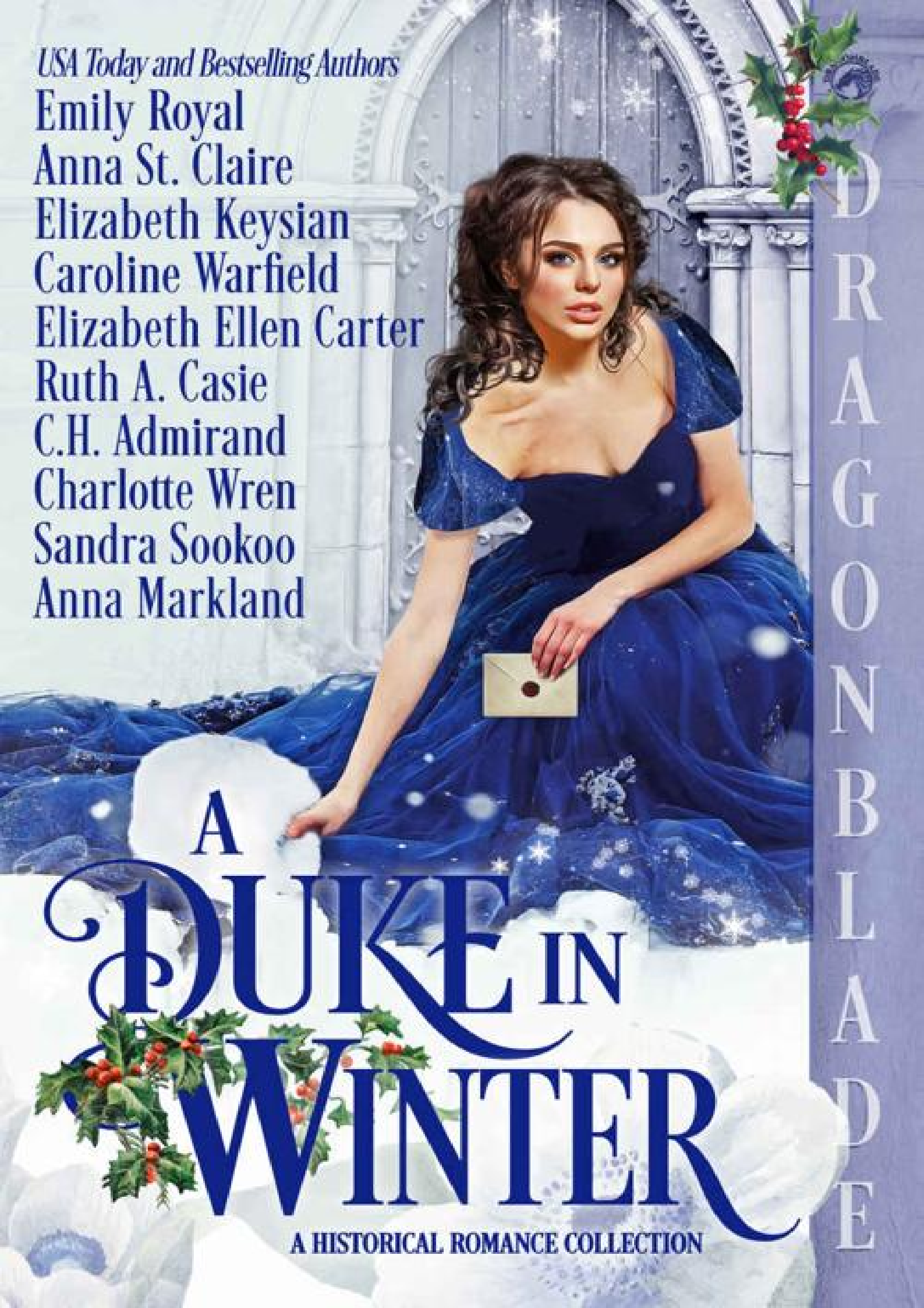


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A
**DUKE IN
WINTER**

A HISTORICAL ROMANCE COLLECTION

A DUKE IN WINTER

A Historical Romance Collection

Emily Royal, Anna St. Claire,
Elizabeth Keysian, Caroline Warfield,
Elizabeth Ellen Carter, Ruth A. Casie,
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**THE TAMING OF THE
DUKE**

Emily Royal



CHAPTER ONE

London

December 1817

TWO MEN STOOD on the edge of the ballroom and surveyed the dance floor. The younger, Lord Lucian Horton, tapped the edge of his glass in time to the music while he watched the other guests—an array of brightly colored silks, weaving to and fro in precisely formed patterns.

His gaze lingered on a young woman sitting at the opposite end of the room. In a gown of soft pink, and with honey-blond curls arranged elaborately on her head, eyes the color of cornflowers, and delicate, elfin features, she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen.

The woman next to her was a different creature altogether. Pretty enough—or at least, she would be if she smiled—her hair was a flame-red color, as if it contained a piece of the sun.

Or the fires from hell.

Sharp, green eyes surveyed the room with an expression of disdain, as if she'd emerged from the womb, already determined to hate the world.

Lucian sipped his drink and sighed.

“Is Lady Wilton’s champagne not to your taste?” his companion asked.

“On the contrary, Horatio, Lady Wilton furnishes her guests with the best,” Lucian said, “and tonight’s no exception.”

“If it’s not the liquor that’s disappointing you, dear boy, it must be a woman. And I’ll wager I know which one.”

“You think you can read my mind?” Lucian asked.

“A man doesn’t need to be a mind reader to know how smitten you are with Miss Blanche Parville.”

There was no point in denying it. Lucian drained his glass, then gestured toward the nearest footman, who scuttled over and took the empty glass.

“Another, Lord Horton?” the footman asked.

Lucian shook his head. “I’ve had enough.”

The servant bowed and scuttled off.

“You should have another glass,” Horatio said, “if only to enable you to summon the courage to ask the delightful Blanche to dance.”

“I’ve no hope of securing a dance with Blanche while the *Spinster Shrew* guards her like a dog,” Lucian said.

“Ha!” Horatio cried. “You’re a coward.”

“Cowardice has nothing to do with it,” Lucian said. “Lord Parville has declared that none shall court Blanche until her older sister has secured a suitor of her own. And, given that Catherine is not only on the brink of thirty, but she’s the most unpleasant creature to have entered society since the Almighty was in leading strings, I’d wager that Hades would turn into a block of ice before *that* happened. No man would want to put up with that shrew—especially with no dowry.”

“Why do you seek to court her sister?” Horatio asked.

“Because, despite being penniless, Miss Blanche is the sweetest creature imaginable. I’m quite in love with her.”

The dance concluded, and the couples dispersed, giving Lucian a clearer view of Miss Blanche Parville.

What an exquisite creature she was! The exact opposite of the miserable-looking shrew next to her.

Perhaps now was the time to ask her to dance.

But before Lucian could make his move, another young man approached her. By the look of him, he’d indulged in too

much of their host's champagne. He swayed from side to side and extended his hand to Blanche.

A sharp voice spoke.

"No—my sister shall *not* dance with you!"

The young man flushed.

"Miss Catherine, I only wished to request a..." he began, but he was cut short.

"Save your breath, you fool! Do you think my sister would consider it anything other than purgatory to stand up with a man so far in his cups that he's incapable of walking without bumping into walls?"

"Ye gods!" Horatio laughed. "The Spinster Shrew has a tongue sharp enough to tear a man to shreds. How can the lovely Blanche be related to such a creature?"

"They had different mothers," Lucian said. "Blanche's mother, Lady Eugenie, was Lord Parville's second wife. It's a wonder he didn't marry a third time, given that he has no male heir."

"Perhaps after seeing two wives into the grave and losing his fortunes at the gaming tables, he's lost his appeal as a suitor," Horatio said. "After all, a title alone isn't enough to live on. And there's no guarantee that a third wife won't burden him with another daughter rather than furnish him with a son."

At that moment, another man approached the two women. Older than the first, his hair was thinning at the top and graying at the temples. The shrew swatted the first man with her fan, then turned her attention on the second, who bowed and offered his hand to her sister.

"That's Lord Gremshaw," Horatio said. "Surely he's not going to subject himself to Miss Catherine's sharp tongue?"

She inclined her head in the manner of a monarch acknowledging her subject. Then, Miss Blanche stood, and let Lord Gremshaw lead her onto the dance floor.

“What does Lord Gremshaw have that other men lack?” Horatio asked.

“A wife,” Lucian said, “not to mention an advanced age. A young, unattached man has little chance of success securing a position for his name on Miss Blanche’s dance card, while her older sister is so thoroughly single.” He let out another sigh. “If only someone could be persuaded to court Catherine, then I might have a chance at courting Blanche.”

He glanced at Horatio, as an idea formed in his mind.

Horatio shook his head. “Oh no—don’t even *think* it.”

“Think what?” Lucian asked.

“I’m not a fool, Lucian,” Horatio said. “You were going to suggest *I* pay court to Catherine long enough to persuade her father to permit you to court Blanche. But I wouldn’t do it if you paid me.”

“Not for ten guineas?”

“Not even for a hundred! I’m not so desperate for cash that I’d subject myself to even a moment in that unpleasant creature’s company. Besides—what makes you think Miss Catherine would accept a man’s suit? I’ve never heard her speak a civil word to anyone. It would take a very particular type of man to secure her affection.”

“Are you saying that you don’t possess the charm and wit to secure the affections of a lady?”

Horatio snorted. “Lady, indeed! Just because her father’s a viscount, doesn’t mean she’s a *lady*. Ladies should be alluring, tender, and delectable.”

“You make her sound like a filet steak.”

“Miss Catherine’s more like a piece of scrag end,” Horatio said. “Tough on the palate and guaranteed to ruin a man’s constitution for life. No, my friend, you’ll have to find another poor, unsuspecting soul to take on *that* challenge.”

“Such as who?”

At that moment, a ripple of murmurs threaded through the ballroom, as if the atmosphere had shifted.

“I’ll be damned!” Horatio exclaimed. “I didn’t expect to see *him!*”

A newcomer stood at the entrance to the ballroom, flanked on either side by their hosts, Lord and Lady Wilton.

Tall and broad-shouldered, he wore a dark blue jacket and tightly fitting cream breeches, which clung to his athletic frame.

Daxton Hawke, fifth Duke of Petrush.

He stepped forward, and the company parted to make room for him. Several female heads turned, their feathered headdresses nodding in the air—blushing debutantes, desperate mamas—eager to catch a glimpse of most eligible bachelor in England.

A slight sneer curled on his lips, as if he considered the company beneath him, and for a moment, he reminded Lucian of the expression on Catherine Parville’s face.

“Now *that* must be the Hand of Fate,” Horatio said.

“I don’t understand.”

“Dax is the answer to your problem. He’d have no scruples about pretending to court the Spinster Shrew. In fact, he’d delight in the challenge and would likely do it for sport rather than coin. Of course, it would be bad form not to offer him a little stipend for his trouble.”

“You know him well?” Lucian asked.

“We were at Oxford together. Dax was the year above me at Christchurch College. He won the boxing match against Cambridge three years in succession. In his third year, he flattened his opponent less than a minute into the first round. And, he’d be perfect to assist you in your time of need.”

“In what way?” Lucian asked. “Unless you’re expecting him to flatten Catherine in the ring in order to clear the way to

Blanche.”

Horatio chuckled. “Of course not. But, in addition to boxing, Dax excels in many forms of sport—especially the one which all men seek to perfect.”

Lucian glanced toward the duke. The man carried an air about him—not merely the self-assurance which came with being the handsomest man in the room or with having a title of such distinction. But the very atmosphere seemed to bend around him, as if the world—and everyone in it—acknowledged his mastery.

A man like him would have the pick of every woman in the room—and, most likely, had bedded many of them already, given the sidelong glances of the ladies as he walked past. And while Lucian, like most men of his acquaintance, had indulged in a mistress or two, he was not so naïve as to be unaware of the difference between a novice and a master of the sport in which all men indulged.

The sport of seduction.

“Dax’s reputation is unsurpassed,” Horatio whispered. “He’s perfected the skill of removing a woman’s undergarments with one hand, while downing a brandy with the other. If any man has a chance of persuading the Spinster Shrew into a courtship long enough for her father to give you leave to court Miss Blanche Parville—it’s Dax.”

At that moment, Blanche walked by on Lord Gremshaw’s arm. She glanced at Lucian and their gazes met. He smiled and his heart fluttered as she returned the smile. She lowered her gaze, a delicate bloom spreading across her cheeks, then she lifted her gaze again, her eyes sparkling, and his heart was lost.

She was exquisite!

There was nothing he wouldn’t do to have the opportunity to court her. And, if Daxton Hawke had the ability to help him, then he could name his price, and Lucian would empty his coffers.

Provided that the duke was willing to suffer the company
of the Spinster Shrew.



CHAPTER TWO

CATHERINE SIPPED HER champagne in the hope that the cool liquid might temper her headache. But, if anything, the pain increased, magnified by the amorphous haze of noise in the ballroom.

She glanced about in search of her sister. The dance had finished—the penultimate dance of the evening. The rhythm of music and footsteps had been replaced by the harshness of chatter and gossip as the dancers congratulated each other on their prowess. The ladies returned to their mamas to be quizzed on the eligibility of their partners, and the gentlemen returned to their friends—fellow predators—to compare notes on their prey and how best to net them.

You've had too much champagne again, Cat.

The ballroom was overly hot, and she longed for a glass of water. But there was only punch to be had—which she loathed—or champagne, which was only marginally less loathsome.

Why was it that the hostesses of balls supplied so much liquor for their guests? Perhaps they wanted them to fall into a drunken stupor, to forget the dreariness of the evening and the ridiculous charade of tiptoeing around the opposite sex in order to secure a partner for life. Most gentlemen seemed to think their ability to consume as much liquor as possible without collapsing signified their virility. Or worse, they understood that liquor rendered a woman less able to resist their advances.

Careful, Cat, you're sounding like a bitter spinster.

She glanced around the room and noticed a pair of young ladies watching her. They leaned toward each other, exchanged a few remarks, then giggled and looked away.

Society debutantes—creatures whose only function was to look pretty on the arm of a man. But, beneath the vacuous appearance lay a predatory nature to rival that of the men. Most women viewed the rest of their sex as rivals for a man's affection. And that rivalry often took a dangerous turn. A woman was not above leading her opponent to ruination if it paved the way for her own success.

And, for a woman, there was only one measure of success.

Marriage.

Too often, women believed they possessed the power—by their ability to use their beauty and fortunes like bait, to lure men into their traps. But a man could never be enslaved. He merely devoured the bait, and, along with it, the woman's freedom.

Men such as the pair who'd been staring at Blanche all evening—Lucian, seventh Viscount Horton, and his friend, the ridiculously wealthy Mr. Bond. Lord Horton was just the sort of man to devour an innocent female. He'd been introduced to Catherine and her sister earlier in the Season, and had showed a very marked attraction to Blanche—an attraction that Catherine feared was reciprocated.

But Papa would never permit a courtship—not until Catherine had found a suitor. Papa had made his desperation for a man to take Catherine off his hands plain. And, given that Catherine had no intention of submitting herself to a man's ownership, Blanche was, at least for the moment, protected from such a fate. Catherine feared her sister would hate her for it, but she was protecting Blanche out of love—saving her from the fate that both her mother and Blanche's mother had succumbed to.

With a sigh, she set her glass aside. An excess of champagne always brought on a bout of melancholy, and she was on her third glass.

Then, a couple approached—Blanche, on the arm of the silver-haired Lord Gremshaw—and Catherine's melancholy

fell away.

Whatever Catherine may think of society—and the ladies therein—her beloved sister, in her purity, shone like a beacon among the dull debutantes.

Blanche had the sweetest disposition, her innocence only enhancing her wide-eyed beauty. She was the prettiest creature in the room tonight. Her fortune was almost non-existent—too small to attract fortune hunters, but that left her exposed to a different kind of predator.

Men such as *him*...

But, in her innocence, Blanche had no notion of the world—a world she still viewed with the eyes of a child—and Catherine had no wish for Blanche to lose her innocence.

“Cat!” Blanche cried as she approached. “Did you see me dancing? I didn’t put a foot wrong.”

“Of course, you didn’t, Blanche dear,” Catherine said. “You’ve been practicing all week.”

“I almost stumbled, but Lord Gremshaw was kind enough to set me right.”

“Nonsense, my dear child,” Gremshaw said. “You dance beautifully.” He steered Blanche to the seat beside Catherine. “You must be thirsty, Miss Blanche—and Miss Parville—may I fetch you each a glass of punch?”

“Not for me,” Catherine said. Blanche glanced at her, then shook her head.

“Nor me, Lord Gremshaw,” Blanche said, “but thank you for the dance.”

“Then I shall leave you in your sister’s capable hands and return to Lady Gremshaw.” He clicked his heels together and issued a bow, then disappeared into the crowd.

The musicians began to tune their instruments, and a number of couples lined up on the dance floor.

“Last dance,” Blanche said. “Are you sure there’s nobody you wish to dance with, Cat?”

Catherine shook her head. “I have no desire to dance.”

“Would you mind if I...”

“There’s no one suitable to partner you,” Catherine said.

At that moment, a gentleman approached. Dressed in a dark green jacket, embroidered waistcoat and highly polished boots, he cut a fine figure. Handsome enough to be considered dangerous, he stared at Catherine’s sister, overt admiration in his eyes. Then he shifted his gaze to Catherine. A flicker of contempt shone on his face, and she could almost hear the voice in his mind.

There she is—the Spinster Shrew.

He resumed his attention on Blanche and bowed.

“Miss Blanche, what a pleasure to see you here tonight!” he said. “I was just saying to my friend how much I longed to see you. The company is all the better for your presence, and I will regret it for the rest of my life if I miss this opportunity to ask you to partner me for the final dance of the evening.”

Ugh.

Catherine shuddered inwardly at the insincerity in his tone, which had been lowered to enhance the appearance of masculinity.

“Why is that, Lord Horton?” she asked.

His gaze reverted to her, and a spark of panic flickered in his expression.

Yes, you fool, I can see through your ruse.

“Because your sister is the most beautiful woman in the room.”

“Have you nothing to say of her character?” Catherine asked.

“I’m certain that, with the face of an angel, your sister must be the most delightful of creatures.”

“Is that certainty or speculation?” she asked. “You have, I believe, spoken to my sister once, when we were introduced at Lady Gray’s soiree last month. Or, have you ignored the rules of propriety and visited her unchaperoned?”

He shifted from one foot to the other, and when he spoke again, the deep tone of his voice had disappeared.

“Ahem—I meant no offense, Miss Parville,” he said. “I’ve observed propriety, and would do nothing to compromise your sister. I was merely saying that...”

“You were making an uninformed judgment about my sister’s character, merely based on the fact that she’s pleasing to the eye.”

A flare of irritation crossed his expression.

“Are you impugning your sister’s character, Miss Parville?”

“No, Lord Horton,” Catherine replied. “I was impugning *yours*.”

“I...”

“If you wish to dance with a woman merely because you find her appearance appealing, I suggest you find yourself another partner.”

“Perhaps Miss Blanche would like to answer for herself.”

Catherine exchanged a glance with her sister.

Remember Papa’s instructions, Blanche.

As if she understood the silent command, Blanche nodded. “I’m afraid I’m unable to dance, Lord Horton, but thank you for the invitation. Perhaps, another time, when I’m in a position to accept?”

Before Catherine could stop her, Blanche offered her hand. Lord Horton took it and lifted it to his lips. “My dear Miss

Blanche,” he said. “I shall await your acceptance with anticipation.” Then he turned to Catherine.

“Miss Parville—a pleasure,” he said in a tone that implied anything but.

As soon as he’d rejoined his friend at the opposite end of the ballroom, Catherine’s sister hissed in her ear.

“Did you have to be so uncivil? He only wanted a dance.”

“It matters not,” Catherine said. “You know what Papa thinks.”

Blanche rolled her eyes. “Yes,” she said, exasperation in her tone. “He won’t let anyone court me until someone courts *you* first. But have you considered that I might have enjoyed dancing with someone as handsome as Lord Horton?”

“Beauty’s no guarantee of character, Blanche,” Catherine said. “More often, it goes hand in hand with a poor character.”

“A man cannot help how he looks, Cat, no more than a woman.”

“I disagree.” Catherine gestured around the ballroom at the array of brightly colored silks and feathered headdresses, some so tall that they were in danger of brushing the chandeliers. “You only need look at the primed-up debutantes prancing about—all trying to do each other to secure a man’s attention—to see that I’m right. We live in a world dominated by men and women so insipid that they base their opinions on looks alone.”

Blanche folded her arms and let out a huff. “*You’re* the only one basing your opinion on looks, Cat. Perhaps you’re as shallow as those you seek to despise. Or maybe you envy their beauty given your lack of it?”

Catherine averted her gaze as the long-buried memory—of *his* words—resurfaced.

Who’d want to court an ugly little thing like you, Miss Parville?

A light hand touched her arm, and she turned to see Blanche looking at her out of wide, expressive blue eyes.

“Forgive me, Cat.”

“It matters not,” Catherine replied. “The Spinster Shrew has no feelings, remember?”

“It *does* matter, and you *do* have feelings,” Blanche insisted. “I’ll never understand why you must conceal them. And I didn’t mean it when I said you lacked beauty. You could have your pick of suitors if you tried—I only ask why you don’t.”

“Believe me, Blanche, you’re better not knowing.”

“You’ve always been kind to *me*,” Blanche said. “You’re like the mother I never knew. In fact, when I overheard Miss Sandford telling Miss Rowe that you had the disposition of a spider, I had a good mind to tell them both that...”

“Hush!” Catherine said. “It wouldn’t do to tarnish my reputation and have those unbearable creatures believe me to be *amicable*. I’ve a reputation to uphold.”

“Very well, I shan’t pursue it,” Blanche said. “But will you concede something?”

“Concede what?”

“That if a man is ever to know my character, he must first be permitted to *talk* to me. Otherwise, he’ll only ever know me for my looks.”

Catherine sighed. Blanche spoke sense. How was a woman supposed to learn about a man’s character? If a man existed who was worthy of Blanche’s trust, how would she ever discover him without engaging in a little private conversation? And, the only acceptable setting for a private conversation was when partnered in a dance.

Blanche took her hand. “Perhaps, Cat, you might permit me to dance with Lord Horton at Lady Hardwick’s house party next week? After all, you cannot expect me to spend the entire time sitting in the corner. And, though I acknowledge your

inability to trust a man, I would ask that you trust me to take care of myself. You've said yourself that Lord Hardwick is of an admirable character and would never knowingly invite a rogue into his home."

True, Lord Hardwick was an excellent man, and his wife was one of the few women in society who Catherine could tolerate for more than a few moments—she could almost say that she liked the woman.

"Very well, Blanche. I'll give you leave to dance with Lord Horton at Hardwick House, if he asks you. But you must bear in mind that Papa won't let him court you."

"Not unless a man courts *you* first."

Catherine laughed. "I'm hardly likely to find a man whose company I can tolerate," she said. "But, perhaps, if it would make *you* happy, I might make an effort. But he'd have to be an extraordinary man, indeed."

"Then I must be content with that," Blanche said. "May I perhaps fetch you a glass of punch to seal our bargain?"

"What bargain?"

"That if we can find an extraordinary man for *you*, then you'll permit him to court you so that I might get to know Lord Horton better."

Before Catherine could respond, Blanche leaped to her feet and made her way to the punchbowl, where a footman stood waiting.

Catherine smiled inwardly.

Incorrigible child!

Then she checked herself. *Good grief*—she was sounding like an aged aunt. But that's exactly what she was, despite being only ten years older than Blanche. Her own dear Mama had died giving birth to a son—a child who'd survived for just a few days. In his desperation for a male heir, Papa had taken a second wife barely a few weeks after Mama's passing, but Catherine had grown to love Lady Eugenie as a mother. When

her stepmother had died giving birth to Blanche, Catherine had taken her baby sister under her wing to protect her from Papa's bitter resentment.

And she was protecting her now from the predators who circled London's ballrooms in search of a woman to furnish them with heirs.

Catherine cast her gaze across the ballroom. Papa was nowhere to be seen—most likely still indulging at Lord Wilton's gaming tables in the room next door. She caught sight of Lord Horton, drinking champagne and laughing, flanked on either side by two men. On the left, was Mr. Horatio Bond, and on the right...

Her heart skipped a beat, and her throat constricted.

The man on his right was the handsomest man she had ever seen. Not just handsome, but *dangerously* so. With jet black hair curling under his chin, he carried a piratical air of savage brutality.

She caught her breath as she took in his strong, masculine features—angular cheekbones which might have been chiseled from marble, a straight nose bearing a slight kink, as if it had been broken in a fight, full red lips which ignited a fire in her belly, thick, dark eyebrows in an angular slash across his forehead.

As for his eyes...

Oh my! His eyes—the color of sapphires—they were fixed on her.

She met his gaze, boldly. Men usually shied away from a woman who dared look them in the eyes, but he held her gaze, his eyes darkening. His frank appraisal ignited a small fire in the pit of her stomach and, though she wanted to look away, her mind willed her not to—as if she were a rabbit transfixed by a predator's stare. She drew in a breath to clear the fog in her mind, but to her shame, her breasts had grown heavy, and her sensitized nipples beaded against the fabric of her gown.

Then, his glaze flicked down, and she let out a low cry and lifted her hand to conceal her décolletage. As if he read her mind, his lip curled into a smile. A sparkle ignited in the depths of his eyes, and her belly fluttered with a little pulse of longing.

Sweet Lord—how could a man ignite such a fire in her body with a single look?

Stop it!

The voice of reason echoed inside her head, and she drew a sharp breath and forced herself to look away.

What a fool I am!

She had vowed never to be captivated by a handsome face again, but here she was, at the first sight of a man—an undeniably virile-looking man—turning into a giddy schoolgirl.

And, as she knew from experience, *that* was the first step on the path to heartbreak.

She closed her eyes, counting to three as she inhaled, then exhaled, counting to five. When she opened her eyes again, Blanche had returned with two glasses of punch. Catherine took one and sipped it. Then, she summoned courage to look across the ballroom. The man was still there, but his attention was focused on Lord Horton.

Good. Perhaps, Horton would tell the man of her shrewish nature. Then, he'd avoid her like everyone else.

A voice whispered in her mind of what it might be like to be courted a man such as him. But she had already trodden on that path and had no wish to return.



CHAPTER THREE

DAXTON HAWKE, FIFTH Duke of Petrush, leaned against the wall and surveyed the dance floor.

Excellent timing.

The final dance of the evening had already begun, sparing him the fawning attention of eager debutantes and desperate mamas. Though he'd resigned himself to the prospect of marriage, women, in his opinion, were better bedded than wedded.

And the company tonight was not the sort that preferred to be bedded.

The women in the ballroom carried an air of respectability about them—which simply meant a lack of enjoyment and an absence of pleasure. What man wanted to shackle himself to a *respectable* woman for life—a biddable creature who nodded and smiled at every opportunity?

No—Dax wanted a woman with fire in her belly—a woman to challenge him and keep him wanting. After all, the chase was always more pleasurable.

Unfortunately, the sort of woman to challenge him with the promise of sweet victory after a bloody battle was unlikely to be found in Lady Wilton's ballroom. A Cyprian's ball was a better hunting ground. But, even then, the brightly painted, exotic creatures—delectable they might be—only did it for coin. To them, pleasure was a means to make a living rather than something to savor, and Dax always tired of them in the end. He wanted a woman whose screams of ecstasy were *genuine*.

He continued to survey the room, and his gaze landed on Horatio Bond, an old friend from his Oxford days.

At last—some congenial company.

Bond's grandfather had acquired his fortune through trade, but Dax wasn't about to hold that against the grandson. Bond himself had excelled academically at Oxford, but he lacked the conceit of most intellectuals, and Dax wasn't ashamed to call him friend.

At that moment, a sharp voice cut through the dull fog of inane chatter.

“If you wish to dance with a woman merely because you find her appearance appealing, I suggest you find yourself another partner.”

Heavens! Though Dax relished the prospect of a woman who challenged him, he drew the line at wanting to endure the tongue-lashing of a harpy. How else, other than an attraction to a young woman's looks, was a man supposed to determine whether or not to ask her to dance?

He glanced toward the source of the voice and suppressed a laugh. That milksop Lord Horton was bowing before a young woman, hand outstretched in a gesture of exaggerated chivalry. The way he'd bent his legs to crouch before her, suggested he suffered from an ailment of a digestive nature.

The woman was pleasant enough, if a man liked that sort of thing—a pretty creature with blonde ringlets and eyes the color of cornflowers.

As for the woman sitting beside her, the one who'd spoken...

The expression on her face was as if she'd just stepped in something that had just come out of the arse end of a horse.

While her companion looked to be the epitome of ladylike grace, *she* was anything but. Her hair was the color of fire—deep red with flashes of dark gold, as if she'd been forged in the pits of hell. Sharp green eyes glittered with contempt.

A veritable Medusa—had Horton turned to stone, Dax wouldn't have been surprised. Perhaps, if he moved closer,

he'd see serpents in her hair.

A pity. Had she seen fit to smile, she might have been quite pretty—striking, even. Her coloring stood out among the crowd, despite her gown being a plain white muslin compared to the eye-wateringly bright silks worn by the other ladies.

Eventually, Horton shrugged as if in defeat, then crossed the dance floor to join Bond. Dax sauntered toward them.

“Oh, I say, Petrush!” Bond cried. “A delight to see you, old chap. I noticed you turning all heads as you made your entrance—though you’ve arrived too late to dance, I’m afraid.”

“By design rather than misfortune,” Dax said.

Bond let out a laugh. “Your design is the ladies’ misfortune. I swear I heard a collective sigh the moment you arrived. I daresay you’d not be in want of a partner, even midway through the dance. Even if you cut in on a couple, the lady would, most likely, thank you for it.”

Bond gestured toward his companion. “You know Lord Horton, of course.”

“A little,” Dax said. “I’ve seen him at White’s. Aren’t you dancing, Horton?”

“There’s only one woman in the room that Horton wishes to partner,” Bond said. “The Honorable Blanche Parville. But he’s failed in his endeavors.”

“The pretty creature in the white muslin?” Dax asked.

“Yes,” Horton said, his tone sulky. “The one sitting next to the shrew.”

Dax smiled to himself at the petulance in Horton’s voice. In a world where men ruled, particularly those of their class—a viscount would be unused to rejection from a female—particularly a rejection delivered with a sting. He glanced toward the two women, who now appeared to be arguing.

“Are you going to ask him?” Dax caught Horton’s whisper and turned toward his companions.

“Ask me what?”

Horton had the grace to flush, and Bond cleared his throat. “Horton here was wondering if you could assist him on a rather delicate matter.”

“Is he not man enough to ask me himself?”

“I’d make it worth your while,” Horton said. “What say you to fifty guineas?”

Dax let out a laugh. “You think I’m short of cash?”

Horton’s embarrassment deepened. “It’s for a bet, nothing more,” he said, “and it’d be the easiest fifty guineas you’ll ever earn.”

“If it’s such an easy task, I wonder why you’re at pains to pay another to undertake it,” Dax said. “I don’t like the sound of it.”

“All you need do is court a woman,” Horton said.

“Good Lord!” Dax laughed. “Are you out of your wits? I’ve no intention of *courting* anyone. The fawning misses of London hold no attraction for me.”

“Not for real, you dunderhead!” Bond laughed. “Just long enough convince the lady’s father. And, if you’re seen courting a woman, the rest of the *fawning misses* will leave you be.”

“Now *that*, is the only advantage I can think of,” Dax said. “I take it, you require me to court the pretty little creature in the white muslin? And, I suppose, once I’ve engaged her affections, I must seek a way to transfer them onto Horton, here?” he shook his head. “If you want the Honorable Blanche, why don’t you just take her?”

“No, not her,” Horton said. “You’re to court her sister.”

“*Good grief*,” Dax cried. “You’re saying that the woman next to her is her *sister*? She looks more like an aunt—and an unpleasant one, at that.”

Horton laughed, “I daresay she’s old enough to be her aunt.”

“They don’t look alike,” Dax said. “One’s a ray of spring sunshine, whereas the other’s like a sharp frost.”

“They’re *half*-sisters.” Horton said. “Different mothers. It was something of a scandal at the time.”

“Really?”

“Their father, Lord Parville, is rumored to be most put out that he’s yet to be furnished with a male heir,” Horton continued. “Miss Parville’s mother died giving birth to a son, and a month later, Lord Parville led her successor down the aisle. Which means,” he lowered his voice, “the banns must have been read within days of him having buried his first wife.”

“And the second wife?”

“She died giving birth to the delectable Blanche,” Horton said. “Lord Parville was rumored to be so angry at being left a widower with two daughters that he refused, at first, to acknowledge Blanche’s existence.”

Dax glanced toward the two women. Perhaps the Medusa had reason to be angry at the world if she’d suffered her father’s disappointment—though it didn’t explain her sister’s sunny disposition.

Unless, perhaps, she protected her sister from their father’s disappointment. With an absent, disinterested father, it would have been left to the elder sister to take on the role of a mother.

Perhaps rather than being a Medusa, she was a tigress, using her claws to protect her cub.

Another young man approached the two women, hand outstretched. But the Medusa slapped it away.

“Leave us alone!”

Bloody hell—Medusa or tigress, she was an unpleasant prospect for a courtship, even a fake one.

“Perhaps fifty isn’t enough,” Bond suggested with a laugh.

“I’ll pay anything to have a chance with Miss Blanche,” Horton sighed.

Dear God—the man was smitten!

“You haven’t told me why courting her sister helps you achieve your aim,” Dax said.

“Oh, that’s simple,” Horton replied. “Their father has made it plain that he’ll not permit any man to court Miss Blanche until a man has begun to court Miss Catherine.”

Catherine...

At that moment, she looked up and met his gaze. Her eyes which had, at first, reminded him of a cup of poison, had a richness of color like the purest emeralds—an intense, dark green, which drew him in like a deep ocean. She blinked and parted her lips—full, red lips made for kissing. He let his gaze drift across her body and settle on her neckline, where the skin of her décolletage was the color of smooth, rich cream, and the valley between her breasts promised a softness beneath the neckline of her gown. Though her dress was unremarkable in every aspect, his manhood stirred with longing at the promise of treasures concealed beneath.

Then, she lifted her hand and placed it over her chest, as if to protect her modesty.

When he lifted his gaze to her face once more, her cheeks were flushed a delicate color of rose. Her eyes had brightened, until they almost shimmered in the candlelight. But they no longer bore the sharp, shrewish look he’d seen directed at Horton. Instead, he detected something else entirely.

Vulnerability.

“What say you, old boy?” Horton asked. “I’ll raise it to a hundred as soon as I’m courting Miss Blanche.”

“Oh, very well,” Dax replied. “A hundred would be compensation enough for having to endure the company of a disagreeable shrew.”

The woman's eyes widened, and a flicker of pain shone in her expression.

Surely, she couldn't have heard what he'd just said?

Then, she hardened her expression and looked away.

Dax resumed his attention on Horton, and when he next glanced in her direction, she was striding across the dance floor, toward the terrace doors. A man grasped her arm as she passed him, and Dax recognized Lord Francis—evidently deeply in his cups. She wrinkled her nose, then drew out her fan, and swatted Francis smartly across the wrist.

“How dare you, madam!” he cried.

“Oh, *do* forgive me,” she drawled. “Perhaps I should have removed the offending item with a knife.” She closed her fan with a snap and disappeared onto the terrace, leaving Lord Francis nursing his wrist.

Dax couldn't help smiling in admiration. Lord Francis was a lecher at the best of times and had a reputation for forcing his attention on women when in his cups.

“Bloody hell!” Bond cried, laughing. “What a hellcat! No wonder her father's desperate to rid himself of her.”

“I suppose you'll be wanting *two* hundred guineas now,” Horton said.

“No,” Dax said. “One hundred will suffice.”

He found himself intrigued. There was no doubting that the Honorable Miss Parville was an unpleasant creature. But the flash of pain in her expression intrigued him.

Not only did he wonder what she might look like if she smiled—but he wanted to be the man who gave her cause to smile.



CHAPTER FOUR

SWEET HEAVEN! WAS she to be plagued by every drunkard in the place? Lord Francis had a reputation for priding himself on the number of young ladies he'd compromised while avoiding the need to do the honorable thing—though, in Catherine's opinion, being compromised by him and *not* having to wed him was the lesser of the two evils.

Do you seriously think I'd even contemplate the unpalatable prospect of wedding you?

Shaking her head to dispel the memory, she made her way toward the terrace doors. Having left Blanche in Lady Wilton's care, Catherine craved a moment to herself, away from the buzz of inane chatter and false compliments.

A footman stood beside the doors and raised an eyebrow as she approached.

"It's very cold outside tonight, Miss," he said. "It's been snowing."

"And?" Catherine cringed at the sharpness in her voice, but after an evening in the company of men, she'd had her fill of being contradicted and countermanded.

He pulled open the doors, bowed as she stepped through, then closed them behind her.

The cold air hit her like a wall, but she took comfort in its freshness and walked across the terrace, her footsteps crunching in the snow. No doubt Papa would remark on her soaked slippers, but he'd be admonishing her anyway tonight. One more transgression wouldn't make a difference to the tirade of admonishments she was expecting in the carriage home.

She drew her shawl around herself and looked out over the garden. The moon hung low in the cloudless sky, casting a soft blue glaze over the landscape. Despite the strains of music and laughter filtering through the terrace doors, the snow had cast a blanket of silence across the world—a silence she sought solace in.

Why was it that people always saw a need to fill silence with incessant chatter and inane remarks? There was something to be said for a companion who was comfortable enough in one's presence to just let the silence *be*.

A screech echoed in the distance. An owl, most likely, hunting for prey. Yet another predator—but the owl sought its quarry in order to survive. The predators inside the ballroom tonight relished the sport of it.

