified groan, casting one arm over his eyes and praying for a swift death.

“I received one just like it,” John said.

“A second opinion seemed a worthwhile endeavor,” Alex muttered beneath his breath. “Considering all I received from Grey was a note that read ‘*You’re an idiot.*’” A chorus of laughter burst forth, carried on the wind far into the distance, and Alex let his head drop back, closing his eyes. “I should have known better than to enlist your help,” Alex said, letting his voice warble over a few sufficiently dramatic notes. “I’ve brought this upon myself.”

“Oh, come,” John said. “You had to know—consummate meddler that you are—that you were bound to get your comeuppance sooner or later.” To Tom, he confided, “He gets it from his mother.”

“The meddling?” Tom inquired.

“In fact, I was referring to his flair for drama, but now that I think on it—yes, the meddling, too.” John neatly evaded the half-hearted swipe that Alex levered in his direction.

Surrendering to the depths of humiliation, Alex groaned, “I don’t know why I asked the two of you to come. I must have been mad even to consider it.” But of course, it was lie—he had asked them because they were his closest friends, and of course they had come.

They would also make him suffer for it, and he supposed he couldn’t *truly* blame them for it.

The cart hit one last terrible rut as it pulled to a stop in the rain-drenched, soggy muck before the house, and Alex felt that last wretched jarring bump straight down to his aching toes. But at last the time had arrived for him to peel himself free of the bottom of the cart and give at least a passing attempt at cobbling together whatever few scraps of dignity might be left to him. Which, upon reflection, was perhaps a few pitiful tatters.

He let John and Grey haul him to his feet instead.

The door rattled on its hinges, creaking open, and then—

“Papa!” the high-pitched shriek assaulted Alex’s eardrums as Grey’s daughter came toddling out, Theo hot on her heels. The child darted away from Theo’s grasping hands, and would

have pitched straight off the porch and into the mud, if Grey hadn't lurched forward to snatch her up.

"I'm so sorry," Theo gasped, wringing her hands, her eyes darting between Grey and Serena, who had followed behind her. "I don't know how she got the door open—I tried to stop her—"

"No harm done," Grey said as his daughter wrapped her chubby arms around his neck with a delighted squeal and peppered his chin with exuberant kisses. "She's already a wonder with locks." He ruffled Mousie's tousled curls with his fingers and crooned, "We'll make a wondrous little sneak-thief out of you yet, won't we, my darling?"

Theo's bemused gaze flitted toward Serena, as if she could not quite believe what she had heard—but she received a helpless, nearly resigned shrug in response.

"He's already taught her to pick pockets," Serena said, with a fatalistic sigh and an annoyed shake of her head. "She thinks it's great fun. And so did Grey—until she made off with his pocket watch."

"Oh, come, Mouse. It'll turn up one of these days." Grey paused on the porch long enough to brush a kiss to the top of Serena's head. "Just think of it—she'll be *loads* of fun at parties. For me, anyway."

Violet emerged from the house, squeezing past Grey, a serving spoon clutched in her fist. "Dinner is growing cold, and *you* lot are simply standing about. Inside, inside—before all of my work goes to waste. *Not* you," she clarified, jabbing the spoon at Alex when he made to press forward. "*You* stink to hell and back. Bathe first."

Alex had thought himself too exhausted to be hungry, but now that he was to be denied dinner, his stomach cramped pitifully. "But, Violet—"

Her spoon sliced through the air, as intimidating as a sword. "Attempt to cross this threshold at your own peril."

"I wouldn't risk it," John advised, *sotto voce*, as he brushed past Alex. "What are we having for dinner, Vi?"

"I beg you, do *not* so torture me," Alex huffed as even Tom abandoned him for the interior of the house. The scent of something savory and redolent of herbs and garlic wafted through the door, coupled with— "Do I smell rolls?" The

question had emerged a bit more plaintive than he had intended, but as he edged one foot onto the porch, Violet brandished her spoon anew.

“*Bathe first,*” she insisted. “We have *just* cleaned, and I’ll not have you dragging filth in with you.”

Theo smothered something that sounded suspiciously like a snicker in her palm, and Alex hadn’t even the energy to glare at her.

“But how am I to heat the bath water?” Alex inquired shrewdly. “I’ll have to have use of the stove—”

“Theo,” Violet said, her voice clipped, her eyes trained upon the booted foot that Alex slid inexorably closer to the door. “Is there a stream convenient?”

“Yes,” Theo said. “And Mr. Dryden knows precisely where to find it.”

“Good. Then he may return when—and *only* when—he has availed himself of it.” Violet snagged Theo by the elbow, pulled her bodily through the door, and snapped it shut straight in his face only a half a moment before he could dive for it.

Abandoning all pretenses of dignity, Alex pounded his fist upon it. “Just *one* damned roll, you wretched shrews! Is that truly so much to ask?”

From within, the sounds of chair legs scraping across the floor and the clink of dishware assaulted his ears in a mocking symphony. There was the trickle of genial laughter, the hum of pleasant conversation—all as dinner proceeded without him.

Bloody damned traitors, the lot of them.

He threw up his hands in disgust and turned away, surrendering to the inevitable and preparing himself for a long walk to the stream. He’d cleared the porch when he heard the door open once more, and turned, hope springing in his chest —

Theo emerged long enough to lob a dinner roll at his head—which he caught only narrowly, crushing the fragile, flaky thing in his clamped fingers—and then she nipped the door closed once more.

Women.



Dusk had firmly settled over the house when the duke finally returned. His friends had left only minutes ago, with promises that they would be returning in the morning—though Theo had no idea why, or what had brought them here in the first place. Serena and Violet had kept up such a steady flow of conversation that she'd quite forgotten to press the point. And after a while, she had been so caught up in their stories and answering their questions that she would have felt terribly rude to have questioned their intentions.

She was not surprised by the solid, insistent rap at the kitchen door, nor to find Alex standing there, clean and redressed in fresh clothing, his hair turned a deep, rich gold by the moisture still clinging to the strands, his shoulders slumped in exhaustion.

She *was* surprised by the presence of Frederica—the barn cat—and her kittens, who gamboled about his ankles in a playful frolic.

“I seem to have made some friends,” he said by way of explanation as a tiny ginger tabby sank its minuscule claws into the fabric of his trousers and began to hoist itself up his shin. “For the love of God, *please* tell me you saved me some dinner.”

Theo crossed her arms over her chest and lifted her chin. “*Shrews* are not renowned for their kindness or consideration,” she said—but his face fell so tragically and dramatically that she held out for only a fraction of a second before she heaved a great sigh and admitted, “Of course we saved a plate for you.”

He snatched the plate straight from her hand the moment she offered it, offering up a groan of pleasure as he shoveled a forkful of potatoes into his mouth. It seemed to make little difference that the food had grown cold, or that she had not invited him inside—he simply sank into one of the chairs set out upon the rear porch and ate voraciously, even as a passel of curious kittens swarmed around him, scenting the air, no doubt eager to sample the half a roasted chicken that covered the majority of his plate.

“Back, you beasts,” he grumbled around a mouthful of dinner roll, though he flicked a few chunks of chicken onto the porch

for them; a sacrifice upon which the kittens fell upon at once—except for the tiny ginger kitten, who perched upon his knee, flicking its tail expectantly. “Ted, you may stay,” Alex said, and offered a generous shred of chicken, which the kitten snapped up immediately.

“*Ted?*”

“Short for Theodore.” He slanted her a sly glance, clearly very pleased with his own cleverness, and then gestured with a fork. “That grey one is Tabitha. The black one is Henry. And there, the little striped one mauling Frederica’s tail—that’s Beatrice.” Between bites he muttered, “I did tell you I was going to name all of your damned kittens.”

Theo gave a soft huff of laughter, swiping the smile from her face with one hand. “Unfortunately, Beatrice happens to be a boy.”

“Beatrice is a fine name for a cat, male or female.” He offered another generous helping of chicken to Frederica and her kittens and let Ted nibble a shred directly from his fingers.

“Violet cooked dinner?”

“She did. In fact, I was not permitted to lift a finger all day.” Which was still baffling, because she could not imagine why two ladies whom she had never met would have gone to such lengths to keep her idle.

He grunted, “*Good,*” and stroked Ted’s furry head with the tips of his fingers. “They’re lovely women—most of the time. When they’re not intent upon being insufferable harridans.” A brief pause. “I imagine they’ve gone by now. Did you like them?”

“I did, rather,” Theo said, though she wasn’t certain why it mattered. “Serena is—a bit odd, isn’t she? I mean to say, I think she’s lovely—but I can’t say it wasn’t something of a shock to find a marchioness performing menial household chores.”

Alex chuckled around a bite of potato. “She’s a bit...unusual, we’ll say. But then, so is Grey. They suit each other well.” He gave a half-shrug. “Neither she nor Violet have led particularly easy lives, but they’re steadfast and loyal. I’m glad you liked them; they will be good friends to you.”

Considering she would never have call to visit London, she couldn’t imagine how it would be possible to nurture such a

friendship, though the thought of it produced a warm little glow in her chest. Too many things had fallen by the wayside in her life—it had been perfectly lovely, for once, to sit at the table with Alex’s friends and simply enjoy herself. Without the spectre of another day’s hard labor hanging over her head, without worry for the myriad things that had gone undone.

For once, she had simply passed a pleasant evening. And she hadn’t even been allowed to fret over doing the dishes.

Alex raked his fingers through his damp hair, and a lock of it fell over his forehead, obscuring the green of his eyes. “They’ll be back tomorrow. John and Violet will be staying here for a few days, while Grey and Serena take your father to London.”

Theo gave a start of surprise. “To London? But why?”

“A personal errand,” he said smoothly. “Don’t worry—Grey and Serena can be trusted to see that he comes to no harm... perhaps Serena slightly more so than Grey.” He cleared his throat. “And John and Violet will remain here to safeguard your reputation. Your father has graciously offered them the use of his room while he is away in London.”

Her head whirled with this stunning turn of events. “That’s—very kind of them,” she said. “But I should hate to keep them away from their business. It’s truly not necessary.”

Something approximating a laugh trickled from his throat.

“Theo,” he said, “I promise you, it is necessary.”

“But they must be so very busy in London,” she said inanely.

“And I haven’t a reputation to speak of, besides.”

“But you will have,” he said, “and I won’t have it tarnished before we are married.”

“Before—” Her heart gave a vicious pound in her chest.

“Before we are *what*?”

That vivid green gaze sheared to hers once more. “Married,” he repeated succinctly.

An odd, almost hysterical little laugh burned its way up her throat, and she braced her shoulders against the door. “Did you happen to take a head injury today that might have addled your wits?”

“No,” he said, picking at the scant scraps remaining upon his plate. “Miraculously, my head is the only part of me that escaped unscathed.”

“Perhaps you’ve taken a chill from the stream,” she suggested. “Do you feel feverish? I’m told such ailments often present with delirium, disordered thoughts—”

Acerbically, he snapped, “I’m not feverish.”

“Then you’re simply *mad*.” And quite possibly the very worst at tendering proposals. “We are not marrying,” she managed through teeth that clenched so tightly it strained her jaw. “I am not marrying *you*. *You* are not marrying *me*. It’s simply ludicrous that you would even—”

“You’re babbling.”

“I am furious! People are permitted to babble when they are furious!” Some horrible, feral sound crawled up her throat, clawing at her tongue to escape. Her hands had curled into fists, and she squeezed them tightly, feeling the prick of her nails into her palms. “I wish Violet *had* let you bathe here—I would happily reintroduce you to your bath water!”

A rusty laugh escaped him. “Once was quite enough, I assure you.” With a sigh, he set aside his plate, brushed Ted gently off of his knee, and took his feet. “Theo, I am not in the habit of kissing women I do not intend to marry.”

In utter silence, she stared at him—only stared, until he was forced to concede, his cheeks going ruddy, “All right, then—I am not in the habit of kissing *marriageable* women I do not intend to marry.”

“I am not *marriageable*!” Her voice had come out sharp and shrill; the sort of screech she might have expected from some nagging old fishwife. “Nor am I in the habit of marrying out of some misguided sense of obligation—”

“Obligation!” Now *he* was shouting. “Nothing—not one single person nor societal convention—could force me to do something I did not want to do!”

Theo’s jaw unclenched with such alacrity that she found it remarkable that it stayed attached to her face. “You cannot mean you *want* to marry me.”

“I would not have asked if I did not!”

“You *didn’t* ask, you oaf!” It took every ounce of Theo’s formidable will to refrain from jamming her heel straight onto his toes. “Why the devil would you *want* to marry me?”

“Because I love you, you miserable harpy!”

The roared confession sent the kittens skittering off the porch

and Theo stumbling back a pace, her hand flying to her throat in shock. “You—you can’t *love* me,” she said inanely. “You—you’re—” A *duke*. A damned *duke*, who was rubbish at proposals, but somehow, incredibly, seemed to be entirely in earnest. Despite the fact that his jaw was taut and tense, and his shoulders were thrown back with a particular brand of arrogance that Theo could only assume had been bred into his very bones.

His brows lifted in silent inquiry.

“You live in London,” Theo concluded awkwardly. Since he would be *devastated* to know his ruse had been uncovered long before now. And somehow, despite the fact that he was the most idiotic, irritating man it had ever been her misfortune to meet, for some reason, she wanted to protect his feelings.

Because he was so much kinder than she had ever expected him to be. Even though she had been just *awful* to him, still he had borne up beneath the weight of her antipathy. And even though farming most certainly did *not* agree with him, every day he tried a bit harder, refined his efforts. Not because of any particular interest in the vocation itself—but to alleviate the pressure of running the farm, to share the burden of the weight that she had shouldered largely alone for so many years.

“Somehow, where I reside did not figure into my feelings,” he bit off in a clipped, aggravated tone. And though he grimaced with the effort it cost him—which, given the bedraggled state he had arrived at the house in, Theo assumed much be considerable—he dropped to one knee before her. “Having never felt so moved to offer a proposal before, I beg you to make allowances for the clumsiness of mine.”

Why had her heart performed such a terrible lurch in her chest? There was an odd ache behind her eyes, a stinging pain in her throat. “Please get up,” she said, but the words came out on a quavering, distressed note. “Please don’t—” But what sat at the very back of her tongue was not, *Please don’t ask me*. It was, *Please don’t make me wish for something so impossible*.

It stilled her tongue dead and made her heart kick up a terrifying beat, fluttering behind her ribs like a caged bird. Her knees trembled with the weight of the realization that a simple *no* had not been the first thing to cross her mind.

She hadn't wanted him to ask—because she hadn't want to refuse him. Of course she could not marry him, for a million different reasons. Dukes did not marry country nobodies. She had no desire to live in London. *He* had no desire to live *here*. There was her father to consider, and the farm—the town—
And still, a small corner of her heart ached. For the foolish dreams she hadn't known had still lived somewhere deep within it. For everything she had denied herself, and would continue to deny herself, because she had no time for frivolities like *love*. Perhaps it even ached for this ridiculous, foolish man, who had had the poor judgment to fall in love with her. She couldn't decide which hurt worse, which wound would take the longest to heal after he had gone.

“Theo?” Though his exhaustion was evident in the shadows beneath his eyes and the slump of his shoulders, still he collected her cold hands in his. “I *am* asking.”

“I can't.” It was a terrible little squeak, dredged up from the very bottom of her soul, comprised of every bit of resolve she could muster. She simply could *not*, and that was that. It would never matter that for more than a moment she had wished otherwise.

“Why?”

Her fingers jerked in the clasp of his, but he would not surrender them. “I don't know what you mean.” His eyes raked her face, and she wished she were more adept at schooling her features.

“*Can't* implies inability,” he said. His thumb rubbed across her palm in a way that made her pulse leap, and he was silent for a moment, as if choosing his words carefully. “So I am asking—why *can't* you?” There was a deceptive calm in his voice, and a distinctive tinge of satisfaction.

Flustered, she said, “It doesn't matter—”

“It matters very much to me.” His fingers splayed over her wrist, infusing her skin with the warmth of his own. “So there must be some reason—or reasons—compelling your refusal. Suppose you come up with a list,” he said, with a nearly patronizing pat of her hand, “and we shall discuss them.” With no small amount of effort, he shoved himself up from his knees, though he retained hold of one of her hands.

“You—you—” Her breath shuddered from her lungs on an

incredulous wheeze, which she tried and failed to stifle with her fingers. “You never intended for me to accept, did you?”

With a beleaguered sigh, he admitted, “I thought it unlikely you would. The circumstances were hardly ideal: you’ve had a busy day; I’m all but dead on my feet. Still, I thought it went better than the last time.”

“The last time? But you weren’t in earnest. You were—just *drunk*.”

“Ah, well.” He gave a blasé shrug, unconcerned. “*In vino veritas*,” he said.

“Really. And what is there in an excess of cheap ale, then?”

A shade of a laugh crossed his lips, which turned up just at the corners. “Ah, Theo,” he said on a sigh. “I do love you.”

“Don’t say that.” That awful pain behind her breastbone made a swift resurgence. “Don’t—just *don’t* say it.” It wasn’t true. It couldn’t be true. It was bad enough he’d said it at *all*, for now it lived at the back of her brain; an insidious little whisper that drew her attention from everything else that ought to be occupying her thoughts.

“It’s still true, even if I don’t say it.” His fingers cupped her cheek, and memory of last evening danced through her mind. Despite the frenzied pounding of her heart, she wished he would close the last few crucial inches of distance between them and kiss her again. So that for a few moments, she could forget everything that had transpired within the last few minutes. So that a part of her—a very small part, which clamored for attention she had long denied it—could pretend, just for a moment, that whatever had occurred between them possessed any shred of rationality. “I’m off to bed,” he said at last, the pad of his thumb drifting over her lips with the intimacy of a kiss. “But do think on it.”

Then his hand fell away from her face, and he stepped off the porch in the direction of the barn, walking gingerly to avoid the kittens swarming his ankles. And Theo braced her shoulders against the kitchen door, hearing only the rushing of her blood through her veins, the pounding of her heart with its dreadful, insistent ache. And she found it there, in the most battered corner of her heart. The deepest, most painful bruise—that she could not afford to let herself love him in return.

Chapter Seventeen

Despite his exhaustion, Alex had still risen early, although that had been due more to Ted's insistent gnawing on his ear than anything else. Alas, still he had not been early enough to beat Theo to breakfast—a fact for which he assumed that they were all profoundly grateful, given that his efforts at cooking could only be termed substandard.

The kitchen was already crowded when he entered the house; chatter assaulted his ears the moment he opened the door.

Grey had his coachman running to and fro, carting luggage out to his carriage—everything Tom might need for an extended stay in London. Serena and Violet were busily scraping heaps of food onto Tom's plate as Theo fussed over him. John sat at the table, poring over a pile of documents, scribbling notes in the margins of the pages.

A shriek cut over the noise; Mousie, who had been occupied with her breakfast, had noticed him first. She slid off of her chair with a squeal and came barreling across the floor straight toward him.

On force of habit, he scooped her up before she could slam into his shins, and received a fistful of eggs to the front of his shirt for his troubles. "Hullo, poppet," he said, and smacked a kiss to her cheek that elicited a chorus of delighted giggles. Her palm—still coated in egg—found a chunk of his hair and yanked.

Serena suppressed a grimace. "You coddle her," she accused, reaching for her daughter. "She'll be a holy terror at this rate."

She was a holy terror already, but she was a darling child—most of the time. "Half the fun of other people's children," he said, "is to spoil them and then send the right on back to their parents."

Grey released a low laugh. "You could get one of your own, you know," he said.

"Ah," Alex said. "Got to have a wife for that. And they're not as easy to come by as I had hoped." He slanted a meaningful

glance at Theo, and Theo—

Theo *blushed*. Vividly, vibrantly—and *furiously*.

Good.

In the thick, expectant silence that fell over the room—excepting, of course, Mousie’s oblivious gurgles—Tom cleared his throat. “If I might make a suggestion,” he said, patting his mouth with a napkin. “You’d likely meet with more success if—and this is just my suggestion, mind you—you could bring yourself to propose without calling your intended a *‘miserable harpy.’*”

Violet smothered a titter in her palm, while Theo made a sound deep in her throat that resembled the growl of some ferocious, feral beast.

His pen still scratching across the paper, John muttered absently, “Yes, well—Alex has a profound knack for putting his foot in his mouth. And he minds everyone else’s business better than his own.”

“Papa,” Theo said, her voice twanging over the word, strained.

“Regarding what you might have overheard last night—”

“Overheard?” Tom interrupted, skillfully scraping a forkful of eggs onto a piece of toast. “Now, Theo, don’t you go implying I was eavesdropping. The two of you were shouting loud enough to wake the dead, and that’s a fact.”

“It was a mistake. A—a misunderstanding,” Theo chewed the words and spit them out with enough force to be insulting. Her eyes flitted to him, but if she expected assistance from *his* quarter, he was delighted to disappoint her.

“It wasn’t,” he said, as Violet handed him a plate. He drew back the chair opposite Theo and threw himself into it. “I meant every word.” Up to—and including—the ill-advised *miserable harpy* bit.

Tom sucked in a breath, because the tension filling the air between them was a palpable thing. Even a blind man could hardly fail to notice. “You’ll have your work cut out for you,” he said to Alex. “I don’t envy you. Right grateful to be getting out of the line of fire, so to speak.”

“And as to that, Tom,” Grey interjected. “The carriage is readied. We ought to leave shortly if we hope to make London by noon.”

Theo scooted her chair back at the same moment her father

did, her face wreathed in lines of worry. “So soon?” she asked, her hands moving in an agitated flutter. “But I thought—surely just another hour—”

“Now, Theo,” Tom said. “The Granburys have been kind enough to offer me transport. We can’t abuse their goodwill by delaying them further.” He jammed his hat on his head and held out his arms. Theo hastened into them, her face crumpling as she laid her head on his shoulder, and in that brief moment of vulnerability, it was plain to see how very much Theo loved her father. How much she would miss him—even for the short time he was gone. Her breaths rasped with the unmistakable mist of tears.

“Don’t leave,” she said fretfully, her voice quavering over the words. “I don’t want you to go.”

Tom patted Theo’s back, smoothing her plait over her shoulder. “Chin up, my girl. I’ll be back before you know it. Now, come see me



Theo followed her father outside to the waiting carriage feeling like a lost lamb. While Alex was otherwise occupied in hushed conversation with the marquess, she helped her father into the carriage and said quietly, “I don’t know what he told you, Papa, but I promise you, I have no intention of marrying him.”

As he settled back against the seat, her father offered her a gentle smile. “But you should. If not him, surely *someone*.” His hand slid across the seat, found her own, and pressed down over it. “I never wanted you to give up your life for me, my girl. If you can find just a fraction of the happiness I had with your mother, you *take* it, you hear me?”

“I can’t leave you.” A heartrending sob tore itself in her throat. “And I would *have* to leave you. A duke can’t live on a farm. His life is in London.” Her fingers curled into his, taking comfort from the solid clasp of his hand, just as she had since childhood—when life had been as simple as laying her every problem into her father’s capable hands. “How could I leave you, Papa?”

A low chuckle broke from his chest. “Theo, a man in love will move mountains when necessary.” His hand squeezed hers. “And your gentleman is a duke, after all. I wouldn’t underestimate him.”

“He’s not *my* gentleman, Papa.” But it made her heart ache to say the words.

“But he could be, if you wished it.” He sighed. “My girl, I only want for you what every father wants for his child—happiness.” A crooked grin. “And maybe a few grandchildren.”

Theo choked on a startled laugh, but even that unwitting smile wobbled within moments. “Don’t tell me to leave you,” she said, her voice breaking. “You know I can’t.”

“I didn’t say that,” he said. “But, Theo—don’t look for problems, look for solutions. *If* you love that boy, you owe it to the both of you to find a solution you can live with. I don’t want you looking back at every wasted opportunity and wondering how your life has passed you by.” His head touched the back of the seat, a wistful smile lining his mouth. “What I wouldn’t give for one more day—one more *moment*—with your mother. So you just sit and think for a while, my girl. What would you have, if you had everything to choose from? Because it seems to me that *everything* is exactly what that young pup is offering you. That kind of devotion is so rare, and so precious. Don’t be so muleheaded as to spurn before you have considered your own feelings.”

Theo swallowed hard, her eyes pricking with tears. “I love you, Papa,” she said, and heard the tremble of her voice, the quaver that belied her uncertainty, her fear.

“I know, my girl. I love you more.” His hand stretched out to clasp her shoulder in a reassuring squeeze. “Do you know, I’m thinking that the duke isn’t quite so foolish as we might have thought. Not when he has the good sense to love you, too.”



Alex watched through the window as the carriage receded into the distance. Theo had been unusually quiet while Grey

and Serena had said their goodbyes, accepting their assurances that her father would be in good hands. She had even graciously bid goodbye to little Mousie, who had yanked on her skirts, demanding to be picked up.

But now, as the carriage fast faded from view, she stood stock still upon the porch, staring after it as if it had taken a part of her with it.

Probably it had. Her father was the one constant in her life, and they were so close. He saw her shoulders hitch beneath the awful, dingy yellow fabric of her dress, saw her hand fly to her mouth as if to hold in a sob. Her plait twitched across her back, shining in the sunlight, and then—then she was running, the pound of her footsteps thundering across the porch as she dashed off of it and raced away.

Alex was halfway to the door when Violet spoke. “Let her go.” His hand found the door handle. “I can’t, she’s—”

“Likely wanting a bit of privacy,” John broke in, his head still bowed over his papers.

Violet brushed back a curl that had slipped free of its pins. “She’s had a difficult morning, Alex.” A wry smile wreathed her lips. “Besides, what sort of chaperone would I be if I let you go after her alone?”

“Ah, well, as to that”—Alex coughed into his fist—“I was hoping that you might see your way to being...less than strict.”

John gave a soft huff of laughter, and resumed his scrawling.

“Hm,” Violet said, turning her nose up. “I suppose that will depend.” Searching through her pockets, she retrieved a folded slip of paper.

“Upon what?”

“On what Theo wants. Here,” she said, offering the paper to him. “Let her alone for the moment. Give her time to herself. If you wish to make yourself useful, you may begin here—give her less to worry over. Just...give her *time*.”

He held in his hand a list of chores. Good Lord, he’d never washed a window in his life. How did one beat rugs? And the laundering—the instructions went on for half the page, and he felt his stomach curdle with anxiety. But it was all there; every bit of instruction that Violet and Serena had, in their wisdom, seen fit to impart to him. Daunting though it might be.

“Thank you,” he said. “For coming. And for this.” He lifted the paper. “I’ll do it. I’ll do it all.” If for no other reason than that it would save Theo the effort of it. Whatever time it took to perform these tasks was a few more minutes—perhaps a few precious hours—that would be his gift to Theo. *His* time in exchange for hers.

“Oh, believe me,” Violet said, a hint of a smirk playing about the edges of her mouth. “I would not have missed this for anything in the world.”



There was a man in her fields.

Theo hadn’t noticed him at first. She had been too intent upon swiping the evidence of tears from her cheeks in an effort to erase them before she reached the house. In fact, the man had surprised her with a cheerful, “Morning, Theo,” which had accompanied a polite doff of his cap, and she had nearly leapt out of her skin before she had realized that it was just George Yates, one of the young men of the town that she and her father had hired out for occasional farm work back when they had had the funds to afford it.

But they certainly didn’t now, and so his presence in her fields, and the trowel he held in his hands as he yanked some unruly weeds that had threatened to strangle a row of turnips, confused her.

“George,” she said, when she recovered her voice. “What are you doing here?”

He canted his head, brows furrowing. “Working,” he said, lifting the trowel for her inspection. “Thought that was clear enough.” He pulled a face. “I drew the short straw,” he said. “*Weeding*. Hell on the knees, you know.”

“You’re not alone?”

He shook his head. “Gentleman by the name of John Darling came on by earlier today. Said the duke sent him to hire on some laborers. Might’ve mentioned that I’ve done some work for you before,” he offered up with a grin.

“I can’t pay you.” The words tasted bitter; a humiliating admission of her own inadequacy. “I’m sorry. You—you

should go home.”

“Already been paid. In advance.” He tugged up a particularly entrenched weed with a grunt, casting it aside. “So’ve Ben and Abel,” he added, with a nod into the distance. “Might’ve mentioned that they’ve helped out before, too.”

Already been paid? With what funds?

“Fact is, I’m grateful,” he said. “Work has been hard to come by. Thought I’d have to try my luck in London—at a manufactory, or elsewhere.” He swiped a hand across his sweaty brow. “But now that the duke’s got Mr. Darling paying back what Mr. Jennings took from us—”

What?

“—I figure there’s more than a few of us who’ve got a bit of breathing room again.” He blew out a sigh of relief, sinking back on his heels where he knelt on the ground. “Still, I’m glad for the job.”

Of course he was. The village had been drying up for years. No one could afford the labor, after having been gouged for every spare bit of coin. But now—*now*, with two years’ worth of pilfered coin repaid—

Just as Alex had said he would.

It warmed a corner of her heart that had gone cold and fearful years ago. She hadn’t dared to hope his promises would materialize—not *really*. Her hopes had been too often disappointed to risk hanging them on the promises of their neglectful landlord. If she had not placed too much stock in them, then she could not be disappointed when he had failed to live up to them.

But he *had*. He *had*—because he *did* mean the things he said. *All* of them.

“You’ve got all three of us through the harvest—and I can give Mr. Darling the direction of a few more men who might be looking, if you like,” George said. His gaze flicked briefly to her. “You ought to put on a hat, at least,” he said in mild reproach. “Getting a bit pink in the cheeks.”

It wasn’t a sunburn—not yet, anyway. Her cheeks had grown hot for a different reason entirely. Still, she coughed into her fist and managed to say, “Yes. Yes, I will. Thank you, George.”

And this time it wasn't melancholia that sent her running—it was anticipation.



“You really, truly *did* it.”

The choked words had Alex wheeling around, a sopping-wet length of cloth clutched in his fist. Theo stood there behind him, her soft lips trembling just slightly, her arms folded across her chest as if she were trying to hold herself back.