She shivered—not from the cold, but from the memory of another night, almost ten years ago. Then, she'd been a wide-eyed rabbit, unwittingly following the wolf toward his lair. And though she hadn't been devoured, in every other sense, her innocence had been lost—replaced by an understanding of the world ruled by men who used women for their own ends.

At all costs, Blanche must be protected from such a fate. Only a man worthy of trust would be good enough for her—if such a man existed.

The doors creaked open again, and music and laughter filtered through the air.

Dear Lord—could she not be given a moment's peace? Lord Francis had been ogling her all evening—not due to her looks or her dowry which, as most men pointed out, were both non-existent, but because she was the only woman in the room without a single dance partner, and therefore, in the eyes of most men, the most desperate.

But when she turned to face the newcomer, it wasn't Lord Francis.

It was Papa.

He approached her, the moonlight throwing shadows across the angular planes of his face. Cold blue eyes glittered with disapproval—so unlike the sapphire gaze of another that had captivated her only moments before.

“I see you’re not dancing, Catherine, but I trust you *have* danced tonight and not spent the entire evening sitting in a chair?”

“Didn’t you spend the entire evening in the gaming room?” she retorted.

He moved toward her with a speed that belied his thin frame, and she winced as a bony hand caught her arm, and his cadaverous fingers tightened their grip.

“Shrewish creature!” he hissed, and her stomach churned at the odor of stale brandy and cigar smoke. “Always such a disappointment.”

“Because I was born a girl?”

“Yes—and because you killed my son!”

The arrow hit home, and she curled her hands into fists to stem the memory—Mama’s screams from behind her bedchamber door, pleading for her unborn child, while Catherine kneeled on the floor outside her chamber, praying that her beloved parent would be spared.

But her prayers had gone unanswered.

Early pregnancy brought about by a fall, the doctor had said. A fall which had occurred when Mama returned from a ride, and Catherine, rushing out to greet her, had spooked her horse.

“And what of Mama?” she asked.

He let out a snort of derision, and muttered something under his breath, which sounded very much like the words she’d heard eighteen years ago when the doctor had tried to express his condolences.

Wives can easily be replaced.

She had no wish to be a replaceable commodity.

“If you’re not dancing, then I see no need to remain here tonight,” he said. “Go and send for the carriage.”

She glanced up and met his gaze—the sour expression of a man, old before his time, made bitter through loss. But the loss of two wives meant nothing to him. Papa’s bitterness arose from the loss of his baby son, and, most likely, the losses sustained tonight at the card tables. An early exit from a party was his strategy for avoiding creditors.

She pulled herself free, and he made no attempt to restrain her. Then, she dipped into a curtsey.

“As you wish, *my lord*,” she said. “I trust that, in that, at least, I shan’t disappoint you.”

“Have a care, Catherine,” he warned. “I’ve been patient with you these last years. But now I’ve had to waste further funds on your sister’s come-out, my patience is running thin. You must do better, or I shall marry you off to the first man who turns up at my door—whether he’s a beggar or not. I must inquire as to whether Lord Francis is attending Lord Hardwick’s house party.”

She shivered at the thought of that lecher’s hands on her. “Papa, I...”

“Silence!” he roared. “I see I’ve been too lenient with you. No man wants a shrew for a wife.” He lurched to one side and began to retch.

“Papa!” she cried. “Are you unwell? Let me help you.” She reached toward him, but he slapped her hand away.

“If you want to help me, then stop being such a damned shrew and find yourself a husband!” he cried. “*Any* husband—just to get you off my hands. Now, do as you’re bid and fetch the carriage!”

“Yes, Papa.”

“I’ll have to warn your husband to take a firm hand with you, whoever the unfortunate man might be.”

She fled to the doors and reentered the ballroom.

“Are you alright, Miss?”

She glanced up at the footman beside the door.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she said. “Would you be so good as to have Lord Parville’s carriage brought round? My father is indisposed.”

The footman glanced pointedly toward the gaming room, then nodded and walked off.

Catherine crossed the dance floor, weaving her way around the dancers who were still enjoying their evening. Preoccupied with searching for Blanche, she didn’t notice the man before her until it was too late, and she collided into a solid, muscular form.

“Excuse me,” a deep voice said.

Large, powerful hands took her arms where Papa had gripped her moments before, and she winced. She looked up, and the breath caught in her throat, as eyes the color of sapphires stared back at her.

Sweet Lord—handsome he might be from a distance, but at close quarter, he was breathtaking. A man to be avoided.

“Let me pass, sir,” she said.

“It would be uncivil of me not to at least introduce myself, Miss Parville.”

“I see I’m at a disadvantage, sir, given that you know who I am,” she said. “Perhaps you know me by reputation.”

“As the most charming young woman in the room?”

She let out a laugh of derision. “Ah—I see you’re lacking in wits, like most men.”

“Perhaps,” he said, “though whether a man is in possession of wit is, in my opinion, relative.”

“Relative to what?”

“Relative to the woman he seeks to court.”

“I assure you, you’ll find no woman worthy of courting here,” she said, “unless you are yet another dungwit who is entranced by a pretty face and a fat dowry.”

Rather than show offence, his eyes sparkled with amusement. “*Dungwit?*”

Sweet heaven—that smile...

Her stomach fluttered, and she drew in a sharp breath to dispel the heat rising within her body. But her senses were assaulted by a rich aroma of wood, spice, and man.

An unfathomable sensation pulsed between her thighs. Uncomfortable yet somehow delicious...

“Let me go, sir.”

“Before I do,” he said, “permit me to introduce myself.”

He took both her hands and lifted them to his lips. A spark of longing ignited in her as his warm breath caressed her skin.

“Daxton Hawke, at your service, Miss Parville,” he said. “And, let me assure you that I will *never* be entranced by beauty or wealth in a woman. In fact, I take great enjoyment in the exact opposite of both those qualities.”

His mouth curved into a smile, and he parted his lips, His tongue flicked out, moistening his lower lip, and she fought to suppress the notion of what that tongue might be capable of. What might it be like to be kissed by those lips...

Then he released her again, and she suppressed a whimper at the sense of loss.

He clicked his heels together and bowed.

“Miss Parville—I very much look forward to the *great enjoyment* of seeing you again. Perhaps at Lady Hardwick’s house party next month?”

“H-how did you know...?”

“I know—and see—much, Miss Parville.”

Then he was gone, leaving her alone among the throng of dancers.

Daxton Hawke...

The name suited him. A hawk capable of swooping onto unsuspecting prey.

And how did he know she was attending Lady Hardwick's house party?

She lifted her hands to her face, closed her eyes, and breathed in the faint scent of spices.

When she opened them again, he'd returned to his friends.

It was only as she joined Blanche and ushered her sister out of the ballroom to wait for the carriage that it dawned on her.

The man who'd captivated her like no other had paid her no compliment. In fact, she'd go as far as to say that he'd insulted her.

If anything, that made him all the more intriguing.



CHAPTER FIVE

Hampshire

January 1818

“PETRUSH, OLD CHAP—IT’S good to see you!”

As Dax climbed out of his carriage and admired the frontage of the building before him, a tall man approached, hands outstretched.

“Hardwick!” Dax cried. “You’re looking well. What’s your secret?”

Lord Hardwick might be at least ten years older than Dax, but an aura of vibrancy surrounded him, as if he’d taken an elixir of youth. He could have been mistaken for a man in his twenties, were it not for the graying of his hair around the temples. As for his apparel...

The Augustus Hardwick Dax knew favored jackets in muted tones of grey and brown—not the vibrant green he saw before him, or, for that matter, the richly embroidered waistcoat. The man looked positively rakish.

Hardwick took Dax’s hand in a strong grip. “How long has it been? Three years?”

“Four, I believe,” Dax said. “The last time I paid a call, the house was empty. You were abroad, or so I was told—unless you were hiding from visitors.”

“I wouldn’t hide from *you*, old chap,” Hardwick said. “I apologize if you’d had a wasted journey.”

“Not entirely,” Dax said. “I took the opportunity of visiting Hurstpoint Place, seeing as it’s only two miles away.”

“Leander’s seat? I didn’t know you two were acquainted.”

“He was my house captain at Eton,” Dax said. “Something of a rogue, but I’d rather hoped marriage would have settled him.”

“And had it?”

“Probably not. I’d have felt sorry for his wife, were she not of the same ilk.”

“Ah—the insatiable Mrs. Leander.”

Dax lowered his voice. “She demanded I escort her for a walk in the gardens on pretense of something or other, then propositioned me behind the box hedge.”

“Tell me that’s not a euphemism!” Hardwick laughed.

“Fortunately not,” Dax said. “But Lord save me from bored wives. It seems as if as soon as she furnished Leander with an heir, she began to work her way round Hampshire society, collecting lovers the way a man collects birds in the shooting season.”

“And you plan to visit him while you’re here?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“If you do, I’d advise you take a woman with you and pass her off as your fiancée—that’s about the only way to keep Mrs. Leander from ripping your breeches off with her teeth.”

“Don’t tell me she’s thrown herself in *your* path?” Dax asked.

Hardwick nodded. “After Beatrice gave me a son, Mrs. Leander seemed to think I’d be in want of a little variety in the bedroom. However, wives are not merely for the procreation of male offspring.” He lowered his voice. “And, there’s none so skilled as my wife in the bedchamber—and, for that matter, in many other rooms about the house.”

“Ah,” Dax said. “*Now*, I understand your secret of eternal youth.”

“It’s marriage, dear boy,” Hardwick said, his voice filled with contentment.

In most circumstances, Dax would have reached for the nearest chamber pot to vomit in, but Hardwick had suffered heartbreak and he deserved happiness. His first wife had been—for want of a more respectable word—a *harlot*, and Hardwick’s motto was *once betrayed, never fooled again*.

Hardwick called out to a tall, elegant young woman who was greeting a couple beside the main doors. She turned and smiled, and the riddle was solved.

She was stunning.

“Might I introduce my wife?” Hardwick held out his hand, and the woman approached them and took it, then she regarded Dax with eyes the color of liquid chocolate.

“Beatrice, my love,” Hardwick said, “this is my friend, Daxton Hawke, Duke of Petrush.”

She dipped into a curtsy. “Your Grace,” she said. “A pleasure. Augustus has spoken much of you.”

“Oh, dear,” Dax said. “For that, I can only apologize. Most of it’s true, I’m afraid.”

“I sincerely hope so,” she replied with a smile. “I hear that under your somewhat rakish exterior—something I can see for myself from merely looking at you—that you’re the most loyal friend known to man.”

Dax felt himself coloring at her frank appraisal. “Your husband has grossly exaggerated my qualities.”

“I trust not,” she replied. “My husband is known for speaking the absolute truth, and I would be most aggrieved to learn that he’d disappointed me with regards to you.”

Dax took her hand and bowed over it. “Then, let me concede, Lady Hardwick.”

“Thank you,” she said. Then she glanced over Dax’s shoulder, and her face lit up with joy. “Oh! That’s Giles and Henrietta arriving. Do excuse me, Your Grace. Your room’s all ready for you if you’d like to freshen up before supper. And, I hope to see you dancing tonight—there will be plenty of

young ladies in need of a partner capable of steering them across the dance floor without bruising their toes.”

She ran toward a carriage which had just drawn to a halt, her lithe body reminding Dax of a deer leaping over a fence.

No wonder Hardwick was experiencing a return to his youth!

“Don’t tell me I’m expected to dance tonight, Hardwick,” Dax said.

Hardwick let out a laugh. “Of course not! But you must admit that dancing is the only *respectable* method by which a man can become acquainted with a young woman without enduring the company of her chaperone.”

“You were never much of a dancer, if I recall.”

“That’s because I hadn’t yet found the right partner,” Hardwick said. “One could say the same of marriage.”

“So, you’re finding life in the parson’s chains agreeable?” Dax asked.

Hardwick laughed good-naturedly. “My dear boy, is that cynicism I hear in your voice?”

“I recall a time when you were the most cynical man I knew.”

“Only because I’d not found the right woman. I’m most fortunate to have my beloved Beatrice.”

“You’ve weathered much at the hands of a woman, if I recall,” Dax said.

“Those days are long gone,” came the reply. “My Beatrice is an angel compared to her predecessor. She’s unlike any other woman I’ve known.”

Dax glanced once more toward Lady Hardwick, who was embracing a couple—Lord and Lady Thorpe. Though she lacked the decorum expected of a countess, he couldn’t deny that her artless joy made a refreshing change from the cold civility of most hostesses. She was the antithesis of the prickly

Miss Parville, but each of the two women was intriguing in her own way, being utterly unlike the bland misses who paraded themselves in front of him.

As for Hardwick himself...

Dax couldn't help but compare the man to Lord Parville—and find Parville wanting. Hardwick, like Parville, had lost his first wife in childbirth. He'd suffered the further indignity of knowing that the child was most likely not his. But rather than wallow in bitterness, he'd picked himself up and remarried—not purely to furnish himself with an heir but in search of love.

And he'd found it.

Lucky bastard.

Bloody hell, that's all he needed—to be envious of the marriage state.

Thrusting his hands in his pockets, Dax made his way indoors, where a footman was waiting to lead him to his chamber. There would be time to ponder on the benefits of a happy marriage over supper.



THERE SHE IS.

Dax's quarry sat at the opposite end of the table between their host and Lord Thorpe.

She was several places away from both her father and sister, who'd been seated halfway down the table, near to Mr. Bond. Horton sat directly opposite Miss Blanche—by manipulation or sheer luck, Dax couldn't fathom.

He resumed his attention on Miss Parville. Her gown was as plain as the one she'd worn at Lady Wilton's ball, but her eyes were as clear as ever, and her hair shone in the candlelight, shimmers of red and gold. Miss Parville may never be described as *sparkling*, but at least there was no sign of her shrewish incivility. He found himself wanting her to

secure the good opinion of Hardwick—one of the few men of his acquaintance whose good opinion held any value.

Given her reputation, Miss Parville seemed almost congenial. She neither simpered nor scowled but paid attention to her dinner companions and seemed engaged in a conversation that was not merely a trade of insults. Perhaps her incivility depended on the company she kept.

And on the distance between herself and her father.

Any husband—just to get you off my hands.

That's what the bitter old man had said to her on the terrace at Lady Wilton's ball. And not long after she'd almost run through the terrace doors, returning to the ballroom, her features lined with distress, until he caught hold of her, and she'd composed herself almost in an instant.

He'd almost admired her at that moment—the way she had refused to wallow in self-pity, choosing instead to trade insults with him. Her spirit had stirred something that was not mere physical lust—though he had to admit that a woman that spirited would be an exciting prospect to tame in the bedchamber.

Sweet heavens! He crossed his legs to ease the ache in his groin and conceal the cockstand in his breeches.

“Your Grace? Is something amiss?”

He drew in a sharp breath and turned to see his hostess staring directly at him.

“N-no, Lady Hardwick.”

She gave a soft smile, then glanced across the table. “Do you not find it intriguing that the best matches are often the most unlikely?”

Dax followed her gaze to where her husband and Miss Parville were deep in conversation. His heart skittered in his chest as he saw Miss Parville's lips curl into a smile.

Though he found himself longing to see the expression in her eyes, her gaze was directed at Hardwick.

Lucky bastard.

“Yes,” he breathed. “You’re right, Lady Hardwick. I wonder if the best matches occur between complete opposites.”

“I’m so glad you agree, Your Grace. Augustus and I are an unlikely match. He’s always been so sensible, whereas I...” she let out a sigh, “...I’ve always been a little young for my age, or so my cousin tells me. But the world would never evolve if we were only matched with those like us.”

“Oh—you and Lord Hardwick...” he hesitated, “...forgive me...I meant no offense. I wasn’t intending to refer to...”

“It’s quite all right,” she said, laughter in her voice. “I was only teasing.” She lifted her glass to her lips and took a sip, light dancing in her eyes. “But, I’m *so* glad you agree, Your Grace.”

She rose to her feet and the rest of the company followed suit.

“Time for a little dancing, *mes amis*,” Hardwick declared.

A ripple of murmurs threaded through the company, and Lady Hardwick giggled. “I’ve always despised the convention which dictates that the men must retire over cigars while the women are confined to drinking tea with each other. After all, the purpose of a party is to enjoy each other’s company, is it not? Of course, it gives me a reputation of being somewhat risqué, but better than a dullard any day. Would you care to escort me to the ballroom, Your Grace?”

Unable to resist her youthful charm, he offered his arm, and she took it. The rest of the party followed suit, and when Dax glanced over his shoulder, he spotted Horton walking next to Bond, ogling Miss Blanche, his tongue almost hanging out. Their host brought up the rear, arm in arm with Miss Parville.

The ballroom was enormous—a high ceiling bearing murals decorated in gilt which shimmered in the candlelight, and tall mirrors which magnified the light. At the far end, a small group of musicians were tuning their instruments.

Their host bowed to Miss Parville, then led her toward a row of chairs on the edge of the ballroom. Shortly after, her sister joined her. Horton sauntered over toward Dax.

“Well?”

“Well, what?” Dax asked.

“You know jolly well what,” Horton said, irritation in his voice. “Now’s your chance. Lord Parville’s in the room. Persuade the shrew to dance while he’s watching, and Miss Blanche will be fair game.”

Dax glanced at Miss Parville, who was talking to her sister, and his heart ached at the expression of love in her eyes. However shrewish she might be, she clearly cared deeply for her sister.

“Be quick, man!” Horton hissed. “Thorpe looks like he’s going to ask her.”

“Thorpe’s no rival,” Dax said, “given that he’s married.”

“So?” came the reply. “You want to earn your hundred guineas, don’t you?”

“Hush!” Dax hissed. “I don’t want the whole room knowing I’m about to seduce a woman for a bet.”

“Who said anything about *seduction*?” Horton laughed. “You only need make a pretense at courting her. Though, if you’re able to part those icy thighs, I’ll throw in an extra hundred.”

“Good Lord, man—are you so smitten with her younger sister that you’ve lost all decorum?” Dax cried. “Even *I* know it’s not the done thing to boast about a conquest until it’s been achieved.”

“So, you’re going to ask her?”

Horton was worse than a nagging harpy.

“If only to rid myself of your persistence,” Dax replied. He strode across the ballroom, waving away a footman who approached him with a tray of glasses, until he stood before Miss Parville and her sister.

At this close quarter, he could see the resemblance. Though only slight, the two ladies possessed the same stubbornness about the chin. Other than that, they were strikingly different. Where Miss Blanche’s eyes were soft and pleasant, her elder sister’s eyes carried a fire deep within—a fire that threatened to engulf a man.

Dax found himself wanting to be engulfed.

He clicked his heels together and bowed. “Miss Parville—would you do me the honor of partnering me for the first dance?”

The two women exchanged glances. His quarry raised her eyebrows. Her younger sister’s eyes widened, then she shook her head and lowered her gaze, and her cheeks flushed a delicate shade of rose.

“You must forgive my sister, Mr. Hawke,” Miss Parville said. “She’s...”

“And you must forgive me, Miss Parville,” he interrupted. “It’s *you* I wish to dance with, not your sister, charming as she might be.”

“Me?” Her eyes widened in astonishment, then he caught a flash of the fear he’d noticed at the Wilton’s ball. “I’m afraid, I...”

“I insist,” he said, taking her hand.

“I’m disinclined to dance with a man to whom I’ve not been properly introduced,” she said. “Such an offer shows a distinct lack of propriety.”

“I beg to disagree,” he said. “We were introduced at Lady Wilton’s ball—at least, I introduced myself. Perhaps I did not

follow propriety as I ought. If it pleases you, Miss Parville, permit me to rectify the insult now.”

“Perhaps you’re unused to the rules of society?” She continued, “In which case, you must be forgiven. Our charming hostess has a reputation of befriending all manner of individuals. I quite understand her concession in receiving you through the front door rather than the tradesman’s entrance.”

“Cat!” the young woman next to her let out a squeal of horror. But Miss Parville, aware—almost proud—of the insult she’d leveled at Dax, ignored her sister’s exclamation, and met his gaze with defiance, challenge in her expression.

Challenge accepted, my dear Little Miss Shrew.

Still holding her hand, he bowed over it and brushed his lips against her skin. Then he looked up and fixed his gaze on her. Her expression betrayed confusion. She had, perhaps, expected him to retreat like a coward or flounce off like an adolescent nursing his ego.

“Miss Parville, I humbly beseech you to do me the great honor of partnering me for this dance. But before I lead you to the dance floor, may I introduce myself in a manner which befits your station? My name is Daxton Hawke...”

“I already know that,” she said.

“...Daxton Hawke, fifth Duke of Petrush, at your service.”

Her sister let out another squeal. Miss Parville remained silent, but the color drained from her face. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again.

Seizing the opportunity, he grasped her hands. She made no attempt to resist, and he pulled her upright and led her onto the dance floor. As they approached the line of couples, she stumbled and fell against him. She curled her fingers round his, and his breath caught as a crackle of desire fizzed through his body.

She drew in a sharp breath, and he glanced down to see her staring up at him, an expression of shock and bewilderment in

her gaze...

...and a spark of desire to match his own.

Maybe the notion of seducing her was not so unpalatable after all.



CHAPTER SIX

WHAT WAS SHE doing? How the devil had she ended up in the arms of a man—a dangerous man at that?

And a *duke*.

By the time Catherine collected her wits, the dance had already begun, and though insulting him was not something to fear, she had no desire to embarrass Lady Hardwick—a woman who'd welcomed her warmly into her home and treated her with genuine affection. Not to mention Lord Hardwick, who'd proved a most interesting dinner companion, regaling her with tales of his travels around Italy. Most men spoke of their exploits as a method of declaring their prowess to the world. But Lord Hardwick took a genuine delight in describing the architecture and history of Rome.

Catherine had enjoyed a conversation in a social setting with a man who treated her as an intellectual equal.

She glanced up at her partner and found herself in a situation she'd not experienced before. She fought the urge to apologize for her earlier rudeness, though a wicked demon on her shoulder giggled at the notion of a duke using the tradesman's entrance.

He seemed unaffected by her faux pas—which, if anything, disconcerted her even more. He must have some purpose for wishing to dance with her, even after her having insulted him, and she found herself wondering to what lengths she could go.

“Are you enjoying the dance, Miss Parville?” he asked.

“Not particularly, Your Grace.”

He let out a chuckle and drew her closer, and her senses were assaulted by the familiar aroma of wood and spice.

“Why is that?” he asked, his voice reverberating in her chest.

“I lack the accomplishment,” she said. “My sister, Blanche, is by far the better dancer.”

“You impugn your talents, I’m sure.”

How disappointing! Clearly, he was a flatterer, who expected her to swoon with gratitude that he’d condescended to dance with her.

Feigning a stumble, she slipped forward and stamped on his foot.

He drew in a sharp breath, but did not relax his hold. If anything, he tightened it, as he whirled her around in a circle. Then he stumbled and slipped against her.

“It seems as if we match each other in terms of our level of accomplishment,” he said. “I myself was a hopeless dancer. My poor mama despaired of me. She declared that her life would be made eternally miserable for knowing that there was not a single person in the world more flat-footed than I.”

“And was it?”

“My mother still lives, Miss Parville,” he said. “Though, her despair is very real. She regularly declares me to be the worst dancer in all England, and that it’s a punishment to be seen on the dance floor with me.”

“Are you saying that you’re subjecting me to *punishment*?” she asked.

“On the contrary,” he said. Her belly fluttered as his lips curled into a smile. “It’s no punishment at all.”

“How so?”

“Why,” he said, his voice filled with delight, “you’ve brightened up the world—at least for Mama. For, at long last, I believe that Mama’s misery is at an end. I cannot wait to tell her about you.”

At that moment, they were separated for the next few bars, and Catherine glanced across the couples to see Blanche partnered with Lord Horton. The pleasure in her sister's expression tugged at her heart, and she smiled to herself. Across the dance floor, Papa stood, talking to Lord Thorpe. But his gaze was focused on both her and Blanche, dancing. And, though she could never hope to see anything resembling pride in his expression, at least the disappointment which permanently resided in his eyes had lessened. If that was all her father could give her, then she'd gladly take it.

Her partner took her hands for the final steps and claimed her attention once more. She glanced up and met his gaze. His frank appraisal unsettled her, and she moved to trip against him.

Then she checked herself as her understanding slid into place.

I believe that Mama's misery is at an end.

Heavens—he'd just insulted her!

The dance concluded, and the couples dispersed. The time had passed to stamp on his foot once more to provide further proof that she'd taken his crown as the most flat-footed dancer in all England.

Her partner returned her to her seat, then bowed again.

"Would you like something to drink, Miss Parville? A glass of punch, perhaps?"

"I loathe punch," she said.

"Nevertheless, I insist on bringing you some refreshment."

She opened her mouth to refuse, then she nodded. Her throat was dry, and she had no intention of suffering merely to spite him. Sickly-sweet it might be, but it was better than going thirsty. Perhaps she could trip against him and soak his pristine jacket with Lady Hardwick's punch.

"Yes, thank you, Your Grace," she said with a smile.

His eyes narrowed as if in suspicion, then he bowed and disappeared.

Not long after, the musicians tuned their instruments, signaling the start of the next dance. Catherine spotted Lord Horton talking with Papa in a far corner, Blanche at his side. Shortly after, Horton led Blanche across the dance floor. A frisson of fear rippled through Catherine, but she couldn't deny the delight in Blanche's eyes, and the benign devotion in Horton's gaze. If Horton could be trusted to treat Blanche with kindness, then he wasn't such a poor prospect.

Papa would leave her be, if he could be persuaded to permit Blanche to marry. Blanche wouldn't want a spinster sister getting under her feet, but Catherine could shift for herself, somehow. After all, she'd brought Blanche up, taking the place of the mother she'd never known. There must be dozens of families in need of a governess.

She only need convince Papa that she was being courted by a man, and he'd permit Blanche to be courted by Horton.

“Miss Parville.”

She glanced up to see the Duke of Petrush staring at her, holding a glass filled with an opaque liquid, a glint of mischief in his expression. While her future looked somewhat bleak, at least in the present, she could enjoy some sport with him.

She eyed the glass. “What's *that* you've brought?” she asked. “It doesn't look like punch.”

“Alas, I have sad news to share.” He gave her a pained expression, but the glint in his eyes remained.

“Sad news?”

“The punch is of such poor quality, that I insisted a more suitable drink be made, especially for you.”

She took the proffered glass and held it to her lips. His eyes widened and his body stilled as if he'd caught his breath. What mischief was he up to?

She took a sip.

Ye gods—she'd never tasted anything so bitter! Lemonade mixed with vinegar.

So—he wanted to toy with her, did he?

She took another sip, this time prepared for the acrid taste, and she had to concede that she preferred it to the sickly punch she'd been expecting.

His lip curled into a semblance of a smile, as if he fought to restrain his mirth. Returning the smile, she swallowed a mouthful of the liquid, and his eyes widened.

“I wouldn't drink it too quickly,” he warned. “It may not be suitable.”

“On the contrary,” she said. “It's perfect—why else would you have brought it? It's so clever of you to have made such an accurate judgment as to my preferences.”

He shook his head, a bewildered expression in his eyes. “I beg your pardon?”

“I loathe overly sweet foods and drinks,” she said. “Too often at these parties, the men get to indulge in drinks that are infinitely more interesting, whereas the women must make do with syrupy substances that destroy the palate and rot the teeth. It's as if mankind is of the opinion that women are in constant need of sweetening.”

“Do ladies not desire sweetness?” he asked.

“Good heavens, no!” she cried. “I prefer the bitter to the sweet. Bitterness is honest, for it has no need for subterfuge.”

His smile slipped. “You have a somewhat bleak view of the world, Miss Parville.”

She took another mouthful, and he winced. “The world is not kind, Your Grace,” she said, “neither is it fair. Of course, someone of your sex and station is unlikely to stumble across evidence of imbalance. A sweet outer layer will often conceal a rotten heart—in a similar manner by which an overly gentlemanly demeanor will conceal nefarious intentions.”

“Are you saying that you despise sweetness and an excess of civility because you cannot trust it?”

He continued to stare at her, his dark eyes searching, as if attempting to penetrate through to her soul.

If she weren't careful, he'd come dangerously close to stripping back the hard outer shell she'd formed around herself.

And that simply would not do.

She raised the glass to her lips once more, and he reached out as if to stop her.

“Perhaps I should bring you a glass of champagne instead,” he said.

“I've no need for champagne, Your Grace.” Meeting his gaze in full, she tipped her head back.

“Miss Parville!” he cried, “I didn't mean...”

Ignoring him, she swallowed the rest of the lemonade, repressing a shudder as the liquid slipped down her throat. Then she handed the glass to him. “You didn't mean—what?”

He shifted from one foot to another, and the confident stance dissolved. Instead, he looked uncomfortable—*guilty*, even.

“Are you saying that you didn't mean for me to drink the *delicious* concoction you'd procured on my behalf?”

His eyes twinkled with mischief. “Perhaps you'd like a glass of water?”

“And where would you procure it from?” she asked. “A nearby ditch?”

She rose to her feet, and the world slipped sideways. He caught her hand, and she drew in a sharp breath at the spark of desire which ignited in her belly.

“I say, my man—over here!” he cried. A footman appeared at his elbow.

“Bring Miss Parville a glass of water,” Petrush said. “And a little brandy.”

“Sir, I...”

“*Now*. My companion is in danger of being indisposed. And you address me as *Your Grace*.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”

The footman bowed, then disappeared.

The duke took her hands and interlaced his fingers with hers. “Miss Parville—are you all right?” he asked. The arrogance had gone from his voice.

She met his gaze, fighting the wave of nausea. Though she expected to see contempt or false gallantry in his expression, instead, she saw only concern.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I have no wish to make you ill.”

“What *do* you wish for, Your Grace?”

“Can you not call me Daxton?” he asked softly.

Daxton...

She shook her head. The last time she’d called a man by his given name had ended in heartbreak and humiliation, and she had no wish to tread that path again, no matter how gallant her companion was being toward her now...

...no matter how his eyes deepened with desire or his nostrils flared as he drew close, and lowered his voice to a whisper.

“Shall I tell you what I wish for, Miss Parville?”

She curled her fingers round his, taking comfort from his solidity and strength.

“What do you wish for—Daxton?”

There—she’d said it. He drew closer, until she could almost feel his breath on her lips.

“I wish to atone for my transgression, to make myself worthy of you,” he said, “and,” he lowered his voice to a deep rumble which reverberated against her bones, “I wish to be the one to show you that there is nothing to fear from sweetness—or *pleasure*.”

She caught her breath as an uncomfortable heat bloomed in her center. She squeezed her legs together, her cheeks warming with shame at the slick moisture between her thighs.

What was he doing to her—and in the middle of a ball? To the rest of the company, they might merely be a couple seeking rest from a dance, deep in conversation. But, the flare of desire in his eyes spoke of something very different. The air was thick with the fog of her own primal need.

“Shall I tell you what I also wish for, Miss Parville?”

Before she could respond, the footman appeared, brandishing a glass.

“Excellent!” He took the glass and sat beside her. Then he handed it over. Her hands shook so violently, that she spilled some of the liquid onto her skirt.

“Here, let me.” He guided the glass to her lips. He caressed her hands with his thumbs while she tipped the glass back.

Though the liquid cooled her throat and lessened the nausea, the heat in her body increased at his touch. Never before had she been touched in a manner that was so—*intimate*.

“And now, to the matter at hand,” he said.

“What matter?”

“The matter of our courtship, of course.”

She stared at him, searching for evidence of insincerity, but his smile seemed genuine. Then, she shook her head. “I’ve no intention of...”

“May I not be permitted to at least try?” he asked.

He continued to stare at her, and she looked away, unwilling to weather the discomfort brought about by his intense scrutiny. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Blanche dancing with Lord Horton. She saw nothing but unbridled joy in her sister's expression and honest devotion in Horton's gaze. Then she resumed her gaze on her would-be suitor.

He was the first man in her life to make her feel *wanted*—and who had taken an interest in what she had to say. And, he was the first man who refrained from sickly sycophancy and played her at her own game with aplomb.

“Very well,” she said, “I give you permission to court me.”

“Excellent!” He smiled, and his eyes glittered in the candlelight, crinkling at the edges. Her breath caught in her throat.

Sweet Lord—that smile...

“Ah! There you are, old boy!” a voice cried. “You promised to partner me in a few rounds of whist. Hardwick's just set up the card tables in the parlor next door.”

The spell was broken. Mr. Bond stood before them. Catherine's suitor turned to face the newcomer.

“Bond, I'm afraid I'm occupied here.”

“I would not have Mr. Bond accuse me of depriving him of his whist partner, in addition to my many other faults,” Catherine said.

“Then, I shall excuse myself, with your permission.” He took her hand and kissed it. “Perhaps I may be permitted to take you for a drive around the estate tomorrow? I'm sure our host and hostess will have no objection to our using their curricule. In fact, I took the liberty of asking Lady Hardwick.”

“I don't know...”

“Or, would you rather spend the morning with the ladies, drinking sweet wine and discussing the latest society gossip?”

She couldn't prevent herself from smiling.

"Aha!" he cried. "I see you have the same aversion to tattle as I. Though, if you miss the tattle, I can always regale you with tales of Lady Vinegar and her eldest daughter Little Miss Lemon."

"I think I've had quite enough of *her*," Catherine said, with a laugh. Then she checked herself.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed out loud.

She gave him a saucy smile. "For my part, I could regale you with the exploits of Lord Sorettoe."

"Until tomorrow then." He took her hand and kissed it, then followed his friend across the ballroom and disappeared into a room at the far end.

What the devil had she done, agreeing to be courted by a man?

"Well, thank the Almighty for that!"

Catherine cringed at the familiar voice.

Papa sat beside her, taking the seat the duke had just vacated. He gestured toward the parlor into which the duke and Mr. Bond had disappeared.

"You've finally seen sense, daughter," he said. "Keep your mouth shut and perhaps this one can be persuaded to take you on for good, rather than just a dalliance. Then, I can see to your sister's courtship. Lord Horton's already taking an interest in her."

"I don't intend to enter into a *dalliance* with anyone," she said.

"But the Duke of Petrush is courting you?"

She cringed at the desperation in his voice.

"Papa—keep your voice down," she hissed. "You're not rid of me yet."

“Perhaps not, but if I can do anything to help him along...”
He stood and smoothed the lapels of his jacket.

“Whist, eh? I wonder if they’d be averse to a little piquet instead.”

Catherine’s heart sank. “No, Papa, please. You’ve little left to wager, and piquet requires a degree of skill, which you lack.”

“True,” he said, his mouth twisting into a sneer. “But, if I’d been furnished with a son, rather than cursed with two daughters, I’d not have been in such dire need of funds.”

The arrow hit home. Papa rose to his feet and sauntered off in the direction of the games room where, in all likelihood, he’d parade his desperation in front of the Duke of Petrush.

An evening in Papa’s company would be enough to put off even the most determined suitor. In all likelihood, by tomorrow, the duke would have given up all intention of courting her.



CHAPTER SEVEN

WHERE THE DEVIL is she?

Dax glanced across the breakfast table, his gaze wandering from guest to guest. This morning, Lady Hardwick had waved him over and invited him to sit beside her. Lord Hardwick sat at the opposite end. Halfway along the table, Lord Parville sat next to his younger daughter, Miss Blanche, but there was no sign of Catherine. Parville's skin had a greenish tone, and dark rings circled his eyes.

Good. It served the old bastard right after his behavior last night.

Guests continued to enter the breakfast room, crossing the floor to the buffet table and helping themselves. Footmen wandered about, offering tea to the guests. The air filled with the low murmur of chatter, punctuated by the clink of silverware and china as the guests spooned sugar into their cups, sliced into bacon, and sipped their tea.

Horton sauntered in, helped himself to a plate of breakfast, then approached the empty space beside Blanche Parville.

"Is this seat taken, Miss Blanche?"

"Join us, do," Lord Parville said before his daughter could reply.

Horton met Dax's gaze. Then he winked and sat beside his quarry.

"Are you enjoying your breakfast, Miss Blanche?" he asked.

"Very much so," came the reply.

Dax found himself smiling at the besotted expression on Horton's face. He seemed genuinely fond of her. Blanche

Parville was a genteel creature, softly spoken, and cordial.

The exact opposite of her sister.

Horton lowered his voice and murmured something unintelligible—some profession of admiration perhaps.

Miss Blanche shook her head. “My sister was a little indisposed this morning. I believe she’s taking the air outside.”

Lady Hardwick leaned forward, her brow furrowed in concern. “Was Miss Catherine not hungry—or thirsty?”

Blanche looked up. “I believe not, ma’am.”

“Oh dear,” Lady Hardwick said. “It does a young woman no good to venture out on an empty stomach.”

Lord Hardwick spoke up. “I’m sure she’s perfectly well,” he said.

Dear Lord—I hope so.

Lady Hardwick’s gaze snapped round, and she stared at Dax.

“So do I, Your Grace,” she whispered.

Before Dax could respond, Lord Hardwick leaned forward. “Are you still wanting the curricle, Petrush?” he asked. “Or would you prefer to join the men for the shooting?”

“I’ll pass on bagging birds,” Dax said. “I’d promised to take the elder Miss Parville on an excursion—that is, if Lord Parville agrees.”

Parville’s eyes lit up, and he nodded, almost dislodging his wig in delight at the prospect of ridding himself of his daughter. From his position beside Blanche, Horton grinned and mouthed a silent “thank you.”

“Perhaps, Miss Blanche, you might join me on a walk around the estate?” Horton suggested. “The sunken garden is, I hear, most exquisite, and has many Italian features which our host brought back from his travels, is that not right, Lord Hardwick?”

“That’s correct,” their host said.

“My daughter would be *delighted*,” Parville said, “wouldn’t you, Blanche?”

Blanche blushed and lowered her gaze. Her sweet shyness was what most men would call endearing, though Dax preferred the prickly, fiery demeanor of another...