“Did what?” he asked, stupidly. The laundry? The windows? But how could she have known? She'd rushed off hours ago and hadn't returned until now.

“You—you paid back the rents,” she said, and her cheeks hollowed as she sucked in a frenetic breath.

“Oh,” he said. “Well—not all of them, not just yet. I gave charge of it to John, and he only finished tallying it all up this morning. It'll take time to visit every family.” Although it *would* be done by Midsummer, certainly.

“But you *did* it.”

He didn't understand why she had latched onto that so severely. “I said I would,” he said. “The longer I put it off, the longer the townsfolk suffer. I couldn't let that happen any longer.” Was that the glint of tears in her eyes? Good God—he'd never intended to make her *cry*. “Grey managed to confirm the amounts for me.” Unfortunately, that was *all* Grey had been willing to do—the unmitigated arse.

Theo blinked, blue eyes wide and confused. “However did he manage that?”

“Had you not wondered where it was Serena and Grey stayed evening last?” Alex asked. “There was just the one room available at Maudie's tavern—and I would know, as I helped rebuild it.”

“No, I—I suppose I really didn't,” Theo said. “Yesterday was—a bit of a mess.”

That was certainly *one* way to put it. “They stayed at Ivywilde Hall,” he said, with a nod to the west, where the huge manor house sat above on the hill, its gables just visible in the distance. “They're known to have a friendship with the duke,

after all. It's not unusual for traveling noblemen—and their families—to stay at the properties of friends on their way, even if that friend happens not to be in residence at the time.”

He heard her breath break swifter, a keen light coming into her eyes. “Did he—did he find the evidence?”

Alex gave a tightly leashed smile, full of restrained malice. “Enough to hang Mr. Jennings,” he confirmed. “There's only one problem. We'll have to get it ourselves.”

“What? *Why?*”

“Because Grey is an utter arse who lives to torment his friends and enemies both,” Alex grumbled. “But mostly because I'm the only one of us without the faintest idea how to pick a lock, and he has decided this ought to be a *teaching moment*.” He slipped his hands into his pocket, withdrew a set of skeleton keys, and tossed them to Theo for examination. “Still, he was useful. Grey has an uncanny sort of memory—he simply memorized the pertinent pages and recited them to John early this morning. It's not proof enough for a court, but it's certainly good enough to begin repayment. John did the ciphery between what *was* paid and what *should* have been paid, and is even now out returning what was stolen.” And then, when Theo's eyes misted over once again, he added, “Theo. I always intended to return the money.”

But she hadn't believed him, he realized. Not then. Not when he'd been exactly what she'd thought him—feckless and foolish and arrogant enough to believe that no one would dare cheat a duke. That his title had been enough to protect his tenants from unscrupulous land agents. He'd failed the whole town for *years*. Of course she hadn't believed him *then*.

Only now she *did* believe him. No—she believed *in* him. He could see it there, glowing in her face. She believed in him. That fragile spark that had been just a dying ember in her eyes had rekindled into...something. Something soft and affectionate, something terribly close to the way that Serena looked at Grey, or Violet at John.

It was a struggle to stay where he stood, to absently cast the fabric clutched in his hand over the clothesline and wipe his wet hand on his shirtfront and *not* reach out for her. Theo wasn't Serena or Violet; he could not cajole her into his arms—into his *life*—with Grey's skillful manipulation or John's

steady, patient courtship.

These first steps had to be hers alone. So that she would know in her own heart, in her own head, that the decision had always been hers.

She took them gingerly, half-certain of herself. Half-certain of him, probably.

But she *took* them. One foot in front of the other, stepping out into the sunlight that limned her father's garden. The breeze rustled her skirt, whipped through the tiny tendrils of hair that had escaped her plait, and wicked the laundry drying on the line. Her breasts rose and fell with each breath; unsteadily, as if she couldn't quite catch it.

She stopped at last, close enough to touch. Her pink tongue swiped across her full lower lip. She wanted *something*—her hands had fallen to her sides, and they made small, jerky movements, her shoulders rising in a subtle, tense lift.

“What do you want, Theo?” His voice had dropped a full octave, rasping from his throat.

“I—I—” Her hand drifted into the space between them, hesitating there. Her gaze dropped to his mouth. “A kiss?” It was just a whisper, as if she'd suggested something nearly obscene.

Given what he'd shown her that night out in the fields, perhaps she was wise to think so.

Solemnly he held out his hand to her, palm turned up. It took only a moment for her to lay her hand in his, and she watched as he drew it back, pressed her palm to his shoulder, stroked his fingertips along the back of her hand—a gesture that should not have been nearly as intimate as it was.

She teetered closer as her palm slid up, fingers toying with the ends of his hair. Her pupils had dilated, blown until they nearly eclipsed the blue of her irises. Color seeped into her cheeks—nerves or embarrassment, it was impossible to say. And still she crept closer, placing her free hand upon his chest, blunt nails scraping across the linen of his shirt. He wondered if she could feel his heart beating beneath them.

Her breath hitched as he enfolded her in his arms, bringing her that last, tiny distance that separated them. For a long moment nothing else in the whole of the world existed—there was just Theo settling against his chest like a baby bird into its nest, her

cheek cupped in his hand, her waist encircled by his arm.

This was perfection. Perhaps time itself moved slower out here in the countryside. There was no hurry, no rush—no furtive crush of mouths or frantic press of bodies. Only time enough for her unsteady breaths to become a long, slow sigh, for the buzzing apprehension that had strung her muscles tight to yield to something softer.

Time for her to acclimate to the feel of his arm about her waist, the pressure of his palm splayed between her shoulder blades. And then, when the last of that nervous tension had slipped away from her shoulders, he bent his head—

“*Ahem.*”

A groan spilled from his lips, and as Theo’s every muscle shot sharp and tense he cupped the back of her head and pressed her face to his chest in an attempt to save her the embarrassment. Her fingernails dug crescents into his shoulders.

“Violet,” he ground out. “Go. Away.”

A tiny sound—humiliation, frustration—eked out of Theo’s throat, and she cringed closer to him, ducking her head as if somehow she could just disappear into him. He didn’t even know exactly how long Violet had been standing there on the porch.

“Well, *really*,” Violet said, planting her fists on her hips.

“What sort of chaperone would I *be*—”

“*Go*, Violet.” It took every ounce of restraint to not bare his teeth at her like some sort of feral animal.

She gave a disdainful sniff. “Theo?”

With some effort, Theo loosed the grip of one of her hands from his shoulders and managed an awkward little wave.

“All right, then,” Violet said, with a shrug. “Carry on, I suppose. Theo, you knee him in the bollocks if he gets too... er, enthusiastic.” And then she swept back through the door, shutting it behind her.

“Close the damned curtains!” he shouted after her, and Theo’s shoulders curled in, shaking. *Damn.* “It’s all right,” he soothed. “Violet doesn’t carry tales, and she’d be the last to judge.”

She made a muffled sound against his chest, almost a wheeze, and drew back against the pressure of the hand he had

wrapped around the nape of her neck—and *laughed*. Though her face burned with mortification, she covered her mouth with one hand in a desperate effort to stifle the nigh-hysterical laughter bubbling between her fingers.

Though the mood had been undeniably broken—and he was *certain* he could see the flutter of the curtains in the window, suggesting that Violet still intended to keep an eye on them—still he would have been a fool to squander the opportunity. While the dregs of her unwilling amusement still clung to her lips, he slid his fingers into her thick hair, tilted her head back and kissed her.

Just a small one. Chaste, really, by consideration. But she stilled, and he caught that last hum of laughter, sweet and bright, as it left her lips. And she softened, her hands sliding back to his shoulders in a tentative exploration. Not shy, precisely—*nothing* about Theo was *shy*. But cautious, reserved, uncertain.

Perhaps the rules of propriety were different out in the country, but not so different that she didn't know that this had blown right past the bounds of acceptability and straight into the forbidden. Had she been a proper London miss, she would have found herself married out of hand, or ruined otherwise. But she wasn't; she was *Theo*, and that—that was why he wanted her.

For a few extended moments—too short a time, in his opinion—she nestled into his arms like she belonged there. As if she had found the place meant exclusively for her. And then, somehow, she managed to pull herself away, long before he was ready to release her.

He would *never* be ready to release her.

That blush had faded from her cheeks, but something regretful lived in the eyes that skated away from his, the same sort of hopeless melancholia he had seen two nights' past out in the fields. The weight of reality crushing down upon her shoulders; a burden too heavy for any one woman to bear.

He caught her fingers when she stepped away, unwilling to relinquish her altogether, and was gratified when her hand clung to his. She nibbled her lower lip, expression conflicted as she studied their clasped hands, like they represented something unattainable.

“I like your friends,” she offered at last, though she didn’t meet his eyes. “They’re...much different than I thought they would be.”

“Oh?” Unconsciously, his fingers squeezed hers. “How did you think they would be?”

A one-shouldered shrug. “I don’t know. Haughty, I suppose. Supercilious.” A lock of hair slid across her shoulder, loosed from her plait. “That’s the sort of Londoner we’re acquainted with, largely.”

“Ah.” Well, he couldn’t deny it. His social set had a certain reputation, and it was not one of kindness or generosity. He’d been shown more genuine welcome here, in this tiny farming town, than he had anywhere in London. Everyone loved a duke, but none of it was *real*. It was all status and pretension and artifice. “I don’t keep company with those sorts.” For the most part—except when his mother requested his indulgence. “I’ll admit that my mother begs my attendance at certain events, and I occasionally indulge her—but my social circle is quite small. Just John and Grey, Violet and Serena.” A meaningful squeeze to her fingers. *There is a place there for you as well.*

She whispered, “I can’t.” But she looked so torn, her dark brows drawing down in regret. “I can’t go to London. I can’t be—” Her voice faded into nothingness, whisked away by the wind.

“Be what?”

“What you want me to be.” A swallow so hard and heavy that it looked painful. Like she had swallowed back more than air.

“I don’t want you to be anything other than what you are,” he said. But it did not erase the doubt in her eyes, the worry that etched itself upon her face. It had all been so simple for him—he had only had to find her, this woman with whom he could imagine spending the rest of his life. No—whom he *couldn’t* imagine the rest of his life *without*.

But she had considerations far beyond his, concerns that he couldn’t even imagine. Blast it, being a damned duke was supposed to make everything *easier*—

And he hadn’t even told her that he intended for her to become his duchess. Though a brief flare of guilt made his stomach give a vicious lurch, he tossed the thought aside. That was a

different conversation for a different day; somehow he could not imagine that it would be a selling point. Not for Theo. Not when she worried simply about life in London.

Adding a title into that mix would be a bridge too far. He would have to find a time, a way, to break it to her gently. Perhaps with a little nudge from Violet, she would see that with time—and friends—she would have nothing to fear from it. From *anyone*.

She would have the whole world at her fingertips. A duke at her feet. If only she could see her way to agreeing.

Chapter Eighteen

“Alex tells me he has asked you to marry him.”

Theo choked on a mouthful of dinner roll, her eyes watering as they sheared to John, who seemed to have produced the statement in all earnestness without even a hint of mockery in his voice.

“I beg your pardon,” she managed, after a long drink of water to clear her throat of the stubborn, clinging crumbs. “Was that a question?”

Violet snorted, her knife slipping on her plate as she carved off a bit of mutton, studiously avoiding the glare that Alex sent her way.

“No, not really,” John said. “But I will confess to some curiosity over how badly he mucked it up.”

“*John,*” Alex gritted out between clenched teeth.

“Oh.” Theo said at the same time. “*Very.*”

Violet clapped a hand over her mouth, her shoulders shaking.

“I thought he might.” John offered this with a savage sort of satisfaction. “His mother has been haranguing him for ages about marriage, you know. With that sort of pressure, he was bound to make a fool of himself.”

As if to offer Theo some sort of consolation, Violet reached out to pat her hand. “She’s a lovely woman. Truly. She’ll adore you.”

Somehow, Alex had gotten his friends caught up in his madness. Worse still, neither of them seemed to think this was anything unusual. That it was, somehow, a perfectly ordinary occurrence for a duke to make a proposal of marriage to a woman who had never even *been* to London—who had never been more than five miles away from her home.

Alex bared his teeth in a scowl. “If you’re quite finished—”

“Hardly. I have been awaiting this day far too long.” John nipped a bite of fresh cucumber off of his fork. “For someone so *strenuously* opposed to the institution of marriage—”

“I was never opposed,” Alex argued, his chin jutting in

obstinate defiance of John's pronouncement. "I was *opposed* to marrying at my mother's behest, to a woman in whom I hadn't the faintest bit of interest." He speared a slice of roasted potato. "Unlike you lot, I knew what love was before it had to be cast into my face. I see it every day in my mother's eyes. I saw it in you before *you* did." His gaze flicked to Theo, heavy, intense. "I was always waiting for someone I could love. I was always waiting for—" He broke off, staring down at the tines of his fork, which still impaled a slice of potato.

"For what?" Violet prompted, clearly fascinated.

"For this," Alex said, lifting his fork. "I was always waiting for a woman who had the good sense to lob a potato at my head when the situation required it."

John gave an exaggerated roll of his eyes. "I might have known."

"Did you *really*?" Violet inquired of Theo, delighted.

"She did, in fact." Alex crammed the potato into his mouth and chewed. "Hit me *twice*—and that's when I knew."

"What?" Theo said, thoroughly baffled. "Knew what?"

"That I would marry you, of course." He gave a shrug and amended, without shame, "Well—perhaps I didn't *know* then, precisely. But I began to consider it. And as I have never—not *once*—considered marriage to *anyone* before, it was practically a foregone conclusion."

A foregone conclusion? With a flutter of incredulous laughter, Theo turned to Violet. "Is he always like this?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Violet sighed. "Even *more* unfortunately...he's generally correct." She gave a helpless little shrug. "You could do worse, I suppose. I have it on good authority from his mother that he has got all of his teeth."

"Thank you, Violet," Alex said, caustic sarcasm dripping from every syllable. "Your glowing praise warms my heart."

Violet confided, "Pay him no mind. He's merely annoyed that his penchant for meddling has returned to haunt him." To Alex, she said, "This is the least of what you ought to have expected, really. Had I truly wished to make you suffer, I could have married you myself."

"Not without an annulment," John said, with a fond pat of Violet's cheek. "Which I was disinclined to give you."

Violet pursed her lips in a mock-pout. "Still, his mother *did*

offer.”

“Of course she did,” Alex muttered, stabbing what remained of his mutton. His voice dropped to an aggrieved grumble.

“Nosy, meddling—”

“Don’t be fooled,” Violet said, clasping Theo’s wrist. “He loves her.”

“What?” Alex’s head shot up, his brows lifting in surprise. “Of course I do. She’s my mother.”

So many tangled threads of conversation wove around her that Theo found she could not quite decipher exactly what had occurred over dinner. And she knew that her confusion had shown on her face when John slanted her a vaguely sympathetic glance.

“Family dinners are on Thursdays,” he offered. “They are non-negotiable, I’m afraid.”

Catching sight of Theo’s stunned face, Alex hastened to assure her, “They’re not *always* like this.”

“No,” Violet agreed, with a gamine grin. “Sometimes they are *much* worse.”



An agitated flutter had taken up residence inside Theo’s stomach; the kind of nervous, anxious feeling to which she was well-accustomed. It was accompanied by an insidious whisper that resounded in her head: *Get up, you lazy layabout. You haven’t got the time to be idle!*

Except...for the first time in a very, very long time, there was nothing particular to do. When she had gone walking for a large portion of the morning, she had been mired in both melancholy and guilt: she had both missed her father terribly and chastised herself for carving out precious time to brood that *ought* to have been utilized more effectively.

There had been so many things still to do.

There *had* been. And now there weren’t. The laundry had been cleaned, dried, and folded. Dinner had been prepared. Dishes had been washed. The cows had been milked and the butter churned; the eggs had been collected and the floor had been swept clean once more. Even her father’s garden had been

tended in his absence, though she could not guess to whom he would have entrusted the chore.

Still, as the sun set on the horizon, there was a fantastical sense of time stretching out in front of her, time that she hadn't the foggiest idea how to occupy.

She did not know how to do *nothing*. But at the moment, she could not think of a single thing that she had to do *except* nothing. And as the seconds wound down until nightfall she sat, straight-backed in her chair, and jogged her knee as she considered her options.

In the kitchen, the kettle whistled. Theo chewed on her thumbnail, staring out into the darkening evening that had begun to spread out over the fields. The barn roof? No—the shingles were best replaced in daylight. Now that the sun had begun to set, she wouldn't trust her footing in the darkness. Besides, except for some bare patches here and there in the corners where the wind had torn them, it was mostly still intact. Surely Alex would have complained of it if he had experienced any inconvenient drips.

But the hinges—those required oiling. Perhaps the doors would need to be rehung completely, but oiling she could manage. She shoved herself to her feet just as Violet returned with a tray of tea.

“Sit,” Violet encouraged. “Have some tea.”

“I'm very sorry,” Theo said. “I've just remembered something I ought to do—”

“Oh, nothing that can't wait until morning, I'm certain,” Violet said as she arranged the cups on the tray. “Though you might be hard pressed for something to do even then, in all honesty.” A plate of biscuits appeared on the table between them. “You'll have to forgive me; I'm used to company. And with Serena and Grey back in London, and John otherwise occupied counting out coin—well, I find myself rather at a loss for it. And I *have* come all this way.” The glance she sent in Theo's direction would have been pleading, except for the shine of something undeniably sneaky.

Even as Theo sat once more, she knew she had been manipulated into it. Still she found herself saying, “Yes, of course,” as she sank into her chair.

“Will you pour?” Violet gave a gesture to the teapot as she

settled into her chair. “Just milk, if you would be so kind.”

Theo splashed a bit of milk into the teacups and reached for the teapot, and Violet reached across the table to gently rearrange the positioning of Theo’s fingers and to tuck her elbow down.

“You’ll want to pour like this,” Violet said. “Less likely to spill. Of course, a duchess so rarely must pour her own tea, but still it is a useful—”

That bruised corner of Theo’s heart pulsed with—not pain, really. Perhaps longing. “I’m not going to be a duchess,” she said. But the words tasted bitter and a little sad.

“No?” Violet heaved a sigh. “A shame, that. I think you could take London by storm if you had half a mind to. I think I would have liked having you about.” She tucked a loose curl behind her ear and propped her chin in her hand. “May I ask why not?”

It was odd, sitting here with another woman, discussing something of this nature. But Violet’s gaze was open and without judgment, carrying only a simple curiosity as she sipped her tea and settled back in her chair.

Theo’s eyes flicked toward the kitchen door, through which Alex had exited some time ago.

“You don’t need to worry about Alex,” Violet said. “He’s gone off to bathe in the stream. Said a cold bath would suit him fine this evening—but truly, I think he just didn’t wish to go through the bother of heating the water.” She whisked a biscuit off the plate. “Nothing you say will be overheard—or repeated.”

“I wouldn’t know the first thing about being a duchess,” Theo said in a rush. “And my father—this farm is everything to him.” Her hands twisted in her lap, and her stomach pitched and rolled too severely to risk drinking the tea she had poured for herself. “How could I leave him here alone?” Even if he *had* suggested that she had her own life to live, he had always been the largest part of it.

“But who has said he must be alone?” Violet asked. “Theo, do you think Alex could not afford to hire farmhands? A maid? A cook?” She gave a slow shake of her head. “Besides,” she said. “You’re wrong, there—the farm isn’t everything to your father. *You* are.”

Oh. A mist of tears filled Theo's eyes, and she dashed them away awkwardly. "How could I leave him?" she repeated. "It would be so easy for someone to cheat him, or to take advantage of him. His sight—"

"Give both your father *and* Alex more credit than that, I beg you," Violet said. "Your father is clever and resourceful, and Alex—well, Alex is an idiot more often than not, but I promise you he does not make the same mistake twice. He won't let any harm come to your father, and do you know why?"

Reaching out to snatch the handkerchief that Violet had dug out of her reticule to offer to her, Theo shook her head.

"Because if I had to guess—and, Theo, I have known Alex for years now, and I am a very, *very* good judge of character—I'd say he loves your father nearly as much as he loves you." She canted her head to the right. "Did you know his father died when he was very young?"

A hiccup escaped Theo's throat as she considered it. Of course she had known that his father was deceased, in an abstract sort of way. One generally did not become a duke when one's father was still alive.

From practically their very first meeting, Papa had called him *son*. And now, upon reflection, she could see it—the pride he had taken in that appellation, the yearning for her father's approval. *Son*. A title more precious to him than that to which he had been born.

Of course Alex would protect her father. Of *course* he would.

"You know," Violet added, with that maddening, scheming tone saturating her voice. "London is just two hours away by carriage. And Alex owns Ivywilde Hall, after all. There is no reason at all you could not visit frequently."

"But I would still have to be a duchess," Theo managed.

"Mm. Yes, that does tend to happen when one marries a duke." A flicker of amusement twisted her lips. "I'll not lie and tell you I'm envious. I much prefer being a mere Mrs. *But*," she added, "it's truly not so bad as all that. Better a duchess than a marchioness or a countess." At Theo's baffled glance, she said, "No one questions a duchess. And *especially* no one questions the daughter-by-marriage of Christine, Duchess of Davenport."

A startled laugh burst from her lungs. "You make her sound

like an absolute harridan,” Theo said. “She’s not—I met her once, when I was very young. She was very kind to me.”

“She’s still kind,” Violet said. “A truly wonderful woman.” Her lips twisted in a wry smile. “John was correct, though—family dinners are *not* negotiable. But they are lovely nonetheless.” She rubbed her thumb over her jaw. “She was the one to send Alex here, you know. She remembered you. I wondered if she knew the two of you would fall in love.”

Theo resisted the urge to pat her cheeks, which had surely gone red as a cherry. “I’m not—that is to say, I don’t—”

“You can’t even deny it,” Violet crowed, a delight laugh winging from her lips. “Theo, may I be perfectly honest with you?”

God, yes. *Someone* ought to be, considering that Alex had proposed *twice*, if poorly, and *still* hadn’t bothered to confess to her his true identity. “Please.”

“You could swear up and down that you have no intention of marrying Alex,” Violet said, with a surprising candor, “and I still wouldn’t believe it. Do you know what you *haven’t* said, despite every opportunity to do so? That you don’t *want* to. Just four little words.” Violet held up her hand, wiggling her fingers as she counted them off. “I. Don’t. Want. To. And you haven’t said them.”

Theo drew in an unsteady breath. Can’t *implies inability*, she remembered Alex saying, with that odd hesitation that had followed. *Inability*—not *unwillingness*. And he had known it. Just as Violet had. He had *known* exactly what she hadn’t said, what she hadn’t wished to admit, even to herself.

That there might have been a part of her that *would* have accepted, if circumstances had permitted. That against all reason and despite all attempts to squash it back down into the nothingness where it had belonged, she *did* love him—at least a little. Enough that his proposal had hurt her heart, because she knew she could not accept.

She felt her shoulders draw up, curling in on her herself as if it might provide some protection. Her throat felt dry and hot, every word of protest burning in her lungs—because she did not *want* to speak them. But she forced them out anyway. “I have never been more than five miles from my home,” she said on a terrible rasp. “My life is so small, and he—what will

happen when he realizes that none of this is real? That I'm not the duchess he truly wants. That I can't be the duchess he needs."

"Do you know," Violet began, pushing the plate of biscuits toward Theo, "I truly don't believe that a *duchess* has ever entered into his thoughts where you are concerned." She gave a short shrug. "Alex is...quite a simple man, for a duke. But also a *good* one."

"I know that," Theo said, and snatched up her tea, praying it would not upset her stomach further.

"Do you?" Violet asked. "Because you must have noticed that he is particularly ill-suited to life in the countryside. I never thought I would have to explain which end of the broom to place upon the floor. But still, he learned." She gave a soft smile. "It would have been so much easier for him to simply hire on the workers needed and leave them to oversee things. I think we all expected that he would give up and return home, tail tucked between his legs. Instead, he sent packets and packets of letters, asking for advice, for assistance—because he didn't only want to *stay*, he wanted to be *useful* to you."

"No, it wasn't just—it wasn't only *that*," Theo blurted out. "He's seen the townsfolk. Talked with them." Worked alongside them, eaten with them, laughed with them. He had not shied away from what suffering his benevolent neglect had caused. "He wanted to make reparations. To fix what was broken."

"Mm," Violet allowed. "There is that. Still, it is a great deal more onerous a task—for a man of his status and position—to give of his time instead of only his money. Time is a commodity more valuable than coin, after all, and a duke often has precious little of it to spare." She extended one hand in entreaty. "But he has chosen to spend it here. With you. Learning those things that many people would feel to be far beneath a duke's notice. I think that speaks far more of his intentions than anything so inconsequential as a title he was born to."

An awkward laugh rattled in Theo's throat. "But he is *still* a duke, and I—" She gave a helpless shake of her head. "Ladies are born, not *made*," she said. "How would I even begin?"

A grin stretched across Violet's mouth. "I am so very glad you've asked," she said. "Let me tell you about my school..."



Theo lay in bed, cognizant of the deepening night but powerless to sink into sleep. Too many thoughts crowded her head, clattering into one another until they were a cacophonous roar.

A school for *ladies*. Or, rather, a school for *prospective* ladies. She hadn't even known it was a possibility. It seemed the sort of thing that one learned from the cradle rather than in a classroom, but—if anyone could have created such a thing and made a success of it, Violet and Serena did seem the most likely.

Perhaps not the most *qualified*. But absolutely determined enough, cunning enough, enterprising enough. She had heard the two of them chattering about their school the day before, but it had not occurred to her to ask why women of their station would be running a school, much less the nature of it.

She had simply assumed that it had been some sort of charity project, since ladies of quality were often engaged in such ventures. But an *actual school*? Specifically designed to teach women of less-than-noble birth the skills they would require to navigate the aristocracy? She had never considered such a thing.

And Violet was willing to teach her.

Perhaps she had already begun. That delicate correction while she had poured tea had escaped her notice, and still—still she had heeded Violet's advice, because it had been rendered in that soft, gentle tone. Without judgment or condescension. Just a little friendly guidance, as if her capability had never been in doubt. And she knew that the next time she poured tea, her fingers would effortlessly recall the motion, the positioning, that Violet had imbued into her hands.

She squeezed her eyes shut, curled her hands into fists. People would doubtlessly say cruel things of her regardless—the little country mouse that thought she could be a duchess. How low Alex had brought himself to marry outside his class. His world

was comprised of balls and house parties and musicales, and she had never for a moment thought to find herself within it. Her place had always been here, in the countryside, driving a flock of sheep into the fields, or planting crops, or gathering eggs.

She couldn't recall the last time there hadn't been at least a faint line of dirt beneath her fingernails.

And still, Papa's advice swept through her mind, cutting clean through the trickle of anxieties that had begun to pour into it. *Don't look for problems. Look for solutions.*

What if it *could* be as simple as that? There was nothing to lose in accepting Violet's offer and at least giving an honest effort to learn what she could teach. And there might everything to gain.

A short, sharp rap fell upon her window, and she jerked her head to the side—through the thin curtains that obscured the panes, she could see the faint shadow of someone standing outside. Her heart gave a little lurch in her chest, and for a brief moment she wondered if it were at all possible that the bent of her thoughts had somehow summoned Alex here.

There was no sound from the rest of the house, and she moved carefully as she stepped out of bed, avoiding the few floorboards she knew would creak. She flicked back the curtain, peering out into the night, unsurprised to see Alex standing there, his hands braced upon his hips.

Open the window, he mouthed, with a little gesture of impatience, his still-damp hair slicked away from his face.

Theo rolled her eyes, flipping the latch. The window gave an alarming shriek as she pushed it open, loud enough to wake the dead. If Violet and John had been asleep, then surely they were not any longer. But there were no voices, footfalls—if they *had* heard, then they had elected to allow her to make her own decisions.

After a long moment of silence, during which neither of them moved, while waiting to see if they would be discovered and chastised, at last Alex blew out a long held breath and leaned forward to brace his hands upon the sill.

"What is it?" Theo asked. "It has to be past midnight." Too late to be anything but unsavory—and if he had come for some rational, acceptable reason, surely he would not have

presented himself at her *window* instead of the kitchen door. His hands curled over the sill, muscles in his arms straining against the fabric of his shirt. She'd once told him he had shoulders like an ox, and just now he *especially* looked it—farm labor had given him an edge he had lacked, imbued him with a rough quality that had once been absent in him.

At this moment he was not a *duke*—he was only a *man*. A man whose grass green eyes raked her from the disheveled plait that her tossing and turning had made of her hair, to the thin linen of her nightgown in such a way that suggested he was imagining what was beneath it, to the very tips of her bare toes peeking out from beneath the hem.

Her heart gave a swift, fierce thump in her chest with the sudden awareness that no one had ever looked at her quite like he did. As if he could see every secret, hidden part of her—and reveled in all of it.

She would choose him. The realization startled her to the very depths of her soul, and her toes curled with it. If she had everything laid out before her to choose from—if there were no obstacles, no impediments, no other considerations to make—she would choose *him*. This ridiculous, foolish man, who had had the temerity, the unmitigated audacity, to love her.

Warmth bloomed in her chest, spread through her veins with the force of a lightning strike blazing across the sky. This man had seen the very worst of her. The petty, vindictive streak she had harbored and wielded against him. The caustic, scathing sarcasm she had employed only too often. He had borne the weight of her judgment, her scorn. He had seen her harried and haggard, exhausted and emotional. He had held her when she had been at her weakest, and bolstered her flagging spirits. He had seen every ugly thing that had curdled in her soul. And he had loved her anyway.

I don't want you to be anything other than what you are.

She blinked back a sudden sting of tears and asked again, “Alex...what do you want?” Even though she knew. Even though it was all there, unspoken, in his eyes. He wanted to marry her, yes. But at this particular moment, he wanted more for her to invite him to climb through the window and take her to bed.

Chill bumps burst out along her skin, and beneath the thin linen of her nightgown, her nipples peaked to tight points. His eyes dropped to her breasts, and his gaze was so heavy, so hot, that it might as well have been a touch.

The wick of the wind did little to cool the heat that pooled in her stomach and spread through her limbs. Despite the chill of the night, she felt flushed, heavy—as if the weight of his gaze had pinned her to the floor. Still her body moved of its own accord, drawn to him, wading through the honey-thick tension strung between them. To echo his stance at the window, separated by just a few inches of sill, her hands carefully laid between the both of his.

Close enough to kiss. Close enough to touch. If only he would cross that last distance. If only *she* would.

With some effort, he dragged his eyes back to her face, and she wondered what he saw there that it sharpened so severely. His hand touched hers, warm fingers sliding along cool flesh, tripping over her elbow, skittering over the fabric of her nightgown until he had reached the exposed flesh of her throat. Still those fingers that had been clenched so tightly over the sill were gentle as they cupped the back of her neck, slid into her hair.

“Damn,” he whispered, and pulled her closer. “I didn’t come for this.”

But his mouth blanketed hers, and she shivered and leaned in—in, until his arm came around to steady her, and it was so easy to find that perfect place to settle against his chest, even if the cold, hard wood of the sill pressed against her stomach. *This* was the kiss she had wanted; something hot and defining, something to burn away the frayed edges of the lace that comprised her thoughts until there was only clarity.

What *she* wanted. Deep down, when everything else had been singed to nothingness. And it was this—this man, with his strong arm bracing her back, holding her through whatever challenges might be cast into her path. Alex, who had found something beautiful in the ugliness she had shown him.

She heard herself make a soft, keening sort of sound into his mouth, which he countered with a low groan, his hand fisting in her hair as he dragged himself away. “No,” he said, roughly, and his chest heaved from the effort. “This isn’t why I came—

and I wouldn't put it past Violet to listen at the door.”

“She wouldn't.” At least, Theo didn't *think* so.

“Violet? She certainly *would*.” Despite his assertions to the contrary, Alex leaned through the window, and his lips found the apple of her cheek, coasting up toward her temple. “She'd love nothing better than to heap shame upon my shoulders for catching me in *flagrante delicto*.”

“Oh.” Theo nibbled at her lower lip. “Then—we should at least attempt to not be caught.”

“Good God, don't say *that*.” His breath puffed out on a huff of pained laughter, singeing her ear. “I'd like to consider myself a man of principles, but they are stretched rather thin of late.”

That wasn't even the smallest grain of truth in that, even if he clearly believed it. But when she opened her mouth to speak, he pressed his fingers to her lips.

“Don't,” he said. “I have little enough resolve as it is.” He softened this with a kiss at her temple and said, “Hurry, now. We've got to get moving. And for God's sake, put on something thicker than that damned nightgown.”

Chapter Nineteen

“Where are we going?” Theo asked him, as Alex leaned forward to help her climb through the window. It struck him, suddenly, that she had not asked until now—that was to say, she had simply acquiesced to his request to change into something besides a nightgown, and done precisely that.

To his eternal disappointment, she had let the curtains fall as she had rifled around in her wardrobe for something to wear. Of course, she had not been aware that the wind had been kind to him, offering tantalizing glimpses through those very curtains as it had flicked them about. But that hardly seemed the kind of thing he ought to *tell* her.

Still, it had been dark, and the most he had been able to make out was the curve of her back—just before she had cloaked herself in some dark, thick fabric—and a scandalous glimpse of thigh for perhaps a fraction of a moment.

But now, as his hands closed about her waist to ease her over the sill and braced her as she gingerly slid her legs over and hopped out, he realized something else entirely.

“You—you’re wearing trousers,” he said, stunned speechless.

“Oh,” Theo said, with a shrug. “Well. You must promise not to tell Papa. Where are we going?”

Trousers. Which clung to the long lines of her legs in an absolutely improper fashion, molded to the soft curve of her hips, and nipped in just above them, accentuating the contours of her body. She ought to have looked masculine. Instead, she looked like a lady pirate, with the too-large shirt tucked into the waist of her trousers, and the sleeves billowing about her slender arms.

God help him if she turned around. He didn’t think he could bear the sight of her pert little bottom so lovingly encased.

Of course she did *exactly* that, turning to ease the window close—at least as subtly as one might close a window that screamed as if it had been beaten in the process.

Alex swiped one shaking hand over his mouth and wondered

if he might not be serving penance for sins he didn't even recall committing.

"Alex," Theo hissed. "Where are we *going*?"

Oh, right. He'd yet to answer her. "To Ivywilde Hall," he managed to get out between teeth that ached with the desire to sink them into the soft flesh he *knew* lay beneath her clothing. Just the tiniest nibble, there, where the collar of her shirt dipped down to the swell of her breast. Just enough to leave his mark on her, where nobody would know but him. And her. She stutter-stepped as she turned back around, whirling a bit too fast. "To *Ivywilde Hall*? In the middle of the night? Are you *mad*?"

"Well, you can hardly expect me to go in the middle of the *day*, now, can you?"

Her mouth shut with an audible snap. "I suppose not," she allowed. "But it's a fair walk, you know. And what if we are caught housebreaking?"

"It's hardly housebreaking," he said. "*Technically*, I have the duke's complete and total permission." Technically, he *was* the duke, and it was *his* damned house. But now was most certainly not the time for *that* particular admission.

"*Technically*," Theo said in a saccharine-sweet voice, "that won't mean a damned thing if we're caught—because we've gone to great lengths to conceal your purpose here." Squinting out into the darkness, she added, "And we'll have the devil of a time getting there. That hill is riddled with rocks, and I wouldn't *dare* bring a lantern. We might be seen."

But she was going to come. He could hear it in her voice, the quiver of anticipation. The longing for the opportunity to get a little of her own back from Mr. Jennings; to step outside the bounds of propriety for one reckless night. To do something that would *mean* something—for herself, for the town.

"Then I suppose you'd better hold my hand," he said, and offered it to her.

Even as she slipped her small hand into his, he heard the little sniff she gave that cut through the quiet of the night. "It's not *my* neck I'm worried for," she said. "It's yours. I could traverse that hill in my sleep."

But he had her hand clutched in his before she'd even finished

speaking, and he was disinclined to surrender it.
“By all means,” he said. “Lead the way.”



Theo kept her eyes fixed upon the shadow of the manor house looming on the hill above them as she walked, skillfully navigating the uneven dips and rises of the hill. Which was quite all right with Alex, because it gave him the opportunity to stare at the swell of her bottom through the fabric of her trousers as she walked in front of him.

“It’s got to be at least fifty rooms,” she said. “How are we to find the one we need?”

It was sixty-three rooms, actually—and one of his smaller properties. A rock dug into the arch of his foot and he grimaced before replying, “Grey drew me a map. The room we’re looking for will be on the ground floor, third door to the right in the east wing.”

“He drew you a map?” That seemed to snap her free of her concentration, and she darted a glance at him over her shoulder. “How did he manage that?”

“I told you; he’s got a peculiar memory.” The proportions had been all wrong, of course—but the general layout that Grey had provided seemed to be accurate enough. “It’s the most incredible thing. He’s quite a force to be reckoned with, in no small part because of it.” Grey never forgot a thing, and he could call it all to his tongue in a moment. He collected secrets and gossip, using them as fodder for manipulation. Half the *Ton* was indebted to him for the things he’d learned about them, or the vowels he’d secured from them.

“We’ll need to be careful,” he added. “Mr. Jennings lives in the manor.” Although Grey had neglected to point out *where*, which seemed precisely the sort of contrary, Machiavellian thing that Grey would do. Provide just enough information to be useful, and then let circumstances play out as they would. Like a trial over which he was the sole arbiter.

Another rock crushed his toes into the interior of his boot. How Theo had managed to avoid them thus far was beyond his understanding.

“I would have thought that Ivywilde Hall had a steward’s cottage, or something of that nature,” Theo said pensively.

“It does.” This was offered through gritted teeth. “Ivywilde has several cottages located on its grounds, any one of which would have made a suitable home for Mr. Jennings.” But none of those had been good enough for Jennings, it had seemed. “Grey says he’s taken up the master suite.”

Theo’s mouth popped open. “No,” she said. “He wouldn’t—” But she could not complete the thought, as she considered it. “That lying, grasping little *worm!*”

Yes—Jennings was that, and more. Alex had never once come to Ivywilde during Mr. Jennings’ tenure, and so he had no idea exactly where the master suite might be located. Though he did not doubt that there had probably been a time that Jennings had stayed in the steward’s cottage, still there remained the certainty that—much like within other areas of his authority—gradually Jennings had touched his toes beyond it, and then hastened to take whatever he could grasp in his greedy palms.

He was in that massive house, playing at being Lord of the Manor. And all while Alex was down in the town, playing at being a common laborer. Mr. Jennings had set himself up as the Duke of Davenport *in absentia*, effectively. And in his certainty that he would continue to be permitted to run Ivywilde and its tenant farms as he saw fit, he had oozed into the role and played it to its best advantage.

He could feel Theo’s fury in the tight grip of her fingers. It simmered off of her in waves, evident in the *crunch* of her boots as she walked, stomping resolutely up the hill and crushing grass and rock beneath her as she did.

He rubbed his thumb across her knuckles. “Easy,” he said. “The household should have retired for the evening, but here in the countryside—” He didn’t need to complete the thought. It could be an oppressive sort of quiet, and though he’d grown accustomed to the night noises, he also knew that he would recognize a footfall if he heard it. And so would whatever staff happened to be residing at the hall. A single unwary footstep—heavy with the force of her anger—could rouse the whole household.

The manor was dark, its windows black as pitch, vacant eyes staring out over the valley below. Not so much as a candle in

an upper window glowed to suggest that anyone at all remained awake.

“Unfortunately,” he whispered as they crossed the well-maintained lawn where their boots would whisper across the grass rather than crunch upon the gravel lining the drive, “the staff that work within the house were hired on from elsewhere, so they have no particular loyalties to the town.” Which meant that he had not been able to prevail upon a relative to pass a message within—there would be no doors left unlocked, no window left discreetly open to ease their passage. Still, Grey had identified the likeliest door for entry—the one near the servants’ stairs in the east wing.

“No,” Theo bit off, tone clipped even in a whisper as he nudged her toward the terrace that wound round the back of the house. “He sacked the lot of them some years ago. How did you know?”

“I’ve spoken with most of the families in town,” he reminded her. “It’s not usual, what he did, you know.” It was a commonplace occurrence to hire out help from the neighboring towns, to provide an extra income for the families that resided therein. Daughters of tenant farmers made good maids, and sons footman—and the master earned the loyalty of his tenants with good work and decent wages. A beneficial arrangement for all, except— “I suspect that Jennings did not want the loyalties of the household staff compromised by other allegiances. And he had stolen so much from the townsfolk that he’d all but guaranteed himself a sprinkle of arsenic served up with his breakfast.”

Theo offered a soft snort. “Poison is so cowardly. I’d have simply stabbed him.”

Why was that so arousing?

The shadows swallowed them as they slipped past a row of hedges, and Alex slid his hand into his pocket, taking pains not to allow the set of skeleton keys within to jingle overmuch as he retrieved them. Though he could hardly see, he let Theo’s hand fall and stretched out his fingers, finding first the cool panes of glass that comprised a window, then rough stone brick—and then a doorjamb, framing the wood door.

He dropped to his knees, feeling for the door handle, and beneath it, the keyhole.

Theo crouched beside him, her hands braced on her knees. “How do those work?” she whispered, and he assumed she referred to the keys that he clenched in his hand.

“Haven’t the faintest,” he said. “Thievery—and the tools of its trade—is not my area of expertise.” He marked the keyhole with his index finger and selected a key at random. The shrill whine of the key scraping metal within seemed unnaturally loud in the stillness of the night.

“Good God,” Theo hissed. “You’d think you’d never opened a door in the whole of your life. Give it here.” Her shoulder shoved at his, and her hand wrapped around his wrist, sliding her fingers up his hand until she pried the skeleton keys from it.

And he—simply *let* her. Because she was right, damn it all. He’d had servants and butlers the whole of his life. The last time he’d unlocked and opened a door all on his own might well have been *years* ago. The vast majority of the time, it was simply done *for* him.

“Grey will fuss if I don’t do it myself,” he said, somewhat sulkily. Though he supposed that on some level, Grey would be pleased that Theo had also chosen to undertake his ham-fisted attempt at a lesson.

“Well, you can do the next one, then. But better that we get *in* first.” Her attempts were far more subtle than his own, less the screech of metal upon metal and more a faint whisk of sound, little more than a whisper.

He wished he could see the look of concentration on her face—the fierce gleam that came into her eyes when she was determined to see something through. Instead he had to settle for placing his hand at the small of her back, feeling the minute pull and stretch of muscles as she worked. “If it’s any consolation, Serena says it’s easier to learn to pick locks in the dark. You learn to rely on touch and not sight.”

“I’d ask why it is that your friends are so well-acquainted with lock picking,” she muttered. “But I’m certain I wouldn’t want to know the answer. I might be called to give testimony, and I shouldn’t like to be responsible for any of them being transported.”

A grin spread across his face. “Don’t worry; they’re practically untouchable.” But it warmed him that she already felt some

manner of loyalty toward them. “And largely they’ve only stolen from each other. John’s not likely to bring charges against Violet.”

A soft puff of laughter escaped her, muffled between her fingers. “Damn. I’m certain I almost had it. Don’t make me laugh—my fingers will slip.” He heard another slow, steady jiggle of the key in the lock, and then a soft click, followed by —“Ah! That’s it.”

The triumph in her voice skittered down his spine like a caress, and it seemed so natural to turn his head and kiss her—just a light brush of his lips across the apple of her cheek. She made a soft, sweet sound, practically a sigh. For all of a moment, before she found the shell of his ear with pinching fingers and gave it a decisive tweak. “*Not here*, you dolt. Do you *want* to get caught?”

He rubbed his ear briskly with one hand. “I can’t believe you did that. Even my mother hasn’t done *that* since I was a child.” “Hm.” Theo tested the handle, slowly easing the door open. It swung inward without so much as a squeak, revealing an entryway dark as pitch. “Perhaps she’s let you run wild a bit too long, then. Now, *shh*.” She popped up from her crouch, stepping noiselessly through the door, skeleton keys clutched in her fist.

With a nudge, he directed her past the servants’ stairs to the right, and together they proceeded past a staircase, which wound round to the upper levels in a narrow spiral. The scent of polish hung thick in the air, which did not surprise him. There was little doubt that Jennings would insist upon gleaming perfection for the fiefdom he’d created for himself here—even if it happened to belong, in point of fact, to someone else.

The corridor stretched out before them was predictably deserted; with the servants housed upon the third it was unlikely that they would encounter anyone lingering about. Thick carpets lined the floor, muffling the sound of their footsteps, but from the plush give of them beneath his shoes, Alex suspected they would be new and wondered if perhaps this was where Jennings had directed the bulk of the funds that had been given to him ostensibly to make repairs and improvements in the village. Maudie had had a leaky tavern

roof for seasons at least, and for what? A new carpet in a little-used wing of a sprawling manor house?

What other luxuries had Jennings afforded himself at the expense of the townsfolk who had relied on his stewardship? The very thought of it sent a surge of anger zipping through his blood.

Theo paused ahead of him, peering down the intersecting hallway, awaiting direction. With a hand at her waist, he turned her down the hallway, and counted off doors with one hand drifting along the wall, pausing at the third.

Theo stretched onto her toes as she pressed the skeleton keys into his palm. “Your turn,” she mouthed against his ear, the brush of her lips there coaxing out a shiver.

Damnation. Now he not only had to contend with the trickiness of ferreting out the right key for the lock, but an uncomfortable bulge in his trousers. As she stood watch, he cycled through the keys one at a time, attempting to emulate her delicate touch with them. It was an exercise in frustration, and he resisted the urge to grind his teeth against the impatience swelling in his chest with each failed attempt.

And then, finally, he gave a half-hearted twist to a key, and the lock produced a solid click. *He’d done it.* But Theo gave him no time at all to savor his victory; she reached past his head and grasped the handle, swinging the door wide and traipsing inside as if she owned it.

Which was fine. Someday—if he could convince her—she *would*.

He closed the door behind them as he stepped into the room, and a moment later he heard the strike of a flint, followed by the sputter and hiss of a candlewick. A soft glow of light haloed the desk situated toward the rear of the room, where Theo stood, carefully replacing the tinderbox in the position in which she had found it.

“The curtains are drawn,” she whispered by way of explanation, with a jerk of her head toward the heavy brocade curtains that covered the window. “And we need the light in here.” Her fingers rooted beneath the desk, searching. “There’s drawers here,” she said, “and they’re *all* locked.”

Of *course* they were. Because Jennings would want his ledgers both close at hand and protected from snooping eyes.

The chair positioned behind the desk squeaked as he dropped into it, and he set to work on the drawers as Theo prowled the office, exploring what little the light of the candle revealed so distant from it. He wondered what she thought of it, this house that he'd considered a minor property—overlooked and largely forgotten.

The first drawer slid open beneath his ministrations with a sigh and a jingle of coin—a heavy purse lay within, bulging at the seams. Likely Jennings' swindled gains from the most recent quarter day, he thought, and felt a muscle tick in his jaw.

“Oh,” Theo whispered. “There are so many books.” Her fingers trailed reverently across the spines of the volumes that lined the cases built into the walls. In reality there weren't so very many—perhaps a hundred or so, and likely they were nothing more than the solid, weighty sort of texts that men kept in their offices to appear learned. They were certainly intended more for decoration than for leisure. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that his library at his home in London was possessed of some three thousand volumes.

But she still thought him a solicitor, and how could a simple solicitor—even a well-connected one—afford quite so many books? So he held his tongue on that front and instead inquired, “Do you enjoy reading, then?”

“I think I would, if I had the time for it.” Her plait slid over her shoulder as she walked the bounds of the room, studying the furnishings. “We haven't got a lending library, and books are so expensive, you know. We do get *The Times*, but most of the town isn't truly literate. But Papa loved to read, and so he taught me with our family Bible. Even if he can't read the paper any longer, he enjoys having someone read aloud to him.” A slice of her chin was revealed in the flickering candlelight as she turned toward him. “Will he be back from London soon?”

“Quite soon.” He hoped. The second drawer was proving more of a challenge than he would have liked, and the scrape of the skeleton key in the lock was jarring, even though he was fairly certain by the feel of it that he'd selected the right one.

“He said he was on an errand for you,” she murmured, but there was a question in her voice.

Another secret he was keeping from her—except this time at

Tom's behest. There was no certainty that the ocular surgery would be successful, and Tom had not wanted to rouse Theo's hopes for him only to dash them if nothing came of it. Still, he could offer her something small that would not betray Tom's secret. "Actually," he said, and felt the key turn at last in the lock, "it's your father's errand. But it is also his business, and so I would be betraying his confidence to speak of it. He'll be home soon; you need not worry on that score." The opened drawer revealed only sheets of paper, filled with half-finished letters.

The top letter was filled with obsequious remarks and halting complaints about Serena and Grey, slander couched in near hand-wringing prose, of all the ways in which they had trespassed and violated the duke's generosity during their brief stay. A clear attempt to drive a wedge between friends in the hopes that any tales they carried back with them would be disbelieved, and in an effort to ensure they would not be welcomed back in the future.

Ironically, the one way that they *had* trespassed—Grey's late-night tour about the manor to map it out and locate the ledgers—had not made it into the letter. Perhaps even Jennings had thought that accusing a marquess of such perfidy would be a step too far to be creditable.

He had set to work on the third drawer just as Theo gave a soft gasp.

"Someone's coming."

And then he heard it. Footsteps drawing closer, coupled with a grumbling in the distance: "Bloody damned Granburys and their screaming brat." It was issued in a grating nasally voice, dripping with scorn. "Upset the whole damned household."

Theo was skittering across the floor even as he withdrew the skeleton key from the lock, and she puffed out the candle in one breath, plunging the room into darkness as a thin curl of smoke rose from the extinguished wick.

The jingle of keys sounded in the corridor just as Alex slid shut the drawers. Theo caught his arm, tugged him out of the chair, and turned to unlatch the window and slide it open. "*Out*," she mouthed, shoving him toward it and climbing after him.

She had only just slid the window closed and thrown herself

into the darkness bracketing the side of the house with him when Alex heard a muffled exclamation from within the house. Wedged between a hedge and the cold stone of the wall, he could only draw Theo deeper into the shadows with him as hurried footsteps pounded across the floor of the office toward the window.

Had the heavy curtains draping the window settled to stillness in time, or had their movements revealed the presence of intruders?

The window slid open once again, and Alex could see Jennings there, his unnaturally long nose lengthened still further by the unflattering light of the candle he held in his hand. For a long, breathless moment Jennings peered out into the night, brows furrowed as he cast his gaze this way and that, seeking the intruders he surely suspected had been within. Luckily, the candle's light could not reach them where they stood, still as the stone against their backs. With a muttered oath, at last Jennings retreated back through the window and shut it once again. The decisive *snick* of the latch engaging ricocheted through the night, and Alex felt his shoulders sag with relief when the sound that followed was not Jennings bellowing for assistance from whatever staff might be within earshot, but rather the rough scrape of a drawer jerking open and then the clink of coins as they landed upon the desk.

So Jennings was less concerned about potential intruders than he was with ensuring that none of his ill-gotten gains had been stolen. It was enough to bring a scathing sound rumbling into Alex's throat.

"Did you get them?" Theo's low murmur only just reached his ears, nearly drowned out by the rustle of the breeze through the hedges. Stray strands of hair that had come loose from her plait tickled his chin. "Did you get the ledgers?"

"No." But was that truly such a bad thing? Once he had the ledgers in his position, he would be obliged to act upon them. He could no longer masquerade as the Vances' hired laborer. He would have to once more slip into the skin of *the duke*, with everything that entailed.

Theo would never agree to marry him then. Not knowing who he was, and what he had let happen in her village—to her family and her friends—out of his neglect. It would be the

surest way to lose every bit of ground he'd gained with her. "We have to go back," she said, and the desperation that shredded through her whisper tugged at his heart. "We have to —"

"Later," he said, and cupped her shoulder, urging her back around the house. "I don't think he's summoned anyone to search the grounds, but, nevertheless, we ought not linger."

"But the *ledgers*." Theo tugged against his hold. "We can wait. He'll go back to bed—"

"Absolutely not. One housebreaking attempt is quite enough for one evening." He snatched for her hand and pulled her back, dragging her along in his footsteps as he strode away from the house into the night. "Theo, *stop*. Jennings could choose to send someone to patrol the grounds at any moment. Being caught here will hinder our chances of collecting the evidence." So far, Jennings had only the *suspicion* of a break-in. With nothing taken, perhaps he would let the matter rest. "If he grows too suspicious and thinks himself at risk of being caught, he could destroy the lot of it."

He felt the shudder that rolled through her, felt her fingers flex in his, squeezing tightly. She stumbled a pace, and then fell into step beside him, protests extinguished.

"You're right," she said softly. "You're right. We'll have to try again some other time." Still her fingers clutched tightly to his—as if she drew strength from the clasp of his hand around her own.

Just as much, he hoped, as he drew from her presence at his side.

Chapter Twenty

Theo stopped before her window, palm braced against the sill, fingertips brushing a cold pane of glass.

She and Alex could have parted company in the fields. Certainly it would have been a shorter walk for Alex, had he chosen to simply return to the barn. Instead, he had escorted her home, like a gentleman—to see her to her window, if not the door.

Still his hand gripped hers, as if he were reluctant to surrender that small touch—and she wasn't sure she wished to surrender it, either. His body at her side was a barrier against the breeze that whistled through the grass, and soon she would have to climb through the window and return to her small, cold bed.

Her thumb drummed an agitated rhythm against the sill. She had never been wicked, not *truly*. Perhaps she had gotten into some childish mischief here and there, but she had never—not *once*—done anything *truly* scandalous. Even the trousers she'd donned earlier in the evening were a rare choice, worn only out in the fields where no one would see her.

She had had no time to be wicked, even if she had been so inclined. Her hours had been spoken for, from dawn until dusk—and sometimes long thereafter. And it had been a long while since she had felt anything that might have even remotely be termed *inclination*. Even years ago, when she had nurtured futile dreams of marrying Heath, it had been a tepid sort of desire at best—she simply hadn't had anything with which to compare it.

It had been comfortable. Pleasant. The sort of simplicity that had left her to imagine things like hot summer evenings spent passing the time in chairs on the front porch, and grandchildren gathered around her knees—muddling over whole decades in between, as if they were inconsequential.

This? This was messy and frightening and confusing. But it made her heart pound and her pulse race, and for the first time in her life, she *felt* things. Even if those things were

uncomfortable and perplexing and difficult—Alex made her *feel*. Emotions she'd thought herself immune to, and alarming flutters in her stomach, and a worrying, almost maudlin sentimentality when she considered that someday, some not-too-distant day, he would have to leave, and—

“Would you like to come in?” She blurted out the question, the words coming in a mad rush, practically overlapping one another.

“*God, yes.*”

It took only a firm tug to pull her away from the window and into his arms, and a little zip of pleasure coasted down her spine as his palm settled over her back, slowly meandering down to the curve of her bottom. A proprietary, possessive touch, but one that calmed the frenetic beat of her heart and the anxious clutch of her fingers. A touch she could relax into, as if he had effortlessly whisked every one of her worries away with it.

As if this was precisely where—and with *whom*—she was meant to be.

He swallowed the sigh that came pouring from her throat which was made of every bit of tension she had carried with her for so many years, and the heat of his mouth on hers seared away any lingering doubt. A month ago, she would never have believed such a thing possible—would never have believed that she might find herself in such a situation, much less that she would find herself in it with *him*. But now she knew exactly what manner of man he was, and above all other things, he was *hers*.

Her breasts pressed against the firm wall of his chest as she looped her arms around his neck, sliding her fingers into his wind-ruffled hair just as he had made a habit of doing to hers, and the low, savage sound he made into her mouth sent a shiver through her limbs. His grip redoubled, bringing her closer still, her thighs flush with his. The rigid length of his arousal was cradled against the soft flesh of her belly; a pressure that she had expected to feel strange or peculiar. Instead it felt natural, right—as if they had been formed to fit one another in exactly this manner.

Amidst desperate, clinging kisses, his grip eased fractionally, regretfully. His voice was guttural, rough. “Yes, I want to

come in,” he said, and his nose brushed hers in a gentle, affectionate gesture. “But I won’t. Not beneath your father’s roof. Not with John and Violet just across the hall.” His hand clasped her hip, gave a soft squeeze. And then he peeled her arms from about his neck and took one large, resolute step back.

The heat of his body faded swiftly with the cool air that rushed in around her. Bereft and baffled by his sudden desertion, she stretched out one hand in an attempt to lure him back. Instead he caught it in his before she could lay it upon him and pressed a heated kiss into her palm.

“Good night, Theo,” he said. “Sleep well.”

Before she could utter a word of protest, he was striding away, fading into the dark embrace of the night—instead of her own.



Sleep well? *Sleep well?* Theo fumed as she kicked off her trousers and shoved them once more to the very bottom and back of the drawer from which she had plucked them. Snatching up her nightgown, which had been thrown haphazardly across her bed, she wrestled the garment over her head, wincing as the neck caught on the ribbon binding her plait and pulled.

Sleep well. She snorted—unlikely, given that she had tossed and turned even before he had arrived at her window, mind as twisted and wrinkled as the tangled covers she had abandoned when Alex had arrived at her window. How was she meant to *sleep*—much less *sleep well*—when all of her thoughts were occupied with *him*?

She didn’t *want* to sleep. She wanted—

She wanted to feel his arms wrapped around her. To learn the texture of his skin and feel the heat of it on her own. She wanted to feel those callused fingers he had become so proud of, to know how it was that a man touched a woman he wished to marry.

Her hand fisted in the worn fabric of her quilt. There was no part of her that wished to climb onto her hard mattress, lay her head upon her lumpy pillow, and spend a single moment

attempting what would certainly be a futile effort at sleep. She would rather sleep in the hayloft.

The thought caught fire in her head and tingled all the way down to her toes. Why *shouldn't* she? She had as much a right to it as he. If she decided to spend the night in the hayloft, no one was going to stop her—especially not an unexpectedly prudish and unnecessarily principled *duke*.

Jamming her feet into her boots, she threw open her door and stepped out into the hallway.

Muffled from behind the door opposite her own, she heard a feminine voice: “And there she goes. You owe me a crown.”

Followed by a peevish rebuttal from John: “*You* said she’d take the window again. The door is worth a half crown at *best*.”

A hushed pattern of bickering arose, and Theo rolled her eyes even though there was no one to see her. Still, given that they’d *wagered* on her, she didn’t bother to muffle her footsteps as she swept down the hall and toward the kitchen door, which let her out onto the porch and into Papa’s garden.

It shouldn’t have been so dark, not with so many stars scattered across the sky like loose pearls. But the night settled around her, a veil shielding her from the obligations that would arise again with the sun. At least until morning broke anew, she was free to do as she pleased.

The barn door was half open already, and she slipped within, feeling her way toward the ladder leading to the loft in the darkness. Above her, there was a rustling sound—hay being crushed and shifted beneath a restless body—and a gruff muttering that disguised the sound of her footsteps.

“*Off*, Ted. Away with you, Frederica. I am in *no mood*.”

Ah, so that was how he’d become such bosom companions with the barn cats—they slept with him in the hayloft. The thought of several kittens swarming him in an attempt to find a warm and comfortable place to sleep was both amusing and heartwarming. She held onto the ladder with one hand and eased her boots off with the other, the thrashing sounds emanating from above a testament to Alex’s own fruitless attempts at achieving sleep.

Her bare feet braced on the lowest rung, she began to climb toward the loft, one foot after the other, up the rungs that had

been worn smooth from age and use. In the darkness it was difficult to see more than a few inches before her, but as her head popped up into the loft, a sprinkling of light trailed in through the sliver between the closed shutters of the lone window. Just enough that she didn't find herself dizzied and disoriented.