“Then that’s settled,” Hardwick said. He drew out his pocket watch. “Heavens! We’ll bag nothing if we spend the morning idling here. Gentlemen, if you please, we’ll convene in the hall on the hour. Ladies, I believe morning tea will be served in the drawing room, where Miss Bonneville is anxious to demonstrate her musical skills. My wife will provide for your every comfort, I’m sure.”

He rose, and the rest of the party followed suit.

Before Dax could stand, Lady Hardwick caught his sleeve.

“A word, if you please, Your Grace.”

Dax turned his gaze toward his hostess and raised his eyebrows in inquiry.

“What are you doing with Miss Parville?” she asked.

“I’m taking her for an excursion—with her father’s permission.”

Her expression hardened. “You can do better than *that*, Your Grace,” she said. “I think you know I wasn’t inquiring about your plan to tour the estate this morning. You must consider me very naïve if you believe me incapable of understanding how men such as yourself view young women.”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite catch your meaning, Lady Hardwick,” he said.

“Then I must express my disappointment in *your* lack of understanding, Your Grace. Permit me to point it out. Most men view women as playthings, particularly men who express their dislike of the marriage state by sampling as many

curricles as possible before settling on one which they're content to ride for the rest of their lives."

Surely she didn't mean...

"Of course," she continued, "some men are not so fastidious as to refrain from riding more than one curricule even after they've made their purchase."

Dax shook his head in disbelief. He'd not met a woman of her class with such a marked degree of frankness.

He opened his mouth to respond, and she held up her hand.

"Before you reply, Your Grace, I ask you not to insult my intelligence by feigning ignorance of the true subject of our discussion, particularly when she was absent at breakfast. I wonder if her indisposition this morning is related to your friendship with Lord Horton?"

Sweet Lord! Surely Lady Hardwick wasn't aware of the wager between him and his friend?

"Ah," she continued. "I see my insight astonishes you—sadly such astonishment is to be expected, given that men often underestimate the women in their presence. The pointed looks between the two of you this morning—and, I might add, last night—might have gone unnoticed by most, but I've always made it my business to ensure that each and every one of my guests is treated with courtesy and respect—even the ones who are ridiculed as being *shrewish*."

She met his gaze unwaveringly, and a prickle of guilt needled at him. Trust his bloody conscience to plague him now, after having been absent for a lifetime.

But, in truth, the appeal of courting Miss Parville for a wager had lessened, particularly last night, when he'd gained an understanding of her plight.

After following Dax to the card tables last night, Lord Parville's behavior had been enough to make a man's stomach churn. While it was accepted that men, in the company of their own sex, displayed a greater degree of frankness when

expressing opinions of the fairer sex—Parville’s contempt of his daughters extended beyond the limits of respectability. The man was all too ready to express his opinion that women existed for three reasons—to provide men with dowries, heirs, and sexual gratification on demand.

Parville, as incapable of holding his liquor as his cash, had expressed his disappointment, vociferously and petulantly, on learning that Hardwick forbade any form of monetary stakes at his card tables. He’d then drunk himself almost to oblivion, entering into a tirade about the burden of having sired two daughters, particularly when the elder was, in his words, “too vile to attract even the most desperate suitor.”

To his credit, Lord Hardwick had immediately summoned two footmen who marched Parville out of the room, after which he wasn’t seen again for the remainder of the evening. And given the respect and deep affection Hardwick had for his wife, he most likely had related the entire situation to her.

Dax met his hostess’s gaze.

“I assure you, Lady Hardwick, I’ve no intention of bringing Miss Parville to harm.”

She nodded but remained unsmiling, as if she sized him up to determine whether he attempted to deceive her.

“I think,” he added quietly, staring at the seat which Lord Parville had just vacated, “that, rather than bring Miss Parville to harm, I would rather atone for the actions of those closest to her.”

“Perhaps,” she replied. “However, I find it something of a coincidence that your friend Lord Horton is paying court to Miss Parville’s younger sister at the same time you seek to woo Miss Parville herself.”

“Lord Horton’s admiration of Miss Blanche is genuine.”

“And your admiration of Catherine is not?”

“Perhaps it wasn’t at first,” he said. “But I find myself admiring her frankness—a quality that many lack.”

“I suppose I must be satisfied with that,” she said. “My husband speaks well of you, but I’m not one to blindly accept the opinions of others—not even those I love. I prefer to form my own conclusion.”

She rose to her feet, and he followed suit.

“I’ll ask John to bring the curricle round,” she said. “All *you* need do is find Miss Parville.”

She exited the breakfast room and crossed the hallway to the main doors. A footman stood on the drive outside next to a curricle with two horses.

“Ah, John,” Lady Hardwick said. “Perfect. We only need to find His Grace’s companion.”

“If you mean Miss Parville, ma’am, I saw her in the herb garden earlier.”

“Where’s that?” Dax asked.

The footman gestured toward a privet hedge with an archway in the middle. “Through there, Your Grace.”

“Thank you,” Dax said. “Wait here—I’ll return presently.”

He approached the archway and peered through into an enclosed garden—a small paved area with a sundial in the center, surrounded by borders filled with rows of foliage in various shades of green.

A lone figure stood beside a bush with dark green leaves shaped like small spikes. She turned as he approached, her hair shimmering in the sunlight, and her eyes wide.

“Your Grace! What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come for you,” he said.

She averted her gaze and plucked a sprig from the bush, lifting it to her nose and crushing it between her fingers. “Rosemary,” she breathed. “I always find the aroma comforting. Aren’t you joining the men for the shooting?”

“I thought we agreed last night to take a tour round the estate,” he said.

“Y-yes—but that was before...” Her voice trailed away. She colored, and he could almost read her mind.

That was before you played cards with my father.

“Did you think I’d change my mind?” he asked. “If you knew me better, you’d realize that, of the two of us, *I*, at least, do not scare easily, Miss Parville.”

She tipped her chin as if in defiance. “Neither do I.”

He approached her and offered his arm. “Then, Miss Parville, your chariot awaits.”

She took his arm, and he placed his hand over hers. She drew in a sharp breath, and her gaze locked with his. For a moment, a connection existed between them—twin souls staring at each other across a chasm. Then, he smiled and steered her toward the archway.

He’d spoken the truth to Lady Hardwick. He did admire Miss Parville—dangerously so.

Once this excursion was over, he’d seek Horton out and tell him that he could keep his hundred guineas. Dax had no need to be paid to spend time in Miss Parville’s company.

Because, he realized, that her company was not a punishment—far from it.

Her company was a pleasure.



CHAPTER EIGHT

CATHERINE RELAXED INTO her seat, lulled by the gentle rocking motion of the curricle. Though she'd expected the ride to be bumpy, her companion steered the horses with aplomb and a firm hold on the reins—his long, lean fingers curled around the leather as if he understood how to assert his mastery over the horses.

And not just the horses...

Her breath had hitched when he'd helped her into the curricle—his skin warm and smooth against hers, his touch on the small of her back possessive and protective as he guided her into her seat...

“Are you comfortable, Miss Parville?”

“That’s the third time you’ve asked, Your Grace,” she said. “If you continue in this manner, I’ll be forced to change my opinion of you.”

“For the better, I hope.”

“I’ve little time for sycophancy.”

He let out a low chuckle. “I’m no sycophant, Miss Parville, I assure you. If I were, I’d have spent the past hour extolling your beauty and charm instead of inquiring about your comfort.”

“And, do your inquiries about my comfort stem from a belief that I am somehow infirm and, perhaps, your mirth is as a result of my speaking for myself?”

He laughed again. “My dear Miss Parville, when have you been known *not* to speak for yourself—or, for others, for that matter?”

“I see not fault in frankness, Your Grace, if it can be utilized for the benefits of those whom I love.”

“Such as your sister.”

He slowed the horses to a walk and turned to face her. Her skin tightened at the intensity of his gaze.

She looked away.

“Have I spoken out of turn?” he asked. “Or, perhaps, you consider it a weakness to love another?”

“Love is only a weakness if others exploit it,” she said. “There’s no weakness of character in loving another—but the danger of revealing that love is very real indeed.”

“You speak from experience, Miss Parville?”

She closed her eyes, but his closeness—the intoxicating, masculine aroma—threatened to overpower her.

Love may be a weakness, which often brought about a woman’s downfall. But loving Blanche enabled her to remain strong, to ensure her sister never suffered her own fate—the crushing agony of heartbreak and rejection.

Catherine’s own heartbreak had taught her resilience against flattery—but the sharp-witted barbs of her companion were weapons of a very different sort, for they threatened to breach her armor, corroding the hard surface to reveal her soul.

A warm hand covered hers.

“Forgive me, Miss Parville. I fear I’ve spoken out of turn.”

She turned to see regret and concern in his eyes—not a fear that he’d diminished her opinion of him, but a genuine concern for her.

It was a look she had almost never seen in her life—as if his heart called to hers, weaving a spell to bind them together.

She blinked and broke the spell.

“I would be disappointed in Your Grace if you were incapable of speaking *out of turn*,” she said.

He smiled, and a light danced in his eyes.

“Do you wish to return to the house, Miss Parville?” he asked. “Or are you prepared to suffer my company a little longer?”

“Perhaps we can tarry a while longer,” she said. “I prefer the outdoors, and the countryside hereabouts is beautiful. It seems a shame to waste the day stuck inside discussing embroidery stitches with the other ladies. And, besides,” she added, “while the extension of our excursion means I must endure your company a little longer, I’ve always been taught to believe that a little suffering does wonders for one’s character.”

“I must applaud you, Miss Parville, in performing a great service to our society.”

“How so?”

A wicked gleam shone in his eyes. “Because by spending a little time in your company, *every* living soul must find their character much improved.”

“Perhaps,” she replied. “But there must also be exceptions to the general rule.” She met his gaze unwaveringly and bit her lip to stem the tide of mirth bubbling inside her. “Some individuals, I find, are wholly irredeemable, even those who ask me to spend more time with them on an outing.”

His eyes widened in mock hurt. The laughter inside her threatened to burst, and she let out an unladylike snort. Unable to contain herself any longer, she let the laughter ripple through her, until they relaxed back into their seats, shaking with mirth.

He pulled her close, and the laughter died on her lips as she gazed into his eyes—two sapphire pools, dark with desire.

“Catherine...”

He lowered his mouth to hers.

She drew in a sharp breath and parted her lips. His tongue swept across the seam of her lips, then slipped inside. With

gentle strokes, he claimed her, and she savored the taste of him—the blend of honey and spices.

Expert fingers caressed her neckline, then his hand slipped inside her gown.

She froze as the memory came flooding back...

...a hand, which had sought to claim her body—a suitor who had sought to take what he wanted, then discard her, leaving her heartbroken. And a voice, filled with contempt, gray eyes filled with derision.

Who'd want to court an ugly little thing like you, Miss Parville?

“Miss Parville?”

She blinked and stared up into eyes that were blue, not gray—a face which bore an expression of desire, not contempt.

“Forgive me, Miss Parville,” he said. “I had no intention of compromising you.”

He withdrew and took the reins again, and she caught her breath at the sense of loss.

“Shall we continue?” he asked. “I have a fancy to visit one of the neighboring estates. Hurstpoint Place.

She drew in a sharp breath. “Did you say *Hurstpoint Place*?”

“Have you heard of it?”

“I-I believe so,” she said, “though I may be mistaken.” She forced calm into her voice to conceal the maelstrom of emotions. “W-who lives there?”

“An old school friend,” he said. “Though, I hesitate to call him *friend*. We were at Eton together. He’s something of a rogue—which is saying something coming from *my* lips, I admit.” He grinned at her, but she’d lost her appetite for teasing.

“The grounds are worth exploring,” he continued. “Mrs. Leander is somewhat obsessed with her gardens.”

Icy fingers clutched at her heart. “D-did you say—*Leander?*”

“That’s right,” he said. “Andrew Leander. He has no title, but his mother was the younger daughter of a duke—which he reminds everyone all too frequently.”

“No...”

Catherine shivered and drew her shawl about her.

Andrew...

The last time that name had been on her lips, her heart had lain in tatters.

“Are you well, Miss Parville?”

She shook her head. “Take me back.”

“We’re almost there,” he said. “If you’re feeling unwell, you can take your rest at Hurstpoint Place. Once we’ve reached the end of the lane, you’ll see the house—it’s quite impressive.”

“I said no!” she cried. “Please, stop!”

“Miss Parville, I must insist...”

“What a fool I’ve been!” she cried. “Did the two of you plan it between you?”

He glanced at her, and guilt flared in his eyes. “The two of us?”

“You and Lord Leander!”

He narrowed his eyes, then shook his head. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

Pushing him aside, she scrambled to her feet. But before she could climb down from the curricle, he caught her arms and pulled her back.

“What the devil do you think you’re doing, Miss Parville?” he cried. “It must be two miles at least to Hardwick Hall—surely you’re not going to walk back?”

“I will if I must.”

“I only thought...”

“No, you *didn’t* think!” she cried. “None of you do! We’re just playthings for your amusement, aren’t we?”

“Is that what you think?” he cried. “I could never view you as a plaything! I have too much respect for you.”

He pulled her close. “Please believe me,” he said. “If you have no wish to continue, then we shan’t. The last thing I want is to see you distressed. Leander’s an arse, if truth be known.”

“You’re playing me false,” she said, struggling to break free. But he continued to hold her, his touch gentle but firm.

“I’m not playing you false, Catherine,” he said. “Do you not know how I feel—can you not see it? My eyes have been opened. I now realize what I want in life.”

A treacherous little nugget of hope flared within her, and she glanced into his eyes, fearing what might confront her. But all she saw was honesty—and desire.

“I don’t want a simpering miss to cater to my whims,” he said. “I want an equal, to challenge me at every turn—a woman not afraid to meet me in battle, head-on. I never believed she could exist until I met you.”

Her heart leaped with joy at his words, but she fought the urge to fall into his arms. She couldn’t survive a second heartbreak.

She shook her head. “I—I can’t...”

“I know, sweeting,” he said. “You’re unwilling to place your trust in another. Believe me, I understand your fear. But only by confronting our fears can we find true happiness.”

“How can you understand me on such a short acquaintance?” she asked.

“You think the duration of an acquaintance matters when two souls connect?” He took her hand and held it against his chest.

“My heart has no need for weeks to go by in order to declare to whom it belongs, Catherine.”

Catherine...

A ripple of need flowed through her.

“*I* see much,” he continued. “Do you think me incapable of understanding why you’ve fashioned such a prickly exterior round yourself? So a knight covers himself in armor before engaging in battle, you have concealed your true self. It’s how you protect yourself—and the sister you love.”

“Blanche...”

“Blanche is safe, Catherine,” he said. “Horton may be a dandy, but he’s a good man and devoted to your sister. Rest assured that he’ll make her happy if she permits him to.”

He lifted her hands to his lips, caressing her skin with his thumbs.

“What of you, Catherine? Who will make *you* happy?”

“I can shift for myself,” she said.

His eyes deepened with desire, and his voice took on a note of huskiness, as if he struggled to control his emotions. “That you can,” he said. “But, if you permitted me, I could devote myself to your happiness.”

Desire flared within her at the blatant need in his eyes, as if a fire ran through her veins, and she shifted her legs to ease the ache which pulsed deep within—a delicious, unfathomable ache that begged to be eased.

“I told you...” Her breath hitched as he placed a hand on her waist, “...I cannot bear sycophants. I will not smile at your flattery...I—oh!” A cry escaped her lips as he shifted his hand to her thigh, inches away from the source of her need.

“I have no desire to flatter you, my sweet,” he said, his voice a low, primal growl, as if she were in the clutches of a primal beast—a predator ready to devour her. “But I do wish to see pleasure in your eyes—the pleasure you will feel as you spend at my touch.”

Oh, my...

The fog of desire threatened to obliterate rational thought, but she clung to him, shifting her thighs apart in an instinctive gesture, as if her body knew what she needed.

“Do you trust me, Catherine?”

Her breath caught, and she looked into his eyes. But all she saw was desire, a wish not to hurt her—and, in turn, a wish not to be hurt.

Could it be that he was in possession of a heart? Perhaps, like her, he wore a mask—the carefree mask of the rake—to conceal it?

He grew still and sighed, his breath a warm caress on her cheek.

“I’ll do nothing without your consent,” he said, “and I’d never ruin you—I value you too highly for that.”

“But—what about...” she hesitated, feeling her cheeks burn, “...*pleasure?*”

His mouth curled into a smile, and he placed a kiss on the corner of her mouth. “I can give you pleasure and leave you intact.”

“H-here?” she asked. “Outside?”

“Where else? There’s nobody to see—and do you not prefer the sharpness of the frost on the landscape and the excitement from the danger?”

Oh, heavens—yes!

A little pulse fluttered in her belly.

“Your body speaks of your desire,” he whispered, “but I must hear consent from your lips.”

What did it matter that they were outdoors—or that she faced ruination? Marriage was not a state she wished to imprison herself in. There was no harm in a little pleasure with a man who understood her better than she did herself.

She tilted her head until their lips met.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I give you my consent—gladly.”

He dipped his head and kissed her, but this time, there was no gentleness. His tongue thrust inside her mouth, sweeping across every corner, claiming ownership as he devoured her.

And she devoured him in turn, curling her tongue round his, engaging him in a battle of desire to match the battle of wits they’d indulged in earlier.

A growl of approval reverberated in his chest as he held her close, and she drew in a sharp breath to dissipate the heat flowing through her veins.

Then, a delicious coolness caressed the skin of her thighs.

Sweet heaven!

With deft fingers, he grasped her skirts and pulled them to her waist. But despite the cold air, the need to part her thighs overpowered her. The ache in her center threatened to engulf her senses, and she shifted her hips, her body understanding that only he could ease the sweet ache.

Then he drew a finger across her center, and her body tightened, as if it anticipated a burst of pleasure.

“Daxton...” his name escaped her lips, and he let out a groan of approval.

“Oh, Catherine,” he whispered, “are you ready for pleasure?”

He continued to caress her, but rather than feel shame at the intimacy, she relished the delicious sensations rippling

through her body. His movements grew slicker—slow, sensual circles.

How the devil did he know how to bring about such delicious sensations?

Then the tip of his finger brushed over a sensitive spot in her center, and she cried out, as a fire ignited in her belly.

“Oh!”

“That’s it, sweetheart—you’re close now,” he whispered. “So close...”

Then he stopped moving, and she let out a mewl of frustration. She tilted her hips to increase the pressure, moving against his fingers. Tears of shame at her wantonness pricked at her eyelids, but he nodded his approval.

“Ah, yes—that’s it,” he whispered. “Show me how much you want to feel pleasure at my touch.”

She tilted her hips once more and gave a low cry at the flare of pleasure.

Then, he plunged his finger inside her, and her world shattered.

Her body disintegrated at his touch, and she let out a scream as wave after wave of torturous pleasure ripped through her.

“Daxton!”

His mouth crashed against hers, and he silenced her cries, thrusting his tongue in her mouth to mirror his exquisite administrations between her thighs. She clung to him, and her breathing steadied.

Gently, as if she were as delicate as the finest porcelain, he pulled her skirts down, and held her close, his warm breath caressing her neck. As she drifted into a doze, she caught his whispered words.

“Oh, Catherine, my love—no man shall ever hurt you again.”

My love...

He might have given her pleasure—but, in doing so, he had claimed her heart.



CHAPTER NINE

T HIS WASN'T SUPPOSED to happen.

Dax steered the curricle along the lane, retracing the path to Hardwick Hall.

His companion was a very different creature to the one he'd helped into the curricle that morning. The prickly exterior had gone, replaced by a vibrant young woman. Her eyes shone in the light of the low winter sun, like emeralds studded with stars, and her lips curved into a genuine smile of pleasure.

How had he described her when he'd first seen her at the Wiltons' ball?

If she saw fit to smile, she might be quite pretty.

How wrong he was! With the sunlight dancing in her eyes and a smile that was for him—and only him—she was not just pretty. She was breathtaking.

Nothing would stop him from continuing to court her when they returned to London. That old bastard Lord Parville would relish the prospect of ridding himself of Catherine—the daughter he'd never valued, and Horton would be eternally grateful for Dax giving him the opportunity to continue to court Blanche.

Everyone would be happy.

A successful venture, if I say so myself.

He glanced toward her, and they exchanged a smile. Whatever that arse Andrew Leander had done to her, he was a fool. He'd missed out on the opportunity to claim one of the most exciting women in England as a companion for life.

An opportunity that Dax had no intention of passing on.

“I feel I must apologize, Your Grace,” she said.

“Daxton, please.”

Her cheeks flushed. “Daxton.”

He nodded. “Good. And, there’s no need to apologize. If anything, I’m the one who should explain myself to you. You must have thought me incredibly rude when we first met.”

She let out a laugh. “I found it rather refreshing. Most men either pretend they’ve not been insulted, or scuttle away to massage their egos among flatterers and sycophants. No...” she hesitated, her smile slipping, “...I meant that I must explain my refusal to visit Hurstpoint Place.”

“You have nothing to explain,” he said. “I suspect the present incumbent has more reason to apologize than you. I take it you knew him?”

“We met shortly after my come-out,” she said. “I wasn’t so foolish as to let myself be compromised, but I believed myself in love—until he made it clear that a self-respecting gentleman could never consider courting *one such as I*.”

“One such as you?”

She turned away, but not before Dax caught sight of moisture in her eyes. “A woman with little fortune,” she said quietly, “and even less beauty.”

“He said *that*?”

“He may have perhaps worded his opinion a little more...” she let out a sigh, “...*explicitly*.”

The cad!

It wasn’t too late to turn round and resume the journey to Hurstpoint Place—where he’d take great pleasure placing a shiner on Leander’s face to teach him a lesson.

“Did you love him?”

Dax regretted the question as soon as the words escaped his lips. Nevertheless, he held his breath in anticipation of the answer.

She shook her head. “No. I was infatuated—and Papa had stressed the importance of securing a match when my Season was costing him so much.”

So—the impoverished Lord Parville had dressed up his daughter like a prize sow and paraded her round the marriage mart in the hope that somebody would purchase her. Most likely, she would have jumped at the chance of a match—any match, to be free of a man who’d resented her from the moment she was born.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s not your fault.”

“In *that*, you’re wrong, Miss Parville. I apologize on behalf of my sex—we have much to answer for. But I’d like to hope that *my* soul, at least, has a chance of redemption.”

She resumed her gaze on him, amusement in her expression. “Redemption, eh? Is a soul not supposed to suffer purgatory before redemption can be granted?”

“This weak soul will gladly endure what purgatory you see fit to deliver upon him,” he said.

She laughed. “You’re not what I believed you to be at first. In fact, I find myself in the uncomfortable position of beginning to find you *agreeable*.”

He shifted closer to her, relishing the fact that rather than flinch, she leaned toward him.

“Oh, no—that simply *won’t* do, Miss Parville,” he said. “I have no desire to be merely *agreeable*. Such a bland word used too often to describe someone that we can barely tolerate.”

“How would you prefer to be described, Your Grace?” she asked.

“It’s Daxton, sweetheart, or did you forget?”

“Daxton.”

His manhood twitched in his breeches as her tongue curled over his name, as if she relished each syllable.

“Should I describe you as delectable, perhaps?”

“Or virile?” he suggested.

She let out a snort. “Mayhap vainglorious is more appropriate.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Such an adjective would only be appropriate if I was guilty of having over-exaggerated my talents,” he said. “Thus far, I promised to give you pleasure, and I believe I succeeded—unless my ears deceived me.”

She gave a sharp gasp, and her blush deepened. His blood surged with desire as her chest heaved, and he ached to run his finger along the creamy flesh at her neckline, which hinted at the plump softness of her breasts.

“Very well,” she said, her voice tight, as if she, too, struggled to contain her desire. “*Virile* it is.”

The curricule turned a corner, and the chimneys of Hardwick House came into view.

“Such a beautiful building,” she said.

“It’s very much like my country seat,” Dax said, “at least in style, if not in size.”

“Don’t tell me—yours is larger?” She gave a saucy smile.

He leaned toward her and lowered his voice. “Are you still referring to buildings?”

“Your Grace!” she cried in mock horror.

“I thought I’d told you to call me...”

“Ah, yes,” she interrupted, “but if I cry out your name too loudly, someone might hear and draw certain conclusions.”

“Conclusions with respect to what?”

He reached for her hand, and his heart leaped when she laced her fingers through his.

“Oh, I say—old chap!” a voice cried. “I wondered where you’d been! Gallivanting about the place, were you?”

Horton stood alone in the center of the lane.

“Where’s your companion, Horton?” Dax asked.

“Miss Blanche? Inside with the rest of the ladies. Sewing hems—or stitching cushions, or something or other. It seems I was surplus to requirements.”

“You were?”

“Apparently, I kept blocking the light each time I went to look out of the window. I swear Lady Hardwick was going to smack me with her fan.”

Miss Parville let out a soft laugh. “Lady Hardwick’s a woman after my own heart,” she said. “She doesn’t suffer fools—or obstructions.”

Horton glanced at her, and his eyes widened in astonishment.

“You seem in good spirits, Miss Parville,” he said. “I trust my friend hasn’t plagued you too much.”

“On the contrary, he’s taken great pains to ensue my comfort.”

“Ha!” Horton cried. “I bet he has. How much do I owe you, Petrush?”

Dax frowned at his friend. “We’ll discuss that later, Horton. If you hurry, there’s time to join the rest of the gentlemen for the shooting.”

“I’ve no interest in shooting when I’ve already bagged my bird,” Horton said. “No small thanks to *your* efforts, I might add. It was fifty guineas, wasn’t it?”

“Horton,” Dax growled. “We’ll continue this conversation later, once I’ve escorted Miss Parville back to the house.”

“There’s no need to *escort* her anywhere, now,” Horton continued. “Unless, of course, you’ve had a change of heart.”

“That’s enough!” Dax cried. “Go and annoy the other gentlemen, and leave me be.”

Horton bowed his head.

“I beg pardon, Miss Parville,” he said. “I was mistaken, and can only apologize if I’ve given offense.”

He tipped his hat and disappeared.

Dax tugged at the reins. “Walk on!”

The horses set off. Miss Parville remained silent, but he could sense the tension in her body. As the curricle drew up beside the main doors, a footman rushed toward them and took the reins.

Dax climbed down, then offered his hand to help her out, but she didn’t take it. Instead, she stared at him out of clear green eyes.

“A change of heart about what?” she asked.

“Just a silly jape between friends,” Dax said. “Nothing to concern yourself with.”

“I disagree,” she replied. “If your friend saw fit to apologize to me, then he, at least, considers the matter of some concern to myself. And, what was that about fifty guineas?”

“It’s nothing,” he said. “I see that now.”

“Now? Then you didn’t see it before?” She stared at his hand, but still, she didn’t take it. “Can’t you at least be honest? I’d rather be subjected to a painful truth than a falsehood any day. The former is a mark of respect—the latter, disdain.”

There was no escaping the truth. And he *did* owe her that much.

“Before I tell you anything,” he said, “let me say that had I known then what I know now, I’d never have agreed to it.”

The color drained from her face. “Agreed to what?”

“I…” he shook his head, his gut twisting in shame. “I never meant to toy with you, Miss Parville. I spoke the truth

when I said that my friend genuinely admires your sister, but...”

“Stop,” she said, her voice hard, as if a frost had settled in her heart. “Permit me to hazard a guess. You and your friend know of Papa’s stipulation that no man shall approach Blanche until I am being courted. You therefore devised a scheme to masquerade as my admirer in order to persuade Papa to permit your friend to court my sister—in return for fifty guineas.”

Oh, shit.

“Indeed, Your Grace.”

Bugger—he’d cursed aloud.

“Am I inaccurate in any respect?”

He shuffled from one foot to another, as if he were a grubby boy standing in front of his housemaster, waiting for a beating after a capital transgression.

“In one respect, yes,” he said, his voice meek. “The sum was a hundred guineas, not fifty.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I suppose I should be flattered that you considered me worth the effort—or is it perhaps an insult that you demanded for such a substantial compensation for suffering my company?”

“I did it for my friend,” he said, “who I believe is genuinely fond of your sister.”

“You’ve said that on several occasions,” she said. “A man only reiterates his feelings when he’s uncertain of them.”

She gripped the side of the curricule and began to climb out. He offered his hand, but she slapped it aside, almost losing her balance.

“Don’t touch me, Your Grace,” she hissed. “I think you’ve done enough.”

Head held high, she turned her back and strode toward the doors.

“Wait!” he cried. “Don’t you want to know why I told you the truth now?”

She turned and shrugged. “Because you knew I’d find out. Your friend had as good as confessed. All you’ve done is fill in the details.”

“It wasn’t because of that,” he said. “It’s because I have too much respect for you—I care about you too much to want to conceal the truth. I want you to love me—*all* of me—including my flaws.” He took a step toward her. “As I love you—all of you.”

Her hand flew to her mouth, and her eyes shone with unshed tears. Then she shook her head.

“No,” she whispered as if to herself. “I’ll not fall for it—not again.”

“Catherine!” he cried. “Won’t you at least listen? Give me a chance to atone? I regret deceiving you. But the deception was short-lived. And, in some ways, I’m glad I set out to court you. For had I not done do, I would never have seen the real woman.”

“The real woman?”

“The kind, caring woman,” he said, “who thinks nothing of herself and everything of those that she loves. The clever woman with the sharp tongue and ready wit—who conceals herself beneath the façade of the shrew.”

She flinched at that last word, then sighed.

“Shrew I may be,” she said, “but at least *I’ve* never set out to toy with someone’s heart for my own ends—or for a hundred guineas.”

He approached her again, and she raised her hand.

“No further, sir!”

“What must I do?” he asked.

“Spend your hundred guineas wisely,” she retorted. “Or, if you’re unable to grasp the concept of a wise purchase, use it to

buy yourself a woman who doesn't mind being deceived. I hear there's plenty in the bawdy houses of London.

Before he could respond, she turned her back and strode inside.

Shit.

He thrust his hands into his pockets. What the bloody hell was he going to do?

“Ahem.” The footman cleared his throat. “Will you be wanting the curricle again today, Your Grace?”

“Bloody hellfire, man!” he cried. “Do I look like I'll need it?”

“Very good, Your Grace.” The footman bowed, then climbed into the curricle and drove off, disappearing round the side of the building.

Only a week ago Dax would have been crowing at the notion of having won a bet—and a hundred guineas to restock his wine cellar with.

But, in doing so, he'd lost something far more precious.

The only woman in the world he was capable of loving.



CHAPTER TEN

A SHARP KNOCK on the door roused Catherine from her doze.

“Come in!”

The door creaked open, and Lady Hardwick’s maid appeared.

“Excuse me, miss, her ladyship’s been asking for you, seeing as you missed dinner.”

“I wasn’t hungry.” Catherine said.

“She wanted to know if you were joining the dancing tonight. She’s waiting for you now, in the hall.”

Dancing—the last thing she wanted to do.

Catherine climbed off the bed and rubbed her eyes.

“Are you unwell, miss?” the maid asked. “Shall I send for a doctor?”

“No, thank you.” Catherine forced a smile. “I was merely a little tired from this morning’s excursion. Did you say Lady Hardwick’s waiting for me?”

“She wondered if you might like some assistance, miss, perhaps with your hair, seeing as you brought no maid with you.”

Catherine flinched. Was Papa’s inability to afford a maid for her the subject of servants’ gossip?

“Shall I fix your hair, miss?” the maid asked. “I’ve a ribbon that’ll set off the color of your hair just right, see?” She held up a bright green ribbon.

Catherine wanted nothing less than to join the company or cover herself in frippery. But, neither did she want to be the subject of gossip, which she would be if she remained hidden

in her chamber. *She* had done nothing to be ashamed of. The duke—*Daxton*—had behaved abominably. Why should she hide? Let him see her and suffer discomfort—assuming he had a conscience.

Daxton...

“Here, miss—sit yourself down.”

The maid’s merry chatter returned Catherine to the present, and she sat while the maid brushed her hair, then proceeded to pin it up and secure it with the ribbon.

“There!” the maid cried. “You’ll be the prettiest woman in the room tonight.”

Catherine turned her head from one side to the other. She had to admit that the ribbon looked rather fetching. She smiled at the maid’s refection.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ll tell your mistress that she’s fortunate to have such a talented lady’s maid.”

The maid bobbed a curtsy.

“You’re welcome, miss.”

Catherine rose and exited her chamber. As she descended the staircase, strains of music could be heard through one of the doors, and she fought the urge to flee. Before her courage failed, Lady Hardwick appeared at the foot of the stairs.

“There you are!” she cried. “I was most anxious when I didn’t see you at dinner. I hope you didn’t think it an imposition that I sent Betsy to tend to you.”

“Of course not,” Catherine said. “It was most kind.”

“And—you’re well?”

Catherine nodded.

“Good! The evening wouldn’t be the same without you. And, you’ve been missed.”

“Blanche will fare very well without her older sister getting in her way,” Catherine said.

“I wasn’t referring to your sister,” Lady Hardwick said. “One of our more distinguished guests was looking distinctly out of sorts tonight.”

Catherine looked away.

“You’re not curious to know who?” Lady Hardwick slipped her arm through Catherine’s. “No matter. There’s plenty of young men eager to dance.”

She led Catherine into the ballroom, then she excused herself and joined her husband. Lord Hardwick took his wife’s hand, and the two of them smiled at each other—the perfect picture of marital bliss.

A number of couples were already dancing, moving in unison across the dance floor. Catherine spotted her sister with Lord Horton. Blanche’s expression was filled with joy, and Horton had eyes for none but Blanche—eyes that conveyed the purest devotion.

Catherine looked away. Why did Blanche have to be so happy?

Why did they all have to be so damned *happy*?

Then she cursed herself. She would never have resented her sister’s—or anyone else’s—happiness before today.

But, today, she’d caught a glimpse of what happiness might have been like for *her*—of what it might have been like to be loved.

Until it had been wrenched from her. Until she’d realized that she had been used as a pawn, as a means to earn one hundred guineas for a wager.

She averted her gaze from the happy faces and moved around the perimeter of the ballroom, in search of a quiet corner. Then she collided with a solid wall of muscle.

Her breath caught at the familiar masculine scent.

“Miss Parville,” a deep voice spoke, and her body tightened with recognition. “May I request...”

“No, you may not,” she said, her voice sharp to hide her heartache.

She glanced up, and her senses were assaulted by his deep blue gaze.

“Won’t you let me explain?” he asked.

“Explain what, Your Grace? That you took on the challenge of persuading the Spinster Shrew into a pretend courtship in order to earn yourself a hundred guineas and have a jolly good laugh at my expense?” She shook her head. “I have no wish to listen to what you have to say. Suffice it to say that our *courtship* is at an end—though it had never really begun, had it?”

He stepped toward her, and she raised her hand. “No!” she cried. “There’s nothing you can say that I could possibly want to hear. You mock me for being a spinster, but I consider spinsterhood to be significantly better than the alternative.”

His blue eyes narrowed, regret in their expression. But she was no longer fooled by him, no matter how well he might conceal his true intentions.

She turned her back and strode toward a footman brandishing a tray of champagne glasses. Though she loathed the stuff, she needed something to erase the pain—and her host would doubtless object to her disappearing into his study to seek oblivion in his brandy.

She plucked a glass from the tray and took a sip. But, before she could take another, a hand caught her sleeve. She looked up into a pair of red-rimmed eyes, framed in a sallow, weather-beaten face creased with anger.

“Papa.”

“I see it didn’t take you long to scare off your suitor,” he hissed. “Useless child!”

“I have no suitor,” she said. “I never did.”

He let out a sharp, bitter laugh, and her senses were assaulted by the stench of stale liquor.

“Frightened him off, did you? I hope you’re proud of yourself. *You* can tell your sister that she must break off her courtship with Lord Horton.”

“Leave her be, Papa!” Catherine cried. “What Blanche does is none of my business.”

“It *is* your business,” he snarled, “seeing as you’re such a miserable shrew that it’s impossible to get you off my hands! Do you think I wanted to be saddled with daughters?”

“Then be grateful that someone’s courting Blanche.”

“I’m not grateful!” he cried. “I’m bloody furious! If Blanche marries, I’ll be left with you plaguing me all my life. And nobody wants a shrew for a daughter—particularly one who repulsed two suitors.”

“Papa...”

“Mr. Leander was right about you!” he snarled. “Ye gods, I hate the man for not ridding me of you, but you cannot deny he was right. With your shrewish tongue, you’ll never attract a man.”

“Perhaps I don’t *want* to attract a man!” she cried.

The music faltered, and Catherine became aware of several pairs of eyes on her. The dancing had stopped. But she’d passed beyond the realm of wanting to pander to the sensibilities of the other guests.

Let them hear. Let them *all* hear!

“I never want to suffer my mother’s fate,” she said, “to be a broodmare to furnish a man with a son and be discarded if I fail—or worse still, to be tossed aside after my death, to be replaced by another and soon forgotten.”

“I *knew* you resented your stepmother.”

“I did not!” she cried. “I loved Mama Eugenie. *You’re* the one responsible for her death. As you were responsible for my mother’s, though you’ve always blamed me.”

“Why you...” he stepped forward and raised his arm, and she flinched in anticipation.

But the blow never came.

A hand appeared from nowhere and caught Papa’s wrist. A huge—very *male*—body moved between them, as if to shield her from Papa’s fury.

It was Daxton.

“That’s *enough*, Lord Parville.”

“Your Grace.” Papa gave a stiff bow. “I was just reprimanding my daughter on her behavior. Surely you’d not object to a little fatherly discipline?”

“Only where it’s warranted,” Daxton said. “But I suspect the opposite is true—and has been for some years.”

“What the devil do you mean?” Papa asked.

“I mean that you have no understanding of parental love.”

“Love!” Papa scoffed, wrenching his hand free. “An emotion that weakens a man—turns him into a milksop.”

“You’re wrong, Parville.”

“Daxton turned his gaze to Catherine, his eyes filled with admiration. “Love is the greatest emotion of all,” he said. “It leads us to undertake great deeds—selfless deeds. Your daughter Blanche is in love, yet you’d deny her happiness in your desperation to rid yourself of Catherine—the daughter you value so little.”

“I’ve every right to treat her as I see fit, Petrush!”

Papa raised his hand again, and Daxton caught it. “That’s your last warning, Parville,” he growled. “Your daughter is worth a thousand of you—you’ve no right to touch her.”

“I have a father’s right!”

“Only insofar as the law permits it,” Daxton said. “But the law is an ass.” He shifted his gaze to Catherine, and her belly fluttered at the frank admiration in his eyes. Admiration...

...and love.

“My daughter’s nothing!” Papa spat.

“You’re wrong, Lord Parville!” Daxton cried, his voice, his eyes glistening as he continued to gaze at Catherine. “She is *everything*. She’s weathered betrayal, yet has not once lost her capacity for kindness or compassion. You believe her to be undeserving of love because you’re not capable of loving another.”

“Neither are you,” Papa said, scorn in his tone.

“I’m happy to prove you wrong, Lord Parville,” Daxton said. “I love your daughter. I didn’t intend to at first. I confess I’m guilty of the crime of courting Catherine merely to help Lord Horton in his plans to court Blanche. But I soon realized my own folly—the folly of toying with the finest woman in England.”

Catherine’s heart fluttered as Daxton took her hands in his. Long, strong fingers lovingly interlaced with hers, and he pulled her close.

“Can you forgive me, my Catherine?” he whispered, his breath caressing her cheek. “I realized what an ass I’d been as soon as I understood what a kind heart lay concealed beneath your prickly exterior.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Prickly?”

A bloom crept across his cheeks. “Forgive me,” he said, “but I must be frank. *Your* frankness is what I love about you. And your kindness. I’ve seen the love you bear your sister—your wish for her to have the happiness that you believe is forever denied you. But, if you can bestow even a fraction of that love onto me, then you’ll make me the happiest man alive. And, regardless of your opinion of me, I’m, prepared to dedicate my life to making you happy.”

A ripple of murmurs threaded through the ballroom, and Catherine glanced around. The dancing had stopped, and the small crowd had formed, watching them. She caught sight of

Blanche, arm in arm with Lord Horton, her face flushed with joy.

Then, Daxton took both her hands and, before the entire company, he lowered himself onto on knee.

“Catherine—dearest Catherine—would you do me the honor of permitting me to court you properly? Before the whole world, so that they might witness the admiration and love I bear you?”

“Oh, how romantic!”

Cat glanced round to see Lady Hardwick with her husband, her hand over her heart.

“Hush, Beatrice, my love,” Hardwick whispered.

“Don’t be so staid, Augustus!” she laughed. “Didn’t I tell you I thought he was in love with her?”

Catherine’s skin tightened with need as Daxton brushed his thumb over the back of her hand.

“What do you say, my love?” he whispered. “Will you permit me to court you? Then, perhaps...” he hesitated, and vulnerability flickered in his eyes which tore at her heart, “... perhaps, in time, when you have found it in yourself to forgive me, I might be permitted to ask for your hand in marriage?”

Sweet Lord! He’d spoken aloud—in front of a roomful of guests. But when she looked into his eyes, she saw no mischief or deceit. She saw something she had never seen before—a deep regard and love for her—and a plea to be given a chance.

Which is all any good man could ask for.

She curled her fingers around his. “Yes,” she said. “With all my heart, Your Grace.”

He arched an eyebrow in question.

Your Grace?

Then she nodded.

“With all my heart—*Daxton.*”

He rose to his feet and pulled her into his arms. Then, he placed a kiss on her lips, and she relaxed into his embrace, as if she'd always belonged there.

“Oh, how lovely!” Blanche cried, her eyes bright with tears of joy.

Beside her, Lord Horton shook his head, smiling in delighted disbelief. “That’s something I never thought I’d witness. Petrush—you’ve surprised us all.”

“I’ve surprised myself,” Daxton said, “but I’m glad that it was the duke who was tamed by the shrew.”



EPILOGUE

London

December 1818

“**T**O THINK, CAT—A double wedding!”

Catherine linked her arm with her sister’s while they stood at the church entrance.

Two figures waited at the far end of the aisle. The taller of the two turned, and Catherine caught a flash of sunlight in a pair of deep blue eyes, framed by a face with strong, angular features, and hair as black as the night. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and she curled her fingers round the stems of her posy—a bouquet of pure white orchids which had arrived on her doorstep that morning with a card bearing a message inscribed in a bold, clear hand.

May the battle of wits begin.

And what a battle it would be! Two people who challenged each other constantly, warring with words, engaging in combat, until the moment of victory and sweet surrender when she’d yield to the pleasures he could give her.

She drew in a sharp breath as a sinful pulse of heat threaded through her body at the notion of tonight. Other than a few stolen kisses and wicked unobserved little moments when he’d brought her to pleasure with his expert hands—in a secluded garden, in his carriage, and even in the hallway while Papa was in his study not five feet away—Daxton had yet to open her eyes to the true delights of lovemaking—delights he’d promised would send her into the realm of exquisite ecstasy.

The second man turned, and Blanche sighed. Lord Horton was handsome enough, but Daxton, in his magnificence,

outshone his friend as the sun outshone the moon.

Perhaps that's because I love him.

The music piped up, and the congregation stood.

Papa stepped between Catherine and her sister.

“Ready?” he asked.

Papa cut a fine dash in a new suit—courtesy of Daxton, who'd also settled most of Papa's debts. Though Catherine might never completely understand his bitterness, she could, at least, bring herself to forgive her parent and rejoice in the joy which now shone in his eyes.

She took Papa's right arm while Blanche took his left, and together, they walked down the aisle toward their future.

As they reached the end, the grooms stepped forward to claim their brides. Daxton's eyes shone with love as he claimed Catherine and took her hand.

“The Spinster Shrew no longer,” he whispered, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“Quite so, my love,” she said. “I must acquire a new reputation. What say you to the *Diabolical Duchess*?”

His eyes sparkled with delight. “I look forward to many altercations, my love.”

“As do I.”

Then they turned to face the parson, soon to be man and wife.

The battle of wits had begun.

The End

Author's Note

The Taming of the Duke was inspired by Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*. However, Catherine (*Katherina*), the "shrew," has many justifiable reasons for her outwardly shrewish behavior, including her desire to protect her younger sister Blanche (*Bianca*).

Daxton Hawke, Duke of Petrush (*Petruchio*), initially agrees to court Catherine to enable his friend Lucian (*Lucentio*) to court Blanche, with whom he's fallen in love. However, while Daxton tries to "tame" Catherine by using similar approaches to Petruchio in the play, he relishes their battle of wits and finds that he prefers a woman with spirit to a biddable wife—and thus it is the duke who is tamed!

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About Emily Royal

Emily Royal grew up in Sussex, England, and has devoured romantic novels for as long as she can remember. A mathematician at heart, Emily has worked in financial services for over twenty years. She indulged in her love of writing after she moved to Scotland, where she lives with her husband, teenage daughters and menagerie of rescue pets including Twinkle, an attention-seeking boa constrictor.

She has a passion for both reading and writing romance with a weakness for Regency rakes, Highland heroes, and Medieval knights. Persuasion is one of her all-time favorite novels which she reads several times each year and she is fortunate enough to live within sight of a Medieval palace.

When not writing, Emily enjoys playing the piano, hiking, and painting landscapes, particularly the Highlands. One of her ambitions is to paint, as well as climb, every mountain in Scotland.

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**ONCE UPON A WINTER'S
TALE**

Anna St. Claire



CHAPTER ONE

Sussex, England

December 1, 1800

THE HOWLING WINTER wind pounded mercilessly against the windowpanes and added a foreboding to the weight of the evening. Upstairs, the Countess of Wharton labored to deliver her baby. Downstairs, the earl paced the carpet of his study, fuming over something one maid had said to another earlier, as they had carried hot water and towels upstairs. Lord Felix Phillips, the Earl of Wharton, had been standing in the doorway of his study and had heard the exchange. Irritated they were using the main stairs, he had started to rebuke them, but what they had said made his blood run cold.

“I hope the little girl will have blonde, curly hair like the countess,” one said, nattering on as she scaled the broader front stairs with her friend, unaware they were being overheard by the earl.

“How do ye know it’ll be a wee girl?” the other asked.

“Me ma always said ye can tell by the way they carry the babe. The countess carried it out front. That means a girl.” Her answer was tinged with confidence.

“I pray this baby lives. The poor countess near wasted away with grief over the last one that was born still,” the other replied, almost reverently.

A bloodcurdling scream from the countess’s rooms above them propelled them to move faster, and the two girls scurried to the third floor.

Brandy snifter in hand and a cigar locked between his teeth, Wharton turned toward the fireplace and hurled the glass and its contents into the flames, causing it to burst with a

blaze. With each scream of pain, he bit down harder on the cigar, not caring about the ash falling onto the carpet.

“A girl! She’d better not give me another girl. Her job is to produce an heir. I will accept no less!” he raged to no one in particular. “The damned female wouldn’t dare defy me, not again!”

Vexed, Wharton rubbed his temples, desperate to ward off the familiar signs of an intense impending headache. His vision blurred with the strain, as he twisted his neck back and forth, desperate for relief. Suddenly, one sash blew open and an arctic wind blasted into the room, blowing out the fire and enveloping him as he fought to close it.

“Damn and blast!” he yelled.

His butler and a footman rushed into the room. “My lord, is there something I can get you?” the wiry man asked. With a look, the butler directed the footman to secure the window.

“Yes! You can find out what’s going on upstairs, and it better be a son!” Wharton blustered, gripping his temple while he poured himself another drink.

The old man murmured his acceptance and gave a brief bow before leaving the room to do his master’s bidding.



“HAVE THE MAIDS place the water there,” the doctor said, pointing to a table by the bedside. “The baby is coming,” he reported, without looking up. “Bear down, my lady. Push!”

A brutal scream rent the air as the child’s entrance into the world racked the countess’s body. The doctor’s shirt sleeves were rolled to his elbows and blood covered his arms and clothes as he deftly delivered a baby girl. Leaning down to make sure she was breathing, he was met with a loud squall in his ear, answering his unspoken question.

Smiling, he took the sheet offered by the maid and wrapped the baby before laying it in the countess’s arms. “My lady, you have a daughter.”

For an instant, she smiled, before a look of terror overtook her face. “Oh no! I cannot do this again,” she said, before breaking into tears.

“But this is a live birth, my lady,” the doctor persisted. “It gives hope the next one will also be a live birth, and perhaps a boy.”

“You don’t understand. He won’t accept her,” she said, turning her face into her pillow. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

A loud knock on the door was all the notice they received before it burst open, and the earl entered, followed by the old butler. “I heard crying. Hand me my son.”

“My lord, you have a healthy daughter,” the doctor said cautiously, handing the baby to her father.

The earl held up his hand and stopped him. “See me in my study, Sprocket,” he snarled before turning and slamming the door behind him.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

“Dr. Sprocket, please let me know if there is anything you require,” the old butler said before quietly exiting the room.

When the door closed for the second time, the doctor looked down at the baby, who lay in his arms, wide-eyed, as if she had understood her father’s tone. He glanced at his patient, whose face had become stoic as she reached for her daughter.

He nodded toward the housekeeper and looked at the bloodied sheets and floor. “I will leave you to attend to your mistress and the child. Use soap and clean water on her person and the child. I have found it helps with the health of both mother and child.”

“I will see it is done,” answered the housekeeper.

“Good. I must attend to his lordship but will return to check on everything shortly.” He bathed his hands and arms in the basin before smoothing down his sleeves. Before closing

the door, he looked back. *I have a bad feeling about this*, he thought, closing the door.

The butler announced him and opened the study door. He found the earl sitting behind his desk with his back to the door. Without preamble, he rose and stepped from behind the desk. “The child cannot stay,” he said. “And my wife needs something to calm her.”

The countess had been right. The doctor stayed quiet and listened until the earl gave him leave to talk, something his father had taught him, saying it was the best way to collect important information a doctor may not know to ask.

“My lord, you have a healthy daughter—” the doctor started.

“I do *not* have a daughter. The child is not mine and is as good as dead to me,” Wharton returned angrily. “My wife is not well.”

What was he saying? A fissure of alarm shot down Dr. Sprocket’s neck. The man had barely looked at his wife. “My lord, your wife is—”

“I will pay you handsomely for your services. You are dismissed,” the earl said, cutting him off with a look of finality.

Words failed the doctor, and he gave only a nod. “I will check on your wife and gather my bag.”

“And then you will leave.” The earl spoke without looking in his direction.

When he returned to the countess’s apartment, Dr. Sprocket found her holding her child against her chest and lightly touching her dark curls.

“I shall call her Brianna, after my mother,” she said, kissing the child’s cheek.

“You need your rest, my lady, and I want to make sure you are doing well before I leave,” he said wearily, relieved to see her nod.

“My lady, I will return in a few minutes with more clean linens,” the housekeeper said before giving them privacy.

“You were right about what his reaction would be to your child, my lady,” he began. “I am sure the earl will rethink his reaction. Have your maid get word to me if you need my help,” he added meaningfully.

“I will. Thank you, doctor,” she returned in a whisper. “I appreciate your offer of assistance.” She turned to her lady’s maid. “Jane, please bring me the family Bible and a quill. Let no one see you.”

“Yes, my lady.”



“LAWRENCE, DARLING, I need to speak with you,” the Duchess of Kendall said, almost bursting into her husband’s study. “We have a situation, and I desperately need your help.”

Her husband, the Duke of Kendall, stood quickly from behind his desk. “I can refuse you nothing, my dear. Pray tell, what has happened?” It was most unusual for his wife to burst into his study, upset.

“Alaina, the Countess of Wharton, is here with her newborn baby. Her husband, the earl, insisted the child be sent away. It is hard for me to understand the details of the situation, but her doctor escorted her. Perhaps he can supply those.”

“Her doctor? How unusual,” Kendall murmured.

“That was my thought exactly. They left in the middle of the night to get here—to see us. I am her dearest friend, and she has no close family.”

It had been years since he had known anything to so upset his wife. “My dear, I am stuck on what you started with—Alaina, the Countess of Wharton, is here, *now*, with her baby. She has to have just given birth. Does she expect the earl to follow her?”

“I didn’t ask. Perhaps I should have,” she said, twisting her hands. “My God! I have never known a man to reject his daughter!”

“I cannot believe it of Wharton. The last time I saw Felix, he mentioned Alaina’s pregnancy and his desire to produce a male heir, but if what she has told you is true, it is unfathomable,” Lawrence replied. He walked from behind his desk and motioned for her to sit with him on the sofa in front of the fireplace.

“Darling, she is most upset and wishes to speak with you. Of course, I told her she could stay,” the duchess said. “I noticed the last time we saw them in London, he seemed more distant, but this behavior ... I find it hard to believe.”

“Did he ask her to leave?” her husband inquired softly.

“No. She is a jumble of emotions. But the best I could make out was that the doctor helped arrange it after she sent word to him. A doctor doesn’t get involved in things like this, but Alaina feels the baby’s life is in danger”—she took a calming breath—“from her husband.”

“So, she did not come in the ducal coach. Where is she? We should speak to her together.” The duke helped his wife up from the couch. He tugged the brown velvet rope, and his butler, Mr. Chambers, appeared.

“Yes, Your Grace,” the butler said, appearing almost instantly—obviously he had been waiting outside the door.

“Your speed amazes me,” Kendall murmured, shaking his head slightly. “We have visitors.”

The butler nodded. “Yes, Your Grace. They are waiting in the parlor.”

“Chambers, I should like to see them in here. Have the housekeeper ready two rooms and place a cradle in one for the Countess of Wharton.”

“At once, Your Grace.” The butler gave a quick bow before turning to leave.

“And have Cook prepare hearty refreshments, immediately,” Kendall added as an afterthought. “They must be hungry.”

The butler gave another nod and left the room.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and the countess entered, carrying her baby bundled tightly against her, followed by her maid, and a man in an overcoat and beaver hat.

“Thank you for seeing us, Your Grace,” he said, giving a bow. “I am the countess’s delivering physician, Dr. Sprocket, and I traveled here with Lady Wharton. I am counting on your discretion and have anguished over how much to tell you. This has been a most unusual situation, and the countess believes you and your wife could be her only hope.”

“Alaina, please come and warm yourself.” The duchess rushed to her friend’s side, escorting her to a leather-appointed sitting area in front of the blazing fireplace, leaving the doctor to speak with her husband. “Lawrence will help us sort this out, won’t you, dearest?”

“Yes, sweet wife,” Kendall said. “Alaina, please make yourself comfortable while I speak to your doctor.”

He signaled the doctor to follow him to the other side of his study.

Possibly recognizing the opportunity to speak discreetly, the doctor followed the duke.

The sound of the baby’s cry reverberated from across the room and reminded Kendall of his daughter’s birth barely two years ago. Lauren was a younger incarnation of his wife, and he cherished her.

“Can I pour you a drink to help warm you?” the duke asked, walking to the decanter.

“Yes, Your Grace. I would appreciate that. It was a long trip, and I’m just now realizing how thirsty I am.”

Kendall poured them both measures of brandy. “I sensed you wanted to say more. What are you willing to tell me?”

Standing out of earshot of the women, he listened as Sprocket described the Earl of Wharton’s reaction to the birth of his child and the countess’s plea for help. But it was the knowledge that Wharton had kept the poor woman repeatedly pregnant, despite the doctor’s warnings that it courted disaster for both the baby and the mother, that infuriated Kendall.

“The last baby’s death was a blow to Lady Wharton, as it was such a difficult delivery. And, I’ll admit, it surprised me the child did not survive. I came the next day, and it had succumbed,” the doctor said. “As I would for any patient, I invited the countess to reach out to me, should she need additional help. The day following the baby’s birth, her maid found me and delivered a note from the countess asking that I aid her in helping remove her and her daughter to a safe place. Had I not heard the earl’s words and the frightening innuendos in our too-brief conversation, I might have dismissed it. But I recalled the birth of the baby before this one. The child was weak, but not dead. She died after I left that first night, and I never questioned it—and now I regret not having done so, although I do not know what help that would have been. In addition, the earl describes it as having been stillborn and buried it that same day.”

The doctor glanced at the floor before taking a deep breath and looking up at Kendall.

“Understand, I am not accusing anyone of any misdeed. But the earl’s brief conversation following this birth left me extremely uncomfortable, leading me to assist her in leaving.”

“Then you feel the child was in danger,” Kendall said, holding the doctor’s gaze.

It took a moment before the doctor answered; perhaps he was deciding whether he could trust the Duke of Kendall. He nodded. “I believe the earl showed grief, rather than elation, at the successful birth of a daughter and found it disturbing. I felt compelled to assist her.” He described the brief exchanges.

“And he asked for laudanum to help calm his wife when I saw no need for it.”

Kendall listened. “Do you believe the child is strong enough to travel if necessary?”

“As long as you keep her warm, I believe she can. The mother is insisting on nursing, which makes it easier in this circumstance.” Sprocket’s face colored slightly as he related this.

Kendall patted the doctor’s back and gave a slight nod. “Perhaps we should join the ladies,” he suggested. The two men walked over to the two women.

His wife was comforting her friend and looking at the baby.

“Upon your arrival, I had rooms prepared, not knowing what was happening. You are welcome to stay the evening and leave tomorrow once you feel refreshed.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. I believe I will take you up on your offer.” Sprocket turned to the ladies and executed a bow. “Your Grace, my lady.”

A few minutes after the doctor left for his room, Kendall turned to his guest. “Alaina, I know you are tired, but I believe we should leave quickly, in case Wharton follows you. I know a place where I think you will be safe with your daughter until you decide to return. If you decide not to, you may remain there.”

Tears rose in Alaina’s eyes. “I realize the awful spot I have placed you in, Your Grace. My husband is powerful, and if he finds you helped me ...”

“Please, we are friends. If it comes to it, I believe I can handle Wharton. After what I have heard, I believe the need to move you is urgent.”

“I will have us packed and ready to leave quickly. May I ask where we are taking her, Lawrence?” his wife asked.

“You may recall I recently inherited my aunt’s unentailed property in Kent. Legitimately, I need to inspect it, have repairs made, that sort of thing. It’s a small manor house, but Alaina can live there. A small staff—a loyal staff—will assist her and the baby. And with discretion, her existence will remain hidden for some time. I will keep watch on the situation.”

Alaina swiped at the tears and kissed her baby’s head before looking up. “Thank you, Your Grace. We shall forever be in your debt.”

When the women cleared the room, Kendall rang for his butler. The man came immediately.

“Chambers, please send for my solicitor, and tell him he is to attend immediately. Tonight. And Chambers, I will rely on you to make sure the household knows there is to be no discussion of our visitors this night. To anyone. I will dismiss anyone I hear has broken that silence and will make sure they do not find a job anywhere.”

“I have already taken care of the staff, Your Grace. And your solicitor will be here as quickly as possible.”

“Good. Ready two coaches—and ensure they are without ducal markings. We leave for Devon tonight.”



CHAPTER TWO

November 1817

Essex, England

“LAWRENCE WOULD BE heartbroken,” the Duchess of Kendall murmured, reading her morning paper over her tea.

“Did you say something, Mother?” Her son Albert, the Duke of Kendall, looked up from his newspapers. “I wasn’t able to make out what you said.”

She placed her paper down. “I did. It seems the Earl of Wharton’s succession has been completed. I don’t know if you remember, but he was a friend of your father’s, years ago. The flu took him, but his death was wrapped in tragedy born long ago. Your father would have deeply mourned his dear friend’s death.” She shook her head. “I don’t think your father ever got over not being able to help his friend. At one time, they had been like brothers. It was quite wretched.”

He placed the paper down in front of him. “So much has happened since Father’s death two years ago. But to hear of a friendship that waned ... I met no one that didn’t tell me how wonderful Father was. How unusual to hear there was someone that didn’t continue his friendship.”

“It was a most difficult situation.” She shook her head as if clearing it. “The man was obsessed with having an heir. He and his wife lost four or five babies in a row, and I suppose it took its toll on the marriage when the last child was declared stillborn.”

“It was a tragic story. And Wharton never produced a live son. His nephew, Patrick Brewer, inherited the estate at an opportune time. Wharton’s properties were flourishing, the last I heard,” her son said, his tone sincere.

“Yes ...” the duchess said absent-mindedly.

“I heard the man became a recluse following the death of his fourth child.”

“Mmm. Yes. It was a messy situation,” Caroline Stanton said, suddenly wondering how her friend Alaina was faring and if she had heard the news of the succession. She had hated sending her friend news of her husband’s death, especially when Alaina had had to choose between the life of her baby and remaining with her husband, whom she loved, but no longer understood.

While theirs had been an arranged marriage, it had very much seemed a love match in the beginning, like Caroline and Lawrence’s union. But something happened to the earl, and he became a troublesome man, according to her friend. He had been keeping his wife pregnant—four pregnancies over three years—and Caroline had feared for her friend’s life. Until Brianna, none of the children had lived.

After Alaina left, Caroline heard that the earl maintained the baby had died. It made no sense to her or Lawrence, but they stayed silent to protect Alaina and her daughter.

Several years had passed since she had seen Alaina, making her feel like the worst friend.

She reached over to her son and covered his hand with hers. “You stepped into your father’s shoes and have done well, but lately, you seem more your old self.”

“Yes! It is as if a dark episode has ended, and it has quite spurred me to enjoy life. I’ve been making a point of familiarizing myself with all of Father’s properties, and plan to visit each of the more distant ones. Roger and Henry had taken turns checking on them, but with Henry’s marriage to Livy, and Roger’s practice becoming more profitable, they haven’t been as available to me. There are several properties, including a few unentailed ones, that would benefit from a visit. Perhaps I should venture to Devon and work my way back.”

“It’s been such a short time for you, with all that has happened—losing your father, and then the attempt on your life. Have you decided when you will leave?”

“I should leave for Devon soon. There are familial obligations I have neglected these last two years, with Father’s death and my recovery. I would certainly like to be home before the festivities.”

“That sounds lovely. I would enjoy attending with you but could not leave your sister in charge of decorating for Christmastide. She will turn this house into a forest, with her penchant for covering everything in green, leafy garland,” she murmured casually. “Are you speaking of leaving this week?”

Caroline needed to tell Albert about Alaina and her daughter, but first, she needed to pen a note to her friend and warn her about his visit. She and Lawrence had never discussed the countess and her daughter with their sons out of respect for the friendship between the husbands, and the hope that things would heal.

The door to the dining area opened, and the butler approached. “Your Grace, your guest has arrived,” Chambers said, extending a silver salver with an elegant ivory calling card.

Taking the card, His Grace, Albert Stanton, the Duke of Kendall, rolled it over in his hand. “*Lord Patrick Brewer, the Earl of Wharton,*” he read. “Show him in.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“How coincidental, considering our earlier discussion. This could be an interesting meeting.” Albert looked at his mother. “May we continue this discussion later, Mother?”

“Certainly, Albert. There are a few things we should discuss.” *I would describe it as eerie more than coincidental,* she thought with a shiver. Her son planned to visit the very property the Countess of Wharton occupied, although she occupied it under her maiden name, Thomas. The timing of

the Earl of Wharton's meeting with her son made it seem more imperative she warn her friend immediately.

Albert needs all these important details before his visit, but there is time for that before he leaves. He must know all of it.



ALBERT ENTERED HIS study and stared at the picture behind his desk. It was a portrait of his parents with him and his puppy, Buck, when he was a child. The artist had captured the essence of his parents. His father's eyes sparkled with happiness, and his mother's face showed deep affection.

It had been a warm day, and they had spread out a picnic. His father had played lawn games with Albert and his new puppy, while his mother leaned against a tree and watched them. When the artist had arrived, he assured the duke he could paint the grass stains out of his white britches. Albert glanced at the green spot on his father's right leg. Father had told the artist to paint him as he was, grass stain and all.

The memory brought a small tear to his eye but made him smile. If he had the good fortune of having children, he wanted to be the father his own had been to him and his siblings. But that wouldn't happen soon. He wanted a bride who would be his partner, someone whom he could love and who would love him. It was what he had seen with his parents, and he wanted nothing less.

So far, he had not met that person.

The door opened, and Chambers stepped inside. "Your Grace, Lord Patrick Brewer, the Earl of Wharton," the retainer announced.

"Thank you. Please show him in." The duke lowered his voice. "Ask Cook to prepare a tray for me when the earl leaves. I will be in here most of the day." He planned to complete his correspondence and study the books for the properties.

“Yes, Your Grace.” The butler gave a slight bow and left the room to retrieve the guest. A few minutes later, he reappeared with the dark-headed earl in tow.

“Lord Wharton! It’s nice to see you,” the duke said, coming from behind his desk. “It’s been ... how long? Two years? Now, you are an earl.”

“Your Grace, Patrick, please. I am still becoming acquainted with my title. But we were friends, and I would like to think we still are,” the earl said, smiling. “Inheriting the title has been a change, but Uncle Felix seemed to lose interest in life when his wife disappeared those many years ago. He became a recluse and never remarried. My understanding was after he buried the fourth child, the countess left. Uncle never pursued her.” Pain was in his eyes when he discussed the late earl.

“That’s a tragic story. I suppose I had not kept up with him. I imagine the deaths of so many children can sour a marriage. Your uncle was a close friend of my father’s, but I don’t recall seeing him at Father’s funeral,” the duke said, shaking his head. “And please, call me Albert.”

“The last time I saw you, I believe it was at Tattersalls, with the duke ... er ... your father.” The earl gulped audibly. “I’m sorry. It was thoughtless of me to bring that up.”

“No, please do not apologize, Patrick. My father’s death was tragic, and we miss him terribly. Our family keeps him alive in conversation, but our lives have moved on. It is as he would have wished,” Albert assured him. “But you are right. We were at Tattersalls to buy my sister a horse. It was a birthday surprise.”

“That’s a grand present! I’m sure she treasures the animal,” Patrick replied. “I have not seen your sister in a handful of years. There was that one trip home with you during a Christmastide holiday when we were about twelve. I recall she tagged along with all of us boys, and we could not shake her, no matter what we tried.”

“Yes, she was our constant shadow at that age. Lauren is out riding her horse as we speak,” Albert said with a chuckle. “She’s quite attached.”

Patrick heaved a small sigh. “It’s great to catch up, but I know you must wonder why I’m here, so let me get to the heart of my visit.”

Albert gave a nod. “Would you care for some refreshment?” He walked to the decanter of brandy.

“Yes, thank you. I’m sure it’ll give an extra layer of warmth. The weather seems colder than usual,” the earl said, accepting a glass. “You mentioned my uncle and your father were friends.”

“My mother considered the countess her closest friend, and I recall her being extremely upset when all this transpired. As a child, I asked no questions, but I remember their sadness. Father and the earl had been friends since Eton, much like us,” Albert said, wondering where this was heading. Patrick needed something from him. That was clear.

“It’s taken me a while to sort through my uncle’s personal effects, and I found some things that I wanted to give to the rightful people,” the earl said, withdrawing a small leather pouch from his pocket. “These are some sealed correspondences Uncle Felix wrote shortly before he died. He addressed one to your father and the other to the Countess of Wharton. I have often thought these letters held answers to questions I have, but they were not mine and I have not opened them.”

“That’s quite honorable. You must have cared a lot about your uncle. It’s hard to hold answers in your hand, but not look at them,” Albert remarked. His admiration for the earl rose.

“Thank you, Your Grace. It’s a matter of integrity. I wanted to assure you they had never been opened.” Patrick sipped his brandy and visibly relaxed. “I also found some personal effects—jewelry, which I would see returned to her if she lives. They were personal gifts from my uncle to her.” He gave a slight

shake of his head. “Uncle Felix petitioned to have her declared dead, but changed his mind. I thought he planned to marry another, but that never materialized. Instead, he withdrew. If he wrote a letter to his wife, he likely felt she was alive. It is my hope she lives.”

Albert had not known what to expect with the visit, but the old earl speaking from the grave had not been among his thoughts. He would have to speak with his mother. “Your uncle had all but withdrawn from Society. Are you certain he wrote the notes?”

Patrick gave a pained smile and shook his head. “Uncle called me to his side before he died and told me there were some things he wished for me to know. He asked me to deliver some letters but did not explain to whom he addressed the letters. And I would have forgotten about them because they were not on his desk. I found the letters sticking out of a book of love poems he had on his nightstand. He had purchased it for my aunt when they first married,” the earl explained, before taking a calming breath. “Uncle Felix was an unusual man. But I loved him. We were close, especially when I was younger. He was a different man, then.”

He peered into his glass of brandy, swishing it slightly and watching its legs coat the sides of the glass. “It is important I deliver these items.” He pushed the letters across the desk to Albert. “If your mother knows of her whereabouts, ask her to see Lady Wharton receives the letter and have her send a message to me. I would like to see my aunt again. She was a lovely woman, inside and out. I cannot account for what happened between her and my uncle, but it became obvious he cared for her, at least in the end. He wasn’t himself ... There were stories ...”

The earl let the sentence drop.

“My sincerest sympathies on the passing of your father, Albert. Please extend them to your family.” Patrick stood to leave. “If you find out anything about my family’s

whereabouts, would you let me know? Aside from my parents, Uncle Felix was my only family. I would like to know them.”

“Them? Are we speaking of the countess, or are there others?” Albert asked, struck by the inconsistency.

“Yes, of course. I had a dream once that my cousin lived, but it was wishful thinking. We are speaking of the countess.”

Albert stood and shook his friend’s hand over the desk. “Of course, Patrick. I will let you know if I hear of anything of Lady Wharton.” Something felt off, and he wondered if Patrick had held something back. He saw his friend to the door and watched him leave in the Wharton carriage.

As the carriage left their drive, the rustling of satin skirts sounded behind him, and his mother approached from the direction of her parlor. “Was that the new Earl of Wharton?” his mother asked.

“Yes, it was. He left letters for me, but I feel you are the better person to have them,” he said, withdrawing the two notes from his pocket and handing them to his mother.

“One is to your father,” she said hoarsely. Tears filled her eyes.

“And the other is to the former earl’s wife—*your friend*,” Albert said, hating to see his mother in pain.

She nodded and accepted the letter for the countess but said nothing. Instead, she quietly walked toward her parlor.

Albert was certain she would discuss the letters when she was ready. In the meantime, he had a property to visit and planned to leave in the morning. “Mother, there was one more thing.”

She stopped and turned to face him.

“He asked if we found the countess—if she is still living—to reach out to him. He misses his aunt, and she would be his last family member.”

Albert watched tears run down his mother's cheek. He wanted to ask more but held back. There would be time later.



CHAPTER THREE

Six days later

Sidmouth, Devon, England

“MISS BRIANNA, WHAT shall I do with these cages?” The stable hand stood in the doorway, leaning back awkwardly, struggling to hold a crate-like wooden cage almost his size.

“Roy, you are a dear! The mother cat is ready to have those babies. The crate is perfect! It should keep them safe and give the mother cat plenty of space to have her litter,” Brianna replied. “If you see any sign of her labor, promise to send for me.”

“Yes, Miss Brianna. But if it’s too late—”

“I want to be told. Promise me,” Brianna interrupted.

A recent litter from one of the stable cats had met with disaster after a hawk spotted the babies beneath some shrubs outside of the stable. While the mother cat was away, the hawk swooped in and attacked the nest. Brianna’s heart broke when she heard the mother cat wailing and noticed two kittens had been taken.

Hawks need to survive, but I will not let this happen to another mother cat.

Roy and his father had been kind enough to build this crate for her, and she planned to have them make more, because it seemed like a suitable solution for many of the animals she found that needed to heal.

“How is baby Clover? I was thinking about taking her out to where we found her and seeing if her mother had returned,” Brianna said.

“The fawn was good when I fed her an hour ago,” Roy answered, maneuvering the crate into an empty stall. “Cook sent some food down for the mother cat, too.”

“Cook loves the cats and kittens but pretends otherwise—as does my mother,” she replied.

He pulled out a bottle of milk with a nipple fashioned from the tip of an old glove. “Cook said this is for your baby fawn.”

“That’s thoughtful of Cook. Does she know I’ve named her Clover?” Brianna asked.

The stable hand looked up. “Cook?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No, Roy. The fawn. I found her in clover and thought it would be a nice name.”

“Miss Brianna, even though the mother left her for a long time, she will most likely be back for her,” he said cautiously.

“I don’t think so. She left her for several days, but I will be careful not to tame her. She must have a name,” she returned. “Speaking of Clover, I should feed her.”

He gave a small laugh and picked up a pitchfork to put out fresh straw for the horses. “Yes, miss.”

Brianna turned the corner in the stable and saw the small stall they had placed the fawn in open and empty. “Oh no!” She ran to the back of the stable and pushed open the door.

The fawn was unmoving as it lay in the high grass behind the stable. Its head remained still, but its eyes darted back and forth as if it were perceiving danger.

The way the infant’s white spots blended into the grass fascinated Brianna. As she drew closer, she placed her hand on the fawn’s neck, speaking to her softly. “There now. I’m here for you,” she soothed. Attempting to lift the fawn, she stretched one hand beneath her belly and slipped the other hand on her back when she lunged at her, emitting an almost human-sounding bleat.

Dog barking sounded from the trees and grew closer. Fear pricked her neck. It sounded like more than one dog.

“Come, Clover. We need to get back inside,” she urged. “Those dogs don’t sound friendly.” Gritting her teeth, she picked up the small deer, held her close, and made a run for the stable.

She opened the stall and placed the animal inside gently. Clover bleated in protest. “Shh! It will all be fine, Clover,” she said, stroking her head. “When your mother comes for you, she will find you waiting. I promise.”

As if understanding, the baby bleated softly.

“I have milk for you. It’s not the same as you’re used to, but hopefully, your mother comes back as Roy says,” Brianna whispered wistfully. She maneuvered the nipple at an angle and was pleased to see the fawn drinking. Without her mother’s nourishment, she would weaken. The fawn looked up and gently bumped her arm with her head as if asking for more milk.

As the barking grew closer, Brianna looked around for Roy. Hearing a noise in the front stalls, she tucked Clover in the hay and left to find him.

As she turned the corner, she saw Nero standing in the entrance, his ears perked to the sounds of the approaching dogs. The ten-stone gray mastiff stood nearly as tall as a pony, and Brianna marveled at his agility, especially considering he had been the runt of the litter. Her mother had gifted him to her a few years ago, and the dog had become her constant companion, especially when she was outside.

“What do you make of it, Nero?” she asked, standing next to him and rubbing the back of his neck. She noticed his hackles were up.

“Barrrrrooff.” His deep bark sounded agitated.

She worried about the dogs she heard in the distance. Rabies remained a tremendous concern with dogs that traveled in packs. Estates occasionally lost all their hunting dogs when

one became stricken with rabies from a bite. With so little known and no cure available, the only remedy was the death of the animal. She couldn't bear to see any of her babies injured.

Worriedly, Brianna glanced around, as the barking grew closer, hoping to see Roy or ... someone. She should have run to the house but could not bring herself to leave her animals when danger lurked so close.

"I should close the back door of the stable," she said out loud. Patting the mastiff's head, she ordered him to stay.

The back door hung ajar. Aware of the noises beyond the stable, she stepped closer and pulled the latch down on it, making sure it was secure before moving back toward the front. As she neared the stall where she had left Clover, she noticed it open, its latch broken, and the top board split—almost into two pieces. Fear pricked her neck.

Hearing a gurgling sound, she edged closer and looked inside. Clover lay next to a large doe, nursing. Turning, she looked at Brianna and bleated, as if to say, "I told you my momma would be back." The small deer turned back to its mother and head-butted her stomach, something Roy had explained fawns did so their mothers produced more milk.

Fleetingly, Brianna wondered if the doe had stirred the dogs.