Just enough to see Alex's silhouetted profile, one knee thrown up, as he reclined upon his back, one arm cast over his head gripping the pillow, and the other—

The other buried beneath the blankets, settled over his groin.

Oh. She leaned forward a little too far to maintain her balance, and threw forward her hands to brace herself, sinking nearly elbow-deep into the prickly hay.

A gravelly growl rose up as Alex jerked upright, reaching toward her. "Ted, I *told* you..." Whatever he had intended to say faded into silence as his fingers closed around her arm, when he had doubtless been expecting soft kitten fur.

"*Theo?*" That was incredulity in his voice, interlaced with pleasure, and quite possibly trepidation. Like a web of conflicted emotions had woven itself inside his throat. Just as quickly as he had grabbed her, he released her as if her skin had scorched his, scuttling backward and retreating beneath the blanket once again.

"I *hope* you had not been expecting someone else." It was a neat trick to make it over onto the hayloft with the confining restriction of her nightgown, but somehow she managed. Bits of hay pierced the thin fabric, pricking at her skin. "How do you manage to sleep here?" she asked. "It seems dreadfully uncomfortable."

Voice thick, he said, "Layered blankets help. Theo, please—" But even as he stretched out one hand as if to ward her away, she scrambled forward from the scratchy hay to the relative comfort of his blankets.

Like some sort of scandalized maiden, he drew the topmost blanket, which had fallen down to his waist, up to his chin—or would have, if she had not been kneeling atop it. A vicious yank returned control of it to him, but also sent Theo sprawling, her knee jerked right out from under her along with the blanket.

"*Oof.*" A grunt of pain escaped him as the point of her elbow

landed in his stomach. With a wheezing breath, he sank back down to his back, one hand coming up to cover his eyes. Sucking in a huge, raspy breath, which jostled her elbow, he let it out once again on a ragged laugh. “Am I being punished for something? I act with honor—with the *noblest* of intentions—and *this* is my reward?” he inquired. And then, with a beleaguered sigh as she removed her elbow from his stomach, he added, “Theo. I’m not a damned saint, and I have only so much self-control, which has been sorely tested this evening. You *must* leave, before I—”

Her hand settled on his chest, a light touch just over his breastbone, and she heard his breath whistle through his teeth. “We’re not beneath Papa’s roof,” she said softly.

“Technically,” he gritted out, “there *is* a roof above us, and it belongs to your father.”

“Technically,” she replied, “it belongs to the duke. We only lease it.”

“That *really* isn’t any better,” he groaned, flattening his hand over her own when she would have eased it downward. “Theo, *please*. I don’t sleep clothed.”

He was *naked* beneath that blanket? Well, she supposed that explained his fierce defense of his modesty. With her free hand, she located the edge of the blanket where it had slipped to his waist, and nudged it down. A growl—not unlike a great, predatory beast—split the silence that had fallen between them only a half second before his hands seized her, flipping her to her back.

Hay was not quite as forgiving as she would have imagined. Or perhaps Alex’s restless thrashing had simply packed it into a dense pad beneath the piled blankets. She flexed her wrists, somewhat annoyed to find them caught firmly in the grip of his hands. Somehow, he’d got one of his legs thrown across the both of hers, and the faint moonlight spilling in from the window limned his shoulders and arms in a pale milky glow.

She watched his muscles bunch and move as he tightened his grip on her wrists, fascinated. It wasn’t as if she had never seen a man without his shirt before. Harvest season could be brutally hot when one was working the fields. Still, the sight of a man without his shirt had never before provoked even a flicker of interest.

Until Alex. Now, her fingers curled with the desire to touch all of that skin that gleamed in the moonlight. To feel more than just the wool of the blanket separating her legs from his.

Soft strands of his hair tickled her cheek as he bent down. “Do you have even the *faintest* idea of what you are inviting?” he asked in an irritable mutter, which was rendered as he relaxed his grip only slightly. Not enough for her to free her hands, but enough that she knew he had considered that he might be holding on just a bit too tightly for comfort.

“I live on a farm,” she said. “We have all sorts of animals and livestock. One could say that I have a general familiarity with their mating habits. You cannot raise livestock without witnessing a fair amount of copulation.”

His shoulders hitched as a hoarse laugh erupted from his lips. “Lord. Don’t call it *copulation*, if you please.”

“Why?” Her brow furrowed in confusion. “That *is* the term, is it not? I don’t think it could be called fornication, exactly. Animal husbandry—”

“Don’t call it *fornication*, either. It’s decidedly unromantic.” Nonetheless, she could feel the smile wreathing his lips as bent to press them to her temple. The heat of his bare chest seeped through the linen of her nightgown, and her toes curled.

She licked her dry lips and asked, “What ought I call it, then? Carnal relations? Intercourse?”

“Nothing, because we won’t be doing it.” This was followed by a sigh of genuine regret. “Not in a hayloft, and not when you haven’t agreed to marry me.”

Theo pursed her lips, shifted beneath the weight of his knee slung over legs. “What if I *did* agree?”

He stilled entirely. “What are you saying?”

“Supposing I *did* agree to—to—”

“To marry me.”

Her hands flexed again in his grip. “Yes. To marry you. Supposing I did—”

“Which is not an agreement to make lightly, because I will hold you to your word.” She could well imagine the severe slash of his blond brows accompanying the statement.

Her lips pursed. “But if I *did*, we would be—”

“Engaged.”

“Yes. Engaged. To be married.”

“Marriages do have the remarkable tendency to follow engagements, yes.” There was a thread of humor woven through his otherwise bland, dry words.

“But if we *were* engaged, and then we—” An aggravated little sound slipped out of her throat. “I don’t know what I should call it.” He’d already denied most of the words she knew.

“*Love*,” he said, rather a bit too fiercely, and enunciated in staccato, sharply-defined syllables, “*I—love—you*. It’s always going to be love. There will nothing sordid or tawdry or unsavory about it.” And after a moment of hesitation, he added, “Even if it *does* take place in a hayloft. Is this a negotiation?”

“Yes. Is it working?”

He blew out an aggrieved breath. “Unfortunately, rather well. Do you know, I think you might be worse at accepting proposals than I am at making them.” But his right hand released her wrist and cradled her face instead. “No *supposing*. You have to be certain.”

“I am.” A strange little flutter of emotion caught in her throat—like a hiccough mixed with a sob—as she realized that she really, truly, *was* certain. She was going to marry this man, and she would take Violet’s lessons, and she would likely be the oddest duchess that London had ever seen, but it wouldn’t matter in the least—because all that mattered was that he loved her.

And she loved him.

Her palm settled over his heart. “I am certain. But—I don’t want to be married in London.” Not with crowds of people she didn’t know looking on and judging her.

“I’ll speak to the reverend tomorrow,” he said, and eased himself down to nuzzle the shell of her ear.

“Tomorrow? But, Papa—”

“It’s three Sundays to call the banns. He’s not going to miss our wedding, I promise you that.” The whole of his body had blanketed hers, and his hand fisted in the skirt of her nightgown, gathering the material up. “You’ll have to expect my mother to be in attendance, too,” he added. “She missed John and Violet’s wedding. She would only miss mine over my dead body.”

“Don’t you mean *her* dead body?” She couldn’t think with his

hand curved over her thigh, sliding up toward the juncture of her legs.

“No,” he said, dropping a kiss near her ear. “I meant she’d kill me.”

She would have laughed, if she could have found it within herself to do so. But all of her attention was focused on those sly fingers burning a gentle path up her inner thigh. The maddening desire to squirm at the strange, almost ticklish sensation struck her, and her fingers curled into her palm before she realized he had, in fact, released *both* of her wrists.

His fingertips found the cluster of curls between her thighs, and her hips arched into the gentle stroke. Just a graze, a teasing touch—moving on before she truly had the chance to enjoy it, and sweeping up her belly.

Her nightgown had bunched up beneath her breasts, held there by the pressure of Alex’s arm, and the cool air that rushed in beneath it provoked a cascade of shivers. As she lifted her arms, he whisked the gown over her head and sent it sailing somewhere, past the pillow uncomfortably cradling her head.

“You could have a traditional wedding night, you know,” Alex said, but he slid one arm beneath her as he settled over her, and the possessive nature of the embrace suggested he would be somewhat less than amenable toward letting her go. Which was fine, as Theo wasn’t particularly inclined to go anywhere herself.

“A wedding night is a wedding night, regardless of tradition,” she said as his warm chest touched her breasts. It was odd to be so bare in the presence of another person—odd, but exhilarating. There was just so much *more* than she had expected. She could feel his breaths as his lungs expanded, feel one of his hairy legs abrading her own, feel the muscles bunch and flex in the arm he braced beneath her neck.

He held still as she let her fingers wander, sliding over his shoulders, his back, his waist—though a puff of breath against her neck and a slight flinch suggested that she had inadvertently discovered a ticklish spot.

“I wish I could see you,” she breathed.

“That *will* have to wait for our wedding night,” he said. “I’m not keen to bring an open flame near this much hay.” When his fingers coasted down one of her arms and discovered the chill

bumps that had risen there, he tugged the tangled blanket out from where it had become bunched and wedged between their entangled legs, and draped it over himself, effectively blanketing her as well.

But now there was that hardness pressing against her belly, hot and firm, without even the flimsiest of barriers between them.

“I’ve thought about this,” he confided, his voice dropping to a silky murmur. “Tonight, even. When you climbed out of your window in those trousers, and they just embraced you so perfectly”—one hand slipped beneath her to squeeze the curve of her bottom—“right here.”

Her stomach performed a giddy little flip.

“And that shirt. You had nothing on beneath it, and your breasts moved with every step. I’m surprised I didn’t break my neck trying to climb that hill.” His hand slid up her side, fingers glancing over the curve of her breast as his palm came up to cup the weight of it as his knee wedged itself between hers.

Theo began to realize that her understanding of mating—at least as pertained to *people*—was somewhat lacking. She had known that there had to be something different, something *more* than that which occurred between animals. But none of her nebulous imaginings had ever been quite so...explicit. Her head felt heavy, overloaded with stimulus, struggling to process each new touch even as she anticipated the next—the heat of his breath against her neck, preceding the touch of his lips. The caress of his thumb over the point of her nipple. The way his knee drew up and his thigh pressed against her core, and the hot, shivery sensations it evoked.

There was a tremble in her arms as she draped them over his shoulders and rubbed her palms down his back, feeling the cool mist of sweat that had risen there. Every part of her wanted to arch into the touch of his, like—like they were two pieces of the same whole, yearning to join together once more. Her legs moved restlessly, squirming until he curled his hand around her thigh and draped it around his waist, seamlessly readjusting the fit of their bodies, and she swallowed the gasp that swept up her throat as she *felt* him, there, against the most private part of her.

“Second thoughts?” he murmured near her ear, his teeth

nibbling the lobe.

“No,” she said, and it came out a breathy sigh as she turned her head, seeking his lips. “No, I—I can hardly think at all,” she added absently, chasing the kiss he held just out of reach. He let her frustration build until the blunt edges of her nails dug divots into his shoulders in an effort to hold him still, and he chuckled at the throaty growl she gave. The kiss, when it came, was such a relief that the entirety of her body softened and relaxed, sinking into a state of bliss.

That was what he had been waiting for, she realized, as his hand curved around her thigh and made slow and steady progress upward. For her jittery nerves to subside; for her to simply relax and enjoy—to feel more than think. But even that realization drifted away from her as his fingers sifted through the curls at the apex of her thighs and touched a place so sensitive that it made her hips arch toward that slow, lingering stroke of their own accord. And he—he made a low, satisfied sound deep in his throat and did it again, and again, until she couldn’t contain the odd, strangled little sounds that those strokes provoked.

She heard herself make a muted embarrassing noise as his fingers slid inside her, stretching delicate tissues. Somehow she had clenched a fistful of his hair in one hand and she was certain she *had* to be pulling it, and yet somehow his voice was only slightly strained as he asked, “I’m not hurting you?” She gave a short shake of her head, though she couldn’t have managed words to save her life. Her whole body shimmered, every nerve set alight with the pressure of his fingers moving inside of her, setting a rhythm that made her lift her hips to meet it. A tide of heat swept over her, emanating from that place where his fingers stroked and played, and her skin felt flushed and dewy.

A tingling pleasure spread through her limbs, and she clutched at him desperately, grateful for the weight of his body over hers that kept her bound to the earth instead of floating out into the starry night.

And then his fingers left her, and she gave a strangled, mournful little cry into the hollow of his throat, where she had somehow buried her face. The soothing brush of his lips against her ear did little to ease the sting of his withdrawal,

just as she had been on the verge of something incredible.

His groan burned her ears as she squirmed restlessly against him, searching for the relief he had promised. “Theo. Just hold on to me, darling,” he said, his voice a hoarse rumble. He slid one hand beneath her to lift her into the thrust of his hips, and she whimpered as he glided across damp, sensitive flesh, and a skirl of white-hot bliss jolted through her.

The pressure of his entry stung just a little as she felt her body yielding to the insistent thrust of his—but she arched toward it in an effort to ease the emptiness inside of her. Distantly, she heard the strained praise that he murmured into her ear, felt the tight clasp of his hand at her hip.

“There,” he whispered, his voice sliding over her like a stroke of his hand, rippling down her spine. “That’s it. No, don’t move just yet—” He broke off on a strangled gasp, his hand clenching her hip in an effort to quell her instinctive movements.

He was trying to be considerate, she guessed, because there *was* a deep ache where they were joined, as her body adjusted to accommodate him, untested muscles protesting the invasion of his body by clenching around him. But it was impossible *not* to move—that ache grew into a throb, and the only thing that eased it was the friction of him moving inside her when she shifted her hips and lifted against him.

“Theo. Please.” The desperate, gravelly tenor of his voice sheared along her nerve endings, and his lips caught at hers in brief, stinging kisses. “Tell me I’m not hurting you.”

“It doesn’t hurt,” she said, marveling at the strange, husky quality of her voice. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders in an effort to hold him closer, and her thighs trembled as they nipped tighter about his waist. Her body moved in a helpless undulation, a clumsy attempt at achieving the satisfaction that drifted just out of her reach.

He muttered some breathless exclamation of relief, lost into the seam of her lips, and for a moment his arms held her just a shade too tightly. The first, exploratory thrust brought a sigh sliding up her throat and a ripple of pleasure tingling through her limbs. That ache faded into a pleasant glow of heat and sensation, building upon itself in an escalating wave.

With the pressure of his hand he eased her awkward motions

into his rhythm, and once she had found it, it was smooth and seamless—a dance performed without effort, without thought, to a melody of sighs and whispered love words. It was like something out of a dream to touch and be touched with such reverence, to feel the sweat-slick brush of his skin on hers. To turn her head and fall into the adoration of his kisses, to feel her body come alive beneath the sweet drugging heat of his. Pleasure sparkled along every inch of her skin, coalescing into a burst of ecstasy that sent her spiraling out into the starry sky, weightless and effervescent. His deep, quiet groan rumbled through the darkness, muffled into the tender skin of her throat. She felt his chest heave with hectic breaths, and the weight of his body collapsing over her was a welcome anchor as she drifted down into a cozy lassitude, sheltered from the chill of the night within his arms.

There was a security, a comfort, in the greedy grasp of his arms around her, in the rub of his hand down her side as he shifted the bulk of his weight off of her, and she curled up against him, legs and arms sliding together to interlock in a delightful, messy tangle of limbs. His lips brushed her forehead, her temple. Her hand settled over his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart beneath her palm.

Alex's hand found hers, interlacing their fingers. "I'll meet with the reverend first thing in the morning," he said in a low, satisfied murmur. "So I suppose all that remains is the question."

"Hm?" Theo rubbed her cheek against his shoulder as he drew her closer. "What question?"

"*The* question." His fingers squeezed hers. "Theo, will you marry me?"

They had already agreed that she *would*, and it really shouldn't have mattered whether or not he asked. But she knew that he had wanted so badly to get it *right*, and it touched her that he cared enough to ask anyway.

It *did* matter, because it was offered in all earnestness, and he was waiting for her response with bated breath, as if he feared that she might rescind her acceptance. Finally, neither of them were shouting, and she had not the *least* inclination to shove him into a cold bath. This time they had both gotten it right, even if it would never qualify as a conventional proposal.

But it was exactly the proposal she wanted, from exactly the man she wanted it from. Her unconventional duke, who loved her despite the fact that she would doubtless make him an even less conventional duchess—or perhaps even *because* of it.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes. Of course.” And she laughed as his breath whistled through his teeth as he let it out once more.

“Third time lucky,” he muttered, notching his chin above her head.

“I love you,” she murmured, and felt his arms contract around her. “I should have said earlier.”

“Yes, you should have.” But there was a whisk of laughter in his voice, for all that he had tried to imbue it with severity. “A man needs to know these things.”

Even if the hay beneath the blankets had packed itself down to a granite hardness, Theo had never been so comfortable as she was now, snuggled up against his chest. “Can I come back tomorrow night?”

“I think you’d better,” he said. “Else I would be reduced to crawling through your window—and you’re much louder than I had expected.”

It took a moment for his meaning to sink in, and she gasped in horror. “You don’t mean—”

“Let’s just say that it would be best if we did not tax John and Violet’s inclination to look the other way too strongly,” he said, chuckling. “Neither are overly given to lecturing, but I’d prefer not to stretch the bounds of their indulgence.” His palm rubbed her back in a soothing stroke. “Go to sleep. Dawn will come sooner than I’d like.”

Mortified, she turned her hot face against his shoulder and closed her eyes. For just a moment, as she drowsed against him before sleep pressed in around her, she considered opening her mouth and speaking those words that Violet and Serena had both cautioned her against: *I know who you truly are.*

But she said nothing.

And neither did he.

Chapter Twenty One

“Alexander Dryden, I am *extremely* disappointed in you!” Startled awake by Violet’s voice—which had not sounded in the *least* disappointed—Alex blinked his eyes open to find the day already well-advanced, and Theo stirring beside him. Muttering an expletive beneath his breath, he reached over his head, fumbling for Theo’s nightgown. The motion frightened away the cluster of kittens that had curled up around them during the night, sending Ted bounding right across Theo’s stomach. Her nose crinkled in annoyance as she sat up, holding the blankets to her breasts. Before his fingers had even brushed the edges of the fabric, Alex heard the sound of shoes falling upon the lowest rung of the ladder.

“*Violet*,” he growled, snatching Theo’s nightgown up at last. “I’ll thank you to mind your own business.”

“I’m Theo’s damned *chaperone* and you’ve *compromised* her, you oaf! What have you to say for yourself?” Though her voice was decidedly insistent, at least she seemed content to remain below. For the moment.

“I’ll have you know that *she* compromised *me*!” Alex shouted back.

“I *beg* your pardon.” Theo grabbed her nightgown from his outstretched fingers, and the fabric snapped with the violent shake she gave it to shake free the hay that clung to it still. She slipped it over her head and glared at him as it settled over her shoulders.

She looked so deliciously incensed, so delightfully embarrassed to have been caught in a compromising position. He could not resist adding, “She climbed right up here and seduced me. What man could possibly resist?” He spread his hands and offered up a helpless shrug, though this was more for Theo’s benefit than for Violet’s.

“Theo, I’m surprised at you,” Violet said, though her voice bespoke amusement rather than condemnation.

“Oh, no, you’re not,” Theo grumbled as she rose up onto her

knees, twitching her nightgown over her hips and down her legs. “You won a crown off of your husband last evening, because you *wagered* upon me.”

“It was *half* a crown,” Violet corrected. And then, speculatively: “Do you think you could go through the window next time?”

Theo threw up her hands. “You’re *all* mad, the lot of you!”

Alex caught her shoulder before she could rise and head for the ladder. “Now, now,” he said, enfolding her in his arms. “It’s too late to back out. I mean to speak to the reverend this morning, and you agreed—”

“Temporary madness,” Theo said through clenched teeth. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“You *are* getting married, then?” Violet interjected from below.

“Yes,” Alex said, and he was gratified that despite her irritation, Theo grumbled her own assent—even if it *did* follow a resigned sigh. He brushed her tangled hair back over her shoulders, and she turned her face up to receive a kiss, though the sour pucker of her lips left something to be desired.

“Don’t pout. Just because you were outmaneuvered—”

“Outmaneuvered!”

“—doesn’t mean we won’t be very happy together.” He chucked Theo beneath the chin, smoothing the scowl from her lips with the pad of his thumb. “I’m only teasing. Now, *up*, you slugabed—I’ve a reverend to visit. And *you*,” he called down to Violet. “Best you be going, or you’re likely to see parts of me that John would no doubt take great exception to.”

An unmasked sound of distaste echoed from below. “Theo, I’ll expect to see you in no more than a quarter of an hour,” Violet said as she hopped off the ladder. A moment later, her receding footsteps faded into silence.

“Does *every* conversation with your friends turn out like this one?” Theo asked, as Alex chased away a kitten that had settled back into his lap and turned to root through his trunk for clean clothing.

“Nearly all of them, to some degree or another,” he said absently, tugging his shirt over his head and reaching for his trousers. “You do grow accustomed to it. I’ll not lie to you, sometimes it’s utter chaos—but they’re family, all of them.

Violet wouldn't bother to poke fun unless she liked you."

A relieved expression flitted across her face, her shoulders falling to a natural slope. "They're lovely," she said. "Mad, of course. But lovely just the same. I hope they will—I mean to say, I hope we—"

"Theo," he said, as he fastened the fall of his trousers and reached for her shoulders. "If nothing else, they will love you because *I* love you. You have nothing to worry over. You'll get on famously. A few family dinners and you, Serena, and Violet will be thick as thieves, I promise you."

"And your mother?" This was delivered with a grimace, as if she were bracing herself for an unfavorable response.

"Violet had the right of it. She'll love you, too." He brushed a kiss across the tip of her nose. "So long as you are a faithful attendant of family dinners. Speaking of, perhaps I could relieve you of that burden this evening and try my hand at making dinner."

"May God save us all," Theo muttered beneath her breath, and Alex aimed a swat at her backside as she scrambled away toward the ladder.

And as he peeked his head over and watched her scramble free of the barn, a queer sense of peace settled over him. This was *it*, he realized—what John shared with Violet, and Grey with Serena. This sense of belonging, of completeness. The other half of his soul found at last. In just a few short weeks, Theo was going to be his wife.



"I shan't say a single word." Violet pantomimed twisting a key in a lock over her lips.

"Good," Theo said in response as she stomped in the door.

"I've been embarrassed quite enough for one day already."

"In *judgment*," Violet amended swiftly, bouncing upon the balls of her feet. "I shan't say a single word in *judgment*. But, *really*, if you *could* go out the window in the future—"

"*You*," Theo said accusingly, jabbing one finger in Violet's direction as she kicked off her boots, "are a *terrible* chaperone."

“Oh, had you wished me to be a good one?” Violet folded her arms over her chest. “If you would prefer for me to harangue you to death, I can certainly do my best to summon up a good lecture. Only look.” She arranged her features into a parody of a disapproving scowl and set her chin at a haughty angle. “I *have* practiced this expression, though I’ll admit I’ve never had to use it upon one of my female students.”

Theo had to admit, it was rather well done of her—though the forbidding line of Violet’s lips clearly wanted to list upward into a smile. “No,” she admitted with a sigh, as she dropped into a chair, the skirt of her nightgown billowing around her. “No lectures, if you please. Only tell me—do you truly think I can manage it? Being a duchess, I mean to say.” Just the thought made her stomach pitch and roll with nerves.

Violet’s face softened. “I think you’ll find it a good deal easier than managing a working farm,” she said. Her head tilted to one side in gentle inquiry. “Has Alex yet confessed...?”

Theo shook her head. “I thought he would last evening,” she said. “But he didn’t. And *I* didn’t. Should I have, do you think?”

Violet shrugged. “Knowing Alex, it has entirely slipped his mind. I’ll have John suggest to him that he ought to tell you. It’s hardly a fair secret to keep, now that you’re engaged to be married.”

Engaged. To be *married.* It sounded so foreign—and yet, the glow of pleasure that bloomed in her stomach at the words quieted even the frenzied churn of nervousness there. “Yes,” she said, and it crackled with decisiveness. “But I can’t just marry *Alex*. He is the *duke*, and he always has been, and they’re one and the same—” Belatedly, she realized she was babbling, trying to explain the twisted machinations of her thoughts. “Please help me,” she said, finally, wringing her hands before her. “Please *teach* me. I don’t want to make him ashamed of me. I don’t want to disappoint him.”

“Oh, Theo,” Violet sighed. “That won’t ever happen.” Her lips curled into a mischievous grin. “But if you make it a point to exit via your window from now on, I’ll teach you anything you like.”



“Something on your mind?” John inquired, a few evenings later, as he and Alex brought down the linens from the clothesline.

“Rather a lot,” Alex confessed as he grappled for two corners of the sheet, struggling to bring them together when they wanted to flap in the breeze that sailed through the garden. “The banns will be called beginning tomorrow, and—” And still he had not told Theo the truth. Hell, he hadn’t even told the *reverend* the truth, and that boded ill for his immortal soul. It would not be a *lie*, precisely, when the reverend called the banns for Alexander William Phillip Henry Dryden and Theodosia Vance, but neither would it be the *whole* of the truth.

And Theo was owed the whole of the truth.

“You know you must tell her,” John said. “Better just to get it over with, no?”

But the thought of it turned his blood to ice with fear. “She could refuse,” he said dully. “The whole of her life is here, and I—I very nearly brought it all to ruin.” He knew she was plagued by worries—for her father, for how drastically her life would change in London. Adding in the pressures of becoming his duchess? It could spell disaster. She had had to overcome her dislike of the very fact that she thought him *distantly related* to the duke.

If he had learned anything at all of Theo, it was that gaining a title would *not* be a welcome revelation.

“I think she would forgive you that,” John said. “She’s a reasonable woman, in my estimation. Well, excepting perhaps her regrettable inclination to collude with my wife—I’m convinced they’ve conspired to fleece me of coin.” He shook out a sheet with a ferocious snap, clapping the corners together with a frown. “One would *think* that a door would be preferable to a window.”

Despite himself, Alex chuckled. “I knew they’d get on.”

“Perhaps a little *too* well,” John said, with a shake of his head.

“They’ll wreak havoc across London, you know.” He paused, a wry smile lifting his lips. “I’m rather looking forward to it.”

Alex would have, too, if there weren’t so very many ways all of his plans could go wrong. Three weeks from Sunday he

planned to be married. He'd yet to hear from Grey whether or not Tom's visit to the oculist had met with success. He'd yet to inform Theo of her impending elevation into the ranks of the nobility. The village was still largely in shambles—though much progress had been made in restitution and repairs—and Jennings yet walked free, power unchecked.

A clumsily folded blanket fell from his hands into the basket at his feet. "How goes your progress?" he asked of John. "Any troubles? Or...complaints?"

John seemed to understand precisely what he was asking. "No aspersions cast upon your character," he said. "While I understand your reluctance to reveal yourself, I've not encountered a single family that had anything but thanks to give for your aid. Whatever your reputation—that is to say, the *duke's* reputation—might once have been, it seems you've successfully mended it."

Even that was cold comfort, given the fact that the townspeople, too, had been deceived. What would they think when they eventually learned that it had been their *landlord* who had labored alongside them? The very man who had been the source of their suffering?

"As for the repayments," John added, "I've perhaps a quarter of those affected left to visit." A brief hesitation followed, a frown of concern knotting his brow. "I think it would be best to make such visits beneath the cover of darkness—at least until Jennings is gone."

Alex's head jerked up. "Why so?"

"I crossed paths with the fellow in the village today, in a manner of speaking," John explained. "I'm certain I was seen passing over a purse to Mr. Conroy." He rubbed at his forehead with one hand. "With the things I've heard from the townsfolk—I doubt it will be too long before Jennings pays the Conroy family a visit. If you could have seen the avarice in his eyes..."

A troubling thought. If Jennings suspected that even a single family had coin going spare, it could cause problems for the entirety of the town.

"And when I stopped for a meal at the tavern," John continued, "there was some...concerning gossip. It seems Jennings has finally caught wind of the repairs in progress. He

pulled aside several workmen to question them on their presence in town. If the gossip is true, he attempted to sack the lot of them, and was not well pleased to discover they had been hired on the orders of the duke. Unless I miss my guess, he'll be working out a way to twist the tale to you—he'll realize, naturally, that your confidence in his ability to manage his responsibilities has been eroded.”

Of course. Alex had, after all, cut Jennings out completely, bypassing the man who *ought* to have been responsible for the maintenance of Alex's lands and tenants. Jennings would understand that his comfortable position was in imminent danger of being usurped—and he would grasp with both greedy hands at whatever tenuous claim to power he could.

“He'll want to know how this came about,” Alex predicted uncomfortably. “He'll be seeking answers from the townsfolk. He'll want to know who has been carrying tales to the duke.” His stomach gave an ominous rumble that had less to do with the burnt chicken he had produced for dinner and more to do with the unsettling feeling that he had compounded all of his problems.

He did not doubt that his and Theo's little jaunt up to Ivywilde Hall had aroused Jennings' suspicions. Though Midsummer was fast approaching and the rents would be coming due in just ten days' time, he had had it from Theo that Jennings rarely bothered to collect it himself. Alex had been counting on Jennings' reticence to visit the town to obscure all that he had set into motion—but the element of surprise had been lost, and now Jennings would be seeking to wrangle control of the town once more.

Worse still, even if he did not yet know it, Jennings would be seeking *Theo*. And a man in his position—cornered, threatened, and desperately seizing at what little remnants of power he could manage to grasp—would use any means at his disposal to force information from those beneath his control.

With their families and livelihoods at stake, how long would it take for the townspeople to reveal what they knew?



Flanked on either side of the pew by Violet and John, Theo folded her hands in her lap and stared straight ahead in a futile attempt to pretend that she did not feel the curious stares that had fallen upon her.

It had been some time—weeks, at least—since she had last attended church, given the demands the farm had placed upon her time of late. She had expected the faintly chiding lecture from the reverend about observing the Sabbath in an appropriate manner, of course—though the lecture itself had been mercifully brief and offered with kindly understanding. She had known Reverend Stewart all of her life, after all, and he was well aware of the unenviable situation that most of the families faced.