While the two deer were occupied, she looked for anything she could use as a weapon until Roy or his father returned to the stable. She could not leave the animals vulnerable.

Recalling something Roy's father once mentioned, she moved to the cabinet near the front of the stable and inside found an old gun. He had called it a blunderbuss. Picking it up, she held it carefully, trying to remember if he said they kept it loaded or not.

Oh well, it's all I have. I'll assume it is, she thought, relaxing her grip a little. *If nothing else, it should be something good to swing if a dog gets too close.*

“Barrrooff!” Nero barely got a warning bark off before five gaunt dogs emerged from the side of the stable. A smaller dog hung back; possibly, he followed the pack. Four black and brown dogs with drool oozing from their mouths rushed her dog. A lead dog leapt on top of him, and he shook it off. Several of the others charged, and he head-butted them and kicked them away. Nero slung his head and angrily pawed the dirt, threatening the angry dogs who barked and darted at him. The lead dog attacked again, and the bull mastiff slapped him across the yard with his huge paw. Slobber and massive amounts of dust flew everywhere.

Brianna screamed as she watched her dog defend himself. “Oh, God! I must help Nero.”

When Nero slapped the dog away again, it gave her an instant. Squinting her eyes almost shut, Brianna aimed and squeezed the trigger of the ancient weapon, trying her best to direct its blaze away from her dog. The gun went off with a tremendous roar, knocking her onto her bottom. Fire flared from its muzzle as lead balls sprayed the canines, and a massive cloud of gun smoke covered them all.

Brianna swiped at her eyes, trying to see, silently cursing and thanking her luck that the gun had fired. Several dogs lay scattered, ravaged by their injuries. The smaller dog that had stayed back lay whimpering and licking bloody wounds from the shot. Nero’s rage grew as the lead dog persisted in his fight. The ten-stone dog reared up and came down on the smaller dog. Screams pierced the air.



SCREAMS AND THE sounds of a brutal dog fight spurred Albert to hurry, and he pulled up hard on his reins when he saw the carnage in the clearing in front of the stable. Blood ran in muddy rivulets from several dead animals surrounding a large bull mastiff. His gelding fought against his bit and tried to stop rather than get closer to the killing in front of them. Suddenly, his left hoof turned over, causing both horse and rider to spill onto the ground.

The duke landed upon his face, and when he pushed his body up, he found himself face to face with a growling bull mastiff, covered in blood and dust.

“Nero, no!” the lithe blonde woman cried, running toward her dog and grabbing him by the collar.

Albert didn’t move a muscle, captivated by the beautiful woman and her beast standing in front of him. While the dog threatened him, the girl’s incredible beauty took his focus, even with her dress hidden beneath a layer of dust and black soot covering her face.

Spotting the outdated weapon lying behind the dog’s massive haunches, he put together some of what must have taken place. He’d add *brave* to any description of her. Surely, this valiant beauty had saved herself and her dog with a firearm she most likely had never touched before.

Unsure her grip would hold the dog, he took a chance and stood slowly, focused on the woman’s large brown eyes. Albert heard his carriage amble up the drive behind him and stop, while he dusted off his jacket and britches.

“Is that your pet?” he asked, hoping to break the ice. Sensing her hesitation, he gave a quick bow. “The Duke of Kendall, at your service.”

She wiped her face with the back of her hand before dropping into a hurried curtsy while still trying to maintain her hold on the dog. “Yes, Your Grace. I am Miss Brianna Thomas. I beg you do not think badly of Nero. This pack of wild dogs that descended upon us sorely tested his sweet nature.”

“Yes, I see,” he said, peering more closely at the carnage of whimpering and dead dogs lying around him. “Is there some way we can put your dog at ease?” he asked, warily eyeing the animal in her control.

She bent down and spoke to the dog. “Down, Nero.” Her voice was soft but firm.

“Arrumph,” Nero whined in return, clearly frustrated by this intruder.

“Are you a visitor here?” Albert could recall no Thomas family working here or living around the manor, and his mother had mentioned nothing about the property before he left. And it was most unusual for a visitor to bring a dog the size of the bull mastiff that stood between them.

“No, Your Grace. This is my home.”

At that, he started. Didn't she recognize the Kendall name? Perhaps he should mention that the manor house was his family's, but he remained quiet. His father had taught him to let others talk, if they were willing, first.

“I was caring for the animals in the stable when loud dog barking frightened the animals,” she explained. “I barely had a moment to find something to help before they were upon us and attacking my dog. It was dreadful. I used the only thing I could find to save Nero. Our stable hand or his father should return soon. But I will be happy to see to your horse. My dog may have some wounds to attend to, as well.”

“Miss Brianna!” A stable hand ran from the wooded area behind the stable. “Are you all right? I heard gunfire ...” His words faded as he took in the disaster still lying around them. “Dear Lord! You used m'grandfather's old gun!” He looked at her before picking it up in wonderment. “You fired this?”

She nodded.

“I didn't realize it worked, and I'm shocked my father kept it loaded!” he said.

“Thank goodness it was, Roy!” Brianna exclaimed, clasping her hands to slow the trembling. She slowly looked around. “It possibly saved several lives, including Nero's,” she said, regarding the slaughter about her. “Sadly, it also took lives. This is tragic.”

Roy leaned down and looked at Nero. “He's got blood on him. I cannot tell if he's been bitten. I will have to bathe him.”

Albert bit back a retort that guns kill. *Is the girl a stable hand?* It dumbfounded him to see a woman helping in the stable, and he tried to recall what the ledgers had said about the property. He didn't know how he felt about a woman caring for his horse. It was most unusual. However, he knew little about caring for animals, always allowing his ostler and the other stable hands to handle those things. It was apparent the woman held a soft spot for animals, and he wanted to know more about her.

"May I be of help?" he asked.

"Your Grace, thank you. We could use a little extra help right now."

She didn't seem to mind she was speaking to a duke while sparing little deference. Maybe it was her lack of pretense. He found himself charmed—and wasn't sure it was entirely her beauty that had captivated his interest.

He heard footsteps coming up from behind him and turned to see his footman approaching. "West, it appears we arrived at a difficult time. Can you help with the carriage and horses? The manor maintains two or three stable hands, and it appears they have their hands full."

"Yes, Your Grace. The driver and I should be able to 'andle it," West replied, his eyes focused on Nero and the woman. "But the dog is big. Do ye think I'll be able to move past 'im?"

Albert turned to the stable hand and Brianna and quirked a brow. "Does the dog bite?" he asked, looking at Nero.

"Oh no, not unless you are attacking someone. I think you will be fine," she said airily, petting the dog's head and wiping his drool on her skirt. "It's all right, Roy. I think the danger has passed for a little while," she said to the stable hand. "Can you help me with this injured animal?" She pointed to a small black dog that was lying in front of them, barely able to move. "It looks young. Hopefully, we can help it. Sadly, the gun killed two dogs, but it was the only way to stop the attack on

Nero and goodness knows how many other animals. One ran off and these two didn't make it. But this puppy is injured; perhaps it can survive."

"Be careful, miss. The dog may be rabid," Roy warned her.

"You are right, but they appeared just hungry. Perhaps they developed a pack mentality. He doesn't seem eager to bite me. But let's follow your father's guidance and keep it away from all the other animals until we can be sure it is not infected. I have a feeling about this puppy. It hung back from the others and got caught by the scattershot."

She leaned down and hugged Nero. "I need to take care of my baby here. There is blood all over him, but I don't see bites."

"I will do my best to move the little dog into one of the new cages in an empty stall, Miss Brianna," Roy offered. "And I will bring out the tub and wash Nero for you. My father will be concerned about any bites, so I'd best get him cleaned up. He loves that dog almost as much as you do."

"Thank you. I will do my best to see to both. For now, I must return to my chores inside." With a quick curtsy, Brianna ducked inside the stable.



CHAPTER FOUR

NEVER HAVE I seen such a breathtakingly handsome man!

Frivolously, Brianna wondered if all dukes were as handsome as this man but knew there couldn't possibly be a more attractive man.

She gave a sigh of relief as she walked to Clover's stall and saw mother and baby there. When the doe went for food, she would get Roy to fix the gate, but leave it open. Clover would probably stay there until her mother returned.

For the moment, Brianna leaned back against the wall across from the stall and took a deep breath, glad that her skirt hid her trembling hands. She squeezed them tightly and released them, hoping to calm herself. The Duke of Kendall was here.

She found it hard to focus. It was as if a handsome prince had walked out of the pages of her favorite fairytale. Blond hair, broad shoulders, and muscled thighs she could appreciate because of the tight buckskin britches.

It wasn't as though she didn't see men in Devon's countryside; she saw plenty. But none had ever caused a rapid pulse. And with limited opportunity to interact with men, she spent more time observing.

His green eyes were surely a path to his soul. When he'd looked up from the ground, she felt herself being sucked into their depths.

Mama had received a note from the Duchess of Kendall and mentioned that her son, the new duke, would visit the manor house. The note had emphasized all would be well, and it would please her son to continue the arrangement, but there was a hint of uncertainty there. So she'd asked Brianna not to

draw attention to herself—the total opposite of everything Brianna had done. It would upset her mother to learn about the dogs, not to mention how she had looked when she had met the duke.

Unconsciously, she rubbed her face and looked down at her soot-covered hand. *I don't think he recognized my name. Could the duchess have forgotten to speak with her son? Surely not.*

It made everything worse for Brianna. She had promised her mother she would maintain proper decorum and keep herself scarce during the duke's visit, except on the occasions they should attend. But today's situation dictated otherwise. If not for the bad timing of everything, she might have been in the stable tending to the kittens, or back in the house, instead of standing amid dead and injured animals in front of the stable.

Thank goodness they had not killed Nero. And now she added rabies to her worries. The accepted way to deal with the disease was the death of the animal and any they encountered. But Mr. Benson, Roy's father, felt quarantining the animal for eight months would provide enough time to know if the dogs were rabid. She trusted Benson. As hard as it would be for her, if Nero had been bitten, she would isolate him as well. But she clung to the hope the dogs were only hungry and not rabid.

Her heart pounded as she listened to the duke speaking to Roy and his footman about the dogs. She had little experience with Society, but surely a duke helping bury dead dogs was not the norm. But he was doing just that, despite Roy's protests. And he had peeled off his waistcoat and wore a loose-fitting white shirt.

The sight of his working and the sound of his husky voice sent tiny tingles to her midsection. Never had she reacted to a man's presence so.

“Your Grace, my pa and I can handle this,” she heard Roy say. “Cook and Mrs. Smythe will have our hides if they think

we detained you, much less allowed you to bury dead animals.”

“I gave you no choice,” the duke replied. “It is not a big deal and will give me time to get to know you, Roy. This is my first trip to this property. It was my great-aunt’s property, and she bequeathed it to my father. I plan to spend a few days looking around to determine needed repairs.”

“If you insist, Your Grace—here is a shovel,” Roy replied. “Wear gloves when touching the animals. With Miss Brianna and her love of animals, Pa tries to read a lot. He believes animal saliva and blood carry the disease. I don’t know what to reckon about it, so I use gloves.”

She could hear the clanging of the shovels as the men lifted the dogs and placed them in a wagon.

“That’s interesting. Where did your father find out about the saliva?” the duke asked.

“Pa is real smart, he is,” Roy replied. “He reads papers he finds about it. He’s taught Miss Brianna lots about healing. Says Dr. Samuel Bardsley recommends isolating the dog that’s been exposed to see if it gets the disease, but most people kill them. I ’spect if these dogs hadn’t died by the scattershot, we’d have ’ad to shoot them. They weren’t acting right.”

He walked over to the small puppy lying beside a mulberry bush and panting hard. “Miss Brianna is waiting for this one. Said it hung back from the others. She has a big heart, and I hope she is right,” the stable hand said.

Brianna heard the whimpering of the injured dog and stepped into the empty stall beside Clover’s. Gathering the straw in place, she prepared a soft bed before looking around. With the solid panel walls and gated stall door, the puppy presented no threat to the fawn. Roy had nailed boards to the bottom of the gate to keep it inside the stall. It would have to suffer the isolation. She could not expose her animals on the farm to the illness.

“Miss Brianna, your stable hand said you were waiting for this one.”

A deep voice stirred her senses, and she turned and stared into the endless depths of the duke’s cavernous green eyes.

“Your Grace. Th ... thank you,” she whispered, barely able to make her lips move.

“I’ve checked him over and didn’t see any scars or bites. He had the misfortune to be starving and was probably a hanger-on,” the duke said, bending down to lay the puppy on the straw.

Clover issued a loud bleat from her stall, and the duke stood and peered over the wall, taking in the doe and her baby before turning back and chuckling. “Miss Brianna Thomas, I had envisioned horses, but you truly have a menagerie of animals in the stable.”

Brianna nibbled her lower lip, unsure of how to respond. Her mother had never said much about the duke, even though Brianna knew she was good friends with his mother. She could not imagine having a powerful duchess for a friend.

“Yes, Your Grace. I can understand that, but I could never see an animal injured and not help. Benson has been teaching me what he knows about animal care.”

“What do you intend to do with all of that knowledge?” he asked.

“Use it to heal,” she returned. *Keeping it to oneself helps no one.* “I realize it’s most unusual to find a woman tending to animals needing medical help, but it is my passion. I love animals and have been doing it my entire life. It’s something I’m good at it. Benson tells me he hasn’t had to call a farrier to care for any of the horses, cows, or sheep in several years.”

“That’s probably saved the estate lives and money,” the duke replied thoughtfully.

“Cook loves the cats and kittens, although she would say otherwise,” she said, raising her chin a little as she answered.

“She would tell you she is afraid of mice, but I’ve seen her crying when she loses one. That’s one reason I asked Roy to build me the large cages. The stable is large enough for lots of horses and still has room for the other small animals. Cats benefit from the warm straw, and they keep the mice population away. If I can help mend their injuries, I want to do that.”

“I confess, I know nothing about medicine, but admire anyone that wants to learn it. Have you always had this passion?” he asked.

“My love is for the animals, and I hate to see them in pain,” she replied. “I want to help.”

“The dogs may have smelled the doe. They would not have smelled the fawn. They don’t have any real scent until they are older. That and the white spots protect them from predators. It’s not perfect, of course, but it helps.” He looked around at the stalls that held various animals she had rescued. “Is there anything wilder than the deer?” he asked, clearly amused.

“No, not today,” she said, feeling a warm blush move up her neck. The duke was patient and kind, and genuine. He seemed sincerely interested in her pursuit of healing animals, which secretly thrilled her.

She could like him—except he could never be interested in her. It was just Brianna and her mother, and they relied on the generosity of his family, according to her mother.

“I hope you and your mother will join me for dinner tonight. This trip here was long, and it will be wonderful to have pleasant company instead of sitting at an almost empty table in a small room in the tavern. You said you live here, in the manor house. Correct?” he asked, jarring her from her thoughts.

“Yes, Your Grace. We live *at* the manor, but not *in* the manor house. At least, not anymore. We moved to the small dowager house behind the manor house when they completed repairs several years ago.”

“I had forgotten it was here. I need to spend some time seeing all the property. Perhaps you will consent to accompany me to the village tomorrow?”

“I would have to ask Mama, but she may allow it,” Brianna said. She would love to go to the village with him.

“And show me around. My mother told me it’s grown considerably over the years, but I have nothing to even compare it to, having never been here. Perhaps you can tell me about the changes. Will I see you at dinner?”

“I’m going to say yes. We often eat our meals here, since it’s just us and the staff. Cook prefers it unless we are ill and need to eat at the smaller house,” she said with a grin. “And Mama enjoys it.”

He clasped his hands together. “Good. I will look forward to seeing you at dinner. It’ll be wonderful to have company. Until then, Miss Thomas.”

She watched him accept his waistcoat and jacket from his footman and walk toward the manor house.

She looked forward to dinner. What she didn’t look forward to was telling her mother of the tragic dog fight. She clung to hope that Roy found no bites when he bathed the dog. She thought Nero had done an admirable job holding off the pack, but she had closed her eyes when she fired the old gun.

When she returned to the house, her mother was just waking from an afternoon nap.

“I’m so glad you are back. How is your small fawn, my dear?” her mother asked.

“Clover’s mother came for her,” Brianna began.

“That’s great, darling.” Her mother seemed distracted.

“Well, it would be, except I would guess she will leave him for a little longer,” Brianna replied.

“What do you mean, a little longer? I don’t understand.” Her mother sat up a little taller.

“There were wild dogs that must have heard the fawn calling to his mother. They came to the stable while I was there. And things happened.” Brianna gulped. Nothing about this story would sound acceptable to her mother, she realized. As she related the story, amid her mother’s gasps, she cringed inside. Until she described the shot she took with the gun she found, she had not realized the unbelievable amount of luck that had been required.

“You found a fifty-year-old gun, and it was loaded?” Her mother crossed her hands over her heart. “Do you know what I would have done if something had happened to you? I would have never gotten over that loss. I could not lose another child, my darling girl,” she said, swiping at tears.

“Mama, I admit when I thought about what had happened, I dreaded telling you. I assure you, I acted purely on impulse. Surely Providence was watching over me,” Brianna said. “But that’s not all of it.”

She turned and walked to the nearest window, which opened to the back of the manor house, where *he* was. “The duke arrived moments after I fired the gun and dead and injured dogs lay everywhere. Nero had just beaten the lead dog, and ...”

“Oh, my girl. I asked you not to draw attention to yourself. Now I will worry about what he thinks about the people occupying his property. My friend said she thought he planned to continue the arrangement, but her letter did not assure me of that.” Her mother’s voice was strained.

“I had to save my dog and my animals, Mama,” Brianna said, feeling a lump in her throat. She hated to disappoint her mother. “I told him only what you wished. He seemed to accept our being here, and he invited us to eat with him at dinner. He almost insisted.” It would not hurt to add that, she decided.

“I must decline,” her mother said. “I received a letter yesterday from someone I once cared deeply about. It was a hard letter to read, and I cannot clear my mind. I would not be

good company. You take Jane. She will be happy to chaperone. The staff will keep her company. I will be fine with Augustus and the staff. Cook has already assured me she would send my dinner over.”

“But Mama! You must attend. The duke could take it as a slight. And besides, he is so handsome, I stare. If you are there, I would feel pressure to stare down at my plate instead of at him,” Brianna teased. “Besides, won’t Augustus be at the manor house?”

Mama laughed. “Yes, I suppose he may. He mentioned he was trying out a footman as an underbutler, so he can cover effectively.” She swatted Brianna lightly and laughed. “You can be silly. You are good for me, daughter. I am not happy about the events of the day, but I should be grateful. I have my daughter.”

“Roy is washing Nero for me and checking for any bites. I could not tell—he was covered with blood. But I am praying he is scratched, at most,” Brianna said nervously.

“If you are going to dinner, you will need to get a bath and get changed, my dear. You are quite a mess, and it smells like you’ve been working in a stable,” her mother said with a smile. “Jane is readying the tub for you.”

“There’s one more thing, Mama. The duke asked if I would accompany him to the village tomorrow. He has decided he needs a few days here and asked me to show him around. May I go?” Brianna bit her lower lip. This was something that had never come up before, and she did not know how her mother would react, but she wanted to go.

Just as her mother started to answer, there was a knock on the front door, and they heard Augustus answer it.

“Hi, Augustus, would you tell Miss Brianna that I bathed Nero, and he had a few scratches, but they looked scabbed over? I do not know how he managed it, but there were no bites and no new wounds. He was dirty and covered with blood, probably from the dogs that were injured when the gun

fired. I would tell her myself, but I'm very dirty, especially after bathing that one."

"Very good, Roy. I will see she gets the message," Augustus said before closing the door.

Relief flooded Brianna when she heard about Nero. She had found him as a puppy, wandering in the field, cut up by briars and starving. She had fallen head over heels when she saw him and adored the dog.

"I think he escaped any possibility of the disease, Mama!" she said, giving her mother a big hug. "I'm so relieved!"

"Oh, Bree! I'm sure this is wonderful news, but I worry so much about you. You are all I have!" her mother said, sitting up. "I realize he is a loyal animal, and I should hug him and be glad all ended well, not disparage the incident. But I worry so!"

"Mama, I assure you, I am being careful. The pack of dogs was dangerous and hungry. They would have hurt the fawn and the kittens. Nero kept them at bay."

"Yes. And there was the small matter of the gun you shot. You have never held a gun before. Those are huge. My papa had one. They scatter shot everywhere."

"I'm sorry, Mama. It's all that was available, and I had to do something."

Her mother's face softened. "Yes. I apologize. Of course you are careful." She gave a moan and a sigh. "It must be this terrible megrim making me feel out of sorts. And as for your other question, if Jane accompanies you, you may go tomorrow to town. You are not yet seventeen," she said, sitting up and slipping her feet into her slippers. "Now, I must rest. This day has already tested my endurance." She sent a tired smile in Brianna's direction before leaving the room.

What just happened? One minute, things seemed to go well, and her mother's mood was fine. In the next, gloom had slipped over her as soon as she mentioned the duke and his offer to take Brianna to the village. It made no sense.

Concerned, Brianna watched her mother leave the room.



CHAPTER FIVE

ALBERT FOUGHT THE temptation to have a small plate of meat and cheese before the evening meal. He knew it wouldn't sate his hunger, and so he would wait for dinner. Instead, he kicked his feet up on his desk, folded his hands across his stomach, leaned back in the chair, and closed his eyes. He wanted to think about the afternoon and Miss Brianna Thomas. She was unlike anyone he had met before.

I hope she comes to dinner. Otherwise, I will have to create a reason to spend time with her tomorrow.

She intrigued him. There had been no refusal to his invitation, and he hoped that was a good omen.

Hadn't his mother mentioned needing to speak with him before he left? Albert realized she never had. He knew if it was important, she would have made time. Even so, he pondered what it had been about. When he traveled, he often thought back over things he had rushed through.

One thing that fascinated him was the rotunda-shaped study, and he focused on it from behind his closed lids.

Had his father done work at this desk when he visited? The room was comfortable and inviting and would have suited his father's aunt, or his father. Except for a fireplace with a painting above it, a ceiling-to-floor window covered the area behind his desk. Bookcases lined the other walls from floor to ceiling. White woodwork framed a rich Aubusson carpet, with its subtle muted tones of burgundy and green, and covered most of the dark wood floor. Opulent burgundy curtains covered the windows, almost matching the leather chairs in front of his desk. The room was airy and cozy.

A knock at the door brought Albert to a sitting-up position behind the desk. "Enter."

“Your Grace.” Wilson, his valet, stood in the doorway. “You asked me to keep you on the schedule for dinner.”

“I’m ready to clean up. Is the room prepared?”

“Yes. I placed you in your father’s old suite and prepared your bath,” Wilson answered.

“You’ve done us all a tremendous favor,” Albert said, laughing. “It’s been an eventful day, and, of all days, this one requires a bath.” He had given no thought to where he would sleep and wished he had anticipated being placed in his father’s old suite. He could have requested a different room.

Wilson winced. “I hate to agree, Your Grace, but ...”

“Normally, I’d find that insulting, but knowing what I smell like,” Albert said, snickering, “I honestly agree.”

Albert liked Wilson. It was good to have someone more contemporary with his own age.

An hour later, he returned to his study and poured himself a glass of brandy. Something had been nagging at him since his arrival. He’d felt out of his element because he knew very little about the area or this property. His father had always been the one to check on it.

“Before I forget, I plan to go to the village tomorrow,” he told Wilson. “Check with the staff and find what I should be made aware of before I go. I’d hate to create a blunder on my first trip here.”

“Yes, Your Grace. I’m sure Cook and Mrs. Houser, the housekeeper, will be able to give me good information.”

“Thank you, Wilson.”

He watched the young man leave before glancing at the cluttered desk in front of him. It occurred to him that there might be some communications from his father, something that might give him a better idea of the property—its boundaries, important crops, important villagers, and guests, that sort of thing.

He had already reviewed the stacks of books lining the high walls, trying to envision where his father would have installed a safe. Father did it with all his properties, so they did not have to carry important documents and such on the roads, subject to highway robbers and other hazards. It would be too obvious to have a safe behind the painting. He'd still checked there, of course. But where else?

His gaze wandered up the two stories of books connected by the rolling ladder attached to a track running on the inside of the wall.

Suddenly recalling his own mother's desk, with the secret compartments designed by his father, he opened the drawers, felt inside to the back, and then reached beneath his father's desk, feeling around for anything unusual. Nothing.

Feeling beaten, he glanced at the clock and gave up his quest for the night. He wanted to be in the dining room to greet his special guests when they arrived. *I'll come back later and look. There must be something.*

Wilson was waiting for him when he got to his suite of rooms.

"I thought I might have to retrieve you, Your Grace. Knowing how you enjoy the study, I feared I had lost you in that one with so much to explore."

Albert snorted. "You know me well. I quickly realized I would return here to cold bathwater if I didn't hurry. Father seemed to have maximized the space when he ordered the repairs. It goes two stories up with books. It's quite a treasure."

His valet smiled and gestured to the selection of britches and waistcoats lying on the large four-postered bed. "I thought the navy and black brocade waistcoat and black britches would suit, Your Grace."

"I trust your selections. My only concern is whether we will indeed have any guests. I haven't heard."

“I take it you are in favor of the company? Cook thinks they will show and is cooking the selection you requested. I understand it will be a surprise for all,” Wilson said with a perceptive smile, before adding, “She made the young lady’s favorite dessert—baked cinnamon apples.”

“My father always said *no news is good news*, so I will cling to hope they will show. I would very much like to get to know the residents here.” Albert especially wanted to know Miss Brianna Thomas. “By the way, ask around discreetly and find out who worked with my father on the renovations for the library. Someone must have carried on his orders in his absence. I’m wondering if there are blueprints. It’s just a curiosity I have, nothing more.”

“It’s certainly a beautiful room, and very unusual in its round design. I’ll see what I can find.”

Perhaps I’ll be able to figure out what this nagging feeling is all about, Albert thought.



BRIANNA DRESSED AND went to find her mother. She found her dressed, but lying on her daybed, staring at the ceiling.

“Mama, are we ready to go to the manor house?” she asked.

Her mother swiped at her face. “I am not feeling up to it tonight, Bree. I sent word to Cook, and she will send me dinner here.”

“Mama, I hate to go without you,” Brianna whispered, and meant it. She did not want to face the duke alone. He was too handsome by half. Mother needed to be there to ground her.

At first, Brianna had thought about avoiding him, even though she wanted to know him, badly. His nearness made her nervous—pleasantly so, but nervous. And with his persistence about dinner and tomorrow’s visit to the village, she reasoned he was equally determined not to avoid her.

But why? She had no social rank. She was no one special, and her mother had asked her not to draw attention to herself—although she had never explained why.

A sniffle drew her attention to her mother, who had obviously been crying. “Why are there tears, Mama?”

Mama sniffed. “I received a note with sad news, is all. Someone very special died, and I feel conflicted over not having been there. One day, I will explain it to you, but not today. I cannot talk about it right now.” Her voice sounded strained. “You are a beautiful young woman, and the duke is quite taken with you. Jane will chaperone, and even though she won’t dine with you, I have perfect faith in your abilities to carry on a delightful dinner conversation with His Grace. It would not be right to ask you to stay.”

Her mother had never spoken thus about her. “You’ve changed your opinion of him? Earlier, you didn’t want me to draw attention to myself ...”

“I think that is my anxiety speaking. Your company will delight the duke over dinner and in a brief excursion to the village. He will soon be on his way,” Mama answered.

There was so much to ask, but Brianna chose not to. “Yes, Mama. I will do my best and keep the conversation trivial.”

Her mother nodded, barely picking her head up as she shifted her position on her couch. “I will be better by the time you return. Please forgive me for not going, but I need some time to adjust. There is nothing for you to be concerned about, Bree. I will be fine.”

Jane stepped into the room with a small bowl of warm, rolled towels. “My lady, I brought wet towels for your head. They should help.”

“Thank you, Jane. If you can accompany Brianna to dinner, I would be most appreciative.”

“I will be happy to go with her, Lady Thomas,” Jane returned, and looked at Brianna. “I will be ready in a few minutes, Miss Brianna.”

Brianna leaned over and kissed her mother on the forehead. “Feel better, Mama.”

“I’m sure I will. I just need a little while,” she replied. “Go to dinner and relay my regrets to His Grace.”



BRIANNA ARRIVED AND was escorted to the dining room, where the duke awaited. “Your Grace, my mother sends her regrets. She was not feeling well and took her meal in her room.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” he said. “In that case, you won’t be upset if we shuffle things up a little, would you?” He gestured toward where her place setting was in the middle of the table. “I will be more comfortable if you would sit next to me. Would you mind?”

“No, Your Grace,” she replied. Of course she did not mind.

“Terrific,” he said, holding out a chair for her. He waved off the footman, and she stepped in front of her chair before the duke carefully slid it to the table and took his seat next to her.

This was not what Brianna had envisioned when she accepted the invitation to dine with the duke, but found she liked it—very much! It warmed her heart to realize he did it to make her more comfortable. She had dreaded the possibility of eating at the very long table, unsure of where they would place her.

“What do you like to do when you go into town?” he asked, redirecting her attention. “I’m counting on you to show me around. It’s the first time I’ve ever been here. Father visited periodically, often with my mother. She enjoys the seaside. This is my first trip to Devon that I can recall. And I’m eager to see everything the village offers, so I will have a good idea of how to help them.”

Brianna couldn’t miss the sad look that passed over his face when he mentioned his father. The man had last been here three years ago and seemed so robust and full of life. It had

excited him that his sons were coming home. On every trip, he mentioned his family and told special stories about them, making her feel as if she knew them. She tried to recall what he had said about his eldest.

“I knew your father,” she said instead. “He was always very kind. He hired Mr. Benson and his son to care for the livestock and the stables—after Mr. Peters died, of course.”

“Do you ride?” he asked.

That was it! His father had mentioned his eldest son loved his horses and was always working with the new ones. “I do, Your Grace, although not enough. Mr. Benson and his son Roy, our stable hands, taught me.”

“From what I hear, Mr. Benson is a pretty learned fellow,” he said, before carving a piece of his quail and popping it in his mouth.

“Very. He’s taught me a good deal of his mother’s remedies, as well as some herbal medicine. It’s helped a great deal with the kittens and other small animals,” she said.

“That’s fine, but you use a physician if you become sick, I assume,” he said, looking concerned.

“Oh yes! But for small matters, knowing about herbal remedies helps. A doctor is a nice person, but he always wants to bleed a body. I don’t think that’s necessary,” she said, realizing she had probably said too much.

He smiled. “I see. Well, don’t worry. I’m not a supporter of that either. I think it weakens the body and the spirit. My brothers fought on the continent, and they returned with tales of wartime medicine—things they had seen and, sadly, experienced. I think things will change.”

“You must be proud of them,” she said, suddenly feeling a little shy.

He looked at her plate, which had been untouched. “You should eat! Cook has your favorite dessert coming!”

Brianna smiled up at him before picking up her fork. Truthfully, she was famished and could hardly wait for dessert.



CHAPTER SIX

The next day

“YOUR GRACE, YOU may need to alter your plans,” Wilson said, laying out the day’s clothing. “We had a huge snowfall last night. I am unfamiliar with the weather in Devon, but the butler said this type of winter surprise is commonplace. There’s a lot of snow, and it’s still snowing.”

“Ask West to prepare the sleigh. I noticed it covered behind the stable. The stable hand, Roy, can determine which horses are best suited,” Albert replied. He wouldn’t let a winter storm destroy his anticipation for the day. He wanted to know Brianna better, and this was his ticket.

“I’ll see to it, Your Grace,” Wilson said.

Albert had awakened early and looked forward to the day. Dinner had been pleasant, and, considering his arrival behind a mad dog fight, he couldn’t recall the last time he had enjoyed a woman’s company as much. Usually, the simpering young ladies of the *ton* bored him senseless, and he seized any excuse to leave their company as quickly as possible.

Miss Brianna Thomas had proven a delightful conversationalist, completely without pretense. She had regaled him with amusing stories about animals she had treated, besides the horses, cats, and dogs. Her love for animals was heartwarming and forced him to see the animals differently; she had convinced him they felt pain and heartache. The doe’s behavior toward her fawn was a perfect example. She had risked death from a pack of predators and crashed through a gate to find her baby.

After dinner, Brianna had shown him some of her favorite books in the study. His father had permitted her unfettered use of the study, and she was well acquainted with what it

contained. He found her bookish inclinations equal to her desire to help others. He had known no one as selfless as this exquisitely beautiful woman. If she had been a boy, she could have pursued a career in medicine, but Society denied women that option. Perhaps that would change one day, but not soon enough to make a difference for Miss Thomas.

“Your Grace. I found a rough sketch of the study, as you requested yesterday,” his valet said as he straightened the room.

“Thank you, Wilson,” Albert said, tucking the rolled drawing beneath his arm before heading to the study. He planned to take another look at the study before he left. “This will help me tremendously,” he said, leaving the room.

The morning was young. He planned to pick up Brianna and her maid at the dowager house, but that wasn’t for a few hours. He wanted to check out the study while he had time.

Taking the sketch, he compared it with the room, looking for places his father might have inserted space for a secret safe.

A couple of ideas struck him. His father loved horses and read insatiably on the subject. Albert tried to recall his favorite book.

“Oh, yes! It was *Horsemanship with Horses of Distinction*.” Albert recalled it as an enormous book with illustrations, and evaluated the large books at eye level or lower. His father would not have placed it higher than his reach.

When he found the book, he pulled it out, but nothing happened. *No spinning shelf—nothing!* “Dash it all!” he groaned. “I thought that idea had merit.”

Frustrated, he eyed the room while another idea took root. The last time he was in here, he had found himself drawn to the fireplace, particularly the intricate decorations. An elegant scroll design ran along each side of the fireplace and beneath the mantel, and a small, buttonlike decoration filled the inside

of the ends of the scroll. Running his fingers over the design on the right side, he used slight pressure on all parts of the scroll. *Nothing.*

Moving to the left side, Albert repeated his actions. When he pressed the raised portion of the scroll on the left side, he heard a click, and a mid-shelf panel in the bookcase to the left of the fireplace opened, exposing a safe requiring a combination. He felt like he had just found a treasure! Now he needed to open it.

It must be something familiar—but not something readily thought of, as a birthday might be. Father would have written it down ... somewhere.

Sitting, he thought about his mother's desk at home and smiled. After pulling the center drawer out as far as it would reach, he felt around for any movement, pushing right and then left on the back end of the drawer until the back panel slid slightly left and a small scroll of vellum fell out. He unfurled it and saw pairs of letters, separated by commas.

LA, AH, HR, RL

A niggling of recognition stirred. *Could it be possible the four letters are the same as the first names of my siblings and me?* Pulling out a pencil, he played with the letters using a coding game he and his brothers had created when they were younger. Adding the various letter codes together within the commas, he tried it, turning the lock appropriately and landing on each in the order presented. The safe opened.

It was mostly empty except for a small stack of money, various signed documents he would read later, and a small black box containing an elegant gold band and an amethyst and diamond ring—obviously wedding rings. He didn't recognize it as his mother's and wondered to whom it had belonged.

Glancing at the mantel clock, he moved the small piece of scrolled vellum back into the desk compartment. It was time to pick up Brianna. *There will be time for this later.*

Fifteen minutes later, his driver pulled the sleigh into the circular drive of the dowager house. "I expect to be a few minutes," Albert told West. "I have not met her mother yet."

The footman nodded. "Yes, Your Grace."

The heavy snowfall had slowed to a gentle dusting. *I hope it stays light while we are in the village*, he thought, walking to the door.

Albert knocked once before an older man opened the door. The man looked familiar, but from where?

"Welcome, Your Grace. Miss Brianna will be down in a few minutes. She asked that you await her in the parlor."

Albert followed the man into the parlor, and by the time he turned to speak to him, the butler had left.

He resembled the man who used to work as underbutler on their estate years ago. Albert remembered him as a kind man.

Sometimes household occupations ran in families. Perhaps they were related. *How strange*. Brianna would know his name.

Soft footsteps in the short hall revealed her approach, and he turned back to the door as two ladies entered.

"Your Grace, I am Brianna's mother, Lady Thomas."

He turned the name over in his mind and was struck by the resemblance between the mother and daughter. Lady Thomas was a slightly more mature version of Brianna. This was what Brianna would look like when she reached the age of his mother. He was unsure why, but that made him smile.

"The Duke of Kendall, my lady," he said with an elegant bow. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I appreciate Brianna's accompanying me to the village. This is my first visit to the property. Her guidance will be of tremendous help."

He wondered why they lived in the dowager house on his Devon property. He started to ask but held back. Perhaps his

father's adage to listen first would supply the answers he sought.

He looked at the younger woman. "Miss Brianna, are you ready to show me about the village?"

"Yes, Jane and I are ready," she said, smiling. "I have been looking forward to showing you some of my favorite places and people in the village."

"I promise not to keep her out too long," Albert said, before escorting Brianna and her maid to the carriage.

West opened the door to the sleigh as they approached. "Your Grace," the footman said, giving a quick bow.

"The village is only about twenty minutes," Brianna said. "I cannot wait to introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Crustin. They own my favorite shop."

"And what would that be, Brianna?" Albert said with an amused smile.

"The bakery, of course! The smell of bread baking is probably the most wonderful scent on earth. I should be three hundred pounds if I allowed myself to eat much of it, but I do allow myself to smell it. Mrs. Crustin always has a small package set aside for my mother and me. She is almost like a grandmother to me. I've never known any other family but Mama, and my pets."

The wind blew the white flakes into small tornados of winter as the sturdy Morgan horse pulled the sled into town. Three bells mounted on the harness collar jangled softly as the horse set a lively pace into the village, the song sounding clear in the crisp winter environment. Albert inhaled the morning air as it whipped across his face.