She'd witnessed the reading of the banns at least a dozen times, had shared in the joy of her community as new families had been announced and created right here, beginning with this moment—the first announcement of their intention to marry.

But she had never considered how it would feel to have *her* name read aloud.

She risked a peek past Violet at Alex, who looked entirely unbothered by the curious whispers flying around the church. But then, perhaps he was accustomed to gossip and speculation dogging his footsteps.

From the corner of his eye, Alex caught her sidelong glance, and offered up a small, crooked smile in return. Laid across his thigh, his fingers curled as if forming to the shape of her own—and that small gesture soothed the anxious, fluttery rhythm of her heart.

Only two more Sundays, and they would be married. *Married*. The thought bounced around her head as she settled back against the pew, only half-listening as the reverend chuckled and called for attention over the excited murmurs of the congregation.

Married. Somehow, she would find her place in London just as surely as Alex had found a place here, amongst her own small town. And even if it was only amongst his small social circle, those few people he counted amongst his closest friends—she would be happy. They might be an unusual lot, but they were good, kind people—

A cascade of grumbles rose in a wave from the back of the church to the front as the doors were flung open, and she watched a subtle scowl take up residence on Reverend Stewart's face, transforming his features from saintly benevolence to disapproval. Theo turned her head, peering between the parishioners seated behind her in an effort to catch a glimpse of the intruder—though from the glowers she caught amongst the crowd and the grumbles that wafted up around her, she knew it could be only one man.

The click of heels upon the wood floor of the aisle leading up the center of the church echoed off the rafters, and several congregants flinched from the sound like gamebirds startled from their nests by the report of a gun. Mr. Jennings stood, tall and proud, in the center of the aisle, his hands clasped behind his back. A slick smile touched his mouth, and his mustache twitched over his thin lips. Dressed in his Sunday best, he looked out of place amongst the plainly-garbed congregation—a king surveying his pitiful subjects and finding them far beneath his exalted notice.

“My apologies, Reverend Stewart, for my late arrival,” he said, though he made no move to take a seat.

“Naturally, Mr. Jennings, all are welcome to attend services,” Reverend Stewart replied, a touch of condemnation in his voice. “Some of us, perhaps, could have benefitted from last Sunday's sermon on Christian charity.”

Theo coughed into her fist to mask a flutter of ill-timed laughter at the cross expression that flitted across Mr. Jennings' face.

Smoothly he swept away all traces of anger, lifting his chin with an unearned arrogance. “Alas, I come today not as a parishioner, but as an agent of His Grace, the Duke of Davenport,” he said, and resumed his easy stride toward the front of the church, ignoring Reverend Stewart's deepening frown. “A matter has arisen upon the estate, and my duties require that I address it swiftly.”

“I wonder that you could find no better time or place to do so, sir.” Reverend Stewart adjusted his spectacles on his nose, staring down at Mr. Jennings, who had arrived at the front of the church, just before the pulpit. “I would remind you that this is a time of worship, and presently you are stealing this

time from our Maker—”

“*Theft* is precisely what I would like to address, Reverend. Specifically, a theft that occurred recently at Ivywilde.” Mr. Jennings turned his back upon Reverend Stewart, looking out over the congregation, his hawkish dark eyes piercing and accusatory. “Though I would not be so crass as to name names, some of those present have been, shall we say, *less* than prompt with the payment of their rents. I should not like to think that any of the duke’s tenants could be so devoid of morals as to resort to theft, but the evidence is irrefutable.”

“Mr. Jennings,” Reverend Stewart said severely. “This is a serious accusation—”

“Indeed it is,” Mr. Jennings interjected. “*Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s*, eh, Reverend? I would remind those present that when they steal from me, they are stealing from the *duke*.” Mr. Jennings’ gaze searched the crowd, no doubt seeking signs of guilt upon the faces of those gathered. “I count myself a reasonable, amiable man—”

A bark of laughter originating from the rear of the church drew a glare from Mr. Jennings. His chest puffed out in offended self-importance, his cheeks hollowing with leashed fury. “Allow me to make myself clear: I expect the utmost cooperation in unmasking the villain behind this grievous offense,” he said, his voice sliding from oily slickness to cutting severity. “The duke has entrusted me with the authority to void the lease agreements of anyone whom I suspect of abetting the perpetrator. I beg you: do not allow your conscience to be burdened with the weight of this evil act. Speak now, and aid me in identifying the culprit.”

No one moved. Not a soul even *breathed* in the wake of Mr. Jennings’ speech. Theo fought to keep her features placid and even despite the seething ball of fury that had kindled in her chest, but her hands fisted in her lap.

Faced with the sour, recalcitrant stares of the community, Mr. Jennings made a scathing sound in the back of his throat. “Well, then,” he said acidly. “Though it is no small surprise that the relationship between a land agent and tenants can be an acrimonious one, I must say I had expected better of you. And only *think* of the effort to which I have gone to convince the duke to advance the funds to improve the town—I daresay

the duke shall be most disappointed to hear that his generosity has been repaid thusly.” He shook his head in a mockery of regret. “And I had *so* hoped this matter could be resolved peaceably.”

Theo did not believe for one moment that he had hoped anything of the sort. It galled her to remain silent, to do naught but to dig her nails into her palms as Mr. Jennings let slip his somber mien into something infinitely more condescending, more sinister.

He drew himself up to his full height, which was admittedly impressive, and gave a disdainful sniff. “It pains me deeply,” he said, “to resort to such measures. But it is my responsibility—my *duty*—to resolve such matters to the duke’s satisfaction. Until the guilty party is apprehended, everyone will be treated as a potential subject. With all that it entails.”

That icy, cold gaze held the weight of the warning as it passed along the crowd, and Theo knew what it meant. He would harass the townsfolk—threaten them, perhaps, with eviction or jail or worse—until *someone* broke.

As he retreated once more up the aisle and toward the rear of the church, Theo suppressed a shiver as that gaze slid down her pew, lingering a fraction of a second too long upon John, Violet, and Alex.

The nagging suspicion that Mr. Jennings had already chosen the first victims of his impending interrogation sat like a ball of lead in her stomach.

Chapter Twenty Two

“That is the *fifteenth* sigh in the past half an hour,” Violet remarked, gesturing with her fork as Theo picked over the light lunch they had cobbled together. “If I hear another, I swear I shall hire you out as a bellows to the local blacksmith.”

Theo fought to summon up a smile and failed. That troublesome pit of concern had only grown in the last few hours, since Alex and John had returned them to the farm and excused themselves to assist the workmen in repairing a rotted roof on one of the tenant farms in the area.

Given the tense ride they had all endured back to the farm, which had been largely quiet excepting the whispers flying between Alex and John, Theo could only assume they would be taking advantage of that time to plan their next moves against Mr. Jennings.

“I’m...worried,” she admitted, stabbing a slice of cheese with the tines of her fork. “You *know* what they must be discussing.”

Violet’s nose wrinkled with annoyance. “It does rankle to be left out of the conversation,” she said. “But I can assure you they mean no disrespect—”

“That’s not what I’m worried for.” The truth of it was that Theo *knew* all of that. She *knew* that there was no ill-intent behind it, that they were simply *men* managing a disadvantageous situation in the best way they knew how.

But they were *good* men, and good men tended to have the same horrible, fatal flaw. They expected other men to behave honorably. Whatever plan they were contriving, it was doomed on its face—because their adversary was neither good nor honorable.

“Mr. Jennings,” she said, “isn’t the sort of man to let a slight go unpunished. And I fear he is suspicious about the lot of you.” She remembered that icy gaze, lingering just a bit too long for comfort, and shuddered.

Violet gave a little shrug. “Suspicion is hardly enough to merit action,” she said. “What can he do, truly, beyond questioning?”

A horrified laugh gurgled from Theo’s throat. “My goodness,” she said. “Things must be *very* different in London.” She gave a little shake of her head. “Mr. Jennings is a swift dispenser of justice—and he has the ear of the nearest magistrate. He’s not a bad man, mind you, but he hangs on Mr. Jennings’ every word as if it is gospel.” And of course, in a dispute between a tenant and a land agent, he would always err of the side of the land agent, assuming a man trusted with such a position to be worthy of it.

A little frown etched itself between Violet’s brows. “But the courts—”

“The magistrate *is* the court, for all intents and purposes,” Theo said. “It’s true that certain cases are remanded to higher courts, but even a country magistrate has the power to pass sentences of whippings and imprisonment.” She fidgeted with her napkin, twisting it in her fingers. “You must have guessed that Alex and I were behind the accusation of theft Mr. Jennings levied this morning at the church.”

“I did rather suspect, yes,” Violet acknowledged. “But if you have the ledgers—”

“We don’t,” Theo blurted out. “In fact, we took nothing. But Mr. Jennings implied we *had*, and I think—I think he will use it as an excuse to take yet more from the townsfolk. And since Alex has made good on his promise to repay them what they are owed, there is ever so much more to take. Only think,” she said, splaying out her fingers. “If I accused you of stealing coin, could you prove its provenance? If I had a man at my side—a man of the law—could I not take what was yours with impunity?”

Violet shifted uncomfortably in her seat, the corner of her mouth twisting into a dispirited frown.

“I saw the way he looked at you—*all* of you—in church today,” Theo said quietly. “You are strangers to him, and strangers in a town like this merit suspicion. I think he must know you have *something* to do with his troubles. He will be looking to make an example of someone, and you will all be... convenient. I doubt he could possibly suspect the *truth*,” she

added, “but the truth might be even more dangerous.”

“How so?” Violet whispered, folding her arms over her chest with a shiver.

Theo cast her eyes down to the table. “What do you suppose Alex would do, should he find himself accused by Mr. Jennings of theft or worse?” she asked.

“I imagine,” Violet said, “that he would reveal himself to be Mr. Jennings’ employer.”

“With what proof?” Theo inquired. “And if you were Mr. Jennings, and your perfect scapegoat made such a claim, would you be so inclined to believe it?” The air wrenched itself from her lungs on a monumental, shuddering exhalation.

“Worse still, if you *did* believe it—it would mean the end of your position, and the distinct possibility of hanging. Jail, at the very least.” She rested her palms flat upon the scarred surface of the table, her stomach roiling. “Would it not be... more *expedient* to pass a sentence of imprisonment upon that man—duke or no? By the time such a matter was resolved, you could have simply taken your ill-gotten gains and fled.” And fleeced no end of families of their coin in the meantime. “If we do not act swiftly,” she added, “the evidence of Mr. Jennings’ wrongdoings—and any hope of bringing him to justice—will be lost.”

Her complexion faintly green, Violet slapped her hands down on the table and shoved her chair back. “I hope you have got Grey’s skeleton keys,” she said, her voice tight and tense. “Because we have *got* to get those ledgers.”



“How the devil do you manage it?” John asked on the ride back to the farm, shifting the reins from one sore hand to the other. “I feel battered and bruised all over. I’m quite certain I’ve embarrassed myself with my poor performance.”

“Time and experience,” Alex said, smothering a grin in his callused palm and scraping his disheveled hair away from his face. “When I arrived here, I truly thought I was prepared for this. I thought fencing and boxing and riding had kept me well enough to manage on a farm.”

John whistled, long and low. "I can safely say I was not prepared in the least. I can only imagine how you have fared." The truth was, he'd fared damn well, all things considered. Oh, there had been days—whole *weeks*, even—when he had been sore and exhausted and he had floundered beneath the workload, the expectations. But he had only to think of Theo, and how much she had managed alone already. How much stronger she had been than he, how determined in the face of certain defeat. And if it had not lifted his exhaustion, at least it had strengthened his resolve.

Though he and John both sweaty and covered in a fine layer of dirt and dust, it did not escape him that it had been *John* to come away the worse for the wear this afternoon. And though they had both been outstripped by the capabilities of the townsfolk and workmen who had gathered to share the burden of the repairs, Alex felt he'd rather begun to hold his own. Of a certainty a few hours' labor had not sent him reeling into exhaustion, unlike John, who looked as if he might well keel over at any moment.

And though there had been precious little time to discuss Mr. Jennings' veiled threats, he had received several assurances from those present that he could expect their discretion, even if Mr. Jennings *did* call upon them. Which was more than he had expected, but then he supposed that, given the changes he had wrought within the town, he had earned some measure of loyalty from them. Or at least he had earned it on the *duke's* behalf.

Still, the solemn nature of the manner in which those assurances had been offered was troubling. He had hoped for a few days more; time enough to break the news to Theo before he was forced to divest himself of his assumed identity. But it was the townsfolk—the good, solid people who had welcomed him into their community—that would suffer yet further for his delay.

"I say," John murmured with a wince, as the reins tugged at his sore hands when he eased the horses into the turn up to the Vance farm. "That's not one of yours—is it?" He nodded to indicate the stately coach standing before the house, emblazoned with the ducal crest.

"No," Alex bit off, eyeing the shiny black lacquer and the

gold-painted crest gilding the door. “And it’s not Mother’s, either.” Neither was the coachman, who sat atop the driver’s seat holding the reins of four matched bays, in his employ. Which could mean only one thing.

“Jennings is keeping himself in style, then, isn’t he?” John said in a guttural growl, as he snapped the reins to coax the horses into a trot. “He’s got Violet and Theo alone. Vi can hold her own, but Theo—”

Alex snorted. “Theo would stab the man as soon as look at him. She can hold her own as well.” But he still didn’t much care for the thought of Jennings foisting his presence upon two lone women. The moment the cart breached the yard, John let fall the reins and he and Alex both leapt down, storming toward the house in full fury.

From within there was the murmur of voices, the stomp of boots—the clink of coins.

Alex cast open the door in frothing rage, and it slammed back against the wall, startling the occupants of the room. Jennings, Alex had expected—but *three* sets of eyes swiveled toward him at the sudden intrusion. The mountain of a man lingering at Jennings’ side had to be the bailiff Theo had once mentioned, but the third man—he had the look of a gentleman. He was of middling years, and his clothes were fine and in good repair; if not the *height* of fashion, then at least near enough to it to suggest he spent a not-insignificant portion of his time in London. A man of some importance, at least out here in the countryside.

“What the hell is going on here?” Alex snarled as he stalked into the house, his livid gaze sweeping the room and discovering with a stomach-twisting lurch that neither of the ladies seemed to be present. “And what the devil have you done with Theo and Violet?”

Jennings, who was poised over the chest of coins that had been dragged out from the bedroom where John had stored it, spared hardly a glance at Alex, his attention largely fixed on the handful of coins he held in his palm and let slip through his fingers to drip one by one back into the chest. “I haven’t the faintest idea where Miss Vance and her companion have gone off to,” he said, and flicked his fingers absently at Alex and John. “Bailiff,” he said, almost jovially, “take these men into

custody, if you please.”

“On what grounds?” John inquired, his hands fisting at his sides.

“Theft,” Jennings supplied easily. “This chest—and its contents—were recently stolen from Ivywilde.” A slick smile touched the corners of his lips. “Had I not seen you gentlemen at church this morning, perhaps I would not have known where to commence my search. But strangers, you understand, are naturally suspicious figures in the countryside. And though, to my surprise, not one soul deigned to denounce you publicly, I could hardly fail to notice that, when I mentioned the theft that had taken place, every eye in church fell upon *you*.”

Alex seethed with fury. It burned in his chest and rippled through his blood as a red haze descending over his vision. “The only thief here is you,” he said in a biting tone, so threatening that even the bailiff—a man considerably larger than Alex, and at least half a dozen stone heavier—paused in his procession across the floor toward him, a flicker of disquiet traversing the craggy planes of his face.

Jennings offered only a brief sneer at Alex’s accusation, expression smug. “Naturally,” he said, “I have decided it would be best to handle this matter quickly and quietly. To that end, I have engaged the services of our local magistrate, Mr. Vickers, to lay formal charges against you.”

To his credit, the magistrate had begun to look uncomfortable—though Alex could not guess why. The man’s eyes were fixed on John, his brow pleated with concern. “Jennings, are you certain you have not misunderstood the situation?” he inquired.

Incredulously, Jennings turned on him. “Of course I have not misunderstood the situation,” he snapped, his voice thrumming with impatience. “These...these *brigands* have stolen from me!”

“You had better be damned certain, Jennings,” Vickers said, his cheeks hollowing. “Because I don’t see how he could have done—or *would* have.” He made a staying gesture to the bailiff, who dutifully retreated a step to wait, despite the incensed growl that Jennings loosed. “That’s Mr. John Darling,” he said, “and by all accounts he’s richer than God

himself. He owns the school that taught my little Flora everything she needed to land a viscount last Season.”

Alex blinked, surprised into silence by the tenor of accusation coloring the magistrate’s voice.

John relaxed incrementally. “Technically, it is owned—on paper, at least—by the Marquess of Granbury,” he said smoothly. “But otherwise, it is a joint venture between my wife—Violet—and the marchioness.”

For a short, fraught moment, Jennings quailed beneath the hostile stare of the man who was meant to be his ally, his face going a shade paler before at last high color washed into his thin face, painting two burning splotches high on his cheeks. “I don’t care *who* they are,” he blustered at last, and his shoulders twitched as he brought them up high and tight in agitation, “these men were caught in possession of stolen coin. Let the courts decide what to do with them.” His voice dropped to a cruel rumble as he added, “Men have been hanged for less.”

“Now, Jennings, let’s not be so hasty with such allegations.” His gaze shifting uncomfortably between John and Jennings, Mr. Vickers’ Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat with distress. “I have heard your complaint, and I will now hear a defense from the”—he swallowed audibly—“er, the accused. Perhaps there is some reasonable explanation—”

With a blistering oath, Jennings spat out, “If you will not do your duty, then stand aside.” To the bailiff, he ordered, “For God’s sake, man, *arrest them*.”

“*Wait!*” The sharp screech sailed into the house, and Theo came careening in the front door, barely avoiding a collision with John as she skidded to a stop, panting with exertion. Her hair was wild, whole locks escaping from the plait that bounced over her shoulder; her cheeks were flushed and wind-burned, and several green patches stained the legs of the trousers she wore, suggesting she had taken a tumble at some point, in her haste to reach the house.

“Miss Vance!” Horrified, Mr. Vickers shaded his eyes with one hand. “Your...*attire*.” He averted his gaze as if Theo’s clothing were an affront to the eyes.

“My apologies,” Theo said, her nose wrinkling in annoyance. “It’s rather difficult to run in a dress, and time was of the

essence.” To John she said, “I’m afraid I hadn’t any trousers going spare to that would have fit Violet. She’s on her way back, albeit a bit more slowly.”

His brow furrowed, John asked, “Back from *where*?”

“Ivywilde Hall, of course.” Theo lifted her hands, revealing a pair of thin, leather-bound books—*ledgers*.

With an outraged gasp, Jennings lunged for them—but Alex maneuvered to block his path by throwing up an arm to restrain him, and Theo skirted around his grasping hand to set the books in Mr. Vickers’ grasp.

“*Thief!*” Jennings grunted, his cheeks turning an ugly mottled red shade with his rage. “That—that *woman* is a thief and a housebreaker! I demand you arrest her immediately! She has flagrantly engaged in theft—those ledgers are *my* property!” His shrill voice stung Alex’s ears, and he shoved the man away with a sound of disgust.

“So you admit it, then?” Theo purred, folding her arms over her chest as Jennings recovered himself, his face going sallow as the implications of what he had said swept over him.

“Miss Vance,” said the magistrate, as he began to thumb through the topmost ledger, his eyes scanning the pages in confusion. “Would you be so kind as to explain to me what I am looking at?”

Theo took the second ledger and opened it, holding it up for Mr. Vickers’ perusal. “The evidence of Mr. Jennings’ theft. He’s been defrauding not just our town, but the duke as well. If you’ll compare these pages, sir—”

“Lies!” Jennings snarled. “Lies designed to impugn my character, from a woman whose family faces eviction. You cannot *believe*—” But his words fell flat at the sharp look Mr. Vickers leveled in his direction. Clearing his throat, he fought to control the jarring tenor of his voice and tried again. “It’s true the rents were raised,” he said, striving to recall his haughty demeanor. “However, it was on the orders of the duke himself—and who am I to question the will of my employer?”

Expression grave, Mr. Vickers at last closed the ledgers with a sigh. “I’m afraid I cannot make a determination on such evidence,” he said at last. “I admit I have heard compelling testimony—but without further proof, I suggest we let cooler heads prevail for the time being.” He tucked the ledgers

beneath his arm. “In the meantime, I shall hold these as evidence—and I shall send an inquiry to the duke posthaste.”

“That’s all you require?” Theo covered her mouth with one hand to smother the giddy giggle that emerged. “Only a word from the duke?”

Solemnly, Mr. Vickers nodded. “You understand that with two such disparate versions of events, I can only rely upon the duke’s word on whether or not such instruction was given to Mr. Jennings.”

“Then ask him,” Theo invited, and she swept one hand in a wide arc, ending on a little flourish as she indicated Alex. “*This* is Alexander Dryden, the Duke of Davenport.”

Chaos erupted once again...and Alex’s cracked in half as everything he had held true about Theo perished in a blaze of righteous fury.

Chapter Twenty Three

In the space of a heartbeat, Alex had gone from *Just Alex* to *The Duke*, and the change was so abrupt and severe that Theo did not quite know what to make of it. Gone was the lighthearted man whose hayloft bed she had left only this morning—and who had pulled her back half a dozen times for another few moments of warm, sleepy kisses before she had at last made it to the ladder.

He was undeniably a duke, even in worn trousers and a simple linen shirt. Even with his hair a touch too long and his boots stained with mud and worse. All traces of the levity to which she had become so accustomed were gone, and those vivid green eyes had not *once* touched her since she had announced him to Mr. Vickers.

It was as if she had completely ceased to exist.

Which was ridiculous, she told herself, even as her stomach clenched with worry. She had taken him aback by stripping him of his disguise, she knew. His mother, Violet, and Serena had all said he would be *devastated* to know his ruse had been seen through.

But he didn't *look* devastated. He looked...resolute. The lines of his face might have been carved from marble for all the emotion writ upon them. And he was so bloody *ducal* in his manners and poise that Theo longed to ruffle her fingers through his hair just to dishevel it a little—just so that he would appear just the tiniest bit *her* Alex once again.

Violet returned to the house just as the bailiff—whose services had been commandeered by Mr. Vickers—had clapped Jennings in cuffs. “Blast,” she said, her mouth wrenching into a pout of disappointment. “I had hoped I hadn't missed it.”

“He'll be taken up to London to stand trial,” John said, slinging his arm around her waist. “I expect it will not go well for him.” He canted his head to the right thoughtfully. “I confess, I'm not certain whether I'm hoping for transportation or hanging.”

Violet laid her head upon her husband's shoulder. "A man like that? Hanging would be too good for him." She nudged John with her elbow. "You *did* arrange for a replacement land agent, did you not?"

"Grey had a few likely candidates under consideration, last I heard," John replied. "I don't doubt that he'll send someone round as soon as he hears of Jennings has been routed at last." With his hand upon her back, he eased Violet toward the door, away from the spectacle Jennings was making of himself with his stalwart refusal to be loaded into the carriage. "And you know Grey—he'll hear more or less immediately."

Theo edged closer to the carriage, wanting to see Jennings on his way to stand trial—but wanting more to be near Alex, who felt suddenly too far distant. And still he did not look at her as she came up on his right side. Instead he folded his arms over his chest and watched the bailiff wrestle Mr. Jennings at last into the coach beneath the threat of a good wallop, did he continue to struggle.

It was just a few moments more before Mr. Vickers and the bailiff had both loaded themselves into the carriage, and the coachman snapped the reins to urge the horses into motion.

It was a relief, of course, to have seen the end of Mr. Jennings. But the silence that fell between them as the carriage disappeared into the distance was profound, roiling with things unsaid.

"Alex—" Theo turned, stretching out a hand to place upon his arm.

He sidestepped the touch, his long legs carrying him a step away that might as well have been a mile. "*Your Grace*," he said severely, his voice snapping with command. In the afternoon light, with the sun burning its way toward the horizon, his green eyes glowed with some nameless fury she could not possibly comprehend.

"What?" Her fingers curled, her arm retracting as if the very rancor in his voice had curdled her blood in her veins. "Alex, why—"

"When did you know?" He bit off the question, and a muscle ticked sharply in his jaw. "Did Violet tell you? Serena?"

"Who you were?" An awkward little laugh bubbled up in her throat. "No. No; I already knew. Not *quite* immediately, but

nearly. Papa figured it out first, and I—I wrote to your mother to confirm it.” What had she said to earn the hostility upon his face? So his secret had never been quite the secret he had thought it to be—was that truly such a terrible thing? “I’m sorry,” she said, “I know—”

But even her apology had not blunted the razor-sharp edge of his ire. “Do you know how many enterprising women have thought to trap me into marriage?” he hissed. “How many women make no secret of their plans to make duchesses of themselves?”

Theo recoiled from the words, which held the tenor of an accusation. Somehow, some way, everything had gone so terribly, terribly wrong. A queer little catch formed in her throat. “What are you saying?” she asked.

“I never would have expected it from *you*,” he said on a strained laugh. “More fool me, I suppose. For thinking that there was ever anything honest or genuine about you. For thinking you were a woman worth loving.”

The weight of those words struck her like a blow, wrapped around her heart, and *squeezed* until the useless, pathetic organ had shattered in her chest. She had not thought such a thing could cause a physical pain—but it did. The shards of her heart had gone flying about like bits of glass, and every inch of her throbbed with the ache of each tiny cut.

Despite her whirling head and injured heart, still she reached out to him once more. “Alex, please. There’s been some sort of misunderstanding. If you would only—”

“*Don’t*.” It was a soft but stark warning, seething with bitterness. “Don’t speak. Don’t touch me. Don’t—just *don’t*.” A derisive sort of grimace touched his lips, as if the very sight of her disgusted him, and with a contemptuous sound that rumbled at the back of his throat, at last he turned and began to stride away.

She could have called him back and demanded an explanation. Or perhaps she should have gone after him and offered her own. But the antipathy on his face, the revulsion—a shudder slipped down her spine, and she swallowed down the lump that had risen in her throat.

There was anger there, simmering beneath the surface of her hurt. That it had taken so little for his opinion of her to change

so drastically. That he had loved her but not *trusted* her. And what was love without trust?

Nothing. Nothing at all.



“This calls for celebration,” Violet said the moment Theo walked through the door. “It’s a touch early, but what say you for dinner?”

Theo tried to summon up a smile. “I’m not terribly hungry,” she said, hating the way her voice quavered. “Perhaps later. I’ve put off my chores long enough today.” She sidestepped Violet on her way toward the kitchen door, passing by John, who sat at the table, counting out the coins in the chest—to make certain it was all still there, she assumed.

“Oh.” Violet’s brow knotted. “I see. Well, I was hoping we could practice dancing this evening—”

Theo’s stomach heaved. “I don’t think that will be necessary,” she said, as she paused to swipe a hat off of the peg near the door.

“Not necessary?” Violet’s brows arched toward her hairline. “I promise you, waltzing is done in every ballroom. You’ll need to—”

“No,” Theo said. “I won’t.”

The silence that pervaded the house was deep and ugly, and Theo felt her cheeks burning with humiliation.

Chair legs scraped across the floor. John unfurled himself from his seat and asked, “Where is Alex?”

“I don’t know.” That much, at least, was true. “He’s just... gone.” And he had walked away from her so *easily*. Like he could don or doff his affections as simply as shrugging out of a coat. Her chest felt as if it had caved in on itself, carving out the suppurating wound left where her heart had once been. She chewed the inside of her cheek and breathed through her nose, one hand wrapped around the door handle. “It’s not such a long trip back to London,” she said. “There’s no reason for you to stay any longer.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We are *not* leaving you here alone.” Violet’s hand fell upon Theo’s shoulder, but the warm clasp of

it just felt like pity. “Theo, what has happened?”

Theo’s breath wheezed through her tight throat. “I truly don’t know,” she said. “He was angry with me because I knew who he was all along. I don’t—I don’t understand *why*.” She felt as if she had missed something important, as if she held but half the pieces necessary to form a complete picture. The wound was still too new, too raw, to allow any sense at all to be made of his furious accusations, and the ugliness with which he had painted her made her feel ashamed. Gently, she tugged free of Violet’s hold. “Suffice it to say there will not be a wedding, so you needn’t...you needn’t waste your time with me any longer.”

She tried to tell herself this was a relief—that she would not have to learn to dance, or to pour tea elegantly, or to master the strictures of polite conversation. There would be no more walking circuits around the room with a book balanced upon her head to perfect her posture, or practicing a sedate walk designed to make one’s skirts whisper across the floor. But the truth was that she had *enjoyed* Violet’s company, *and* John’s, and she had felt like they had become her friends, and now—and now they never would be.

There was a whole life that would never be hers. One that had, for so brief a time, sat in the palm of her hand. And even the parts that she had worried over and groaned to contemplate seemed precious now that they had been lost to her. It hadn’t been the direction she had thought her life would take—but she had been willing to walk that fearsome, diverging path with Alex. He had made her life seem so much *bigger* than it might otherwise have been.

Right up until the moment he had made her feel so very small. John cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I have yet to finish my work here—and I know Violet would prefer to stay, at least until your father returns home. May we rely upon your hospitality a bit longer?”

“Of course,” Theo said, jamming her hat on her head and tucking her plait up beneath it. “It’s only...I won’t have the time to entertain you.” Alex had taken over the brunt of the chores, and without him, the work would fall once more upon her shoulders. It was a convenient excuse, but the truth was more that she had already grown too attached to these people

who would inevitably leave. “I hope you won’t take offense, but I’d very much like to be alone for a little while—I need to see to the fields.”

Violet made a protesting murmur, but John’s hand on her arm restrained her from stepping forward. “Don’t lose hope,” he said to Theo. “Whatever Alex might have said, he loves you. He only needs a bit of time to come to his senses. He *will* be back.”

It was meant to be reassuring, she knew, as she murmured some sort of bland, noncommittal response and stepped out onto the porch and into the light of the setting sun. But she wasn’t fool enough to believe it.



Alex walked up the steps to Maudie’s tavern sometime after dusk had fallen. The depths of his rage had carried him the whole way here, though he hadn’t particularly cared where he had been headed when he had left the Vance farm—only that he had *left* it.

He was filthy, and tired, and hungry—but the coins tucked away in his pocket could buy him a room for the night while he sorted out his emotions and determined what to do. Just as easily he could have gone up to Ivywilde Hall, he supposed, but he knew he would only be thinking of Theo, and the night they’d broken in. The same night she had come to him in the hayloft, and the night she had accepted his proposal.

No; the tavern was better. There was a well-appointed room available, and it was not tainted with memories. His coin would buy him the use of the room and a hot meal and a bath. And perhaps a few blessed hours of peace.

The thrum of conversation that had penetrated the door fell into silence the moment he opened it, and as his gaze drifted across the common room, taking in the faces of the patrons gathered within, he knew. How he hadn’t seen it before was beyond him—but it was there, scrawled across every face within. Perhaps he simply hadn’t been looking for it before now, comfortable in his presumed anonymity, his assumed identity, which they had never given him reason to suspect was

held in question.

They *knew*. All of them. Every damned one of them knew *exactly* who he was. Perhaps they always had. A whole damned town had pulled the wool over his eyes, patronizing him with their *welcome*, such as it was.

They'd let him pretend to be one of them, treated him as if he'd belonged amongst them. And all the while, they'd been laughing at him behind his back—the *duke* who wanted to play at being a commoner.

“Oi, Dryden,” someone called, and Alex’s stomach churned. “Come, sit. Have a drink.”

A day ago—an hour, even—he would have done just that. And he would have enjoyed himself, as he had several times before, enjoyed the easy camaraderie that seemed to surround him here. Except that it had been a lie all along. He simply hadn’t known it.

A room was out of the question. Hell, the whole damned *town* was out of the question. Instead he strode up to the bar, dug into his pocket, withdrew a handful of change, and slammed it down.

Maudie’s brows winged up in surprise, her plump cheeks hollowing. “What can I get ye?”

“A horse,” he said, nausea churning in his gut. “Immediately.”

Chapter Twenty Four

Four days had passed since Alex had left, each one bleeding into the next. There was a rhythm to them that Theo had had to find all over again—a cycle of waking and rising and chores and livestock and crops, rotating through the various responsibilities with a sort of mechanical determination.

She had thrown herself into the work with little regard to anything else, because it was at the very least a passable distraction from her melancholy. With each day that passed, it became clearer and clearer to her—and no doubt to John and Violet, though they continued to deny it—that Alex would not be returning.

For the first day or so they had tried, in vain, to encourage her to hold onto hope. And though she had given them weak smiles and murmured something bland and noncommittal, she had known what they did not—hope was the killer of the spirit. There was nothing that could destroy a body quite like hope. It was a slow poison, sweet as honey until it turned the blood to acid and ate away at a person from the inside.

But she had the oddest suspicion that John and Violet had been holding onto hope *for* her—only now it was wearing thin. Their reassuring smiles had become strained, and at night they whispered to one another in hushed voices, as if afraid she might overhear. So perhaps they had at last begun to suspect what Theo had already accepted.

And she *had* accepted it. But one could know something to be true and still mourn the loss of it, and so, late at night, when the whispering had ceased and the hall outside her door echoed with John's light snoring, she crept down the hall and out to the barn.

Alex's trunk remained there, in the hayloft, filled with all of the clothing he'd left behind. The blankets piled upon the bed of hay he'd fashioned for himself still smelled like him—and the kittens that traipsed over her at night were a welcome

warmth, curling up against her chest and behind her knees. The fact of the matter was that she had grown accustomed to sleeping beside him. She had grown accustomed to the warmth of his arms around her, to the rise and fall of his chest, to the sound of his heart beating beneath her ear.

She only needed time to let it all go. Time to heal the wound he'd slashed through her heart. Time to allow her body to accept what her mind already understood. That these last few days before his scent faded from the battered pillow beneath her head would be all that she would have of him.

A tiny ginger kitten—the one Alex had named *Ted*—prowled across the blankets with a mournful little meow, attempting to shove his head beneath them. It was a ritual he had engaged in every night since Alex had left, and Theo suspected he was missing the man he had decided he belonged to. After his pawing had proved unsuccessful, he sat back upon his haunches, faced Theo, and let out a little mew of displeasure.

“I know,” she said, and she scratched along his back as he came bounding toward her, curling up disconsolately beneath her chin. “I know.”

She missed him, too. Despite everything, still she missed him. For all the good it would do.



The next afternoon, as Theo knelt in the soft earth, plucking weeds that had sprung up between the father's cucumber plants in the absence of Alex's careful tending, Violet came flying out the door onto the porch.

“There's a carriage,” she said without preamble. “It's coming up the drive now!”

The elation in her voice, the relief—Theo battled with an uncomfortable surge of hope, and struggled briefly with the realization of how easily she could be infected by it. “It's probably nothing,” she said brusquely, and her mind drifted to the trunk of clothing Alex had left behind in the hayloft. Perhaps he had sent someone along to fetch it at last, and how foolish would she be to think anything else?

“But it *could* be Alex,” Violet insisted. “John has been sending

letters *everywhere*—”

Theo felt her jaw clench, and a rush of anger caught her unawares—that she was so pitiful, so tragic a figure that they would send out a volley of correspondence in an effort to bring him back. “And has he responded?” she managed to ask lightly, nonchalantly.

“Well,” Violet hesitated, knotting her fingers before her. “No. Not exactly.”

“Not *exactly*?” Theo pressed, rising to her feet and scraping the dirt that clung to her hands away on the front of her gown.

“It’s just that—we don’t know where he’s *gone*,” Violet said.

“No one does. Not even Grey.” She splayed her fingers out in entreaty. “If Alex had received one of John’s letters, he would have responded. I’m certain of it.” She took a hesitant step forward. “Or perhaps he has already—perhaps he is coming up the drive even now. Won’t you come?”

“Fine.” It was a dull, listless response—but for once, beneath the surface of her skin, *anger* burned brighter than grief. It lasted for just a moment, just a flicker of it. But it was enough. Enough to give her something to cling to, to feel like—like maybe that terrible gaping wound would scab over eventually. That someday, in the far distant future, she would be able to look back on all of this, and—

Well. Not *laugh*.

But perhaps she could view it without bitterness, without pain. Just a brief, strange time in her life that had happened, passed, and faded into nothing but a memory filtered through the lens of nostalgia.

So she didn’t hold out hope. But she followed Violet back through the house, and braced her back against one of the posts holding up the roof over the porch, folding her arms over her chest. She followed the procession of the carriage toward the house, and told herself she would not be disappointed when it inevitably turned out that Violet’s hopes were revealed to be futile. But still her heart leapt—just a little—when the sunlight glinted off the gold-painted crest on the side of the carriage.

The Davenport crest. It had been stamped into the wax seal that had adorned the duchess’ letter, and painted upon the carriage that Mr. Jennings had arrived in days ago, when he

had finally been apprehended. She would have recognized it anywhere—and she stood a little straighter, feeling the rough wood at her back bite into the fabric of her dress, peppering it with splinters.

A few moments later, the carriage had rolled to a stop. The coachman jumped down from his perch and approached the door of the carriage, but Theo could already see that the face profiled in the window did not belong to Alex. A fall of lavender skirts dripped from the interior of the carriage as the door opened.

Though her skirts were a bit wrinkled from travel and her hair was coming loose from beneath the jaunty little cap she had pinned atop the cluster of artfully-arranged blond curls, still the woman who emerged from the carriage exuded an unassailable elegance. She shook out her skirts, made a token, futile attempt at brushing the wrinkles free, and at last looked up.

With the same vivid green eyes that Alex possessed. It had been so long since Theo had last seen the duchess—she had been only a child, after all—but she could hardly fail to recognize the look of Alex in the woman who stood before her. It could *only* be the duchess.

“You must be Theo,” she said, with an effusive smile. “Oh—just look how you have grown!” Heedless of the dirt that threatened to sully the hem of her gown, the duchess rushed toward the porch, sweeping Theo into an exuberant embrace. The sweet, tart scent of lemon verbena washed over her; a sunny, summery fragrance.

“Your Grace,” she managed, awkwardly, unsure what to do with her arms—which were squeezed into her sides anyway. Did one *hug* a duchess?

“And Violet.” The duchess at last drew back—though one hand remained closed upon Theo’s left shoulder. “I was so pleased to hear that you had come to stay with dear, dear little Theo. And John?”

“Out, Your Grace,” Violet said, bobbing a small curtsy. “He’s at Ivywilde, helping the new land agent acclimate himself. Midsummer is fast approaching, after all.”

“So it is.” A brief flicker of trepidation flitted across the duchess’ face. “And...Alex?”

Theo fought to keep her shoulders from sinking. So not even the duchess had any inkling as to his whereabouts. She had told herself she would *not* be disappointed—but she was. Just a little. Just enough to salt the wound.

Violet shook her head. “No,” she said, and then, with a swift glance at Theo, amended, “Not *yet*.”

Not *ever*. It was just that no one wanted to voice the fatalistic words. As if speaking them aloud would make them *real*, an indisputable fact. But that was the thing about facts—regardless of whether or not one chose to acknowledge them, they remained true.

“It’s no matter,” the duchess said, briskly, though her smile had slipped somewhat on her face. “He’ll come to his senses soon enough. Now, I have brought a lovely blue silk for your gown,” she said, her hand coming up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind Theo’s ear. “It will look *splendid* with your hair.”

“My...gown?” Nonplussed, Theo could only furrow her brow.

“Your wedding gown, my dear.” The duchess gestured to the trunks strapped to the rear of the carriage, which Theo assumed contained the blue silk the duchess had chosen. “Every bride deserves a beautiful gown. I *do* hope there is a local seamstress...although I suppose I could summon one down from London—”

“Your Grace,” Theo interjected weakly, and then again, when the duchess showed no propensity to let loose of her grand plans, “*Your Grace*. Although I thank you for thinking of me, I have no need for a gown.” She set her shoulders and declared it, that *thing* which they seemed not to wish to acknowledge. “There is not going to be a wedding.”

But the duchess was not to be denied so easily. “Of course there is,” she said sweetly. “If I know my son—and I do—he will recover his senses soon enough. Why, when he wrote to me of you—”

“He—he wrote to you? Of *me*?”

“Of course, my dear. I *am* his mother.” The duchess waved a hand dismissively. “Naturally, we bicker upon occasion—”

“*Every* occasion,” Violet interjected.

“—but he is my *son*. And I was so pleased to hear he had at last chosen a wife. I knew—I *knew* from the way that he spoke of you that he loved you. I knew it likely even before *he* did.

He only needs to recall it himself, once he has finished his inconvenient bout of sulking.” The duchess gave an exaggerated roll of her eyes, as if to insinuate that even she found her son’s predilection for dramatics a bit *much*. “Do not lose hope,” she said finally—a refrain which Theo had grown incredibly weary of—and turned to gesture toward the carriage once more. “And look. I have brought you a wedding gift.”

Theo peered past her, wondering what it was she was supposed to see—but there was only a man unloading trunks strapped to the rear of the carriage. A footman? No; he wasn’t wearing livery, and he seemed too old for the position. His hair had gone to grey, where it curled out from beneath his battered hat.

Though she could see only a sliver of the man’s face from her position, there was something familiar about the man’s stance. And then turned just slightly, swearing beneath his breath as he pushed a pair of thick spectacles up upon the bridge of his nose.

“Papa?” she said, and her brows drew together in befuddlement. Spectacles? But *why*? What use were spectacles to a man who could not—

But he turned at the advent of her voice, and she *knew*. His eyes—the same blue of her own, which had been long occluded by the cataracts which had blinded him—blinked at her from behind the thick lenses of the spectacles he wore.

Her boots were carrying her across the porch, down into the grass and the dirt, her hand scrubbing at her face, which had somehow grown damp with tears.

“You—you can see me,” she said, inanely, her voice breaking upon the words. Her chest shuddered with a sob as he extended his arms to her.

“Ah, my girl,” he said as she rushed into them. He patted her back gently, with all of the affection of a doting father. “I’ve always seen you. Hearts see ever so much better than eyes.”

And Theo buried her head against his shoulder and cried.



Theo sat upon the edge of her bed, brushing out her hair to refashion the plait for the evening. The night was warm, the air soft and scented with the smell of wheat ripening in the fields. It breezed in through the sliver of her open window and ruffled the delicate lace sleeves of the gown that hung over the back of her door.

The gown that was meant to be her wedding dress. For the wedding that was meant to be tomorrow, and which Theo knew would not take place.

She had tried not to think about, as she had tried not to think about so many other things. She hadn't even wanted to be *measured* for the gown, but the duchess had insisted, and, at the time, she had thought—really, it was just a gown. Where was the harm?

But now she knew. The harm was in the presence of it hanging there, taunting her with things she knew would never happen. It was a physical manifestation of her disappointed hopes, the ones that kept creeping back up on her despite her attempts to shove them back down into the cold and dark place inside of her, where they belonged.

The closer the date of her supposed wedding had drawn, the less anyone had been disposed to talk of it. Even the wedding gown had been delivered by the seamstress the duchess had engaged, and the poor woman had handed it over with an almost apologetic air.

In small towns, news traveled fast—everyone knew that Alex had left town in a hurry, and that he had not since returned. If they did not already *suspect* that Alex had retracted his offer of marriage, then they would discover it soon enough, when that marriage did not materialize. To her surprise, Reverend Stewart had continued to call the banns, citing the fact that no one had instructed him *not* to. But even he did not seem to consider it likely that a wedding was to take place.

At least the house was her own again—the duchess, John, and Violet had repaired to Ivywilde Hall, under the guise of clearing house of every lackey that Mr. Jennings had hired on and reappointing locals. Two days ago, Serena, her husband, and their child had joined them. But soon enough, they would leave.

They would *have* to.

Just one more day, and the truth would be indisputable, no matter how badly they wished to deny it. Just one more day, and her life would return to what it always had been, and all of this would one day be a distant memory. Just one more day—and then Theo would take that beautiful, icy blue gown, and she would tuck it into the very back of her wardrobe, behind all of the gowns she had long outgrown, and she would endeavor never to think on it again.

Chapter Twenty Five

It *should* have been his wedding day.

Though he had made every effort to put the thought from his mind over the last two weeks, Alex had woken with the thought burning in his mind this morning, and it had not left it since. He had risen well before sunrise—country life seemed to have cured him of any propensity to laze about in bed until noon or later—and with every hour that had passed, so had the gnawing anxiety in his stomach.

It *should* have been his wedding day. Except that he had run away like a coward, and had spent every spare moment since his departure refusing to think upon it. Every time the merest *hint* of a thought had risen, he had tamped it back down with liquor, or backbreaking labor, or interviews.

He hadn't truly cared where he had been heading when he had left, but he *had* known that it would have been far too simple a feat to locate him in London. Instead he had headed southwest, to one of his lesser estates. There he had stayed three days, meeting with the tenants he had long neglected, interviewing the land agent he had hired to maintain the property—and of whom he'd heard no complaints—and then he had moved on again, and again, ending up at last in Berkshire. He'd stayed in no one place too terribly long, and he had made himself scarce enough that whatever inquiries might have been made had missed him.

It had kept his mind occupied, his body exhausted—and had probably concerned his tenants, who likely had not expected their landlord, a *duke*, to have taken a personal interest in the maintenance of their properties. Over the last weeks he had baled hay, repaired fences, patched roofs, hung doors, harvested crops—and any number of other tasks that had fallen into his path.

He had learned quite a lot about the lands he owned, and the people that lived upon them. He had heard their concerns and promised modernizations that had been a long time in coming.

He had *finally* become the kind of duke his father had once been.

And it was because of Theo.

The thought lodged uncomfortably behind his breastbone, stinging with a peculiar ache as he forced himself at last to consider the truth—that whatever motivations Theo had had for concealing her knowledge of his identity, he had become a better man for it. That he had flung some unfair accusations at her, when one considered that he had judged her for the same crime of which he had been guilty—concealing the truth. That he had said things to her that made his stomach clench with guilt and shame. That he had brushed off the explanation she had clearly wished to give.

That he had left her without a word, and had spent the last weeks studiously avoiding sorting through his tangled emotions. Perhaps a part of him had always known that the greater sin had been his, that he had lashed out in anger and humiliation at the one person who had never deserved it. Perhaps he simply hadn't wanted to acknowledge that he had let his past experiences overcome his good sense.

It had never been Theo's loyalty that should have been called into question. It had been *his*.

And it was their *wedding day*. Or it would have been.

Could still be?

He shaded his eyes against the sun and judged its position in the sky, and his heart sank—the sun hung high in the sky. It had to be at least eleven already. Even if he saddled a horse and rode at a gallop the whole way, it would be at least two hours, likely closer to three, before he would make it back to Ivywilde Hall. Too late to be married. By sheer distance, he had missed his own wedding.

Disappointment struck deep, and he rubbed his chest, though it did nothing to exorcise the ache there. Sometime in the past two weeks, the anger and humiliation had faded to only a dull pain. And absent the scalding heat of those ruinous emotions, he was left with one fact. It simply did not matter what she'd known and when she'd known it, whatever the reason she might have had for pretending she had no knowledge of his identity.

He loved her. Perhaps it *should* have mattered whether she'd

fallen in love with the duke or the man—but it didn't. It mattered only that when he envisioned his future, it was *Theo* he saw at his side. She had carved out a place for herself in his life, and no other lady would ever fit into it.

It was too late to be married when they *ought* to have been, but if he left *immediately*, and rode through London, and could obtain a special license—

He might very well make his wedding day after all. Just...a little later than expected.



“*Alexander William Phillip Henry Dryden*, where the *hell* have you been?”

“Hello, Mother.” Alex snagged her by the arm as he stalked from his townhouse and down the steps toward his waiting carriage. “We can chat in the carriage; I’m afraid I’m abhorrently late for my own wedding.”

The duchess sputtered her confusion. “But—but—you’re going to Ivywilde?”

“Naturally,” he said, and handed her into the carriage. “That’s where Theo lives, after all.”

“But I’ve just come from Ivywilde!” she wailed.

“Well, if you had plans to attend my wedding, you’ll be heading back.” He climbed in after her and she shuffled her skirts out of the path of his boots with a moue of displeasure. He knocked on the roof, and the carriage lurched into motion.

For a moment she stared at him, and he was well aware that his appearance left something to be desired. He suspected, given the fact that he’d ridden at breakneck speed to London, he was sweaty, disheveled, and smelling distinctly of *horse*. The Archbishop had affected a similar expression—a wrinkled nose, a curled lip—when Alex had barged in upon him.

The duchess flung up her hands in agitation. “Have you *any* idea of the *time*?” she hissed.

“A bit after four?” It was a guess; it had taken him longer than he had expected to wrangle a special license from the Archbishop, who had *not* appreciated the intrusion.

“So you understand, then. You cannot be married *now*.”

“Mother. I came to London to obtain a special license.” He patted his pocket, hearing the faint crinkle of paper within. “I might have missed my wedding, but it is *still* my wedding day.” He crossed his legs, stretching out in preparation for the long ride. “Incidentally, how did you find me?”

His mother heaved a sigh, touching her fingers to her brow. “One of Grey’s informants stopped my carriage on the road,” she said. “He’s had people looking for you all over. You were spotted heading for your townhouse; I simply redirected my coachman.”

He had suspected Grey might’ve employed such means. It was why he had avoided returning to London when he’d left Ivywilde. “So...you returned to London to find me?”

“No,” she snapped. “I returned to London because you have been missing for *two weeks*, and when you missed your wedding...” Her voice faltered here, her hands dropping into her lap. Her mouth trembled with emotion. “You must understand,” she said on a hard swallow. “We—all of us—have hurt Theo dreadfully.”

His heart wrenched in his chest. He knew his part, of course, but— “What do you mean?”

“Every day,” she said, her voice warbling a little, “must have been a kind of torture for her. We were so certain you would return, so certain you would see sense.”

He had. He *had*, eventually.

“But you didn’t come.” She rubbed the little furrow that had carved itself into the otherwise smooth plane of her forehead. “I had a gown made for her. Every woman deserves to feel beautiful on her wedding day, you know, and I—I wanted to welcome her into the family. But she could hardly bear to look at it. I think she must have known she wasn’t going to wear it.” Her breath hitched in a surfeit of emotion, and Alex felt his fists clench, his nails digging crescents into his palms.

“She’ll wear it,” he said. “Mother—”

“*No.*” She held up one hand. “You have to *listen*, Alex, because we had to *see* her suffer. She knew what none of us would acknowledge. And still she humored our faith in you, right up until noon today, when she finally took that gown off the back of her door and left the house. And we had to admit—all of us had to admit that she had been correct all along.

That we had only been hurting her.” She gave a pitiful little sniffle. “Alex, what on earth possessed you?”

He rubbed his palm over his chest, which had begun to feel as if someone had driven a dagger into it with a vicious twist. “She knew all along who I was,” he said. “I had thought—the whole time I had thought she had fallen in love with *me*. But she knew, and it tainted everything, and I was so *angry*.” His hands flexed. “If she had just told me—”

“I told her not to!” the duchess cried. “And Serena and Violet—they did the same. You were so *proud* of your little ruse. Where was the harm in letting you believe it had succeeded?”

His head struck the back of the carriage. “I was going to tell her myself,” he said. “But then she already knew, and I—” *Panicked*. He had *panicked*. She wouldn’t have been the first woman to fall in love with a title irrespective of the man who carried it. Too many people—ladies *and* their ambitious mamas and papas both—had attempted to manipulate him into marriage. And though he’d successfully dodged all of them, the revelation that Theo had always known exactly who he was had tripped every wire in his brain that had warned him of impending traps. He had reacted instinctively, horrified that woman he had fallen so helplessly in love with had been cut from the same cloth. And so he had avoided thinking about her at *all* until today.

So he had never taken the time to consider that Theo had *always* known exactly who he was—her dislike of him had not been artificial, nor her affections, once earned, contrived. She’d sneered at his very presence, laughed at his meager efforts to be of use around the farm—and then begrudgingly given him her respect as he had slowly earned it. She had given of her time, teaching him the skills he had needed to learn.

She had thrown a bloody *potato* at his head when he had displeased her. And he had grown attached to her at that very moment, because just like John, who had pushed him out of a tree when they had been children together, and just like Grey, who had broken his nose at their first meeting, Theo had not given a damn about his title. He had never been *the duke* to her—and she had never once treated him like one.

Even though she had known, almost from the very beginning.

Always, he had just been *himself*.

She had known, too, when he had asked her to marry him, exactly how her life would change. She had known what would be asked of her, how *different* it would be from everything she had known. Still she had trusted him—with her hand in marriage, her life, her family, her *heart*.

And two weeks ago he had spurned that trust.

His eyes closed on a weary sigh. “Can I make this right?” he asked.

And his mother—ever his stoutest champion, his greatest defender—could only give a hesitant shrug. “I don’t know, Alex,” she said. “I truly don’t.”



Go on to Ivywilde Hall, Alex had told his mother. *I have to do this alone.*

Only now as he stood, literal hat in hand, on the weathered porch beneath a sky that looked as if it might turn to rain, he experienced a bout of nerves. As a general rule—tacitly agreed upon by all of society, even if it had never been directly stated—dukes did not have to tender apologies.

No one ever asked for one, because everyone loved a duke. It had never mattered what he did or said, how abominably he might have behaved. He was forgiven immediately because of his old and distinguished title, his power and prestige, his connections. *Everyone* loved a duke.

But no one had ever really loved the man behind the title. No one had ever cared enough to know *him*, because who he was—who he *truly* was, deep down—had never mattered. No one had cared to look past the title to the man beneath it. He had been simply *Davenport* for so long that *Alex* had faded into obscurity, hidden from the eyes of society behind the smothering curtain of the dukedom.

He had thought—this whole time, he had thought—that Theo had been the first woman to love him for himself. And he had been deliriously happy to simply *be* himself. Finding out that she had known all along had been...devastating.

He had become so accustomed to the *duke* casting such a

shadow over his life, over *him*. It had not occurred to him that Theo had faced perhaps a heavier burden than had he. It was no different than ever it had been; he had still been the man hidden behind the curtain of the dukedom.

But Theo had peeked past it. She had loathed him on sight, from the moment they had met—except she had gradually given up her prejudices, readjusted her assessment of his character. She had fallen in love with him *despite* the duke, not *because* of him.

And he had said...some truly terrible things.

Run off like a coward.

Missed their wedding.

“Had you planned to knock?”

Alex turned, nearly overbalancing on a warped board. He had been so deep in thought that he hadn't even heard the approach of the three men who had walked up the drive behind him. Sam, Heath, and...Tom. Alex's fingers had ruined the brim of his hat beyond repair with their fierce grip, but they tightened still further beneath the weight of the glowers settled upon them. Of course, Tom had never actually *seen* him. But there was no doubt that he had guessed anyway.

He had been wrong about more than Theo, he realized with a sickening sense of shame. That last night in Maudie's tavern, he had been too mired in his own hurt feelings to realize the truth of it—that the townsfolk had not, after all, been patronizing him with their regard. They, too, had forgiven him for his neglect and welcomed him into their midst. But now—In one foolish, reckless move, he had eradicated every bit of goodwill he had earned. Theo was one of their own, and he had scorned her. He had only to see their faces to know that *this* trespass would not be treated lightly.

Shamefaced, he dropped his gaze to the toes of his boots. “I was working up to it,” he said.

Tom swiped the frown from his face with one hand. “Wouldn't recommend it.” He gave a nod to Sam and Heath. “I can handle myself from here,” he said, clapping each on the shoulder in turn. “Get on home, both of you.”

Alex could not blame them for the speaking glances they cast in his direction as they passed out of sight toward the barn, where they had no doubt stashed their horses, but still it stung.

Slowly Tom approached the house, with a slightly awkward gait—Alex supposed that Tom had spent so many years seeing with his feet and counting his steps that he had yet to break himself of the habit.

“You walked to the tavern?” he asked, awkwardly.

“The weather was fair enough for it when we left,” Tom replied, adjusting his spectacles on the bridge of his nose, as he heaved a sigh. “Regaining my sight has been a humbling experience. It’s been more than fifteen years,” he said, “since last I had a shred of sight to call my own, and much can change in that time. Wouldn’t have recognized my own damned farm if I couldn’t feel it under my feet. Relearning the landscape, seeing where to put my feet—that’ll take some time. But it’s the surface that’s done the changing, not the substance.” He gave a shrug as he stepped onto the porch. “The truth of it is, son, hearts will always see clearer than eyes.”

Alex suppressed a wince. “A lesson I could have done better with had I learned it some weeks ago.”

“Shouldn’t take an old blind man to teach you a lesson,” Tom countered. “What you learn and how quickly you learn it is your own responsibility.” His fingers brushed the door handle. “Theo’ll be out in the fields somewhere,” he said. “Blankets are in the barn, when you’re ready to turn in.”

The disappointment in Tom’s voice was harder to bear than anger might have been. “I think I had expected you to hit me,” Alex said softly.

Tom shook his head as he crossed the threshold. “Seems to me,” he said, “you’re doing that well enough on your own.”



Alex found Theo out in the fields, slowly driving in the sheep who had been grazing upon the turnip tops. A nudge here and there with the shepherd’s crook held in her hand sent the occasional lamb skittering after its mother or redirected a reluctant ewe to follow its flock back toward the pen.

She did not, precisely, *ignore* his approach—but neither did she acknowledge it until he had fallen into step beside her.

“Midsummer’s rent has been paid,” she said, and the bland monotone of her voice sheared straight through his nerves. “You’re welcome to check with your land agent yourself, Your Grace.”

Though she had spoken his title in evenly tendered voice, absent spite or malice, still they twisted in his gut like a knife—because *he* had thrown it there, like a gauntlet, between them. The distance between them was a space he had demanded with his unfair accusations, with the cruel words he had slung at her without a care for how they had been received. It was a distance so much wider than the scant few feet that separated them, and he did not know how to breach it. “I should have told you,” he said softly as she swept out the crook before her and nudged along a black-faced little lamb that had stopped in her path to chew on the frothy green leaves of a turnip top. “I held onto that secret because—I thought you wouldn’t want me if you knew.” The truth of it seared his throat.

That for the woman he loved, his title had been a *liability*. She had had no aspirations to become a duchess. But she would have made the sacrifices required—because she had loved him.

“I should have told you what I already knew,” Theo acknowledged, an odd sort of wistfulness in her voice, as if she were looking back upon a closed chapter of her life. Still, her voice was indifferent when she spoke again. “But the past is in the past. I am not with child, so there is not the least need for you to be here, Your Grace.”

A grimace settled over his face. “That’s not why I—”

Her cool, clear voice cut straight through his own. “I don’t want you now.”

He had expected it, of course. But still the pain of it caught him by surprise, and his heart gave an anguished beat in his chest, struggling to make sense of the words. “Would you have married me today,” he asked quietly, “if I had arrived on time?”

When she did not immediately respond, he knew the answer—she *would* have. Once more she would have graciously extended to him the benefit of the doubt and forgiven him. But he had lost all right to beg her benevolence when he had let

her sit and stew in her uncertainty, waiting past noon for a wedding that was not to occur.

He patted at his pocket, feeling for the opening. “I should have come earlier,” he acknowledged. “I was waylaid in London, obtaining a special license. It took some time to convince the Archbishop to issue one, but we could still be married. Today.” She stopped dead, her fingers reaching for the paper he’d pulled from his pocket. In the fading light she looked it over, her eyes moving across the words scrawled upon the page as if committing it to memory. And then she very carefully, very deliberately, tore the document into four neat, precise pieces. They fluttered from her fingertips to the earth, and a curious ewe wandered over to take a nibble of a corner.