Brianna snuggled beneath thick blankets, and warming bricks heated her feet. Her cheeks shone with a bright pink and her eyes glistened with wonder. Alfred wished he could tug her close and keep her warm with his body heat, but with her maid sitting across from him, that couldn't happen. He noticed

Jane stayed to herself, while Brianna became animated with excitement as they entered the village.

When they slowed in front of the bakery, Brianna lightly touched his arm. “Can we stop here? That’s Crustin’s Bakery.”



“GOOD AFTERNOON, MISS Brianna! What a wonderful surprise to see you! Who is your new friend?” Mrs. Crustin said, wiping her hands on her apron and moving from behind the counter to greet them.

“Mrs. Crustin, allow me to introduce the Duke of Kendall,” Brianna said. “You may remember his father, who used to come into the village with his wife whenever they visited. This is his son.”

“Your Grace, it is a pleasure to meet you,” the proprietress said, dipping into a curtsy. “How sad to hear about your father. We always enjoyed his visits. Wait! I want my husband to meet you.” Before Albert could say anything, the cook disappeared into the kitchen, calling her husband.

An older, stooped man ambled out of the kitchen a moment later. “Your Grace, how nice of you to visit our humble bakery,” he said. “Before you leave, I have a package for you and your mother that you must not forget,” he said to Brianna, pointing to a small brown basket on the top of the counter.

“Are those cinnamon rolls?” she asked, sniffing the air. She turned to Albert. “You will love these. They are my absolute favorite, Your Grace! I’m almost drooling over them.”

“Why don’t the two of you have a seat over here?” Mrs. Crustin said, ushering them to a small parlor table across the small room. “I’ll bring you your favorite chocolate and cinnamon rolls.” She turned to Albert. “Would you like chocolate or prefer tea?”

“Tea, please,” he said, noticing how she also made Brianna’s maid comfortable.

Mrs. Crustin signaled the maid to her side. “Miss Jane, you know I have some for you, too. May I give you the package to hold for Miss Brianna? I’m sending some loaves of bread home for Lady Thomas.”

“Yes ma’am,” Jane replied, taking a seat at another table, as Mrs. Crustin placed a brown package next to her.

“Thank you, Jane,” she said, hugging the maid.

Albert and Brianna were finishing their rolls when a young man burst through the door. “Miss Brianna. I saw ye come to town and hate to bother ye, but could you look at m’young horse? He slipped on a large icy patch and is in a lot of pain. I think ’e may have broken ’is foreleg, but I cannot tell. I don’t want to lose ’im.”

“George, I’m sorry to hear about Major. I’ll be glad to look at it. Let me introduce you to the Duke of Kendall.” She stood. “Your Grace, would you mind if I stepped across to the stable?”

“No, if you don’t mind my following you,” Albert said. “Major is the name of the horse, correct?”

“Thank you, Miss Brianna,” George said. “Yes, Your Grace ’e’s m’horse. Please pardon my interruption, but Major is very important to me. It’s the last gift my da gave me before ’e died.”

Brianna turned to Jane. “You can stay here if you’d like, Jane. I know how you feel about these things,” she said, grinning.

“Yes, miss. Thank you,” the maid said, with an obvious look of relief.

“I’ve got just the thing for your tea,” Mrs. Crustin said, bringing over a hot cinnamon roll.

Brianna lifted her chin and closed her eyes, drawing in the delicious scent. “If I don’t leave now, I will find myself a stone

heavier before I return home.”

Albert laughed. Most women he knew didn't make jokes about their person in front of a man. They didn't joke at all. They spoke of the weather and fripperies.

He, Brianna, and George walked across the street to the stable, where they found a gelding lying down, whimpering in the corner of his stall.

Brianna took off her hat and handed it to Albert. “Can you hold this? Sometimes the horses nibble on the hat while I'm working,” she said with a laugh, before turning her attention to the horse's right foreleg.

“He slipped, and it rolled under him. I'm just praying it's not broken,” George said.

She carefully fingered the swollen hock and fetlock joints. “I think nothing is broken, but he strained his tendons. It feels swollen, just like the joints.” She looked up at him. “You're going to have to rest Major, longer this time. Do you have some cloth to wrap the leg? And the balm I left here.” She turned to Albert. “This shouldn't take much time, Your Grace.”

George brought back the corked salve bottle and the clothes she'd asked for and handed them to Brianna. She pulled the big cork stopper and held the concoction to her small nose. It immediately wrinkled from the string of aromatic scents escaping the container. “Woo! I'd say that's still fresh. My stars!” she declared, as she quickly resealed the bottle.

Albert watched Brianna gently massage the horse's swollen joints with salve, wincing at the smell. Then she carefully placed splints on the lower leg and wrapped them.

“It might be good to pack it with some snow. The cold will help shrink some of the swelling. We should take advantage of it.”

George hopped up and grabbed a bucket. “I'll be right back, Miss Brianna,” he said, tearing out the door into the

weather and returning a few minutes later with the bucket flowing over with fresh snow.

“This will help so much,” she said, dipping her hands in the snow and patting it around the horse’s leg. She packed as much as she could, blowing on her hands to warm them in between applications of snow. When she had finished, she wrapped a towel around the leg, securing it with small pieces of rope. “As long as there is snow out there, keep doing this for a few hours, then you can stop. Major strained the muscles and will need to rest them until the swelling goes away. Change the wrap every few days and use the balm on the joints. He needs about six weeks of rest. The injury might have been worse.”

“Thank ye, Miss Brianna,” George gushed. “I was so afraid I’d ’ave to put ’im down. But you’ve given him back to me.”

“You give me too much credit, George. Major needs a little rest. That’s all,” she said, kissing the horse on the nose. Then she turned to Albert. “Are we ready to explore the village?”

“I am. Shall we be on our way?”



BRIANNA HAD ENJOYED this trip to the village more than any she had ever recalled, as the duke insisted on being introduced to every shop owner in town. They didn’t stay but minutes, but it was enough to earn smiles from everyone.

Not only is he the most handsome man I’ve ever seen, but he is probably the very nicest, she thought.

She made introductions to each of the small establishments that dotted High Street, the main street in the town. It had been a boon that the snow stopped when they arrived. Mr. Crustin predicted it would start again in a few hours, basing that on years past.

They had visited the businesses on the same side of High Street as the stable and were now making their way back to the

bakery where Jane had been last.

They found their destination. It was an older building with the name *Libraire F. Stackall: Proprietor* in large letters, edged in fading gold leaf.

“I think there’s just one more place to go,” he said, taking her arm and turning an ornate knob to enter. The twinkling of a small brass bell attached to the top of the door announced them. Tomes covered every inch of the business—knowledge just beckoning to be read.

“No, no, no, Elijah! Shakespeare’s books don’t belong in the astronomy section,” an old man chided his apprentice.

The young man seemed unperturbed by the old man’s rant. He simply retrieved the books in question and returned them to the proper shelf.

“Oh, Miss Brianna,” the old man said. “It’s wonderful to see you.”

“Mr. Stackall, this is the Duke of Kendall,” Brianna said.

“Mr. Franklin Stackall, proprietor, at your service.” As he bent forward, his pencil fell from the breast pocket of his apron. He scrambled for it, grabbing it, swinging it up, and banging it into the bottom of the counter.

“Mr. Stackall, would you mind if we browsed?” Albert said.

“Are you looking for a specific book, Your Grace?” Mr. Stackall asked.

“I have been looking for a specific book for my sister, Lauren. Jane Austen wrote it.”

“I may have one,” he said, picking up a stack of books and looking beneath them. “Elijah, where are the books written by Ms. Jane Austen?”

“They are on the back shelf in the novel section,” the young man returned. “Would you like me to retrieve them?”

“That’s all right. We can find them,” Albert said, reaching down and touching Brianna’s hand.

At his touch, a tingling sensation pulsed through Brianna. She closed her eyes and squeezed tightly, willing the feeling to memory.

As they moved toward the back of the shop, she spotted a small sign above that said *Novels*. “I think this is where it would be. Do you know which novel you want?”

“Is there one that sounds like a woman’s name?” he asked. “She mentioned it to me once, but I think I’d recognize it if I see it.”

“*Emma* is the last book I recall, Your Grace,” she said.

“You’ve read Jane Austen’s books?” In husky tones, he whispered, “I wish you would call me Albert.”

“Albert,” she breathed. “I’ve read most of her books. I enjoy her books.” Brianna trembled with anticipation as his fingers traced their way down her arm to her hand, drawing small circles in her palm. “Call me Brianna,” she whispered.

“Your name ... it suits you, Brianna,” he murmured for her alone.

“Mama said it was my—” she started.

“Shh.” Albert placed his finger over her lips. “I’ve been wanting to do this all day ... since I first saw you, if I were honest.” He leaned in and covered her lips with his, urging her mouth open with his tongue. He entangled his tongue with hers. He pulled back a few moments later, leaving Brianna breathless. “I have a special request.”

“What is that?” she replied, reveling in his closeness and the essence of his scent at the same time.

“Dinner with me tonight. Please bring your mother.”

Chewing on her bottom lip, she nodded. “I feel sure if you ask Mama, she will be glad to come,” she returned, hoping her

mother would indeed accept. Mama seemed to have adjusted to whatever had upset her earlier.

“I will ask her. But right now, I cannot resist another kiss.” He angled his head, and his lips gently covered hers.

His clean scent of citrus and sandalwood swathed her senses, urging her to hug him tighter. Her body quivered with excitement. She reached up and tugged him closer, twirling her fingers in the back of his hair. Brianna couldn’t help herself—she tugged him closer and kissed him.



SNOWFALL HAD PICKED up when they arrived back at the dowager house. Brianna looked around, loving the scenery. Snow covered the ground and balanced delicately on the branches of the evergreens.

As the driver slowed the horse to a stop, West jumped down and held open the door to the sleigh, securing a step.

Before Brianna could stand, Jane leaned forward and touched her arm. “Your Grace, if it pleases you, I can take these purchases in first. It will allow you time to check for any smaller purchases,” she said.

“Certainly, Jane. That would be thoughtful.”

The maid stood, and West assisted her with the packages into the house.

“Thank you for a lovely trip to the village,” Brianna said, making a mental note to thank Jane for the few minutes of privacy she had unexpectedly afforded them.

“I had a wonderful time as well. You are an excellent tour guide.” Albert retrieved a small, brown-wrapped package from a pocket inside his heavy coat. “I picked up a copy of *Emma* for you and one for my sister.” He held her hand by his side, intertwining his fingers through hers.

“Thank you, Albert,” she said, feeling warmth creeping up her neck. “I have never received a gift from a man, Your

Grace.” Her voice was almost a whisper.

“I know it feels awkward, but I could not resist. Consider it a thank you for helping me select a gift for Lauren and a reminder of our day in the village.”

She nodded.

“Would you be interested in riding horses tomorrow?” he asked.

“I would. Yes!”

“Perfect. Let us plan for eleven o’clock.” He glanced around. “We should go in so I can speak to your mother about dinner tonight.”

Brianna was thrilled with his gift and had no plans to call attention to it. Jane Austen’s stories were captivating but had not adequately conveyed the glorious feeling of a man’s tender kiss, she mused as they walked into the house. This man—whose company she found charming, warm, and addictive—had kissed her senseless today in a bookstore, of all places. Brianna was sure her toes had curled ... and she found she wanted much more kissing.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The next day

“MISS BRIANNA, YOU asked me to wake you up early,” Jane said, opening the curtains.

Brianna sat up and blinked at the sun streaming into the room. She stood and walked to the window, gazing out at the white, glistening scene before her. “It snowed again last night! It’s so beautiful.”

“Yes. The snow seems to be letting up. Are you and His Grace going horseback riding this morning?” Jane asked.

“We are. He asked me after the trip to the village yesterday, and Mama approved. I had hoped to wear the gold woolen habit.”

“It’s pressed and ready for you, Miss Brianna. Your mother mentioned you needed it last evening after dinner. Lady Thomas seems happy for the attention he’s paying you,” the maid said.

“What makes you think so? She seemed reticent when he asked,” Brianna replied. “But she gave her approval.”

“Miss Brianna, ’tis not my place to be saying this, but I have known your mother since before you were born. My mistress’s eyes have always mirrored her heart. And what I see in her eyes, what I’ve noticed when he invites the two of you for dinner and what I see when you go to the village, is happiness.”

Brianna’s heart skipped a beat. She had been worried about disappointing her mother.

“Let’s get you dressed, because he will be here soon and you won’t have a decent chance of breaking your fast,” Jane

said, and nodded toward the corner of the room. “Your tub is ready behind the screen. You must promise to keep a close eye on the snowfall. The duke isn’t as familiar with this area’s weather as you are, and you know how easily you could become stranded or lost in a blizzard.”

“I promise, Jane,” Brianna said. Jane was right. Snowstorms could be erratic here.

An hour later, she met her mother in the dining room to break her fast. “Good morning, Mama,” she said, filling her plate and taking a seat across from her mother.

“You look lovely, darling,” Mama said, taking a small spoon and stirring her tea before regarding her daughter. “You like the duke.”

It was more a statement than a question. “I do, Mama,” Brianna said. “But I have no expectations. He’s been here for such a brief time and will be gone in a few days. He plans to visit another property when he leaves.”

“Oh?” her mother replied. “Where do you plan to ride your horses?”

Before Brianna could answer, Augustus announced the duke. “I’ve placed him in the parlor, Lady Thomas.”

“Thank you, Augustus,” Brianna returned. “Mama, I forgot to mention to Jane that his footman planned to accompany us. Jane needn’t come. She’s afraid of horses.”

“Oh goodness! That’s right. Thank you for letting the duke know. Jane has been too good to us over these years.” Mama looked down at her plate. “And she’s seen us through diff ... many years.”

“He mentioned the beach as a good place to ride,” Brianna added.

“That’s a wonderful place. I used to ride on the beach when you were a small girl. It’s a beautiful place, especially in this weather. Go! Enjoy yourselves.”



AN HOUR LATER, both horses cantered across the stark white sands in front of the towering spirals of snow blowing up in a spinning motion from the sand like a top. For a few minutes, they rode quietly, with West riding a short distance behind them.

The salt of the sea breeze fondled her face, providing a cleansing feeling as it blew. She spurred her horse ahead just as a rogue gust of wind blew her hat from her head and loosened her hair until it blew wildly behind her. Enjoying the unbound freedom, she swiped at the dampened curls blowing across her eyes.

Looking behind her, she noticed Albert grinning and holding her hat. She slowed, and he caught up with her, as both horses resumed a canter.

“I saw it lift, and miraculously, I was in the right place. I’m sure West would have collected it, had I missed it,” he said, wearing a wide grin. “I need to know something.”

“Yes?” She did her best to stay next to him.

“When I went to the stable, I found the legs of my horse—his cantons—loosely wrapped and maintained with salve. Thank you. He’s riding like a champ today,” he said, patting his horse’s neck.

She smiled. “I remembered seeing his leg roll when you first arrived. With all that was going on, I checked on him later, thinking he could benefit from being loosely wrapped. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No. He’s been with me for a long time, thank you,” he said. “Your concern touched me.”

They rode for a few minutes, enjoying the pristine water as it slapped against the shore and pushed large patches of snow around. A frigid wind blew with gusts of swirling snow.

When they passed what looked like a cave, he pointed to it and slowed. “Let’s stop.”

Carefully, they moved their mounts into the front of the cave. Almost immediately, the walls of the cave seemed to close in and, within minutes, diminished much of the howling wind from the English Channel.

Albert reached out and grabbed the bridle of her mount and tied both reins to a rock before reaching up and assisting her from her mare. “Have you ever been in a cave before?” he asked.

“No,” she said, with an involuntary shudder. “I’ve always heard that’s where pirates and bats lived.” For a second, she steadied herself, closing her eyes and inhaling his scent of sandalwood and citrus, inhaling *him*.

He laughed. “Pirates and bats?”

“Well ... yes. That’s what I heard,” she replied.

He grabbed her by the hand and led her toward the mouth of the cave, leaving the horses with West. “Can I show you something?”

“Yes,” she said tentatively, noticing the smallness of the cave. “This is it? It’s not a big cave. I’ve never been this close to one.”

“I doubt if pirates frequented this *cave*, but I find it’s excellent for this ...” He pulled her close and kissed her tenderly. “I should apologize for that kiss yesterday, and for acting like a green lad, but I cannot. I want to hold you again,” he said. “May I?”

“Yes,” she said, tilting her chin up.

“You are so beautiful, Brianna.” He angled his head and kissed her, sensuously twining his fingers through her long blonde locks. “I love the feel of your hair,” he murmured, moving his lips over hers and down the side of her neck.

Her lips parted involuntarily, and twinges of delight flowed through to her fingertips at his touch, exciting her senses and leaving her wanting more. More of his nearness.

What was happening? Albert had said he planned to leave in a few days. If he spaced his visits like his father's, it could be two years before she saw him again. The thought sent an ache to her heart.

Irritated, she furrowed her brow, focusing on the cave they were in, and getting her mind on the time they had. *I refuse to wallow in pity and ruin our time together.*

“What are you looking at so fiercely?” he asked.

Her face relaxed, and a soft laugh escaped. “Where ... I see no bats.”

“Some caves aren't big enough to house the pirates and bats,” he said, laughing. “This cave is probably too shallow, but it provides some respite from the weather—and privacy when you need it.” He flashed a knowing grin her way.

Heat warmed her cheeks. That was a most delightful respite, she thought.

“It's barely the size of a room and has probably been formed by some extreme weather event that washed part of the ground away. I read the cliffs are made of sandstone, which is not as tough as other rocks,” he explained. “Water and wind can change the formation.”

“It's beautiful, isn't it?” she said, awed by the beauty of the snow on the sand and the tall white cliffs. “I've never ridden on the beach before, and never in the snow like this.”

“Should we ride some more?” They exited the grotto.

“Yes, perhaps we should get back on the horses. My mother will expect me back before too long.”

The two of them walked outside into the sunshine. Albert laced his fingers together to assist Brianna in reclaiming her saddle. Then, mounting his horse, he pointed ahead. “The snow has retreated for a period. Let's stay on the sand a little longer and veer off to a path I noticed earlier. It should be less stressful for the horses to avoid a snow-covered incline.”

She nodded, and they turned and rode back the way they had come, giving their horses their heads along the water's edge. As Albert drew closer, she called for a race and urged her mare into a gallop. The winter sun made the water glisten and the snow-covered sand almost magical. His caresses and kisses had stirred feelings she had never experienced before, including a sadness she never expected.

As they neared one of the taller cliffs, his horse overtook hers by several lengths, until he signaled to slow, pointing out the path he had mentioned earlier.

“What do I win?” he asked good-naturedly.

“How about some lemon biscuits? Cook and I made them fresh this morning.”

“That sounds delightful. You like to cook?” he asked with genuine interest.

“Sometimes, especially when it's cold like it is today. It gives me a sense of satisfaction.” Brianna felt a lump form in her throat as they cantered toward the manor. “Will you be back this way again, Albert?”

She had grown accustomed to thinking of him as Albert and needed to be careful. Her mother would tolerate no disrespect, and she'd rather not explain their kisses and the familiarity she had allowed.

Several emotions flashed over his face before he offered a knee-buckling smile. “I have every intention of returning, Brianna.” He regarded her for a moment. “Have you ever thought about living anywhere else—a future away from here?”

Unsure of the turn the conversation had taken, she nodded. “I would like to, one day, see London. I've never seen a town larger than Sidmouth, which, you can see, is small.”

He nodded, and they rode in companionable silence for a few minutes. Minutes later, they were back at the manor house and trotted toward the stable.

“Welcome back, Your Grace,” Roy said as the duke slid from his horse. “The horses probably needed the ride. How did your gelding do?”

“Very well. His gait was perfect,” Albert said, handing the reins to the stable hand.

Brianna handed the reins to West as the duke helped her from the horse.

“Allow me to walk you to the door. I’d like you and your mother to join me for dinner tonight. Would that be all right with you?” he asked.

“I would be honored,” she said. She wouldn’t be able to keep herself away.



ALBERT HAD KNOWN no one like her. Never having believed himself in love before, he had nothing to compare to how he was feeling now and could not say this sensation was love. But there was an intensity to his feelings. He had become instantly smitten with the girl, but when had it become more than that? When he closed his eyes, he saw her. When he slept, he dreamed of her. And when he was supposed to focus on the details of the estate, his mind drifted to thoughts of her. He had to continue his trip, but only wanted to spend time with Brianna.

Mindlessly, he twisted his signet ring around his finger as he walked to his study. There were so many questions, and he had hoped to have more answers. But he didn’t.

Sitting down, he looked around the room, staring at what now had become familiar. When his attention drifted to the small safe his father had created in the wall, he got up and opened it, recalling the nuances of the intricate fireplace scrolls. The papers he had planned to read earlier remained. He wanted to do that before he left. There were still several hours before dinner, which Brianna and her mother had agreed to share.

He set the small velvet box aside and instead opened a previously sealed vellum note that looked like it had been written in a woman's hand. It was from his great-aunt Tricia. It must have been written shortly before her death.

Dearest Lawrence (or to my family) ~

The small velvet box of gold embodies my past, one I shared with Trenton, my love. We were not lucky enough to see our children live to become adults, and therefore, I am leaving these rings to my brother's family. My prayer is they find their way to two people who find their true heart's desire in each other.

~Much love,
(Aunt) Tricia

"How like Aunt Tricia," Albert murmured. He remembered his great-aunt and uncle as two people who belonged together. They always found things to cherish about life, despite the misfortune cast upon them. He recalled the year the flu ravaged their family. His father's cousins, Martha and Jackson, had both died, along with his uncle, leaving only Aunt Tricia and the servants.

There were a few more documents, so he picked through them. Recognizing the one with his father's handwriting gripped his heart. This letter felt different from the instructional things he'd found in his father's study at home. It was as if his father had left this for him, knowing he would look for answers. His gut told him to set his father's note aside for a little while longer, so he put the note down and reopened the box of rings.

A knock sounded at the door before it opened. Augustus stood there holding a salver. "Your Grace, a messenger delivered this earlier while you were away."

"Weren't you working at the dowager house earlier?" Albert asked as he accepted the note.

"Yes, Your Grace. I am training a footman to help me with my duties, and to be available for times when I am assisting at

the dowager house,” Augustus replied.

“I recognized you earlier ... finally. But it had been years since you worked for my parents,” Albert said. “How is it you found yourself here?”

“When the duke—your father—gained this property, he needed a butler to help manage the staff and asked me. I had been working as an underbutler and took the job. It has been my pleasure to be here, Your Grace.”

Albert nodded. It explained things, but he couldn't help but feel there was more, although he didn't know what question to ask to find out.

“It appears my mother will join us for dinner,” he said in a surprised tone, reading the note. “Please have Mrs. Houser prepare her rooms and alert the stable to expect the horses and carriage.”

“Yes, Your Grace. I shall handle it immediately.” With that, the butler turned and left.

Albert's mother was joining them. Why?

It meant he needed to decide what to do about Brianna that much sooner.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Later that afternoon

ALBERT WAS FINISHING up a brandy in his study when he heard a commotion at the front of the house. Rereading his aunt's brief note and some documents from his father showing the deeded property had given him useful information, including the improvements made to the property. His father had completed renovations in the dowager house five years past. Apparently, Lady Thomas and her daughter had stayed in the manor house before that and moved in then.

He wondered what had precipitated the move ... and more, what had precipitated their living here. There was still no explanation for that, but he hesitated to ask because it was apparent his father had been behind it. To question it might make them feel unwelcome, and that was the last thing he wanted.

Indeed, had they not been living here, he would never have met Brianna Thomas, the woman who seemed to have turned his world inside out.

Stepping from behind his desk, he hurried to the front door, just as the door to a black coach with the Kendall insignia opened. West was about to help the passenger out of the carriage, but Albert hurried down the steps, tapped West on the shoulder, and took over.

"Welcome to ... the manor, Mother," he said, kissing her on the cheek. "But I wondered what you were thinking to travel alone."

"She didn't come alone, dear brother," Roger said, emerging from behind his mother. "I rode along, determined to keep her safe. But she was most insistent."

“Roger! I’m happy to see you. Mother has been here before, but I imagine you are as much a stranger to the property as I was before I arrived,” Albert said, shaking his brother’s hand before pulling him close and hugging him. “I’m glad you came. I suppose I can shelve any vexation I may have concerning Mother traveling here alone. Thank you!”

“No, I did not. Your father’s ghost would have risen and shaken me to the core. He was very fastidious about our safety,” she said. “I think about Lawrence every day, and when we meet again, I want no lectures,” she said, giving a small swipe at a rogue tear that escaped her eye.

Losing his father had been an enormous shock; Albert knew they would always mourn his passing, especially considering the tragic way he had died. A horrific accident had interrupted a planned homecoming for his brothers Roger and Henry from the Napoleonic Wars, aided by a disastrous storm that had taken the life of their father too soon.

“It was a little tricky with the snowfall, but luckily, we didn’t encounter icy road conditions. However, I believe we will wait until the snow clears before returning home,” the duchess said, handing Augustus her cloak and hat. Behind her, West and another footman carried her trunks to her room.

“It looks like you are staying for weeks, Mother,” Albert said, grinning.

“I mentioned that too,” Roger said, “and was told one never knows when one will need a particular item.”

Both men snickered. Their mother tried to look indignant but threw her hands up. “Guilty as charged.” She laughed. “Your father would say the same things to me, but finally gave up. Let us not forget Christmastide is almost upon us. Parties require extra clothing.”

At that, both men shook their heads.

“Tell me news of home. How are Henry, Livy, and Lauren?” Alfred asked.

“You’ve only been gone a few days ... well, a week and a half, brother,” Roger gibed. “Most things are as you left—except the stable cat who had a brood of kittens.”

“What I’m interested in, son, is how are things here?” their mother asked, wearing a strained look that hadn’t been on her face five minutes ago. Even Roger’s look had altered.

“Things are fine ... more than fine, really,” Albert replied. “But there is something I don’t know and should know. Can you come into the study?” He saw West pass by, having finished unloading the carriage, which Albert could now hear being moved from in front of the house. “West, would you mind asking Cook to have tea sent to the study? Would you like anything else, Mother, Roger?”

Both gave a shake of their head.

“Tea is perfect for me after that chilly ride here,” the duchess added.



HIS MOTHER TOOK one of the leather chairs in front of his desk, and Roger stoked the flames on the fireplace before taking the other leather chair. “I love the shape of this room. If my office looked like this, I might never leave it,” he joked.

“Your father spent a lot of time designing this space. His aunt Tricia had a round study here with bookshelves, but always wished it was bigger and held more books. He thought redesigning it with her in mind would honor her memory,” Mother murmured.

A knock at the door sounded, and a footman brought in the tray of tea.

“I will handle it from here,” the duchess offered. With a polite bow, the footman left the room.

“All right, can someone tell me what urgent matter caused this visit?” Albert looked at his mother.

“Well, darling,” she said, setting down the teapot and taking her seat. “I have a few things you might have needed to know before you left.” She trimmed off a piece of sugar and stirred her cup before taking a sip.

Both men looked at her expectantly.

“Mother, you never even discussed this on the way here, despite your insistence on coming. I find myself as anxious to hear as Albert,” Roger prodded.

“Well,” she said, setting down her cup. “Have you met my dear friend, Lady Thomas?”

Alfred nodded. “Your friend? What would one of your friends be doing living here, Mother? It seems highly unusual.”

“Thomas was her maiden name. She reclaimed her title as the daughter of Earl Linville Thomas. It was your father’s idea. She needed to remain hidden until they could sort things out. Her married name was ... *is* the Lady Wharton, as in Countess Wharton. And her daughter is the daughter once declared dead by the earl, Lady Brianna Phillips.”

“Phew!” Roger remarked, leaning back in the seat. “I wouldn’t have wanted to miss this.” He looked straight at his brother. “Have you met Lady Brianna?”

Albert pushed back and stood, pouring himself a brandy. “Mother, Roger? Can I offer either of you one?”

“I might like a sherry, my dear. My nerves are rattling, just discussing this again. Before you left, I should have told you. But when I went to find you, you had gone.”

He handed his mother a sherry and poured his brother two fingers of brandy, before replenishing his own glass and taking his seat. “I’m listening.”

“You know your father could never refuse me anything. And Alaina was—and still is—my dearest friend. I sent her a letter letting her know you were arriving. And I sent the one you gave to me that had come from Lord Wharton ... the new

Lord Wharton. I had some idea of what it might contain, since there was a new earl but had no way of knowing anything for sure.”

“Yes. Wharton was most eager to find Lady Wharton.”

“Do you believe he was sincere?” Roger asked. “I had heard she left him, and the old earl had begun proceedings to have her declared legally dead. Then it all stopped. I confess I have forgotten the timing,”

“Nasty business, that,” his mother remarked. “I’m sure as a solicitor you hear lots of sordid stories, darling Roger. This is one of them, I am afraid. And it ends with some innuendos and little resolution.” She stopped and stared up at the picture behind Albert. “I always loved that portrait. It was such a happy day.”

“Mother, please continue,” Roger prodded.

Albert laughed. “Yes, please. I see your patience hasn’t improved since I’ve been gone, little brother.”

They all laughed.

Roger Stanton could make them all laugh at just the right time. The duke and duchess had adopted him when he was five, and he had become family. He was Henry’s best friend, as well as his brother. Everyone adored Roger, mostly for his jovial outlook on life.

“Alaina went into labor. The child was her fourth in almost as many years. None of the others had survived, and the earl, she said, was frantic to get an heir.”

Albert cursed under his breath. “I’m sorry, Mother,” he said.

“It’s fine, son. I was upset when she told me she was with child again. The doctor had warned her husband it was dangerous to continue these pregnancies at such a close pace. She had almost succumbed to the one before it. All were girls.

“Alaina’s doctor brought her and the baby to our home in Sussex. He shared with me that the first two were stillborn, but

the third had survived birth and appeared fine. When he returned in the morning, like Alaina, he was told the baby had died during the night. The earl told everyone it had been stillborn and buried it that same day, and the doctor regretted not questioning it.

“The doctor described the earl as unreasonable following the birth of this fourth child. And he had asked for something to help Alaina sleep. He received a note from the countess telling him she needed help. The earl wanted the child gone, since it wasn’t an heir. The doctor helped Alaina get away and secreted both her and the baby to our home.

“Your father could never refuse me. He brought them here, along with several servants he knew he could trust with their lives. And we have kept them here, in secret, all these years. When your father died, I was so overwhelmed with grief—and then you were injured—that I forgot to discuss this with any of you. I should never have kept such a thing from you boys. When the missives came the other week, there was so much there. I needed a minute to sort it out in my head before I explained it. But by then, you were gone.” The duchess dabbed the tears from her eyes as she spoke. “You will continue to protect them, won’t you?”

“May I inquire what the letter to Father said?” Albert asked.

“It was not so much a deathbed confession as an apology for having shamed himself and lost his wife. He acknowledged he would not ask her to return. He knew she would only leave again. The earl thanked your father for intervening and asked that we tell Alaina he loved her until the end,” the duchess said. “I do not know what your father did regarding this, but he told me once that he had taken care of the paperwork. He said there had been no death certificate. But Alaina was smart enough to have the doctor sign the Bible acknowledging Brianna’s birth date. She brought the book with her. Your father and Felix Phillips had been best friends most of their lives. Lawrence had a marvelous way of dealing with tough

situations. I'm grateful my children learned that quality from your father."

Albert looked at his brother. "Will that be enough to prove who she is?"

"I believe it will—and if it's ever challenged, there is the doctor's word and Mother's. Did the doctor ever write anything to Father affirming the child's name?" Roger asked.

"I believe so. There was a small packet of paperwork in a slim brown covering with a narrow red ribbon in the safe," the duchess said.

"I believe I found that here, along with a letter from Father." Albert now suspected Father had written an account of this for Brianna's sake, should she ever need it, knowing she or one of his sons would see it carried out as intended. He reached into his desk drawer and withdrew the letter, skimmed it, and handed it to his mother. "Father described much of the situation, as you told it this night."

"Should we introduce her to Lord Patrick Wharton?" Roger asked.

"I would like to be the one to do that, if things go my way," Albert said.

"Son? What way? What are you talking about?" Both his mother and Roger looked astonished.

"I plan to ask her to marry me, Mother. If she will have me, I will introduce her to Patrick as my duchess," Albert said. "I decided before reading Father's letter, fearing it would place some sort of pressure on me—which, as it turns out, it would have. I find I cannot go a day without seeing her." He smiled.

Roger jumped up from his seat and congratulated him. "This was worth the trip to hear!"

"We may be ahead of ourselves. I planned to ask her tonight. With the two of you here, it seems even more right."



CHAPTER NINE

That night

“MY LADY, YOU are lovely as usual,” Jane said as she fastened her mistress’s blonde curls into a soft chignon behind her head. “You must be so excited to see your friend!”

“If she is here, something must be wrong,” Alaina murmured.

“My lady, please do not think that way,” the maid said, stopping her ministrations to her mistress’s hair. “I feel it in here”—she tapped her heart—“that this night will be special for you. I think, just like that night seventeen years ago, that if there was something wrong—*truly wrong*—we would know it. Your friends have kept you and your daughter safe for all these years. If something was wrong, they would have told you already.”

“You are probably right, my dear. I worry about Brianna. I want her to have a chance at a decent future, whatever that turns out to be. She’s missed so much because of my decisions.”

“My lady, your daughter lives because of your love. You saved her life; I am sure of it. And probably yours,” the maid added. “A braver woman I have never known. This is but a dinner with friends.”

“Stay close, Jane, in case I need you,” the duchess beseeched.

“Of course, my lady, but your daughter and your friends will let no harm come your way. They have protected you these seventeen years,” the maid said, securing Alaina’s pearls. “You must take a calming breath and cleanse these worries out of your mind.”

The countess fingered the strand of pearls about her neck. “These were my dear mama’s. They are all I have of her.”

“Your parents will always be in your heart, my lady,” soothed Jane.

At once, Alaina realized she had forgotten to check on her daughter. “Is Brianna ready?”

“I finished assisting her an hour ago. I have never seen her so excited as she has been to meet this man for dinner each evening,” Jane returned.

“I have said very little. I only hope I have done the right thing, allowing them to spend time together. It’s so difficult to know the right thing. My daughter deserves a chance at life, but I don’t want her heart broken,” Alaina said, taking a deep breath. “I had a good feeling about him.” Taking her maid’s advice, she closed her eyes and willed herself to breathe steadily and slowly. She would get through this evening. These were her friends.



FROM THE MOMENT Mama consented to dinner, Brianna’s body had thrummed with excitement. She would see Albert shortly, although she wasn’t sure of how much she’d be able to eat. Even though he planned to leave the next day and their time together was short, she counted the hours until she would see him again.

When she arrived home, she’d placed her new book under her pillow and gone out to check on Nero. Even though he had no visible scratches, she had kept him in the stable—not so much quarantined but confined and away from danger—until she could be sure the dog that escaped would not return. The puppy was doing fine, and the mama cat and her kittens were thriving. The fawn was still in the barn with its mother protecting it, but Brianna knew the time would pass too quickly before they would say goodbye to it. There would be more animals, but she would miss these. They would always remind her of meeting the duke that day.

“Are we ready to go to the manor house, darling?”
Brianna’s mother stood in the doorway of her room.

“You look beautiful, Mama. You must be excited since the duchess arrived. She will be there,” Brianna said, happy to see her mother looking so radiant.

“It’s been a very long time, Bree, and it’ll be wonderful to see her,” Mama agreed.

Jane scratched at Brianna’s door before stepping inside.
“My lady, the duke is here to escort you to the manor house.”



THE LIGHT FROM the full moon and the candlelit windows turned the glistening snow into a sparkling wonderland and gave the manor house a palatial splendor as the coach carried Brianna, the duke, and her mother to the front door.

As they approached the top step, Augustus opened the door and stepped out. “My lady, Miss Brianna, Your Grace, please come in. Mr. Stanton and Her Grace are awaiting you in the parlor.”

“Alaina, Brianna, how wonderful to see you,” gushed the duchess, taking the hands of her most special friend and squeezing them gently. “May I offer you some beverage? We have tea, lemonade, and sherry.”

Alaina laughed. “You haven’t changed—always saving the best for last, Caroline. I’d love a glass of sherry.”

“Allow me,” Roger said, stepping over to the small glass beverage cart, pouring a glass of sherry, and handing it to the countess. “I am one of the younger sons, Roger,” he said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Roger. Your mother has spoken highly of you and is proud of the work you do. You are a solicitor, correct?”

He nodded. “And this must be the beautiful Brianna I’ve heard about. Miss Brianna, they have not given your beauty enough praise.”

Brianna blushed. “Thank you, Mr. Stanton.” She looked at Albert, who winked at her while standing behind his brother, sipping a brandy.

The duchess put her arm around her friend and whispered discreetly, “I know you, my dear, and I want to assure you that all is well. I needed to see my son and take care of some business that necessitated our following him to Devon.”

“I received your note and the letter from Felix. Would I be wrong to assume the business has something to do with me?” Alaina asked.

“Some of it does. Circumstances did not give me a chance to brief my son that you were living here before he left. It was important to do that. And it had been too long since I had seen my dear friend. I became vexed that the clandestine note I sent warning of Albert’s trip would worry you, and needed to make that right.”

Alaina nodded. “You have always been too kind to me. And to rush down here for me—you are the dearest friend a person could ever have. Thank you.” She managed a smile. “I am certain Cook has been in her element with dinner arrangements. She loves to feed a crowd.”

Albert walked up to Brianna and took her hand. “Do you think anyone would think badly of me if I stole you for a few minutes?”

Brianna turned to her mother, who nodded her approval.

“I’ve been wanting to talk with you about an idea I have had,” he began when they were alone.

“An idea? What kind of idea?” They had spoken about so many things in the past few days that she wondered if it had to do with her animals. He had ideas for housing her strays where they might be a little safer, particularly from predators like the dogs that threatened the kittens and the fawn.

“Just something I’ve been thinking about now,” he said, evading an answer.

He led her through the dining room to the veranda overlooking the snow-covered gardens below and placed his jacket around her shoulders.

“I have something to ask you, Brianna,” he said, and dropped to one knee.

Brianna gazed into green eyes that had held her captive for days, as her heart beat a loud tattoo. She was certain he could hear it. Her lips formed a question, but no words emerged.

“It’s more a question,” he said, taking her hands in his. “I came here and landed unceremoniously in the mud, staring up at the most beautiful woman I have ever met. And since that experience, I’ve gotten to know you and find myself unable to think about riding away from here and leaving you.” He took a steadying breath and shifted a little. “Brianna Thomas, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

She could feel her lower lip tremble and her eyes fill with tears. Nodding, she whispered, “Yes. Yes, I would love to be your wife.”

Albert stood and reached into his pocket, withdrawing a small black velvet box. “Will you accept this ring as a symbol of my affection?” He opened the box and displayed a sparkling amethyst and diamond ring.

Trembling, she took a small step back and held out her hand. Tears streamed down her cheek while he placed the ring on her finger. “It’s so beautiful!”

He pulled her close and slanted his face, grazing her lips with his before giving her a soul-searing kiss that ignited her body to its core, with a tingling that continued beyond the touch of his lips.

“Shall we let the others know?” He nodded toward the dining room, where everyone had already gathered.

With her still wearing his jacket, they returned to the much warmer dining room, and their announcement was met with cheers around the table.

“Let me be the first to congratulate you, dear sister,” Roger said, before kissing her on the cheek and pulling out the vacant chair next to her fiancé for her.

“What a beautiful ring, Brianna,” her mother said.

Brianna still could not grapple with this having happened. It was almost as if she was watching someone who looked like her becoming part of a fairytale.

“My dearest daughter, Brianna, I am so happy for you,” her mother said through glistening eyes. She rose and raised her glass. “Allow me to toast my daughter and my son-in-law to be. I hope your life together is as magical as your romance, with love and all the riches it brings.”

“Hear, hear!”

“Thank you, Mama. I feel like a lost princess that just met her prince,” Brianna said, swiping at a couple of tears. Her comment was met with astonishment around the table. A lump formed in her throat, and she looked from Albert to her mother.

He placed his hand over hers. “There is much we have learned tonight that you could not possibly know, my darling. It has nothing so much to do with you, as with who you are.”

The duchess leaned forward slightly and looked at her sons and Alaina before speaking. Alaina nodded. “You are Lady Brianna Phillips, and your mother is Countess Alaina Wharton. Your father took ill when you were born, and it became necessary to take you away for your safety—and my husband insisted that this become your home, and took every step to make that happen,” the duchess said. “The details are not important at this moment. And until I arrived this evening, your mother and I had not shared your identities with my son. So, what you said gave us all quite a start.”

“I never thought to see anyone tempt my brother Albert to the altar unless it was through the heart,” Roger said. “The hardest part of his role as duke has been fending off the matching mamas and their young, eligible daughters. Wait

until London hears my brother was snared by a winter beauty hidden in Devon; all the young bucks will be here looking for their goddess!” he added, grinning broadly and gaining laughter from everyone.

“Thank you, all,” Brianna began. “I know how much you love me and have only felt love here. If they brought here me, it was for reasons I would never question.” She reached for her mother’s hand and squeezed it. “I have enjoyed a happy life, and while I may have suspected something more, I knew not what to ask. But now, I cannot imagine myself any happier than becoming Albert’s wife.”



EPILOGUE

Sidmouth, Devon

Christmastide, 1817

FRESHLY FALLEN SNOW covered the small uncut-stone-covered parish chapel on Church Street. The building was framed by low-hanging branches from oak trees hundreds of years old. The town was perfectly decked out in its best winter white. Carriages and wagons of all sizes lined the street, a testament to the village's excitement at seeing the new Duke of Kendall wed the parish's favorite young woman, Lady Brianna Phillips. As Brianna Thomas, she had selflessly attended to countless sick puppies and kittens, assisted horses with injuries, and helped locals with delivering calves and lambs. The locals were quick to call for Miss Brianna.

Inside, the church was beautiful, decked out in greenery, mistletoe, and holly bound with large white bows at the ends of the pews. The fresh smell of evergreens filled the room.

Soothing music on the pianoforte gradually faded, and the giant bull mastiff gave a low, throaty bark from the doorway, causing all guests to shift in their seats and turn. Nero wore an elaborately tied cravat, adorned with a single amethyst pin in the center. His unorthodox announcement of the bride startled Vicar Selman, who dropped his *Book of Common Prayer*, knocking his glasses from his face as it fell. The pastor immediately dropped to all fours and began searching for his spectacles.

The drowsy, well-fed matron in the last row fell forward, hitting her head, and screamed.

The heavy oak door opened, and Lady Brianna Phillips stepped forward carrying a bouquet of white and lavender Lenten roses and wearing a pale green chiffon and lace empire

gown. A matching attached cape, accentuated with pearl beading, trailed as she focused on the tall, blond man standing in front of the altar, flanked by his two dark-headed, handsome brothers. The three men were elaborately dressed in black, with cravats that matched Nero's.

"Nero, heel," she commanded quietly. The dog stood and escorted her to the altar. When she stood next to her betrothed, the dog quietly sat down on its haunches and waited.

"Found them!" the vicar shouted, scrambling to get up and stepping on the front of his white robes, causing him to tip forward.

"Don't worry, vicar. I have you," the Duke of Kendall said, helping him regain his posture behind the altar.

"Thank you, Your Grace. Now, where was I?" the vicar said, thumbing frantically through the book.

"The beginning," whispered Roger, one of the groomsmen.

"Yes, yes. Here we are ..." the vicar began, then took the couple through their vows. Finally, he was announcing them as newly married. "I present the Duke and Duchess of Kendall," he said, carefully sidestepping the altar and the dog.

The large dog fell in behind his mistress and new master as the couple walked down the aisle to the carriage waiting in the front.

"We will see you at the manor house," the newlywed duchess told the dog, causing it to whimper.

"Don't worry about him. He can ride with us," her new brother-in-law, Lord Henry Egerton, said, standing with his wife, Lady Egerton. "My wife is already in love with him."

"Nero has welcomed us to the family with ceremonial kisses," Roger added, lightly patting the dog's massive head.

"Arrrooff!" Nero protested, watching a carriage with his mistress and her new husband pull away from the side of the street.

“Thank you for agreeing to have Nero as part of our ceremony. I believe he was very well mannered,” Brianna said in the carriage.

“He added a certain level of excitement to our ceremony that only rivals the moment we met,” her husband said, pulling her close.

She smothered a giggle. “I remember that moment very well. You landed facedown in the mud, looking up at Nero.”

“You were there, as well. And I received little sympathy from you, my darling wife,” mocked Albert.

“The handsome face that rescued me absorbed my attention,” she said mischievously.

“It was?” he said, kissing her neck. “How handsome?”

She nibbled on his earlobe and continued down his neck. “Very.”

He cupped her face in his large hand and looked into her whiskey-brown eyes. “I am the luckiest of men to have found that person who completes me. If we get an opportunity to slip away, my dear, should we take it?” he asked, tenderly kissing her forehead.

It suddenly struck Brianna that he’d asked instead of assuming command of her person. His consideration was astounding. He made her feel safe. And loved.

I love him, she realized.

She had seen coupling between animals and understood what would happen. She thought of her favorite line from a childhood poem as she kissed his hands. *Here, a little girl is a price beyond treasure*. She felt only anticipation of their wedding night.

“I would do anything for you, dear wife,” Albert murmured in her ear, while he cupped the sides of her breasts. “I want you so badly, but I do not want to frighten you.”

As they rounded the manor drive, a black carriage pulled in behind them with the Wharton crest on the door. Henry's carriage and the ones carrying her mother and the duchess pulled in behind. The door to Henry's carriage opened, and Nero bounded out and stood by the door to Albert and Brianna's carriage.

“Arrooff!”

“I think that was his stated intention to escort you inside,” Albert said. “I hope he plans to share that duty with me.”

“This is priceless, dear brother. Perhaps he is welcoming you to the family,” Roger said, walking up behind the dog, followed by his brother Henry and his new wife, Livy. “I wonder if he'll let me help my beautiful sister-in-law from the carriage. Nero sat next to me and, as soon as he saw your carriage stop, he nearly leaped through the window. I had no choice but to let him out.”

“He will make life interesting,” said Albert, prompting the three brothers to erupt in guffaws.

Brianna's mother, the duchess, and Albert's sister, Lady Lauren Stanton, exited their carriage and joined the bride and groom and the best men.

“I suppose it might be novel if the entire family walked into the wedding celebration behind the bride and groom,” suggested the duchess.

A man walked up behind the group and stood a few feet away, watching. Nero noticed him before anyone else did.

“Abbrooff!” His bark was deep and loud, causing everyone to turn.

“Lord Wharton.” With Brianna on his arm, the duke walked up and shook the man's hand. “It was hard not to mention your attendance to my new mother-in-law and my wife.”

“Thank you for keeping my confidence, Your Grace.” Lord Wharton turned to Countess Wharton, who, with the dowager

duchess's urging, stood beside the duke and her daughter. He regarded the countess. "You are still as beautiful as I remember you, Aunt Alaina. I fulfilled my uncle's request, but I have one of my own." When no one said a word, he continued. "With the death of my uncle, I have no family. On this day of family joy and celebration, I wonder if you and Her Grace would consider allowing me to be part of yours."

Brianna looked at her mother and back at the earl then stepped forward, taking Lord Wharton's hand. "You would be my cousin," she said with moist eyes.

"I would."

She nodded and squeezed his hand. "Welcome to our family, cousin. I cannot think of a better day to welcome family if not Christmastide and one's wedding day."

"Let us move inside and greet the guests, or they might start looking for us," Albert urged.

As they walked into the dining hall, Augustus announced them. "The Duke and Duchess of Kendall."

Albert kissed Brianna on the cheek and whispered, "Brianna, the day my horse threw me into the mud in front of Nero was the luckiest day of my life."

Brianna gazed up at him with misting eyes, warmed by the promise of love in his eyes. "I cannot think our lives together will ever be dull."

The End

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Anna St. Claire

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About Anna St. Claire

Anna St. Claire is a big believer that *nothing* is impossible if you believe in yourself. She sprinkles her stories with laughter, romance, mystery and lots of possibilities, adhering to the belief that goodness and love will win the day.

Anna is both an avid reader and author of American and British historical romance. She and her husband live in Charlotte, North Carolina with their two dogs and often, their two beautiful granddaughters, who live nearby. *Daughter, sister, wife, mother, and Mimi*—all life roles that Anna St. Claire relishes and feels blessed to still enjoy. And she loves her pets – dogs and cats alike, and often inserts them into her books as secondary characters. And she loves chocolate and popcorn, a definite nod to her need for sweet followed by salty...*but not together*—a tasty weakness!

Anna relocated from New York to the Carolinas as a child. Her mother, a retired English and History teacher, always encouraged Anna's interest in writing, after discovering short stories she would write in her spare time.

As a child, she loved mysteries and checked out every *Encyclopedia Brown* story that came into the school library. Before too long, her fascination with history and reading led her to her first historical romance—Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With The Wind*, now a treasured, but weathered book from being read multiple times. The day she discovered Kathleen Woodiwiss's books, *Shanna* and *Ashes In The Wind*, Anna became hooked. She read every historical romance that came her way and dreams of writing her own historical romances took seed.

Today, her focus is primarily the Regency and Civil War eras, although Anna enjoys almost any period in American and British history. She would love to connect with any of her readers on her website – www.annastclaire.com, through email – annastclaireauthor@gmail.com, Instagram –

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HER TEMPESTUOUS DUKE

Elizabeth Keysian



CHAPTER ONE

MINERVA HARTE WOULD rather be anywhere than bobbing around on the wintry sea in a little rowboat, watching flames consume a French frigate. Her fingers and toes were numb with the cold, and the pallid, scared faces of the survivors as they watched the vessel burn would haunt her dreams for weeks to come.

But Anthony Pendorran, Duke of Tremar, had told her it would be an entertainment she would never see again in her lifetime, something to tell her children and grandchildren. Exactly *how* he expected her to acquire any of these—or a husband—she didn't know, as she was mainly kept to the house by her guardian.

Minerva adored the duke, nonetheless, knowing that he kept her closeted for her own protection. How could she ever complain? How could she risk displeasing him when he had taken her in and given her more comforts than a young lady of dubious parentage had any right to expect? She was like a daughter to him, and even when she disagreed with his dictates, she generally complied.

“I can't see the ship holding her own much longer, Your Grace.” The valet, Pascoe, his well-manicured hands clasped uncomfortably around an oar, shot his employer a hopeful look.

“Perhaps not.” Lord Anthony's eyes were avid with excitement, his head jutting forward as he gazed at the burning ship. “But now that we're out here, I intend to watch the spectacle until its conclusion. It's not every day that one sees a French vessel on fire and its crew begging for help on a Cornish beach.”

“There must be gunpowder aboard. Shouldn’t we retire to a safer distance?” Minerva pulled her cloak more tightly under her chin. Her guardian was a well-traveled, well-informed gentleman, and she was unused to him taking risks.

His handsome brows furrowed. “Minerva, child, how often have I told you not to question me? Of course, I have your safety as my prime concern—as I always have.” He gestured ahead of them. “A sinking ship might cause a swell that dashes us on the shore, so best to stay here and see what happens. Besides which, we’re all enjoying ourselves too much.”

A blast of wind ripped off Minerva’s hood, and she gasped as her hair broke free from its moorings and whipped about her face. At the same moment, a massive shower of sparks erupted from the French vessel, and the timbers groaned in agony like a living creature. Fear shuddered up her spine.

“I really think we should go, sir. I’m feeling queasy.” The duke was normally solicitous if she felt ill, but he was enjoying the death throes of the ship too much to tear his eyes away.

“In a moment.”

She hugged her cloak about her and tried to ignore the glowering sky. The waves surrounding their small boat had developed a greasy appearance, and the sense of danger that oppressed her intensified. She sent Pascoe a beseeching look, then caught the eye of their footman, George, who was plying the other oar.

He cleared his throat. “Your Grace—the temperature is dropping rapidly. Don’t you think we might just return to shore and watch from the clifftop?”

“You’ll be just as cold up there as you are on the water, and the spectacle will be nothing like as thrilling. You’ll thank me for this in the future, as it will be an everlasting memory. And it will also teach you that you have nothing to fear from the French, for they are weak and vulnerable mortals, no better than the rest of us.”

Her mouth quirked. No one could call Anthony Pendorran weak or vulnerable. Admittedly, he had a soft heart—he *must* do, because he treated her so well. But he kept it well hidden—as any nobleman should, lest his tenants, servants, or political rivals take advantage.

To the outside world, the Duke of Tremar was a perfectly dressed, well-mannered gentleman. If there were rumors about him being a scapegrace in his youth—well, that was only to be expected. The tabbies of the *ton* thrived on telling tales and keeping the gossip mill grinding. Even though Minerva was intrigued to know more about her guardian’s past, she felt it would be wrong to learn anything from lips other than his own.

She’d been but a child when she’d first met him in Naples and had only known that she’d liked him. With his muscular build and aura of power, he’d been every inch the dashing Englishman. He was a daring horseman and a skilled fencer and she’d loved watching him. He could also swim—unlike herself—which was probably why he showed no fear now, as the choppy waves grew higher and rocked the little boat more violently.

Minerva glanced up and saw with a chill to her heart that black clouds were boiling into view beyond the burning ship.

“I think there might be a storm—” Her words were torn from her mouth and cast away by a sudden gale.

“What the devil?” Lord Anthony seized the gunwale nearest to him to avoid being thrown from the boat. “Hold tight, Minerva!”

He shouted something else to the servants, but his words were carried away by another powerful gust. She battled to grab one of the rowlocks as the boat pitched dangerously, then crashed back down in the swell.

Blinking the spray from her eyes, Minerva fought for breath as the elements battered their tiny vessel. They were further away from the French frigate than before, and the

servants tried frantically to bring them back to the shore. Only—the shore became more distant with every stroke as if they were in a toy boat and had no power at all. If they couldn't make any headway, they would be around the point and out on the open sea in no time. But surely, somebody on the beach would notice their difficulty and set out to rescue them? Wouldn't they?

The next hour—it seemed like a lifetime—was spent in a sickening battle with the sea. She clung on as the men fought bravely to keep their little craft upright, but the darkening coast was unfamiliar—they'd been swept miles away from the burning ship in Tremar Bay.

Her fingers were numb and her clothes were soaked. The men's faces showed their exhaustion but Lord Anthony's jaw was set—he would not give in. If only she knew how to row! Why had she not been taught anything useful? Was it too late to learn?

Pushing her sodden hair from her face, Minerva glanced toward land. They were nearer now than previously, but the land rose up as unwelcoming, jagged cliffs, with the sea boiling and frothing at their feet. The boat would be dashed to pieces—they now needed to row *away* from the coast.

Suddenly, the roar of the wind was broken by a screech, a bizarre sound that could not have come from any human throat. Looking up in alarm, Minerva saw a brightly colored object racing toward them. At first, she thought it was a child's toy kite, but it moved in too animated a fashion. It was getting closer—any moment, it would be upon them. But that was the least of their worries.

Or was it? The thing flapped around Pascoe's head, and when he raised his hands to beat it off, he lost his grip on his oar. It slapped against the side of the boat with an ominous crack.

“Curse you to hell, you soulless ingrate. Unnatural son and brother—death is too good for you!” The words had not come

from anyone aboard. The voice that uttered them was inhuman and terrifying.

And they were the last thing Minerva heard before the boat gave a terrifying judder, tipped her over, and hurled her into watery blackness.



CHAPTER TWO

HE WAS NOBODY'S master—he was nobody's friend. Nothing mattered anymore—except revenge.

Parys Pendorran, the deceased Duke of Tremar, turned his face to the wind and gazed at the choppy sea. He often came out just before dusk, too troubled by his inner demons to relax or contemplate sleep. The noise of the storm had made him restless, too.

On tempestuous evenings like this, when the clouds were iron-gray, and the salt spray was flung right to the top of the rocky promontory, Parys' body ached. The wounds he'd sustained rescuing his tenants from the French prison camp had nearly killed him, and his subsequent illness lingered even now, sapping his strength. The scar that pulled down one corner of his mouth irked him, despite its antiquity. His careless little brother, Anthony, had permanently disfigured him after a playfight with their father's dueling blades. He didn't mind—he'd never considered himself handsome. But that was the least harm Anthony had caused him.

Parys lifted his chin and gazed out to sea. It would be so easy—a few steps forward, a tumble down the cliff face, bouncing from rock to rock, then a neck-breaking *crunch* at the end, resulting in everlasting peace. No one would miss him—he'd been dead for three years as far as the world was concerned.

A cold, wet snout was pressed into his hand.

“Curse you, Caliban. Whenever I think of freedom, you remind me that I still have responsibilities.” He ruffled the dog's ears. “I shouldn't be thinking like that, should I? I ought to take my revenge instead. I ought to tear my brother's heart out and feed it to the crows.”

He ought, indeed—the duchy was his by right and Anthony should be hanged for his crimes. Parys gritted his teeth against the pain of his brother’s betrayal. Did he really want to go back to all that responsibility? Would being Duke of Tremar again fill the gnawing hole in his existence, or did he need something more than that? And what if his physical strength deserted him at a critical moment, as it so often had since his illness? No duke worth the name should be seen as an invalid, especially not one little more than thirty years of age.

Caliban whined and pawed at the ground. It was that same pitiful whine that had forced Parys to battle with the sea for the life of the creature when it was but a shivering puppy. It was a monstrous size now—whoever would have guessed? He smiled and stroked the animal, but Caliban jerked his head up, sniffing the wind.

“What’s up, Boy? Is there something down there?” Instinct made Parys drop to the ground. It was unwise to be seen by any vessels off the coast—visitors were not welcome. But then, what madman would be out in a boat in this kind of swell?

He made his way cautiously to the cliff’s edge, but before he could see over, a strong gust brought something colorful flapping right past his ear. It was swearing loudly.

He sat up, frowning, as his parrot, Ariel—another foolish rescue from the sea—landed on his arm, claws gripping painfully.

“What do you want now? Is a man not entitled to a moment’s peace?” he growled. “I should pluck you, make you into broth and grind your bones for glue.”

“How now, you secret, black, and midnight hag? You scupper-rat, you cream-faced loon.” Ariel’s screeches showed that he was upset.

“Is there no end to your vocabulary of insults, Ariel? You *do* know I wouldn’t really hurt you after I went to the effort of

setting your broken wing. Although I am oftentimes tempted to stick your head in a falcon's hood so you can't pick up any more bad language."

Ariel's vocabulary had, in truth, helped keep Parys sane since he had pulled himself, exhausted, from the greedy sea to recover his strength on this remote, comfortless promontory. Much of the animal's language had been learned on shipboard—there was no doubt about that. But sometimes, he came up with a puzzling expression, or something which he must have heard Parys say out loud.

Unfortunately, most of Parys' utterances were curses at Fate, his life, and the world in general. It was depressing to hear his own words cast back at him, to realize how far he had fallen, to understand how little remained to him of hope.

"Give me one of your seaman's curses, you foul creature." Those usually amused him. "I need to be rid of this melancholy."

Ariel clicked his beak. "You have such a February face, so full of frost, of storm, and cloudiness."

A shiver like icy water coursed down Parys' spine. This was too close to the bone. Ariel bobbed anxiously, and Caliban lay flat, his ears pressed against his skull. The feeling of cold dread enveloped Parys again.

Something was amiss with his animals, and he could sense it, too, though he had no idea what was wrong.

Shaking Ariel from his wrist, he pulled himself as close to the cliff's edge as he dared and peered over. He could just make out that a dark object had washed up on the shoreline, something larger than the usual flotsam and jetsam that pitched up on the narrow shelf of beach below.

In a moment of stillness between buffets of wind, the parrot suddenly launched itself onto the empty air, then dived toward the object.

Parys sat up, the tension leaving his chest. Nothing more than a dead sea animal that Ariel fancied having a peck at. If it

was fresh, it was worth investigating, as it could provide food for himself or Caliban. Despite the provisions he got from the local village in exchange for his skills, something additional for the table was always welcome, even if it was seal or whale meat. Dressed duck, salmon in aspic, sugared fruit, and the other piquant dishes of his ducal table were but dim memories.

Life here was plain and simple and in the absence of an ice house, food was most definitely seasonal. He couldn't remember the last time he'd tasted a syllabub, blancmange, or chilled champagne.

Just as he got to his feet, the wind brought him the sound of Ariel's screeches. The bird was already picking at the dead beast. But wait. It was tugging at what appeared to be a long lock of human hair. Still firmly attached.

A body? Deuce take it—now trouble would come calling, and he wasn't prepared for that. He must send the body back whence it had come, back to the watery depths of the sea.

There was a narrow path leading down to the tiny inlet, which smugglers had once used. Since Parys had taken up residence on this headland—regularly cut off by the tide—it had gone out of use. The Cornish were a superstitious bunch, and with his gaunt face, wild look, and reputed dabbling in the Dark Arts, he had managed to dissuade them from using his almost-island home uninvited.

As he slithered over the steep rocks, grazing his hands and catching his feet in wiry roots, he noted that the smugglers must be brave men to risk such a path in the dark to avoid the revenue officers. But they weren't quite courageous enough to risk an encounter with a spirit that rose above their heads in the dark and swore at them like the ghost of a dead sailor. Ariel had his uses.

As Parys jumped onto the beach, the bird released the lock of hair and flew to perch on his shoulder. He seemed calmer now, having achieved his ends. Caliban let out a single deep bark from the clifftop, his tail wagging furiously.

“I seem to be at the mercy of my beasts, rather than their master. No one could ever call them *familiars*.” Parys grunted and approached the body.

The sodden figure was that of a female—a petite one, slender of waist and with long dark hair. An unwelcome surge of sorrow washed over him.

He shouldn't care about the death of one unknown woman. Death was everywhere, and the sea was one of the most likely places to encounter it. But it was odd that this woman should be here by herself.

He cast about and discovered a few slivers of wood and a broken oar. From a capsized rowing boat? A lifeboat, sent out from a ship imperiled by the recent storm? Or was the shattered wood unconnected with this woman's tragedy? Had she thrown herself into the ocean to end her sufferings?

“I suppose I'd better bury her on the beach, had I not, Ariel?” Although he could, of course, take her to the village, where they were used to dealing with such things. But then there would be an investigation and awkward questions asked. His true identity might be discovered, and he wasn't yet strong enough for that.

Ariel rocked back and forth on his shoulder as Parys prodded the corpse with his foot. He rolled her onto her back, then stepped back, stunned, as the woman let out a moan.

Was that just the seawater moving in her lungs? His heart thudded painfully against his ribs. A living woman would bring more danger into his life than a dead one.

He strode to the beach's edge, staring at the crashing waves and feeling the same turmoil that drove them. How could he, in all conscience, abandon a fellow human being in need? Maybe her arrival here was timely—maybe the Fates were telling him that it was time to re-enter the world outside. He must prepare his campaign of vengeance, and risk whatever was necessary to restore the balance of his life.

Ariel pecked at his ear. He brushed at the bird irritably, but the creature sank its claws more deeply into his shoulder.

“You poor, base, rascally, cheating, lack linen mate. You scullion. You benighted fool.” Ariel bit Parys’ ear again, then flew back to nuzzle at the woman’s hair.

Perhaps the bird was right. Perhaps he *was* a benighted fool—only madness would cause him to hesitate. Maybe he’d been driven insane, living in isolation on the clifftop, surrounded by the specters of the monks who’d lived there before him, and haunted by the ghosts of his past.

Ariel seemed to have taken to the young lady. The bird nuzzled beneath her ear, and she flapped an enfeebled hand at him. She was alive and must be saved. Parys’ fate was sealed.

It would be a gargantuan task getting the girl back up the cliff, and he never knew when his weakness would come upon him. Perhaps he should wait until the causeway was clear again and run to the village to borrow a donkey. He knew the smugglers had several of those surefooted beasts, well able to navigate these treacherous paths.

The girl shivered and coughed. How long had she been there? She must be so cold, and might already be near death. If she was a foreigner, he could surreptitiously leave her somewhere on the mainland to be looked after. She wouldn’t be able to explain where she’d been or give any description of her rescuer. Fate or not, he wasn’t going to interact with the rest of the world until he was certain he was ready.

He stood over her and gazed down. The pale perfection of her skin indicated her youth—she could be little more than twenty years of age. Her chin was pointed, her mouth small and rosebud-like, giving her an elfin appearance. Dark lashes pressed against her pallid cheeks. It had been a long time since he had looked upon such refined beauty. It had also been a long time since he’d seen anyone dressed in a muslin gown and fine wool coat. She wore one stocking, but both her shoes were gone, and her long hair was spread out on the sand like that of a beached mermaid.

A new feeling awakened in his chest, and he winced and closed his eyes. Then opened them again in shock as a terrified female scream split the air.



CHAPTER THREE

MINERVA HAD PRETENDED that she'd fainted—it seemed the safest thing to do. But one couldn't remain unconscious forever, and the feeling of the man's eyes on her face was frightening her.

He looked as much a villain as the beggars and veterans she'd seen hanging around the poor areas of Naples. Yet, despite his fearsome appearance, he must surely mean her no harm. She was the victim of a shipwreck—albeit a small one—and *everyone* was primed to rescue and take care of shipwrecked persons. Weren't they? She preferred to think the best of people, even in such dire circumstances—he must be given the benefit of the doubt.

She opened her eyes. “Where am I? Where's everyone else?”

Alarm flashed across his features. “There are others?”

How could *he* be afraid of anything, this sturdy fellow with his wild gray eyes and tangled hair? *She* was the one who was entirely at his mercy.

“Yes.” She struggled to sit upright and suffered another bout of coughing. Her cheeks went hot. “Please forgive me.” She spat a mouthful of salt water onto the sand beside her.

Was he smiling at her? It was hard to tell, with half his face hidden by that wayward beard.

“We don't stand on ceremony here. If you need to empty your lungs, do so. Can you walk? I expect you need feeding and fresh water.”

He made her sound like a domestic animal. With a sinking heart, she stared up at the dark, menacing cliff face. What provender was there to be had in such a desolate spot? This

was no place for a young woman of gentle breeding. She needed to be restored to her guardian.

“We must go and look for the others.” It was unimaginable that they had been drowned. If she, small as she was, had survived the capsizing of the boat, the men must have, too. Searching for other survivors was the obvious thing to do, so why was her companion shaking his head?

“What others? You’re the only one on this stretch of beach.”

“My guardian, his valet, and a footman.” Why did he hesitate? Every moment counted. Had this man no heart?

“Persons of quality, then?” He raised an eyebrow.

A sudden gust of wind whipped up from the sea, reminding her that this was December and she would die if she couldn’t get warm and dry.

“What happened? Tell me.”

It was a struggle to answer—her teeth were chattering so much. “We... we were watching a burning ship. The sky went dark, and the wind got up. I don’t know how long we struggled. Something came flying at us, an oar was lost, there were rocks... I grabbed a piece of wood and clung on—” Her explanation ended with a sob.

“Enough.”

Two strong hands gripped her forearms and hauled her to her feet. The stranger shrugged out of his coarse wool jacket and helped her into it—in a surprisingly gentlemanly way.

He scowled. “I’ve no gloves here. Just pull the sleeves over your hands—they’re long enough.”

She’d expected to be revolted by the jacket, but it smelled of woodsmoke and sea air. She wrapped it around her gratefully.

“I suppose I’d better take you to the castle. You go up the path, and I’ll follow, lest you trip and fall. The exertion will

warm you up, I dare say.”

Not the most enthusiastic of rescues! Her tragic plight seemed no more than an inconvenience to him. But a castle sounded good. There would be leaping fires, hot water, and baths, someone from whom she could borrow shoes and warm clothing.

“But you *will* look for the others afterward, won’t you?”

He gazed past her. “Maybe. Or I can instruct Ariel to fly around the island. He’ll tell me if anything new has appeared. He found *you*, by the way.”

“Ariel?”

“My parrot. A gift from the sea, I suppose you might say. As you appear to be a well-bred young lady, you won’t enjoy his language—it’s as colorful as his plumage. He’s incorrigible. Trust me—I’ve tried.”

“You poop deck pope! You son of a ship’s cook!”

Minerva chuckled, then choked as a sob filled her throat. How could she be laughing at a time like this? She was on an island—with a terrifying and unwelcoming stranger—and no idea of what had happened to her guardian and the servants. She’d only just stopped feeling alone in the world. How could she bear to face that emptiness again?

The man was indicating a narrow cleft in the rock. She stared at it in alarm. Then she pushed her shoulders back, wrung out her skirts, and knotted them. Glancing ruefully at her one remaining stocking, she wondered if it was better to leave it on or take it off. The chances were that she would cut her feet in any case. This was *not* going to be pleasant.

“Oh, for the love of mercy! I’ll carry you if I must.”

How could he tell what she was thinking? She held his gaze, startled.

There was something familiar about him, but surely, they could never have met before. She tried to imagine what he might look like with the hair brushed back from his face and

his chin clean-shaven. Of course, he'd still have that white seam of a scar that ran from the corner of his mouth to his chin, but he'd look less like a brigand, certainly.

"I don't suppose we've met before."

"Don't be ridiculous. I would have remembered *you*." He cleared his throat. "Now, are you going to let me carry you or not?"

She looked at her feet again. She'd die of shame if this fellow carried her. Only—it was evident that she was to have no choice in the matter. He bent in front of her, grabbed her behind the knees, and hauled her onto his back. She had to fling her arms around his neck, or she'd have been thrown backward.

She could feel the muscles of his shoulders against her chest, the power of his hips against her thighs as he started off. She wriggled—this was no position for a lady. Lord Anthony would be furious!

"Keep still," came the harsh command. "Unless you'd rather I threw you over one shoulder like a sack of meal. At least I might have one hand free then. And there's no need to choke me, or we'll both go tumbling down the cliff."

"I don't even know your name." Although it was a bit late for introductions now.

"Call me Prospero." He gave a mirthless laugh. "The people in the village do."

Minerva knew a moment of hope as the man tilted forward and started scrabbling his way up the steep path. There was a village as well as a castle. That meant civilization! And perhaps, with good fortune, Lord Anthony, Pascoe, and George might have found their way there.

How they managed to make it to the top of the cliff, she didn't know. She kept her eyes closed for most of that uncomfortable, awkward, hideously embarrassing journey. She dared not look below to see how far they'd come nor above to see how much more she must endure.

The instant they reached the top, she was released. As she collapsed on the grass, all the breath bounced out of her by their ascent, a straggly Irish wolfhound bounded up and started licking her face.

Her rescuer towered over her, catching his breath, his fists on his hips.

“Anyone would think my animals never saw another living soul. I might be forgiven for imagining they were loyal to me but, evidently, I was wrong. Caliban! Here, Boy.”

Fortunately, she had no fear of dogs. When she’d lived in the royal household at Naples, there had been dozens of them—lap dogs, hunting dogs, and dogs small enough to hide up one’s sleeve. Lord Anthony kept several lurchers and a couple of spaniels, but nothing so huge as a wolfhound. She adored animals and didn’t mind being licked—the dog was more friendly than its master.

She gazed around, hoping to see the village or the castle, but the top of the cliff was little more comforting than its foot. The island—or promontory, or whatever it was—was steeply mounded in the middle, with dark ruinous buildings at the highest point. Most of the land was covered with short, pale grasses and the stubby skeletons of last summer’s heather. There was, however, a terrace that had been worked to provide beds for herbs and vegetables.

Another terrace was covered with strangely shaped buildings that looked like stone beehives. Some had empty, dark doorways, making her think of tomb openings. A couple boasted slatted doors, the wood scoured by sea winds and laced with a labyrinth of beetle activity.

“Come.”

The man who wanted to be called Prospero held out his hand. She wobbled to her feet and found that the grass was full of spikes and prickles but turned her face away so he wouldn’t read her thoughts again. That was positively the last time she would ride anywhere on a man’s back!

“Go in and sit by the fire. There’s bread and cheese, and wild onions today. The well water is always good.” He glanced toward the ruins.

Her heart sank still further. So that wrecked stonework was the *castle*?

“The monks who were here in the beginning and the castle builders who came after them chose a good spot but it meant they had to dig a well of inestimable depth. Stay away from it—there’s no power on earth that could get you out if you fell in. Besides which, it would poison the water supply.”

She glanced at him. Was he teasing, or was he in earnest? But that didn’t matter now.

“I’ll eat outside if you don’t mind, and then we can start looking for my companions.” That lofty castle gateway, those ruined but still imposing walls, screamed *prison* at her. She refused to go inside until she had a much better idea of what, and with whom, she was dealing.

“Suit yourself.” He disappeared, and she wandered around a little until her chilled and injured feet forced her to return to the castle gate.

A wooden platter awaited her, bearing a hunk of bread and a slice of cheese. The mug containing the water was a rough, red earthenware, common to many country kitchens across the west of England. She settled in a corner out of the wind and ate her fill.

It was amazing how much better she felt with some food inside her. The crashing sounds of the angry sea subsided, and the memory of that terrifying moment when she thought her last hour had come was pushed to one side. Dusk had softened the outlines of the castle, making the ruined walls less menacing.

Her meal completed, and with no sign of her rescuer returning, Minerva braved the castle gateway but did no more than peer within. It seemed wrong to penetrate any further without the company of her host. She’d been raised to be a

paragon of politeness, and even though her current situation was extraordinary, she still clung to the modes and manners that had served her until now.

But the beehive huts were no one's home. It would do no harm for her to explore, would it? She must at least keep moving, lest the cold claim her. Perhaps the huts were used as storerooms—she could look for a pair of shoes because, without them, she was virtually a prisoner on the island. She had no desire to cut her feet to ribbons on rocks.

She padded across the grass, moving swiftly past the dark, yawning maws of the doorless huts. One had swathes of dried plants suspended from the roof and was filled with a motley collection of bottles, jars, and cutting tools—it looked like the workshop of some medieval alchemist or apothecary. She hurried past and made for the most distant building, which seemed to have been kept in a better state of repair. Perhaps this was the storeroom she was hoping for.

A simple hook and loop held the door in place. She lifted the hook, but the door resisted her pressure. It must be stiff with age and the salty damp from the sea so, despite it being unladylike, she applied her shoulder to the wood and shoved.

The door swung open, and Minerva blinked until her eyes got used to the shadows. It was a very small space, providing just enough room for one person to lie down in. Would there have been a fire in here? She hoped so—it would be grim without one.

She was able to make out a miniature portrait fixed to the wall. Moving closer, she discovered that it was of a woman sporting one of the high, complicated wigs that had been so popular in the previous century. Her costume was of that century, too, with the low, square neckline, the extravagant fall of lace at the cuffs, and the cinched-in waist.

A wooden box was placed in front of the picture. A drying spray of late-blooming heather had been placed upon it, like an offering on a pagan altar. There was a coin purse, too,

embroidered and much faded, and a beautifully worked handkerchief, bearing the initials *PP*.

She was about to examine the handkerchief more closely when a shadow filled the doorway, plunging the cell into darkness.

“What do you mean by spying on me? Is this how you reward me for saving you from the sea? I’ve a good mind to throw you off the clifftop.”

The low hiss of his anger and the menacingly soft tone of his voice were more effective than if he had shouted at her.

She quivered. “I am so, so sorry.” She had no idea that she was doing any harm, but this was clearly a private place, and she should have trusted her instinct and left well alone.

He stepped away, and she hurried outside, not daring to look at his face.

The door crashed back into place, making her wince, and she rubbed her hands over her arms as goose-pimples exploded on her skin. His gaze was like a stab of ice. She’d inadvertently broken his trust—little wonder he was furious. She bent her head and heard him draw in a breath.