“You told me once that there is a time and a place for pride,” she said tonelessly, watching the scraps of paper drift away, borne on the back of the breeze. “I believe I have learned it, Your Grace.”

This time he found he could not stifle his wince as she strode resolutely away from him.



Alex could have walked back to Ivywilde Hall and spent a night in a comfortable bed, but instead—after a long and much needed bath in the stream—he found himself heading in the direction of the barn. His mother was no doubt waiting for news, given that he had dragged her straight back to the countryside on the assertion that she might otherwise miss his wedding.

But from the sympathetic look in her eyes as he had climbed out of the carriage, he imagined she had known it would not be so simple as securing a special license. And given the fact that they had not crossed paths with Grey’s carriage—or John’s—on the road, he suspected that they were all there, waiting for news.

And he found that he could not face them—any of them—knowing how disappointed they would be. At one point or another he had meddled in each of their relationships, and it had been so *easy* to cast himself into the role of judge when he

had been an outsider looking in. But when it had been his turn to fall victim to such flagrant idiocy, he had run off into the night, choosing to nurse his hurt feelings instead of confronting them. John had counseled him to tell Theo the truth, and he had ignored that sound advice, relying only upon his own muddled judgment.

Grey would likely call him an idiot, and worse, he would be *right*.

Serena and Violet—well, it didn't bear thinking on. Violet, at least, was already too fond of Theo to let a mistake of this magnitude to pass without remarking upon it, and she *had* perfected the art of making a man feel like a bungling idiot.

Which he was.

Damn it all.

He could already hear it all in his head; the same recriminations he would have—and *had*—offered to his friends when their propensity for foolishness had threatened to overwhelm their good sense, when they had nearly allowed their own fears to snatch away any chance at happiness they might have had. It seemed he had learned little from their experiences himself.

But he already knew everything they would tell him. Presently, Ivywilde Hall was simply not where he needed to be. He needed to be—here. On the Vance farm.

With Theo.

Who was unlikely to give him so much as the time of day, even if he begged her for it.

Hand over hand he climbed the ladder up into the hayloft. From the darkness, several pairs of eyes gleamed at him as his head cleared the ladder, and at once there was an insistent *mew* and the sound of small paws scrabbling across the hay as a kitten came tumbling toward him.

“At least *you're* happy to see me,” he said, climbing over onto the rumpled pile of blankets. Ted's tiny claws pricked at the fabric of his trousers as the kitten bounded onto his knee. Alex yanked his shirt over his head and cast it above him, taking care not to disturb the kitten as he attempted to find a comfortable spot in the blankets, which was somewhat more difficult than he had expected. Not that the hay had *ever* made a particularly comfortable bed, but it had lost the shape he had

beaten into it over the weeks, and it was a struggle to fit himself into the indentation which seemed to have grown too small.

One by one, Frederica and her kittens gathered round to perform a series of investigative sniffs. Beatrice pounced upon his leg; Tabitha and Henry tussled about, vying for space between his right arm and his side. Frederica padded silently across the hay, walking across the lumpy pillow and disappearing above his head.

A moment later, her tail lashed out, thwacking him straight across the face.

“I *know*, Frederica,” he sighed, waving her tail away from his nose. “I don’t suppose you have advice for me?”

She settled near his shoulder, draping her lanky body across his pillow as she stretched out her paws and began to knead the pillow. A purr rumbled near his ear, but her unblinking eyes reflected the scant light as she stared at him. Her paws pushed at the pillow stuffing, mashing it too close to his ear for comfort, and when he jammed his hand into it to shove it back down, it resisted his efforts too solidly to be simply a bunch of feathers stuffed into a case. Sliding his hand beneath the pillow, he felt with his fingers until he found it—a wadded ball of fabric.

One of his shirts? But how had it gotten there? He turned his head, and in the dark, the moonlight glinted off the brass catches of his trunk, which was just where he’d left it—but the lid had been thrown open. Someone had been rooting through his things. But why?

He heaved a sigh and let the wrinkled linen fall from the tight clutch of his fingers, hearing an offended *meow* as it draped over Henry, who had curled up near his hip. “I don’t know what to do,” he admitted to Frederica, who blinked lazily at him, licking one paw. “How am I to fix this?” If it even *could* be fixed. Theo was not likely to humor any attempt he might make at a reconciliation—not that she would have a surfeit of time for him anyway, given that the harvest was fast approaching.

He winced anew to realize that his departure had likely caused new inconveniences for her. Only weeks ago she had made herself vulnerable enough to cry on his shoulder, admitting her

exhaustion, confessing the weight of the burdens she carried. He had comforted her, assured her that she could rely upon him to ease them, and she had trusted his words, and then—

And then he had abandoned her. She had been willing to shed her preconceived notions of him as the idle, inconstant nobleman, and in one fell swoop, he had proved those suspicions correct all along. How could she rely upon him, when he had proven himself unreliable?

The sound of boots stomping across the ground below startled him out of his thoughts, and the scathing sound that ripped through the silence was harsh—but distinctly feminine.

“Damned idiot duke.” More than just a muttered insult, there was also a despondency in the words, torn from some deep and aching place. “How *dare* he—”

He found himself jerking upright, just as there came the sound of boots striking the lowest rungs of the ladder. “*Theo?*”

A short-lived screech of surprise followed, and the ladder shook. Her boots hit the ground with a *thud* and a scrabble, as if she had lost her balance. “You—you—” Her voice vibrated with intensity, furious and horrified at once. But she managed nothing more than a wordless noise of frustration, and then her boots pounded out a rapid retreating rhythm, the sound disappearing into the distance as she fled.

Frederica blinked at him as he blew out a breath rife with frustration and reclined once again. “I was invited,” he told her, by way of explanation. More or less. ‘*Blankets are in the barn*’ was perhaps less welcoming than he might have hoped, but far more than he had otherwise expected. He reached up to scratch Frederica’s soft head, and was rewarded with a resounding purr. “What was she doing here?” he murmured, shifting uncomfortably on the packed hay. Frederica placed her paws upon his shoulder and performed a little wiggle, shifting her weight until she settled comfortably, having created a little nest for herself in the battered pillow.

And then he knew—why the hay had been packed so uncomfortably, why Theo had appeared in the barn so late.

She had been sleeping here. The hay had conformed to the shape of *her* body over the past two weeks, compacting beneath her weight. Perhaps she had rooted through his things, to hold something tangible of his in her hands when he had

deserted her. The horror in her voice—it hadn't been to find him present still upon her land. It had been because she had been caught sneaking into the barn to sleep where *he* had once slept.

Whatever attempt she had made to harden her heart against him, it hadn't worked—at least not completely. But how to convince her to soften it again? The answer was at once simple and fiendishly complicated. He had torn up the fragile root of the trust that had grown between them.

So he would have to plant a new seed.

Chapter Twenty Six

Harvest season was always difficult, and this year's harvest would be weak—weaker than Theo had led her father to believe it would be, at least. Stronger than she herself had expected, given that they had a handful of farm laborers hired by the duke who had been paid in advance, so it was unlikely that she would have to witness the infuriating sight of crops rotting in the fields.

But they were in a stronger position than she had expected. Midsummer's rent had been paid, and they still had coin to spare. The coin that had been repaid from what Mr. Jennings had stolen would be enough to see them through winter, at least.

And with Papa's sight restored—

She blinked back a mist of inconvenient tears as she bound up her hair with a bit of ribbon. Papa was still adjusting to the heavy spectacles he had to wear, but just occasionally he would look at her—and *look*, as if he could not believe what he was seeing. *That* he was seeing, perhaps. Seeing his daughter for the first time in more than a dozen years.

It wasn't that she wasn't grateful; it was just that she didn't want to *be* grateful. Not to the duke. Not for *anything*. There just wasn't a way she could avoid it, since regrettably all aspects of her life—her small, simple life—had been touched by him.

Well. Some touched, some torn. But she wasn't going to think about that.

The sun had barely crested the horizon, a beautiful peachy sunrise skimming over the fields in the distance. She shoved her feet into her boots and set her shoulders. If she hurried, she could probably avoid encountering the duke. Even if he *had* spent last night in the barn, it had doubtless been an unpleasant one. Just as it had been for her, *knowing* he was there.

Wondering if he had guessed her secret when she had fled from the barn last evening.

Shame provoked a sense of urgency, and she cast open the

door and headed for the kitchen. A simple breakfast this morning, she thought; eggs, and perhaps toast.

Except that the scent of frying bacon met her nose as she approached the kitchen—and Papa was seated at the kitchen table, working his way through a cup of tea and the latest newspaper. With a sense of impending disaster, she peeked around the door frame, and smothered a groan in her palm.

Alex—the *duke*—stood in the kitchen, Theo’s ruffled pink apron cinched about his waist, carefully minding the pan that sizzled over the fire.

The words escaped before she could stop them. “What are you doing in here? *Get out.*”

“Somebody has got to make breakfast,” Alex said absently, with a punctuating snap of the tongs held in his hand. “It might as well be me.” *Clack, clack, clack* went the tongs, in an irritating rhythm. The sound grated along her already shot nerves and she resisted the impulse to stride forward and snatch the tongs straight from his hand.

“It might *not* as well be *you*,” she ground out. “*You* can get the hell out of *my* damned kitchen.”

“*Language*,” Papa chided. “If the boy wants to make breakfast, let him. Anyone could see he’s got a guilty conscience. Let it do some good somewhere.”

Her hands fisted in the skirt of her dress in a magnanimous effort to stop herself from throttling him. “*Dukes* don’t make breakfast,” she said, through the tight clench of her teeth.

“This one does.” It was a blithe, almost cheery retort, and he turned, offering a plate. “You’re grumpy in the morning. Sit down and have some toast; the bacon is nearly done.”

She set her chin mutinously. “I don’t want it.”

“It’s only toast.” Alex set the plate on the counter instead and set about pouring and preparing a cup of tea. Just as she liked it, of course. “I know you’ll be out in the fields all day. You have got to eat something.”

“I don’t need you to cook for me. If I want something, I will make it myself.” She hated the sour tone of her voice, the revealing acidity. That anger that she had thought she had stifled kept welling up inconveniently, pushing past the layer of detachment in which she had cloaked herself. She did not want to be the sort of harridan she had become, but his very

presence challenged her strides toward calm, toward acceptance.

The patronizing cut of his eyes scored her. “Don’t be muleheaded, Theo.”

“Muleheaded!” she gasped, and her palms itched to slap the cup of tea from his hands even as he held out to her. “I don’t want you here, Your Grace. I don’t want you *at all*.”

“You wish me to leave?” He extended his arm, placing the cup that she had refused to accept alongside the plate of toast.

“Yes!” He shouldn’t—*couldn’t*—be here. For her own well-being.

Bracing one hand upon the countertop, he leaned close, nearly nose-to-nose with her. “Then you can damn well throw me out.” Those green eyes blazed with intent. “In fact, I invite you to try.”

“You can’t—” She backed up a step, and almost tripped over her own boots. “You can’t just—*stay*. We don’t want you!” Seeking support, she turned. “Papa?”

Papa stretched back in his chair, balancing on two of the legs as he turned his head to face her. “Well, now,” he said, sipping his tea. “The way I see it, if the boy *wants* to cook—”

“*Papa!*”

“—and there’s chores that need doing, my girl—”

“They’re *my* chores!”

“—and he makes damn fine toast and tea,” Papa concluded, shooting a sly glance toward Alex. “Could use the labor in the fields, too.”

Traitor.

She whipped around to upbraid Alex, since Papa could not be bothered to do so, only to find that he had retreated once more, and was delicately lifting the bacon from the pan before it could burn. As if he could feel her eyes upon him, he said, quietly, “I don’t want you working yourself into exhaustion. Take some toast. It’s not a concession. It’s only *toast*.”

Something about the tenor of his voice tugged at her heartstrings, the cadence clear and faintly pleading. She could see only a sliver of his face, but the tension running through his jaw equaled her own. Despite herself, she found herself reaching for a piece of toast and telling herself it was only because he took up so much room in the kitchen that there was

none left for her to cook something for herself, unless she wished to rub shoulders with him while she did it.

Which she most certainly did not.

Her fingers bit into the crisp, buttery toast as she stomped toward the door.

“Theo,” he said, before she could quite make it out the door, and her feet—for *some* stupid, silly reason—stuck straight to the floor as if they had grown roots. “I *am* sorry. I won’t leave you again.”

Hurt and grief and fury roiled up in an unholy mix of unwanted emotion. *Calm*, she told herself. *Calm*. He could do whatever he liked. She could not stop him, but neither could he command her attention. Without dignifying his apology with a response, she stormed out the door and crammed the toast into her mouth in an effort to be rid of it as quickly as possible.

And it *was* good toast, damn him.



“*Ugh.*”

Theo rolled her eyes—yet again. The unconscious sound of disgust had been a more or less constant refrain from Alex, with each turnip he plucked from the ground and placed in a basket.

He had taken up a position on the row across from her, and as if he had sensed her disdain, he looked up. “I can’t help it,” he said. “I simply do not care for turnips.”

“You’re free to leave anytime you like, Your Grace. No one is keeping you here,” she said blandly.

“I wish you would not call me that.” His fingers closed around another turnip top, giving it a vicious yank—and his face twisted once more in aversion. “*You* are keeping me here. I don’t want to be apart from you. I’ll stay as long as it takes to prove it to you.”

Theo plunged her fingers into the earth, grabbing a stubborn vegetable and pulling it free, turning her face toward her task. The hell of it was that there was a part of her deep down inside, a part that she had neither the time nor the patience to

confront, that might have...wished the same. That he *could* prove it to her. That there existed a sort of perfect combination of words that could exorcise the hurt and anger that lived and breathed and *seethed* inside of her.

“Isn’t it too late in the season for turnips?” he inquired. “I mean to say, I’ve just come from Berkshire, and their—”

Theo’s head shot up. “What do you mean, you’ve just come from Berkshire? You said you’d come from London.”

“Ah,” he said, and this time he managed to pull a turnip without much more than a grimace. “I meant I came *through* London. On my way from Berkshire.” He wiped a sheen of sweat from his brow, leaving behind a smudge of dirt. “When I knew I would not arrive on time, I decided to detour through London to secure a special license.”

So that they might still have been able to marry on the day they’d intended. It sent a terrible little crack shearing through the center of her heart, and she resolved to put it out of her mind.

“That license was dreadfully expensive, by the way,” he said.

And now it was drifting in pieces through the fields. “You may add the cost of it to the Michaelmas rent, if it pleases you,” she said fiercely.

“I don’t want your damned money, Theo.” Color burned high in his face, and she didn’t think it had anything to do with the heat of the day. “I want to marry you.”

“You’ll forgive me, I’m certain, if I have some difficulty believing that, given how quickly you—”

“*I know.*”

The self-loathing in his voice stopped her short, and she paused, one hand wrapped around a turnip, leafy green fronds poking through the gaps between her fingers.

“I know,” he repeated, and she watched his arms flex as he fixed his attention on the row of plants he was harvesting. “I know I hurt you. I lashed out because *I* was hurt, and it was wrong of me. In the future, we should not keep secrets from one another.”

He’d slammed the door shut on any future they might have had with his ill-timed departure, with the cruel words he’d slung at her, with—

“Theo, stop.” His hand closed over hers, the texture of the dirt

clinging to his fingers dry and rough against her skin. “Whatever it is you’re thinking, don’t.”

“I’m not thinking anything.” She jerked her hand out from beneath his, and the turnip with it, tossing it into the basket near her hip.

“Then why do you look as if you’re about to cry?”

“I’m not!” But her eyes *were* stinging. “It’s the sun; it’s too bright.” A ridiculous assertion, given that the wide brim of her hat kept the sun entirely out of her eyes.

“Theo—”

Clearing her throat, she turned her attention back to her task, ripping turnips from the ground with a savagery that suggested they had somehow done her a grievous wrong. “The turnips are late,” she said, in a clipped tone, “because the seeds were sown late. The seeds were sown late because the rows were plowed late. And the rows were plowed late because, until very recently, I had too few hands with which to manage too much land. Would you care to hazard a guess on what—or ought I to say *who*—was responsible for that?”

“That’s...a fair accusation.” For a long moment there was silence as he collected himself, composed a response. “Although I have made great strides, I feel, in restoring what I have broken—”

“What does it say of you, Your Grace, that you break things with such alarming regularity?” Her trust. Her *heart*. She swallowed it down, that burning knot of pain and anger and sorrow, but it throbbed in the center of her chest and refused to be ignored.

With a sigh, he admitted, “Nothing eminently flattering.” And then, cannily, he added, “You were surprised to hear I was in Berkshire. Where had you imagined I was?”

“I’m sure I didn’t think on it.” She said it too swiftly for it to ring true, and she gritted her teeth against the soft, patronizing laugh he gave.

“Liar,” he said, not unkindly.

And the truth was, it *was* a lie. She had imagined all sorts of things. That he had taken himself off on an extended pleasure-trip, perhaps, or hidden himself away in London. He could have gone to house parties, or traveled to Bath, or to Brighton, or to the continent—there were no end of diversions awaiting

him, and no reason he ought to molder away in the countryside. She had imagined him shuddering in horror as he regaled his social set of his lucky escape from a near-disastrous marriage to a veritable country mouse. She had imagined them all collectively turning up their noses and laughing their obnoxious, mocking laughs.

“I have several estates, in fact,” he said, his voice slicing through the monstrous bent of her thoughts. “And I have neglected all of them to some degree or another. I was visiting the closest of those—staying for a few days at each, speaking to my tenants, interviewing my land agents.” Despite his aversion to turnips, he’d become quite comfortable with working with plants. The dirt that had collected in a thick stripe beneath his fingernails did not seem to bother him in the slightest. “I helped repair things that had gone wanting. I shoveled manure. I mended fences—both literal and metaphorical. I slept in haylofts and chased my cooks out of their kitchens and made my own meals. I think I knew, even when I could not bring myself to think of it, that I was always coming back here. To you.”

She turned her face to the sky to let the wind wick away the moisture that had gathered in the corners of her eyes, and tried not to think about what a relief it was that he had *not* been gallivanting about, entertaining himself. That he had done something productive, something *good*. That he had taken what he had learned here as simply *Alex* and put the weight of his title behind it.

“I want you to know,” he said softly. “That your letter—the one riddled with all sorts of invectives and aspersions against my character that summoned me here to begin with—has been responsible for the improvement of so many lives. That you are already a worthier duchess than I have ever been a duke.”

“I never wanted to be a duchess,” she whispered, even though she knew she ought not to do so.

“I know,” he said. “Why do you think I was so afraid to tell you?”

A turnip toppled into her lap, rolling down from the basket she had overfilled; a convenient excuse to exit a conversation she did not wish to have. And to her great relief, he did not protest as she rose to her feet, collected her basket, and walked away.



“Are you *certain* you will not wed my son?” the duchess inquired between dainty sips of tea.

“Yes, Your Grace.” It came out smoothly, evenly—in the past few hours, Theo had moved well past embarrassment straight into a placid calm that surprised her. She had accepted the invitation to Ivywilde Hall this afternoon, since the turnip harvest had concluded a few days earlier, and she had wanted to say her goodbyes before Ivywilde’s current residents packed up and removed themselves to London. She had intended for it to be a brief visit—to thank them for their many kindnesses to her, and to the town in general—but she had found herself swept into a pretty little drawing room for tea and biscuits and had been immediately subjected to an inquisition.

Worse still, Alex had also received an invitation. Though she supposed he hadn’t exactly required one, when one considered that the massive house belonged to him, in point of fact.

“I would consider it a great personal favor,” the duchess wheedled, thrusting her lower lip out in an extravagantly dramatic pout.

“*Really*, Mother.” Alex gave an offended sniff as he handed his mother a plate of biscuits that Theo knew he had made himself, given that Ivywilde Hall yet lacked a suitable chef, and *still* they had come out perfectly. “I do not need your assistance—such as it is—to obtain a wife.” Ted—whom Alex had brought up with him, it seemed—wound around his ankles, mewling for attention, which he gave with an absent scratch between the cat’s furry ears.

The duchess pursed her lips. “Clearly, you *do*.” Laying her hand atop Theo’s, she confided, “Sons are *such* a trial. You should endeavor to have only daughters.”

Alex bared his teeth in a feral smile directed at the duchess. “Why, Mother,” he said, in a voice saturated with patently false surprise, “whatever happened to your all-consuming concern for the ducal line of succession?”

“That hardly matters at present,” the duchess returned, her saccharine sweet tone belied by the irritation sparkling in her eyes, “given that dear Theo insists that she will not marry

you.” Her mouth made a little moue of disappointment as she returned her attention to Theo. “You’re *quite* certain?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” It seemed as if the whole of the room had hung upon her answer, and Serena and Violet shared a look between them, as if they did not *quite* believe her. Idly, she wondered how long the duchess would be able to contain the protests that she held firmly behind her pursed lips.

The silence that hung in the air lasted mere moments.

“Because he *has* got—”

“—All his teeth,” Violet supplied helpfully.

“And hair,” Serena added.

John snickered into the palm of his hand, and Grey rolled his eyes heavenward, bouncing his daughter in his arms. Alex gnashed his teeth in a travesty of a smile.

“And, really,” the duchess said, “it was very brave of him to come here today.”

“Oh?” Theo asked. “Why is that?”

Alex tipped his head back, heaving a sigh. “Because I have been avoiding a lecture.” As every head swiveled in his direction with varying degrees of incredulity, he amended, “*Several* lectures. Which, I would like to point out, I do *not* require. Mother spent a good two hours haranguing me to death on our way back from London.”

The duchess pressed one hand to her bosom and gasped.

“Haranguing! Alex, you—”

“Deserved it. Mother, I *know*.” He patted his knee, and Ted leapt at the opportunity to leap up, drape himself across Alex’s lap, and purr madly. “I knew *before* I could receive any such lecture, which is more than I can say for the lot of you. I was already on my way back—”

“You missed your own wedding!” Violet interjected, her voice thrumming with agitation. Her fury warmed Theo’s heart, even as she kept her own anger on a tight leash, buried down deep.

Grey tucked his daughter’s head against his chest, covering her ear with one hand as his voice cracked across the room. “Have you any idea of how much time I spent in attempting to track you down? How long my wife spent penning letter after letter, and sifting through responses?”

And suddenly the room was alive with a half-dozen voices showering Alex with recriminations—and it stirred that

sadness deep down in the pit of Theo's soul that these people, who had gone through such trouble on her behalf, represented a life that she had voluntarily surrendered. Listening to so many fierce voices raised in her defense, watching Alex bow his head in resignation and accept the reproach they heaped upon his shoulders as his due, it occurred to her how badly she had wanted that life.

How badly she *still* wanted it. And it was there, right in front of her—she could open her mouth, tell them that she had reconsidered. Step right into their sacred circle as if she belonged there, and they would make a place for her. They had *already* made a place for her, because Alex had made certain of it.

But he had revoked it so easily. He had left her so easily.

The duchess' voice crested over the lot of them. “—While *you* were off, gadding about the countryside!” She stared down her son with the sort of expression that only a parent could manage, the perfect blend of exasperation and disapproval.

“That's not true.” Theo's voice could not compete with the discordant blend of so many others. “He wasn't gadding about, he was—” But somehow *Alex* had heard her, and he turned those vivid green eyes upon her, clearly startled by her defense of him. *She* was startled by her defense of him.

But he shook his head at her, just slightly, as if to say, *I have earned this reprimand, and you cannot rescue me from it.* And it broke a tiny corner of her heart, that he would subject himself to it. For her.

Violet shripped, “And Theo was taking *so well* to lessons!”

Alex cut his head to the right, confusion furrowing his brow. “What? What lessons?”

With a flippant little wave, Violet explained, “You know—deportment, posture, conversation. And she was doing *beautifully.*” A hearty sigh followed, and Violet accepted a consoling pat from Serena, who looked just as disappointed.

That befuddlement faded slowly, coalescing instead into a flush of ire, and Alex's brows descended further into a severe scowl. “Theo has never needed any of that. She's perfect exactly as she is.”

Serena made a cloying, sweet sound in her throat, her hands folding over her heart. Violet turned a sly glance toward Theo,

arching a brow, the satisfied slant of her smile a jibe in itself. And suddenly the room was too close, too tight, to contain the depth and the breadth of the emotion clogging Theo's throat. *Don't say such things*, she wanted to say. Because it hurt a part of her heart she had endeavored to render untouchable. With shaking hands she shoved herself out of her chair, but she could not make herself draw enough air to force anything more than a token apology from her mouth as she fled.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Under normal circumstances, Theo would have buried herself in the fields, and fretted over the harvest instead of wallowing in the mire of her muddled emotions. But her version of *normal* had been upended by Alex's improvements. They had taken up all of the turnips in record time. A bit over a week, with Heath and Sam pitching in to help for a few hours each day. Theo's waking nightmares of her carefully-sown crops rotting away in the fields had not come to fruition after all. And Alex had been at her side the entire time—or near enough to it, working his way down the row across from her own, even as she spent the vast majority of her time ignoring his presence.

She had a few days before she would need to begin the tilling and sowing for the autumn crop, and even then she could expect it to go smoother and faster than it had in previous seasons, given that she had a passel of extra hands to work the land.

With Papa's newly-restored sight, and Alex's predilection toward rising before dawn to accomplish the various chores around the farm before Theo could get to them, Theo had discovered that the one thing that she had an overabundance of lately to be *time*.

Time for her brain to ponder every bit of hurt and anger and loneliness she'd suffered. *Time* to agonize over things she simply would have once buried somewhere dark and deep. The very *lack* of time had starved them before, but now those *buried things* grew piercing thorns and twisted vines that wrapped round her heart and exploded past the surface of her, blooming into deep ugly blossoms, demanding to be addressed at last.

She could feel them strangling her, choking her—choking the very breath out of her body as she walked and walked. But she knew there would be no peace at the end of it, because there was nowhere she could go but back to the house, where she would no doubt find a hot meal and a hot bath awaiting her,

just as she had every evening since Alex had returned.

Tonight, she could not take that kind of consideration. Instead, she walked toward the stream that meandered through the western side of the land and stood on its bank, listening to the rush of water that gurgled over the stones lining the bottom, to the sway of the grass in the breeze, and looked out to the sun dipping toward the horizon, and the pale violet sunset spreading across the sky as the first stars began to glow.

Theo had played in this stream often as a child. The water came only to the chest, and it was clear and calm as it flowed gently into the distance, and frolicking in the cool water had been one of her favorite summer pastimes, back when she had *had* the time to entertain such frivolous pursuits. Back when the whole of her life had been so much simpler, so much easier.

How lovely it would be to recapture a tiny sliver of that magic, she thought—and with no more consideration than that, she found herself nudging her boots from her feet, slipping off her stockings, and reaching for the buttons climbing up the front of her dress. The night air wicked away the heat of her skin, and she tossed her discarded dress over a boulder planted deep in the earth just at the edge of the stream. The water slipped over her toes, soaking the ragged edge of her chemise as she slid first one foot in and then the other.

Ah. Peace. It held for a second at a time, like a string stretched taut—but for a precious few moments there was just the stream and the land and the stars. The muted glow of the moon. The whisper of the wind. Her skin, which had browned and burned a bit with exposure to the sun, soaked in the cool of the water.

The smooth stones beneath her feet pressed the aches out of the muscles there as she waded toward the center, where the water lapped up around her belly. Her hair fanned out in the water as she sunk to her knees and tipped her head up to the sky to watch the evening darken around her. The water trickled past her ears, running along in its current with tiny burbles.

But that blessed peace lasted only moments. And then it was all there again—Alex, his abandonment, the anger, the hurt, the grief—all twisted up inside her like a clinging vine searching for sunlight, squeezing and twining, writhing toward

freedom. Her jaw clenched against a scream of outrage, of frustration. Instead, she swallowed a massive breath and slid beneath the water fully, submersing her head.

And when she emerged again, Alex was waiting.



Theo screeched, slipped on the slick rocks in her surprise, and tumbled back into the water onto her bottom, briefly going under once more, and Alex chuckled as her feet thrashed in the air as she attempted to right herself. At last she managed it, swiping away the hair that had plastered itself to her face and neck. The moonlight gilded her skin in silver, and her black hair was darker even than the night that had begun to spread out around them.

Her eyes darted to her dress, which was draped across his knee, and he saw the firm clench of her jaw when she realized that it was entirely within his possession and he did not intend to surrender it to her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, and her voice was every bit as tight at the purse of her lips.

He shrugged. “Call it a happy accident. I come here to bathe on occasion.” He flicked his fingers to indicate the folded toweling and jar of soap he’d brought with him. “I meant to look for you after I’d bathed, since you did not come in to dinner.”

“You’ve found me,” she muttered tersely. “You can go.”

“I don’t think I will.” He braced his elbow upon his knee. “I have got you figured out, Theo. It occurred to me only today when you left Ivywilde Hall, I’m ashamed to say—but I have *got* it at last. You,” he said, with a jab of his finger in her direction, “do not have the luxury of emotions.”

She jerked as if he had struck out at her with his fist. “Of course I—”

“No, you don’t. You take everything, every inconvenient emotion, and you bottle them all up inside you. You don’t have *time* for them, for any of them. You juggle so many other burdens that you’ve let everything else that makes you *human* slip straight out of your hands.” He gave a short, rueful laugh.

“You will throw away any chance at happiness—for *both* of us—because you don’t know what to *do* with those emotions. You’ve been denying them so long, why ought you stop now?” Her chin trembled, and she sank into the water and hunched her shoulders almost protectively.

“You,” he accused as he reached down and yanked off one boot, “are a *coward*.”

Briefly, she flinched at the accusation—and recovered herself just enough to shout, “You’re one to talk! You *left* me!” Even in the fast-fading light, her cheeks blazed a riotous pink, fury and humiliation roiling across her face as she realized what she had admitted in that ill-advised accusation.

His other boot clunked to the ground, abandoned. “I did,” he said. “I did, and I’m so terribly sorry. But I *came back*. I worked myself into the ground trying to forget everything, and I realized that despite it all I still could not imagine my life without you. Hell, until my mother admitted that she had advised you against telling me you knew who I was, I was still half-convinced you’d be marrying me for my title—and I didn’t give a damn. So long as I had you.” His stockings came next, yanked free with too little care.

“I would never!” Her offended screech soared out to the stars. “I didn’t want to be a bloody duchess!”

“Well, you’re damned well *going* to be, so you had best accustom yourself to it!” He raked his hands through his hair in frustration and fought to keep his voice from climbing higher. “I have never expected anything of you but *you*. Exactly as you are. Haven’t you realized that by now?”

And he could see that she had, in the flash of shame that crossed her face. She sunk back to her knees, her eyes cast down toward the water. She vacillated between anger and sorrow, so full of both that she shivered with the force of them. And maybe a little cold.

“Everyone loves a duke,” he said sardonically. “It’s a fact I’ve known all my life. Women have cast themselves into my path, thinking to make duchesses of themselves. Gentlemen beg favors, ladies for my attendance at their society functions. There’s just a handful of people in this world, Theo, who don’t seek to use me for their own ends. When I fell in love with you, I thought—this is *it*. This is the one woman in the world

that has ever seen *me*. Not the *duke*. Just”—he spread his hands out in supplication—“*me*.” A sigh wrenched itself up from the depths of his soul. “And then I found out that I had *always* been the duke to you.”

Grief won out over fury. Her voice quavered over a few broken words. “You said—you said such terrible—”

“They were cruel, untrue words that I never should have spoken them, and certainly never to you. And I *am* sorry for them, Theo.” His shoulders flexed as he dragged his shirt off over his head. “I accused you of what I had always suspected of myself. That the reason nobody had cared to look past the duke was because there was nothing of *me* worth loving. I left because I was so afraid, so ashamed—that finally I had found the woman I loved, and she did not love me.”

Her eyes glowed in the light of the moon as her chin jutted. “How could you think me so disloyal?” she bit off, and she seemed not to notice that he was stripping off his trousers even as her anger seared the air. “I trusted you! I trusted you with my farm, with my father—”

“And were you wrong to do so?” The question sliced through the air even as his feet slipped beneath the surface of the water, which climbed over his ankles.

Her blue eyes washed with tears and she blinked desperately, still trying to hold them back—to hold *everything* back. Jabbing a vicious finger in his direction, she choked out, “You have no idea what it is like to have *nothing*; no power, no money, no influence. To be so small, so insignificant—”

His voice was clipped, annoyed. “You are not insignificant. In fact, *you* have no idea how much power and influence you wield.” The cool water embraced him, rushed around his legs, his hips. “It *is* true that I have led an exceptionally charmed life. It is true that I have had money and power and influence since birth. But you—people *listen* when you talk, Theo, and not because of your position or prestige. They listen because you are *you*. *I* listen.” His hand clenched into a fist over his chest. “So—talk to me. You could have a duke at your feet, if only you would—”

“I never wanted a damned duke!” The words erupted on a screech that startled a flock of nearby birds into flight, and the rustle of wings beating against the wind filled the air. She had

let him get close enough to touch, and her chest heaved with the force of her ragged breaths. Her shoulders trembled, fingers curled into small fists. She vibrated with tension, dashing at her eyes with one hand. “I only wanted—I only wanted—”

Ah. “You’ve still got me, Theo. That has never changed.” Her skin was damp and cool, but she did not flinch from his touch when his palm curled over her shoulder. Instead she listed into the heat of his hand, shivering. “I am so very sorry I made you doubt me. I am so very sorry I doubted *you*. But I am always going to love you, and I will be here, waiting, until you can believe—”

The water sloshed as she cast herself across the scant inches that separated him, and her breath hitched with a sob as she plastered herself to his chest, her head tucking up beneath his chin. A pure, sweet relief slid through him as his arms came around her, and he scraped her wet hair away from her neck as he curled one hand around her nape and the other arm around her waist, and just—held her.

“I’m still angry with you,” she said fiercely, even as her hands clutched at him, as her cheek settled against his shoulder.

Alex pressed a kiss to her temple. “I know,” he said. “*Be* angry, then, Theo. Shout and rail and fight with me. Be whatever it is you need to be. But still, always be *mine*.” He squeezed her so tightly that she made a tiny sound of discomfort.

“And you will be mine?” It was a soft, hesitant question, muffled against his shoulder.

“I have always been yours. From the very moment you pitched a potato at my head.”

Her shoulders shook with a soundless laugh. “You deserved it.”

“Undoubtedly.” The stillness of the night wrapped around them like an embrace, the cool water calming heated emotions until it found them at last at peace. “Will you marry me, then? Not the duke. Just *me*.”

Her arms tightened around his neck. “Yes,” she said. “I love you. And when I’m doing being furious with you, yes—yes, I will marry you.”



“The bath would have been warmer, if you had bothered to come home and take it,” Alex chided as he watched Theo saunter out of the stream to retrieve the jar of soap he’d left sitting beside the boulder. Her wet chemise clung to every inch of skin, the thin linen little better than nothing at all. The coral of her nipples were visible through the material, tightened to firm points by the chill of the water drying upon her skin.

“I think,” she said softly, plucking the jar from the ground, “I’d prefer a bath in the stream this evening.” Her chemise came off slowly, peeled away from her skin as she drew it over her head and draped it across the boulder. The moonlight embraced her, playing over curves and angles, shimmering in her tangled hair.

His breath backed up in his throat as she came striding back toward him, unashamed of her nakedness. But she shivered as she breeched the water once more, and he found himself wading across the stream to reach her, taking the jar from her hand, collecting her against his chest with one arm. Her lips touched his chin, his cheek, sliding smoothly across his skin until she met his mouth.

There was simply no other woman in the world with whom he could imagine sharing this moment—buried in the countryside beneath the glow of the moon, bathing in a stream. He would not have believed it of himself even three months ago, but it was *true*, and it was *real*, and it was exactly where he wanted to be.

The scent of roses bloomed around them. She had plucked the lid from the jar and scooped out a measure of soft soap, and her soap-slick hands caressed him, clever little fingers kneading his shoulders and sliding down his back. Surely she could feel his erection pressed against the softness of her belly—but her hands kept moving, rubbing muscles that had been overworked to soreness this past week.

But he was not the only one who had worked himself to the bone, and he scooped a dollop of soap out of the jar, secured the lid once more, and gently tossed it back onto the bank. She made a soft, approving sound as he stroked his soapy fingers

through her hair and ferreted out the tense muscles at the nape of her neck, working the knots from them.

She turned her face up to receive a kiss as his hands meandered over her slender shoulders, down her arms, and to her breasts. A breathy little noise broke from her throat as his thumbs slid over her peaked nipples. Beneath the water, her small hand closed around his cock, her grip firm and still slippery with soap. She had learned the motion, the pressure—and she used it against him ruthlessly. It took only moments for his hands to bury themselves in her hair and hold her head in place to take her lips with an urgency that surprised even himself.

His need for her was a force of nature, and she—she *understood* it, and softened against him, melting into the ferocity of his embrace. She accepted the mindless thrust of his tongue into the heat of her mouth, and still her fingers stroked him, teased him.

Enough. The stream gurgled, and water sloshed as he poured handfuls of it over her shoulders, through her hair, cleansing her skin of the soapy residue, leaving only the bright, fresh scent of roses clinging to her skin. It had been three weeks since he had had her, held her—and there was no compelling reason to wait a moment longer.

Theo gave a muted shriek as he swept her off of her feet, and water went flying as he strode for the shore. She buried her face in the side of his neck, but he could feel her smile against his skin.

Thank God he'd come to bathe. There was a wide strip of toweling folded upon the boulder, and if it would not make a *comfortable* bed, at least it would be better than the grass alone. He set Theo down once he'd cleared the bank, and she helped him gather up their discarded clothing, piling it beneath the toweling.

“Promise me,” he said, as she followed him down upon the toweling, “that you will love me, even when I make it difficult to do so.” He rolled half over her, tucking her beneath him to shield her from the breeze.

“I thought I already had,” she said, and her leg slid up the outside of his, provoking a shiver.

“I want to hear it again. Every day.” He pressed a kiss into the

hollow of her throat. “Perhaps as many ten times each day. Or more, if the mood strikes me.” He draped a string of kisses in the valley between her breasts. “Perhaps you should simply preface every statement with *I love you.*”

“I love you,” she whispered, bending her head to his ear. “And you must promise me the same, even when *I* am difficult.”

“Theo, my darling, you are *always* difficult.” With a laugh, he dodged the irritated pinch of her fingers at his side and kissed the puckered expression from her lips. “And I always love you.”

A sigh drifted from her lips as his tongue curled around her nipple, as his knee pressed between hers, and her hips undulated to the intrusion of his thigh, welcoming the pressure of his body. Everywhere she sought the connection of their skin—she draped her legs around his waist, she kneaded his shoulder with her left hand and scraped the nails of her right through his hair. He could feel her feet flexing, toes curling as he teased one nipple and then the other, caressing the curve of her breast.

“Alex,” she panted, as she canted her hips, and for a glorious moment, his cock slid against hot, slick tissues and notched against her entrance. But before he could surrender to the needy tone of her voice and sink inside her, she wiggled out from beneath him and urged him to his back.

And then *he* was the one in an agony of desire as she straddled his hips, found her seat, and sank back upon him. A groan rumbled in his chest; his hands gripped her hips to help her find a rhythm, and when she found it, it was all he could do to clench his teeth against the encroaching climax tingling at the base of his spine. Her knees bracketed his hip, and she braced her palms upon his shoulders, her breath hitching in her throat as she rose and fell in a furious, urgent rhythm.

The ends of her damp hair teased his thighs, and the cool droplets of water sliding off her skin and onto his was like a soft rain. He didn’t feel the grass prickling against the back of the his leg which had ended up thrown off the towel beneath them when she’d pushed him to his back, or the odd lumps of scattered clothing bunched beneath him—he felt only Theo, and the press of her blunt nails into the flesh of his shoulders, and the soft, hot grip of her inner muscles contracting around

him. The frantic puff of her breath against his cheek when leaned forward to steal a kiss. Which he gave to her along with a murmured endearment and an open palm smoothed along the curve of her spine.

It was that gentle touch that soothed her from a frenzy of agitated motion into a leisurely, maddening pace, and each slow rise was punctuated with a long, deep descent that took him to the very heart of her, pulling the breath from his lungs each time. But this was Theo's moment, and he could only fist one hand in her hair and hold on, and let her do as she would—until her hips jerked in tense little motions, seeking her release, and he slid his fingers through the cluster of curls at the base of her thighs and stroked her. At last, moments—or perhaps hours—later, she threw her head back with a little cry, outlined starkly against the starry night sky, and the sweet, soft heat of her body clutching his reduced the scant control he'd cobbled together to rubble in an instant. The stars spun in the sky, and Theo—Theo was the brightest of them all.



It was a long, chilly walk back home. Theo's soaked chemise had swiftly dotted the thin fabric of her dress with water spots, and even if the night air was warm, the water dried cool on her skin. Alex had draped his shirt over her, but it was simple linen and hardly thicker than her gown.

It had grown quite late. After they had recovered, she and Alex had spent another hour or so wading in the stream once more, trading apologies and promises. She knew there would be so many more of them to make throughout the rest of their lives—there would be times that they would argue, times that they would hurt each other, times she would forget herself and plunge headlong into bouts of stubbornness. But she would never forget this moment, the clasp of Alex's warm hand on hers, and how lovely it felt to be unburdened of secrets, to have vented the force of the anger and pain that had enshrouded her heart.

She tipped her head against Alex's shoulder as they walked,

and her heart warmed when he bent his head to drop a kiss atop hers. “I feel it is only fair to warn you in advance,” she said. “I can’t imagine I’ll be anyone’s idea of the perfect duchess.”

“You’ll be *my* perfect duchess,” he said. “And Mother will be thrilled to have another daughter. She’s been saving you a seat at her table since I was about...oh, twenty.”

“You’re on the mantel,” she said, patting his arm affectionately. “I remember.” In the distance was the farmhouse, windows darkened. “You know, I met your mother when I was quite young.”

“I believe she mentioned something to that effect,” he said dryly, and Theo knew he was remembering the fact that the duchess had deliberately led him to a mistaken belief of her gender.

“She was very kind to me,” Theo said, “at a time that I desperately needed that kindness.” Her cheek rubbed his shoulder. “My mother had passed away only a few days earlier, and Papa—Papa was—” She swiped at her eyes with one hand. “Suffice it to say, I spent a few days largely alone, before Papa had recovered himself enough to remember that he still had a daughter. I felt as if everything had been ripped away from me all at once. And so I took it into my head to run away.”

“Did you? I can imagine that even as a child, you were very resourceful.”

“I was,” she said. “I slipped out of the house and walked all the way down to Maudie’s tavern, where I intended to wait for the mail coach. I don’t even remember where it was I had intended to go. Of course, I did not know that I had come on the wrong day, and I had not been prepared for the rain.” She offered a little smile. “I suppose your mother had come down into the town for some purpose or another—although I’m not certain it was ever realized, for her carriage stopped beside me and she tried to convince me to come in and get warm, and she promised she would bring me directly home. Which, of course, was exactly the opposite of what I wanted.”

“Naturally,” Alex said, and his hand squeezed hers.

“So I told her that I would not, and that I was running away, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop me. And do

you know what she did?” She spread out one hand before her, rolling her wrist in an exaggerated motion. “She climbed out of the carriage and sat beside me, there on the steps of Maudie’s tavern. In the pouring rain, she sat beside me for hours. She talked to me, and eventually convinced me to return home—and then she took me back to Papa in her own carriage.” She could still remember the bedraggled duchess in her sodden skirts, holding her by the hand and confiding, “*You know, you remind me of my Alex.*”

Alex gave a soft chuckle. “That sounds like Mother,” he said. “My mother comes from common stock, you know—she was an actress when she met my father. They were married only a year before I was born, and she had hardly found her footing within the *Ton* before my father passed away.” He gave a slow shake of his head. “I learned much later that in the early years of her marriage—before she had gained the social standing she enjoys today—many of my father’s set had been terribly cruel to her. They implied she manipulated my father into marriage, that he had wasted himself on a woman of no breeding, polluted his noble lineage with common blood.”

“How awful,” Theo murmured—and shuddered. If this was the world Alex had been born into, she could understand why he largely eschewed it, why he called so very few people his friends.

With a nod, Alex continued, “But they were wrong. My mother loved my father desperately. I think she lost a part of herself when she lost him, and—for such a long time, I was terrified of a love like that. A love that is devastating to lose.” His thumb rubbed over her knuckles. “I always knew love like that existed; I simply wasn’t prepared for it. And then I watched Grey fall, and John—and I knew it would be worth it. I was only waiting to find *you*. And, Theo, even if we have each other only so long as my parents did, it *will* be worth it.”

Oh. Her eyes watered with the sweet ache of her heart, and she sniffled and muttered, “How do you always know exactly the most perfect thing to say?”

“They teach it to us in school,” he said. “Every educated man has got a list memorized—*oof*.” It ended on an exaggerated wheeze as she withdrew her fist from his solar plexus. And then he laughed and caught her fist and drew her once more

into his arms. “Every man has got poetry in his soul. Most simply aren’t lucky enough to find their muse.”

She laid her head upon his shoulder and said, “We’ve missed dinner.”

“A long time ago,” he said. “It was growing cold even before I left.”

“And Papa’s already gone to bed,” she said.

“Likely.”

“So there’s no one to know if I should happen to...spend the night in the hayloft with you.” She walked her fingers up his bare chest, ending at the hollow of his throat.

Even in the darkness, she could see the torn expression flicker across his face. His hand grasped her fingers as he heaved a regretful sigh. “Your father—”

“Adores you,” she said. “And, really, Alex—what would you expect him to do? Demand that you marry me?”

A twitch of mirth put a dimple in his cheek. “Do you know, you’re absolutely correct. At worst, he’d make certain we were married faster,” he said, and his voice was filled with delight at the prospect as he grabbed her hand, urging her to follow. And then they were scampering across the empty fields toward the barn, hand in hand.

Theo made it to the ladder first, and the kittens went bounding away as she climbed into the hayloft, falling onto the pallet of blankets with a sigh of relief. A moment later, Alex appeared, dropping down beside her. He helped her tug his shirt off, and shed her dress and chemise, then went to work on his own clothing—and then she was settling right back into that perfect spot she had missed, right up against his chest, tucked securely into the cradle of his arms.

One by one the kittens came sauntering back from deepest reaches of the hayloft, crawling around and over the blankets that Alex had pulled up around them. A purr rumbled near her ear, and she knew that it was Ted, who always seemed to curl up as close to Alex’s face as he could get—which, presently, seemed to be just over his shoulder.

“I think Ted should be your wedding present,” she said softly.

“He loves you. He’ll be brokenhearted if you don’t take him.”

He smiled against her temple. “Well, I wouldn’t want to disappoint a cat,” he said, but for some strange reason, he’d

turned his gaze upon Frederica, who offered only a slow blink as she curled up at Theo's feet.

Epilogue

September, 1836

“Put your back into it, Davenport—one would think you’d have improved by now!” The good-natured taunt came from somewhere to the west, from one of the men wading into the thick of the wheat field stretching out into the distance, and yet Theo could not identify the source.

But Alex could. He swung his scythe with one massive sweep and shouted back, “You shut your damned mouth, Conroy, or I swear I will buy a reaping machine!”

A chorus of laughter went up through the fields, and Conroy sputtered his horror.

It was not the first time Alex had made such a threat, but the townsfolk of Ivywilde were uninterested in the advancements that had been made in agricultural practices—they’d been doing their farming in their way for generations, and Theo suspected it would be years and years before they could be brought even to admit that the threshing machine that Alex had provided for the town had been a good investment.

In fact, his tenants at Ivywilde were hardly the only ones to have seen such improvements, and she and Alex routinely made visits to their various properties to ensure that the needs of the townsfolk were being addressed appropriately. Suffice it to say, it had been a *very* long time since Alex had been able to set foot on any of his properties incognito.

But it was to Ivywilde they always returned for the harvest, and each year Alex labored alongside the men—even if he could never hope to match their efforts, it was not for lack of trying. And for the time they were here, Alex once again got to experience the camaraderie of the townsfolk, who had decided they simply did not give a damn whether or not he was a duke, and treated him accordingly.

Mostly with friendship; occasionally with gentle mockery, depending upon how badly he had embarrassed himself.

Theo had been relegated to the duties of a serving wench, sent to deliver ale to the men laboring in the fields to bring in the wheat harvest. No matter that she had become the Duchess of

Davenport within the tiny church here, in the beautiful blue silk gown Alex's mother had had made for her, and with her father looking on with tears in his eyes, she would always be *Just Theo* to the townsfolk—which was just as she preferred it. Alas, she had been somewhat hindered in her task by the clutch of a tiny fist on her skirt.

Thus far, their son had been sucking his thumb, distracted by the constant whistle of scythes sweeping through the air followed by the swish of them slicing cleanly through stalks of wheat, but he had recognized his father's voice and removed his thumb from his mouth long enough to shout, "Papa!"

Alex turned immediately, letting fall his scythe as he recognized his son's voice. "Oliver? What are you—oh." A sheepish smile tugged at his lips as he caught sight of Theo. "I thought you were with Grandpapa," he said to their son. "Come here, then."

Oliver released his tight hold on her skirt and went racing toward his father, who swept him up in his arms, and Theo took the time to set her tray upon the table that had been set up nearby for the men.

"Ew, Papa. You're *dirty*." Oliver gave a shriek of laughter as Alex ruffled his black hair.

"Am I? I hadn't noticed." Alex pressed his cheek against Oliver's and turned toward her. Both of her boys, wearing matching grins, their green eyes bright and mischievous. "Do you know who could use a little dirtying up?" Alex asked their son, conspiratorially. "*Mama*."

"Oh, no." Theo thrust out one hand. "Don't you *dare*—" The protest faded into a groan as Alex swept her up anyway, crushing all three of them together. Oliver exploded into delighted giggles, planting a huge, wet *smack* of a kiss upon her cheek even as Alex's sweat soaked into the fabric of her dress. She was going to have a dirty handprint upon her rear that she would have to explain away when she returned to her father's house.

"I love you," said Alex, sweetly, though he made no move to let her go, and she knew was going to smell like dirty, sweaty *man* until she had the opportunity to change her clothing.

"I love you," said Theo, rolling her eyes heavenward and praying for patience.

“*Ew*,” said Oliver, with all the depth of disgust a four-year-old could muster.

Which was rather a lot.



The house was overrun. Violet and Serena had arrived last evening, husbands and children in tow, and even with the additions to the farmhouse that Alex had insisted upon, still there was always someone underfoot, some child shrieking about this or that, too many bodies in the kitchen or milling about the house.

It had been a tight fit even in the early days of their marriage to make enough room to accommodate just a small—at least by London standards—group. But now the house was fairly bursting at the seams. Of course, Ivywilde Hall could have held all of them and more, but it wasn't *home*. Home was here, where she had grown up—where she and Alex had fallen in love.

And even if she knew that Alex and John and Grey would presently be offered rescue—courtesy of Sam and Heath, who would insist they come out to Maudie's for an ale or six—from the madness that was harvest season and its ensuing chaos of children and friends cramped up in too tight a space, still it was Theo's favorite time of year and favorite place to be.

“*Mama!*” Oliver screeched as he came careening into the kitchen, where she and Alex were preparing dinner. “Mousie pulled my hair!”

Ted, who had been winding himself around Theo's ankles, hopeful that she would spare him a few bits of chicken, whisked his tail out of the path of Oliver's shoes and retreated instead to Alex.

Hot on Oliver's heels, Mary—Grey and Serena's daughter—stomped in, her small face flushed red. “I did *not*, Auntie Theo!” And then her shoulders hunched and her lips pursed into a pout. “Maybe a *little*,” she admitted. “But he started it!” Behind her, Alex smothered a snort of laughter into the palm of his hand—which left a smear of flour across his face, given that he had been assembling a crust for an apple pie.

“*Neither* of you ought to be pulling hair,” Theo said, attempting to arrange her face into an appropriately stern expression, when all she wanted was to laugh herself. But at the sly looks the children slanted one another, she wondered if she hadn’t made a massive mistake. “Or—or kicking, or hitting, or biting—”

Violet, who had settled at the kitchen table, her infant daughter cradled in her arms, choked back her own laughter, and Theo jabbed a finger in her direction. “Just you wait,” she said. “Your time will come.”

It took precisely seven seconds for the children to once again begin bickering, and just as Oliver reached out to give Mousie’s plait a yank and Mousie squared her shoulders to retaliate with a shove, Papa came thundering into the kitchen. “What in God’s name is all of this noise?” he grouched, adjusting his spectacles.

Oliver looked down at his shoes, his lower lip thrust out into a petulant pout. “Sorry, Grandpapa,” he muttered.

Papa grunted, turning his gaze on Mousie, who ducked her head, abashed. “Sorry, Grandpapa,” she said, though her grey eyes shot embers at Oliver.

“That’s better,” Papa said. “You two are much too loud. We must think of baby Alice, mustn’t we,” he said, nodding his head toward Violet and the infant she held in her arms. “I’m certain she would not appreciate having her nap interrupted.”

Oliver wrinkled his nose. “*She’s* loud,” he complained, entirely oblivious to the volume of his own voice. “Babies don’t do anything but cry.”

“Ah, but she’ll grow, won’t she? Just as you did.” Papa set his hand upon Oliver’s hair, ruffling his hair. “And you’ll both have to be a good example for her.” He crouched down, extending his hands to the children. “Now, I’ve cleared out a little plot for each of you in my garden. How would you like to learn how to plant spinach?”

With twin shrieks of glee, Oliver and Mousie each grabbed one of his hands, talking excitedly as they bounced around him.

“Oh, no,” Violet moaned, and then there came the telltale snuffling, fussing sounds of a baby waking. Baby Alice flailed her tiny fists and screamed her displeasure.

Alex nudged Theo with his shoulder. “What do you think,” he said. “Hayloft tonight?”
“*Absolutely*,” Theo sighed.



Ah, family dinners. They were *not* to be missed, and so Christine, the dowager Duchess of Davenport, arrived just before dusk, her carriage climbing the dusty path toward the old Vance farmhouse as the vivid autumn sunset spread across the sky and painted the ripened wheat fields in gold. She could hear the merriment that awaited her even before the carriage had pulled to a stop—the shouting children, the rumble of so many voices, the laughter.

A burst of light pierced the window as a curtain flicked back and a tiny face appeared briefly within it. Her grandson’s voice lifted over the rest of the din, “She’s here! Grandmama is here!”

And her heart warmed as a cheer went up, and one by one they all came tumbling out of the house and onto the porch to greet her. All of them assembled—her children, her grandchildren, faces shining with happiness, with love.

Oliver and Mousie were racing across the grass even as the footman was coming round to open the carriage door, and she opened her arms as tiny feet clamored into the carriage, crushing her skirts beneath dirty shoes, sticky hands grasping and grinning faces thrust into her own.

“My darlings,” she said, tumbling the children into her lap. “How I have missed you!”

Mousie, ever practical, accepted the kiss pressed against her cheek and said, “We were at dinner *last* Thursday.”

“Still, I have missed you.” Christine tweaked Mousie’s nose and gathered Oliver into her arms in turn—her beloved grandson who looked so much like his parents, with his father’s amiable nature and his mother’s penchant for mischief. “I do hope I haven’t missed dinner.”

“We were just about to eat!” Oliver shouted near her ear, in his childlike exuberance. And then he added sullenly, as a baby wailed on the porch, “Alice is *cranky*.”

“Babies often are,” Christine said, and she surreptitiously slipped a few toffee candies from her reticule and into their tiny hands, to the music of their delighted squeals. Shooing the children out of the carriage, she climbed out herself at last, brushing at the fabric of her skirt which was now hopelessly wrinkled from travel *and* grandchildren.

“Mother,” Alex sighed as Oliver slipped past him, chewing upon a toffee. “No sweets before dinner!” But he opened his arms to embrace her, and gracefully accepted a kiss to his cheek.

“It is a grandmother’s prerogative to spoil her grandchildren,” Christine said primly as she embraced Theo in turn. “You shall simply have to accustom yourself to it. Violet, my dear, may I?” She held out her arms to receive the last of her grandchildren, Alice, and Violet gratefully handed off the fussy baby.

The infant blinked brilliant blue eyes up at her, quieting instantly, and Christine cooed, rocking her back and forth until Alice’s little eyes closed and she gave a massive yawn and fell once more into a contented sleep.

Violet placed a kiss on her daughter’s forehead and sighed. “How do you *do* that?” she asked.

Christine smiled. “Practice,” she confided. She had always loved babies, and now there were so many of them. And doubtless there would be more—sooner rather than later, if those secretive smiles that Grey and Serena kept sharing between them meant what she suspected they did.

“Dinner’s getting cold,” Tom said, as he ushered the children back in the door. “Christine, welcome—you’ll want to take your seat before someone else snatches it up.” And he sighed as their shared family crowded elbow to elbow around a table that had grown just a bit too close to comfortably contain all of them. “I’m going to need a larger table,” he said, though he didn’t sound distraught even in the slightest.

“I know,” Christine said, dimpling. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

Author's Notes

This was actually the *first* book of this series I attempted to write—except that when I began, I quickly realized that my idiot duke needed some friends with whom to share his woes, and so I gave them to him.

Of course, *then* I realized that it would be far more advantageous to the plot of *this* book if I wrote the others first, so I naturally put off writing it while I produced stories about those friends. So here we are, a year and a half after I began this book, finally at the conclusion.

In my research, I learned that ocular surgery for cataracts existed in the Regency era. Of course, there was a protracted recovery time, and it involved removing the lens of the eye—so the person upon whom surgery had been performed would have needed glasses afterward.

I wanted very much for Theo's father, Tom, to be viewed as a whole and capable person irrespective of his sightedness, and it was important to me that he was not treated as an invalid because of it. I wanted also for his decision to undergo surgery to remove his cataracts to be a *personal* decision, and for him to be accepted precisely as he is regardless of it. I hope I have treated this topic with the sensitivity it deserves, because everyone is worthy of respect, and *no one* deserves to be made to feel inferior because of any disability.

Over the course of this book, I learned far more than I ever wanted to know about Regency era farming, land rent prices, livestock, crop rotation, and food preservation. I don't think my significant other will ever forget the time I came running into the living room to excitedly tell him that barn manure can be used to fertilize crops, which was something I'm certain he had absolutely no interest in learning. I am a modern city girl at heart, so putting these things in context—*especially* the context of two hundred years ago, in a country I have never visited—was a struggle for me. I'm sure I've gotten some things wrong, but I promise you I did my best.

Although it is largely irrelevant, the sheep mentioned briefly in this book are Suffolk sheep—though they weren't given that name until 1859. I liked their sweet little black faces, so that is the breed I decided to use.

Turnips are, in fact, easy to grow, and could be fed to livestock through the winter, since they did not spoil easily. Wheat was harvested traditionally in August or September, and a single acre of wheat could feed a family of four for approximately two years.

Of course, there was machinery available to reduce the labor required to harvest and thresh the wheat—such as reaping machines and threshing machines—but many areas were notoriously slow to adopt these modernizations.

Land rents were paid on quarter days, which, in England, are Lady Day (March 25), Midsummer (June 24), Michaelmas (September 29), and Christmas (December 25). You would not *believe* the lengths to which I have gone in an attempt to find out what a reasonable price for land rents might have been.

Soft soap was pretty much all that would have been available in the countryside, because bar soap was so expensive as to be prohibitive for all but the extremely wealthy to purchase.

I also learned that, given the lack of readily available refrigeration in the form of ice houses in the countryside, one of the most common ways to preserve leftovers would be to pour melted butter over the top to seal it from the air! Fascinating. I hope you have enjoyed reading about Serena and Grey, Violet and John, and Theo and Alex. This concludes this series, but I'll be back with a new book just as soon as I've written it. Thank you for your continued support!

As always, you can keep up with me on Facebook and Twitter, or email me at aydrarichards@gmail.com.

Love,

Aydra