“I found one survivor—I’ve brought him up with me. The others you spoke of must have perished.” There was a pause. “I’m sorry.”

Only one survivor? Lord help her! And Lord help the souls of those poor wretches who had perished at sea.

It had to be Lord Anthony, her guardian. He *must* be the one who had survived. Because if it was not, what on earth was going to happen to her?



CHAPTER FOUR

PARYS HAD NEVER expected to feel the pangs of jealousy. But when Minerva turned away and flung herself into the arms of the devil he'd rescued from the flooded causeway, madness seized him.

To see that sweet, young innocent in the grip of his inhuman brother was too much. He dragged Minerva off, grabbed Anthony by his collar, and shook him.

“What are you doing?” Minerva clung to his arm, but her strength was nothing against his.

“Giving this dog the treatment that he deserves—as should *you*.”

To think that his deadliest enemy should fall into his power! It was almost as if he had willed it so, for it was what he craved with every waking hour; it was what penetrated his dreams with grim scenes of revenge.

He clenched his jaw—the superstitious Cornish would believe he'd brought the shipwreck about through wizardry and magic spells. They knew he read aloud in Latin and other languages. They knew he had a grimoire and a copy of *Culpeper's Herbal* in his possession—both gifts from the sea and surprisingly well-preserved. To a gentleman, such books wouldn't look out of place on a library shelf, but to the common people, if a hermit living in a ruined castle had them, he *must* be involved in the Dark Arts.

Let them think that. He didn't want anyone to know he was constantly experimenting on himself, trying to find a cure for the malaise that sometimes assaulted him, depriving him of both energy and will. The world must believe Parys Pendorran strong in both mind and body—admission of weakness could be his undoing.

“Ouch!” Pain lanced through his foot. Had that little chit just stamped on him? He glared at her.

“Unhand my guardian at once, sir, or I may be obliged to stamp on you again. Trust me—I’m not normally a violent person, but the circumstances are exceptional.”

His stomach twisted as he stared at her determined, elfin face. He forced down his amusement—it was unfitting to laugh at such a moment. Unless it was the cackling laugh of some archvillain from a book by Hugh Walpole.

“Your guardian and I are known to one another. Are we not, Anthony? And I know all his filthy little secrets. The rest of the world will, too, if I let him live long enough to be tried for the most heinous crime of all.”

His younger brother lost all his remaining color. So—Anthony hadn’t recognized him until now. Unsurprising, really—he’d grown increasingly feral during his time in the castle. Not that Anthony would have expected to see him ever again, except in Hell.

Parys resisted a shudder. When Anthony had set him adrift in that tiny boat, he’d already been close to death. If only he’d had the strength to swim to the beach and throttle the man!

“Parys? You’re alive? God be praised!”

Parys rolled his eyes. Such perfidy! “You didn’t think you’d ever meet me again, did you? In fact, you meant to make sure of it when you pushed me back out to sea instead of bringing me in to shore.”

Minerva released her hold on him and stepped back, her bosom heaving.

Devil take it—he needed to get the girl inside and warmed up before she fainted. She’d been through a terrible experience, and he could not, in good conscience, hold it against her that Anthony was her guardian. Anthony could wait—revenge was a dish best served cold, was it not?

He let go of Anthony's collar and enjoyed watching him collapse to his knees on the springy turf. The coward had no fight left in him and was entirely at Parys' mercy—the gods had been kind. *Finally*.

“You will stay here, brother of mine, while I take the girl to the castle and make sure she doesn't catch her death. I'll deal with you in my own good time.”

“The young lady is Miss Harte, my ward, and I advise you to treat her chivalrously.” Anthony's head sank back onto his chest. He looked beyond exhausted.

“Sir!” The woman gripped Parys' arm. “You can't just leave him here!”

Yes, he could, and he was damned well going to. “This cur is going nowhere. The causeway is flooded and the currents are too treacherous to swim in. But to make certain that he awaits my pleasure, Caliban will watch over him. Here, Boy! Guard.”

Caliban stalked forward, his legs stiff, his head lowered. He growled menacingly. Anyone unaware of the dog's foolish, affectionate nature, should be willing to keep *extremely* still under such circumstances.

“But, sir! Prospero!”

“Not Prospero anymore, Miss Harte. I can now reveal myself as the *true* Duke of Tremar.” He stared at his brother, but there was no response. Miss Harte looked ready to faint, so he hoisted her up, threw her over his shoulder, and marched back to the castle.

As he had intended, the movement prevented her from speaking. He needed time to think, and the prattling of a young woman who knew nothing of his circumstances was a hindrance. He would fill her up with some of the rum he'd acquired from last winter's shipwreck. As soon as she was fast asleep and tucked up warm, he could deal with Anthony however he saw fit.

Parys entered one of the few chambers of the castle that still boasted a roof, the kitchen. He kept a fire going throughout the year—the place was cold, even in summer. Setting his burden down, he poked at the embers and threw a handful of driftwood into the hearth.

A faint sound had him spinning around, and he intercepted Miss Harte before she reached the door.

“You’re going nowhere, Miss. You’ll abide by my wishes while you’re under my roof.”

She tilted her head and stared up at him, hazel eyes flaring. “You are no gentleman, sir, whoever you may pretend to be! Have you no humanity? That’s my guardian outside, who’s been tossed about in the storm, just as I have. He needs the same succor that you’ve offered me. Although I have to say that you’ve offered your assistance most grudgingly.”

He raised his eyebrows. No one had taken him to task since childhood. He’d been Duke of Tremar for three short years before the perilous escapade in France had deprived him of everything. He was a man used to being obeyed.

“I shan’t apologize. Just be grateful for what I have to offer you.”

He turned his back on her and busied himself with the rum—the sooner she stopped questioning and obstructing him, the better. Leaving the poker deep in the embers, he hunted through his simples for something to put the irksome young female to sleep.

“Do you want anything more to eat?” His potion would sit better in her stomach if she ate. He didn’t want to risk poisoning her.

“I won’t touch another bite unless you bring Lord Anthony inside.”

There was no need to turn around. He could just imagine Miss Harte standing there, with her arms folded across her pert breasts, her bare foot tapping on the flagstones.

Bare feet! He ought to do something about that. It would be a shame for her pretty toes to be damaged.

“Very well. I *will* apologize, if it means you obey me. And I promise I’ll bring your dastardly guardian inside. But only once I have dealt with you.”

He poured rum into a tankard, added the herbs, then inserted the poker with a pleasing hiss until the drink was warm enough.

“Sit by the fire,” he ordered, pointing to the kitchen’s only chair. Getting enough furniture to make the place habitable had been hard, but the sea was generous. The villagers had been, too—partly to win his favor because they were scared of him and partly in payment for the use of his knowledge and penmanship. He never had guests, but he certainly had a few *customers*.

Miss Harte appeared to enjoy the mulled rum, and she pointed her feet toward the flames.

“Don’t do that—you’ll get chilblains. Wait there—I’ll find you something to put on your feet. Ariel!”

The parrot soared in through the doorway, landed on his perch, and cocked his head.

“Watch the young lady. Sound the alarm if she even *looks* in the direction of the door.” He knew, of course, that the bird could not be commanded, and if it ever understood his wishes, it had certainly never acceded to them. But Miss Harte did *not* know that, and hopefully, just the threat would keep her in her place until he returned.

He mounted the spiral stairs to his sleeping chamber. It was rustic, plain, and poor. He was used to it, but Miss Harte would be appalled, as would anyone from his past life. But compared to the French prison in which he’d expected to die, it was a luxury beyond dreams.

The sheets were clean enough—he hadn’t let himself become *that* uncaring. But it would be best to put her on top and throw a cover over her—she was so delicate, with that

pale, almost translucent skin—such rough cloth would chafe. Now then—shoes. What did he have that would suit?

Ah, yes. The sheepskin boots the old shepherd had given him in return for that lumbago medication. They'd always been too small for him, but he hadn't the heart to refuse them. Pleased with his discovery, he hurried downstairs to offer them to Miss Harte.

Good. She was already nodding drowsily, the firelight gilding the gentle curve of her cheek and sparking bronze highlights from her unbound hair. How Anthony had managed to rear a young lady so refined and beautiful, Parys could not imagine. The fellow must've put her into the hands of a superlative governess and lady's maid.

Perhaps Miss Minerva Harte was Anthony's penance, his way of giving back to the world what he had stolen from it, in the shape of something too perfect to be true.

His wits were wandering. Kneeling before her, he took one foot in his hands and massaged the blood back into it. She made no objection—just observed him with those magnificent hazel eyes, reflecting back the leaping flames in a way he found utterly mesmerizing.

Shaking himself, he shoved the boots onto her feet, avoiding any further contact with her skin.

“This will do for now. Have you finished your drink? Good. Let's get you upstairs to rest for a spell while I decide what to do with my brother.”

“I would never have guessed that he was your brother. Are you sure you haven't made some terrible mistake?”

Bless her innocent heart! There was no mistake. He must forgive her naivety—she'd been coddled and cosseted and knew nothing of the viciousness of life. He, of course, had seen it in all its brutal and bloody reality. He'd seen suffering that no gently bred Englishwoman could imagine.

Nor should they. Their temperaments were too fine to deal with such knowledge. Although he and Miss Harte had been

born into the same social sphere, *his* experiences had cast a chasm between them.

“Are you telling me I don’t know my own brother?” His voice was gruff. “Don’t bother yourself about him—he’s tougher than you. I won’t have your death on my conscience, Child—let’s get you above.”

“Please don’t call me Child, sir.” Her voice was slurred.

The rum and soporific herbs were working their magic. He was ready to catch her when she stood up and swayed, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world to gather her into his arms and carry her up the winding stairs, carefully avoiding any bangs or bumps.

What a fool he was! He was treating her as if she were made of spun glass. She’d already survived a shipwreck *and* had been brave enough to stand up to him—this little faerie creature was stronger than she looked.

He lowered her gently to the bed, straightened her limbs, and pulled the fine woolen cover over her.

“Sleep now. No harm will come to you—I’ll be downstairs. Just call out if you need me.”

As he wandered out into the chilly passageway, he realized he was smiling. “Enough of that, you fool.” He’d soon be disappointing her grievously. So much so that she wouldn’t feel an ounce of gratitude to him for saving her life on a bitter winter’s day. She wouldn’t even lay a flower on his grave...

He paused near the foot of the stairs and ran his fingers over the stonework, smoothed by years of use. Then, he forced himself to go outside and seize his brother once more by the collar to drag him half-running, half-stumbling, down to the castle dungeons. This rough treatment prevented Anthony from protesting, but Parys kept every sense alert—the man could not be trusted to play fair. The scar on his cheek was proof of that.

Having settled him in the only cell relatively clear of detritus, Parys hunted around for some time until he found a

suitable length of wood with which to bar the door. Then he stood and glared at Anthony, picturing in his mind the bloody revenge he intended to have. There were several sharp knives in his possession that would make short work of Anthony's life. But did he really want to be a murderer? Did he want to lower himself to his brother's level?

There was a naïve young woman upstairs. When he took his revenge on her guardian, she must be well away from here. Curse it! Why could the storm not have delivered just Anthony? Why did it have to saddle him with Miss Harte as well?

His brother seemed to have fallen into an exhausted doze. Parys exited the cell, barred the door and made his way back up the narrow spiral staircase with Caliban at his heels. They were nearing the kitchen when the hound let out a menacing growl. Parys froze, every sense alert.

Somebody coughed, then belched. This was followed by laughter—but not from the same throat.

Who had dared to enter his kitchen uninvited?



CHAPTER FIVE

MINERVA HAD ALMOST drifted off when she heard a clamor from below. Men's voices raised in anger. Lord Anthony!

She scrambled from the bed, swayed, and fell against the wall. Her sharp cry of pain must have reached the ears of the people downstairs, for there was a heavy thud, followed immediately by the pounding of footsteps on the stairs.

Terrified, she looked for something to hide behind, but the room was devoid of furniture. The door! She must be behind it when it opened, but her feet refused to obey her commands, and she was reaching dizzily for the bed when the door was flung wide.

Prospero! A relief. Or was it? The look on his face had her cringing back in alarm.

His frown vanished.

"Why are you up? Did you fall? Are you hurt?" He took her arm and sat her on the bed.

The touch of his fingers was magnetic. She resisted the urge to lean into him, to allow his strength to counteract her weakness. "I heard a noise. What's happened?"

The scowl returned. "Two scurvy knaves had the gall to steal rum from my stores, then avail themselves of the comfort of my kitchen."

Two more men at the castle? George and Pascoe—it had to be!

"Oh, sir, don't you understand? These must be our servants—our footman and the duke's valet!"

He turned his face away. "Don't call him that."

Not call Lord Anthony the duke? Hadn't Prospero said something earlier about wanting to be called Tremar himself? She didn't understand—her mind was too clouded. Despite this powerful urge to question him, she knew she couldn't find the polite, persuasive words she needed. Why was it so hard to move and speak? That rum was far more potent than she expected—a lady should know better than to quaff a gentleman's drink.

No matter how all-at-sea she felt, it was imperative that she resist the tempting refuge of sleep. Her companion was too tempestuous to have Pascoe and George at his mercy—she'd seen how summarily he'd dealt with Lord Anthony.

"I'd like to go down to them. But I fear my legs won't carry me."

"You'd do better to go back to sleep. They don't need a woman's ministrations. And it strikes me that you're too well-bred to look upon male belligerence and intoxication in all its foul manifestations."

Belligerence? She remembered that thud. But all was quiet now. *What had he done?*

She edged farther away, hoping he wouldn't notice. "But they are *my* people, sir. I *must* go down to them. As Lord Anthony's ward, I consider it my duty to ensure the welfare of our servants."

He swung back to look at her. "Duty? Don't speak to me of that. I always knew mine, even when it put me in the direst peril. Duty to my tenants, my servants, my country, my family. But not every man is as dutiful as *me*. Your guardian, for example—"

He drew in a long breath. She sensed the tension in him, the battle with some deep emotion he had no intention of revealing. It must have been hard for him, living like a pauper in this place, cut off from human society, alone with his darkest thoughts.

“Forgive me—I spoke out of turn. But all the same, I would like to see them. If only to find out if they *are* who I hope they might be. It would make me so much more comfortable to know that no one perished when our boat was destroyed.”

He stood, bringing her with him. “I suppose putting names to the felons might be helpful. But I insist on carrying you down the stairs to be sure you don’t hurt yourself.”

That might be sensible. She raised her arms, expecting to put them around his neck and be carried in front of him like a limp damsel from a book illustration. But no. Romance was not in Prospero’s repertoire. He caught her wrists together and heaved her over his broad shoulder, so her head hung by his waist and her legs flailed against his back.

This man had no sense of decency! She must forget that she had pitied him. Right now, she felt more inclined to kick him, only—her position was so precarious as they made their way down the spiral stairs, it would have been unwise.

When they reached the kitchen, his gentleness returned, and he set her down carefully, one arm grasped tightly around her waist, keeping her upright.

She gasped. The two intruders were, indeed, the footman, George, and his lordship’s valet, Pascoe. Both men lay unconscious before the hearth, their faces red, tongues lolling from their mouths. The hound, Caliban, stood over them, hackles raised, teeth bared.

She wrenched out of Prospero’s grasp, staggered, and sank to the floor. Then, uncaring of her lack of dignity, she crawled over the stone flagstones to the fallen men. First, she shook Pascoe’s shoulder—he was the older of the two and the least likely to survive such a battering as the storm had given him.

The man moaned, then let out a sound like a grunting pig. Alive, then, thank the merciful heavens!

She turned to George. He, too, was fast asleep and snoring gently. Each man sported a round, red mark on their forehead.

Turning her head slowly, she glared at Prospero.

“They weren’t asleep a moment ago—I heard them.” She thought of what he’d given her to drink, the rum and herbs. Had the herbs added more than flavor to that drink? Had the servants drunk the same mixture? No—there hadn’t been time. What power had this peculiar creature used to subdue two men? Magic? Witchcraft? Anything was possible on this island that wasn’t an island, where a dead woman was worshipped in a beehive hut, and a multi-colored bird spoke with a human voice.

Prospero raised an eyebrow. “I was in a hurry, thinking you’d hurt yourself. I had tired of the argument anyway, so I ran their two thick skulls together. They were so drunk that I imagine they barely felt it.”

There was no apology in his expression. He was a hard man, for all that he had been kind to her. For the hapless Pascoe and George, there was no compassion, just anger.

“These are not common thieves, sir—they’ve been shipwrecked. They have done what anyone would do under such circumstances and looked to their well-being before anything else. How could they know that the liquor they found belonged to anyone, especially if you weren’t storing it in the inhabited part of the castle? As far as they knew, they’d been shipwrecked on a desert island, like Robinson Crusoe. That kind of plight makes a person desperate, and they take succor wherever they can find it.”

“You *have* led a sheltered upbringing, haven’t you, Miss Harte—do you always believe the best of people? I suppose I should be glad that you’ve escaped Anthony’s evil influence. But naivete is not a virtue in *my* book. You won’t survive in the world of men if you can’t look into the depths and recognize a black heart when you see one.”

What black heart? Her guardian’s? Or his own?

There was no time to question him—she needed to make sure he did no further harm to the servants.

“I didn’t ask for your opinion of me. Tell me what you mean to do with these men.”

“Fortunately, the dungeons of this castle have survived the ravages of time. They can sit and contemplate their sins alongside their employer. When they have sobered up, they can make their apologies to me, and I will let them go.”

Hope fizzed in her breast. “And you’ll let Lord Anthony go as well?”

His eyes blazed at her. “Never!” Reaching down, he seized both George and Pascoe by the collar and hauled them upright. Pascoe retched.

“Don’t you dare cast up your accounts in front of this young lady. Miss Harte, stay where you are. Caliban! Guard.”

Before she could object, Prospero had turned his back on her and dragged both men through the door toward a darkened passageway.

“No! Wait!”

Why did he react with such fury to her suggestion that he release her guardian? There was some story here—could it be true that this merciless, mannerless hermit was Lord Anthony’s older brother? And if he wanted to be called Tremar, he must want the dukedom. Anything that threatened Lord Anthony also endangered her.

She must get the truth out of their captor, somehow or other. And as soon as she had full control of her faculties, she would find a way to release the poor souls incarcerated by the castle’s cruel master.



CHAPTER SIX

WHEN PARYS RETURNED to the kitchen, what he saw caught his heart in an agonizing grip.

The fire had been built up to a cheerful blaze. Miss Harte reclined partly on the floor, partly propped against a barrel. Caliban had flopped down by her side, his head resting in her lap while she fondled his ears.

Neither seemed aware of Parys' presence, so he looked his fill and tried to make sense of the pain in his chest. Regret? At something he might have had but now never would? Loss? There had been love in his life once before, love for his family—even love for Anthony before he'd turned out wholly bad. Or was he wounded by the treachery of the animal he'd saved from a watery grave?

Or something even more unnerving? As the pain threatened to overwhelm him, he clapped his hands.

“Caliban, you rump-fed runion—is *this* how you repay me for my kindness?”

The dog scrambled to its feet, long legs flailing as its claws scabbled on the unforgiving stone. Before he knew it, the animal was up on its hind legs, both paws on Parys' shoulders, licking his face.

“Get down, foul fiend. This won't make me forgive you.”

“Foul fiend! You stuffed cloak! You bag of guts!”

Parys pushed the dog away and bit his lip. Ariel had a unique way of defusing a situation with his vocabulary of nautical swear words.

It took a moment to compose himself. “You must have some mysterious power, Miss Harte, to have tamed this

ferocious beast.”

She gazed up at him, sleepy, relaxed—and divinely lovely.

“Not at all. I’ve just been kind to him and done for him what I thought he wanted. Generosity is no bad thing, whether it be given to a person or a creature. Where did your parrot learn to talk like that? He sounds like a real person—but not the kind I would wish to meet. How are the two servants? I hope you gave them something warm to sleep in, if they have not the benefit of a fire.”

It hadn’t occurred to him—he was used to the cold. Although the old dungeons would be far more chill than this room. He shook himself—this was no time for compassion. Their time would come—he’d take all three invaders to the mainland and offer them up to the local constable. Even if it meant besmirching the name of Pendorran.

He frowned. He couldn’t afford to think about that now. Miss Harte needed to get off the hard, cold floor and away from the fire—her cheeks looked feverishly rosy.

“Caliban! Get below and guard that dungeon door.”

The dog looked regretfully at Miss Harte, then slunk off down the spiral stairs.

“I took the liberty of feeding him. You’d left some raw bones in a crock—I assumed they were for him.”

Parys rolled his eyes. The woman had been here but a few hours, and already she was turning his familiars against him and making decisions that should have been *his* to make. The sooner he was rid of her, the better.

“Foolish wench. If he’s to guard our prisoners, it’s best to keep him hungry.”

“Isn’t that cruel?” She looked shocked.

He jabbed a hand through his hair. “He knows I’d never let him starve. I just don’t want him falling asleep.”

Why was he defending himself? *His* house, *his* rules. “It’s late. I’ll take you back up to bed and sleep down here.” Then, in the morning, he’d decide what to do with her and the unwelcome guests in the dungeons. Despite the visceral urge to tear his brother apart with his bare hands, he must seek a more commonly recognized form of justice. And if English justice failed him, he’d take the law into his own hands and deal with Anthony, whatever the consequences. The life he had eked out here was barely living, anyway—would he care at all if he were imprisoned, transported... hanged? Why should he care if the name of Pendorran were brought into disrepute?

“You spoke earlier of black hearts, sir. But what about black thoughts? Your mind is full of them.”

Was it so obvious? He schooled his expression to one of neutrality. He hoped.

“Now is not the time to talk. You should go to bed.” He held out his hand. “I’ll take you. And I promise not to throw you over my shoulder this time.” Even though he’d experienced a delicious ripple of pleasure from doing it.

She pulled herself up, waved his hand away, and perched on the edge of the barrel.

“I refuse to sleep. It’s not right that I should do so when you have my friends in your dungeon. What kind of heartless creature would that make me?”

He sighed and slumped down into his chair, pushing his feet toward the fire. What had he done to deserve this shattering of his peace, this thorn in his side, this goad to his conscience?

“If you mean to stay awake, then I must stay awake with you. I clearly can’t expect my guard dog to do his duty where you’re concerned. I left him to guard you for your own good, you know. The currents hereabouts are treacherous, and the depth of the water over the causeway varies depending on the

time of year. It's more unpredictable now, in winter." This wasn't entirely true, but she wouldn't know any better.

"Tell me how you came to be here, and perhaps I'll understand and be able to forgive you."

He stared into the guileless hazel eyes that watched him, and acute discomfort snaked down his spine.

"What need have I of your forgiveness? You don't even know me."

"If Lord Anthony is, indeed, your brother, then we are family, you and I."

Family? He'd given up all hope of that long ago. In fact, he'd given up on everything but the expectation of one day revenging himself on his brother. Only, despite vivid imaginings, he hadn't decided on what shape that vengeance would take, and now that Anthony was physically here, the thought of sullying his hands directly was less appealing than before. Did he want to clear a path so he could return to his ancestral home? Would Anthony stand in his way if he wished to take up the title?

How incredible that, after all his plotting, his enemy was now at his mercy. The superstitious Cornish would have said that Parys had used supernatural means to capsize Anthony's boat. But it would be folly to believe the folklore that had been woven about him, that he was a magician, that the island was haunted by some faerie spirit who spoke with the voice of a man but had no shape or form. But if some otherworldly force *had*, indeed, allowed him to shape the world so that his brother became his victim, what was its purpose? Was it fair or foul? And what part did Miss Harte play in all of this? At no point, not even in his darkest hour, had he imagined that a shining angel in female form would grace him with her presence.

"The idea of us being family displeases you?"

"The matter is a complex one." What should he tell her? And what would she *do* with that knowledge?

He shook himself. This was ridiculous. He had his enemy imprisoned, and there was nothing she could do about it.

“In my experience—and I admit it is limited—people generally feel better when they’ve unburdened themselves of unwelcome thoughts.”

“You have wisdom beyond your years.” He hadn’t meant to sound so cynical. “Perhaps we should talk about *you* first. I’d feel less wary if I knew more about my confessor.”

She leaned forward and hugged her knees, the sparkle gone from her eyes. “If I tell you *my* secret, will you tell me yours?”

He longed to take her hand and offer the comfort he sensed she needed. But that would create a bridge between them. Which would be folly.

He held her gaze and nodded.

“Very well. But I’m struggling to stay awake, you know, so I’ll be brief. I don’t truly know who I am. There are rumors that I was born out of wedlock and that my mother was, at the time, the wife of Lord Hamilton, and that my father was Horatio Nelson. I know nothing about it myself, obviously, but Lady Hamilton was a great friend of the King and Queen of Naples, and I was put into their care and brought up as an adjunct of the court. I don’t mean like a princess, of course, but I was treated well and given the best education a girl could hope for. Then, when I was seventeen, and everyone was wondering what to do with me, Lord Anthony arrived in Naples and wormed his way into the hearts of the king and queen.”

“Yes. He was always very good at that. He had both looks and charm, despite the latter being deceptive. Did you ever learn why he left England in the first place?”

She shook her head. “I assumed that he was on the Grand Tour.”

“Hah! Nothing so commonplace. He killed a man in a duel and fled abroad, hoping to return when the fuss had died

down.” Parys had worked hard to prevent an uproar, and look how Anthony had repaid him!

His words seemed to echo around the stone chamber, and then the room fell silent. Even the fire held its breath.

Miss Harte’s eyes were larger and rounder than ever. She didn’t believe him. She didn’t *want* to believe him, but he pinned her gaze to his with icy determination. The whole world, including this beautiful innocent, needed to know what Anthony truly was.

“I’m sure he would not have hurt anyone without good reason.”

Love, that destroyer of foolish men, had been the reason. Unfortunately, the woman that Anthony had been caught with was married.

“Believe whatever you want. It doesn’t change the truth. But we were talking about *you*.” His brother could wait. For now, he’d content himself with preparing the ground for the more significant shock that awaited Miss Harte.

“Lord Anthony was kind to me, and over the years, he became attached to me. He was like an uncle to me, and he behaved himself impeccably while he was in court circles. When he received some news that drew him back to England, he offered to take me with him as his ward and find me a husband amongst the English nobility. The king and queen were delighted, and I was happy, too, as I was returning to the land of my alleged parents.”

Parys’ fingers dug into his palms. He knew damned well what news it was that had brought Anthony hurtling back to England, confident in the knowledge that his crime had been forgotten.

He made no attempt to spare her feelings. “It was news that thrilled him. I, the Duke of Tremar, had disappeared. He won’t have told you that, I imagine.”

“He *did* tell me that, as a matter of fact. He sent agents out trying to find you.”

“Nonsense. He made *no* effort to find me. He was ecstatic about having the duchy within his sights, and had no intention of relinquishing it. He’s hated me since we were small. You see this disfigurement on my face?” He touched the corner of his mouth.

“That scar? It is no disfigurement, I assure you.”

He didn’t need her soft words. He didn’t need her sympathy either—it made him angry.

“This was done when we were but boys. It was meant to be a play fight, but Anthony had removed the button from his foil. You see, he was born wicked, and his heart will remain blackened until the day he dies.” Which could be quite soon.

“I beg to differ. Nobody is born wicked. And whatever Lord Anthony may have done in the past, he has been eager to make amends ever since. I can assure you,” she said, standing and walking to the other side of the room, “that he runs the duchy with both skill and generosity. His tenants have nothing to complain of. The servants are well looked after, and the estate and appurtenances are kept in good repair. Lord Anthony is every inch a noble and a gentleman. He has been the perfect custodian, and you’ll thank him for it when you come home.”

Parys leaped to his feet. This was insufferable. How could so many lies pour from so sweet a mouth? He must put her right immediately.

He caught her by the shoulders and gave her a gentle shake. “Listen to me, and I’ll tell you why I disappeared. After my parents died, I resigned my commission to take up my duties at home. While looking into how the estate was managed, I discovered that some of our tenants were smugglers who’d been supplying the late duke and duchess with luxuries for years. Just over three years ago, I got word that during their latest run, the French authorities had captured them, accused them of spying, and thrown them into a prison on the Normandy coast. I couldn’t abide the thought of my people rotting in some foreign jail. I know it was foolhardy of

me, but I had military experience and could handle a boat, so I took a few veterans with me to mount a rescue. Fortune didn't smile on us—we were captured and incarcerated in the same prison for several months before there was any opportunity of escape. We were swiftly pursued and ended up fighting for our lives.”

He had to pause—his throat clogged at the memory. “I don't know what became of my companions—they must have been killed or taken. I made it to the boat and across the Channel but I had a head wound and struggled to navigate. By the time I recognized Tremar Bay, I was in a pitiful condition, having fallen sick with jail fever, or some type of pox. Sores erupted all over me.”

He'd expected her to pull away in disgust, but her delicate hands now grasped his elbows. She looked both startled and sympathetic.

“How brave you were! Who else would have shown such loyalty, such courage? You risked all your comforts, all your privilege, your very *life*, to help others.”

“That's not the end of the story.” He bowed his head, bringing it closer to hers, and lowered his voice. “When I reached the bay, my energy was exhausted. I managed to light my lantern and hang it from the stern, then lay back, hoping I'd be found before dawn.”

“I'm so sorry for your suffering.” She touched his jaw, and he suddenly wanted it to be clean-shaven and more pleasant to touch. “Obviously, you recovered,” she added, smiling, “for there are no scars besides this one. What happened then?”

He would never understand the complexities of women. He and she had been fighting a moment ago, but now Miss Harte was full of concern for him. How would she feel when he revealed his brother's perfidy? Suddenly, it mattered more than anything else that she should believe *him* and relinquish her attachment to Anthony.

“I woke in the morning to find the boat scraping and rattling beneath me. I looked up, and there was my brother, who I’d thought still in Italy, staring at me in absolute horror, like he’d seen a ghost. When I found the energy to speak, he stared at me in disgust and shook his head. I tried to get out of the boat, but he rocked it from side to side until I toppled over, too weak to resist. I knew what he was doing—he was pushing the boat back out to sea with me in it. He had no intention of saving me. The lure of the duchy had too great a hold on him.”

He sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. This was the first time that anyone—save his dog and his bird—had ever heard the story of the despicable act that had forced him to spend the past three years rebuilding his strength on this comfortless rock.

Miss Harte’s mouth was open in shock. He gazed at it, distracted by the bow-shaped curve of her upper lip, and entranced by the luscious fullness of the lower. She stiffened, then trembled in his grasp.

“I cannot believe it. I cannot believe that Anthony would do anything so heinous. To his own brother! You must have been delirious—there must be some mistake. The current seized you, or he slipped and fell, or there was a sudden sea swell.”

“There is no mistake.” He should have been angry with her. He should have been cut to the quick that she didn’t believe him, that she still held true to Anthony. So—he’d make her think again. He’d soon teach her who was the better brother.

But not now. His fury at Anthony, his frustration with Miss Harte, dissolved like mist on a fine day, leaving him strangely elated. Was it cathartic to have finally told someone his story? Or was it the simple pleasure of this woman’s proximity, the touch of her hands on his arms, and the salt-smelling disarray of her hair? He’d been starved of female company so long—starved of *any* company worth the name, in truth.

Those lips. Those eyes! *Now*, who was the magician? She had bewitched him.

“Prospero? Sir? Parys! What are you doing?” Her hands moved to his chest and pushed.

He didn’t know what he was doing. The only thought in his head was that if he didn’t seize the moment, he’d regret it for the rest of his life.

He hadn’t been brought up to *ask*. He’d learned to take. Gathering Miss Harte against his chest, he lifted her.

And kissed her with all the yearning in his deprived soul.



CHAPTER SEVEN

MINERVA WAS NOT one to pick a fight, or rage, or throw a tantrum. But she knew full well that, if she were to be considered worthy of the title of lady, she must slap Parys' cheek.

But there was no fighting this man. She sensed his hunger, his pain, and couldn't summon the willpower to resist him. The touch of his lips on hers was intoxicating, the feel of his muscular chest crushing her breasts—exhilarating. He made every inch of her feel alive, beautiful, desirable.

He broke the kiss long before she'd finished relishing the exquisite sensations he aroused. She was set down, well away from him, still stunned by her reaction. She dared not look him in the eyes lest he be aware of her body's betraying response.

She couldn't remember when she'd last been held. She'd certainly never been embraced like *that*. If nothing else came out of this adventure, of one thing, she was certain. She wanted to be held again.

“My apologies. That was not the behavior of a gentleman.” His tone was harsh.

No. But it was the behavior of a man who'd lived alone, eaten up by bitterness, and deprived of everything he'd once held dear. Parys Pendorran had been betrayed—and starved of loyalty and love.

That he was still capable of passion was clear from his kiss. That he could still love was suggested by the memorial to his mother in the beehive hut.

“You are forgiven. Of that, at any rate.” She tangled her fingers together, desperate to dispel thoughts of wicked passion and endless embraces. If she fell apart the first time a

man touched her, she was no better than her alleged mother, a woman who'd been generous with her favors.

If there was any of her purported father's courage in her, she needed it *now*.

"I don't know if I can forgive you for thinking so ill of Lord Anthony, however. Your tale is grim, but your accusations are grimmer still. What could have forced your brother to take such a desperate measure against you?"

"Why must you side with him, despite what I've told you?" The resentment in his voice tore at her.

Because Lord Anthony was all she knew—he was familiarity, comfort, security. The man before her was alien and disturbing in so many ways.

"Neither of us has heard *his* side of the story. There may be some part of the picture missing here. All I ask is that you speak to him. Call off your dog, release your prisoners and discuss the matter like the nobleman you are."

If he felt any guilt at having kissed and held her in so intimate a manner, then he owed her *something*. She was unaccustomed to using guile, but three men's lives rested in Parys Pendorran's hands. She must use whatever weapons she had at her disposal, or she'd never forgive herself.

"I can't do that. I've waited too long for this." His tone was as hard as Cornish granite.

She glared at him, no longer coy. He returned her look directly—any guilt he felt for kissing her was clearly gone.

Her heart beat harder. "So, what *do* you intend to do with them?" Surely, he had no intention of killing Lord Anthony? But a storm raged in those dark eyes, and she could imagine him capable of almost anything. How was she to tame the beast?

"Your servants? I merely wish to frighten them. Their loyalty is to Anthony, not to me, and I can't risk them freeing my brother before justice has been served. As for Anthony—I

will, for your sake, attempt to be the better man. I won't tear him limb from limb—at least, not in your presence.”

He strode across to the fire, then turned to face her. “They say revenge is a dish best served cold, and I understand that. So, ultimately, I mean to retrieve everything that he stole from me. I have decided to reclaim the duchy, the lands, my tenants, and the title. Anthony's servants will be cast into the street while he faces justice. His sentence will be harsh—be prepared to lose your guardian.”

What would happen to *her*, then? Would he throw *her* into the street as well? Saints alive! This man was as easy to hate as he would be to love!

Her cheeks flushed. Where had *that* thought come from? She quenched her embarrassment with a flood of anger.

“I'm not accustomed to arguing with anyone, but you've pushed me beyond the pale, sir. If all you want is revenge and to hurt people because *you* have been hurt, you're less of a man than I imagined. I might be able to forgive you that foolish kiss, but I can't forgive your intractability. Your brother may have been a scapegrace when he was young, but in all the time *I've* known him, he's been above reproach.”

Not only that, but she *had* sometimes noted a lack of warmth in Lord Anthony. Was it due to the guilt he carried?

Parys was looming over her now, but she refused to flinch.

“How can you say this to me? You know nothing of the matter but what I've just told you.”

Had he no respect for her point of view? She prodded at his chest. “That's exactly it. I only know what *you* have told me. I don't know what he'd say, and nor do you. If you send him to trial, how can you be certain of the outcome when you don't know the circumstances that drove him? And you never will unless you talk to him. Without locked doors, cells, and guard animals.”

She gnawed at the inside of her cheek—her words must be carefully chosen. “If *you're* not prepared to go down to him,

let me. He'll talk to me, especially if he knows there's no point in concealing what happened between you. I'll use the utmost diplomacy and ensure both of you are apprised of all the facts."

To her surprise and puzzlement, his chest quivered beneath her pressing fingers. The next instant, he burst out laughing. It was an awkward, strangled laugh—like his smile, it was rusty from lack of use.

She bristled indignantly. She'd just presented what she considered a very reasonable solution, and all he could do was mock her.

"Are you like this with Anthony? Do you try to wrap *him* around your little finger, too?"

Objectionable fellow. How *dare* he!

"On the contrary. He's a very strict guardian." Strict but fair—and doubtless too protective now that she was a grown woman. But there was no point in praising Lord Anthony in the hearing of his brother.

She sucked in a breath and lowered her shoulders. "Let me go down to them—that's all I ask. I won't undermine your authority or attempt to free them."

"Caliban won't let you. He has orders to let no one open that door but me."

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. "I'm simply offering to ask Lord Anthony what happened that night and bring his confession back to you. You may do with it what you will. I shan't judge the matter—only put the facts before you."

Parys shrugged his shoulders. "Very well. But I doubt he'll admit any wrongdoing in front of the servants. If he bargains with you, or tries to trick you, call Caliban down upon him."

Resting his fists on his hips, he regarded her with a look that sent skitters of awareness up her back. "You may be small and delicate, but you're quietly determined, Miss Harte. If I don't accede to your demands, you'll wear away at me like the

waves on the rocks below. Let's get this over with—carting people up cliff paths and down the stairs, and disputing with you, has wearied me.”

He sank back into his chair and he did, indeed, look exhausted all of a sudden. He reached for a small glass bottle, uncorked it and swallowed some of the murky liquid within.

“Go down to the men,” he told her, returning the bottle to its shelf. “I’ll give you a blanket or two for them. No—don’t think that I’ve softened toward them. I appreciate that no man can be put on trial if I let him freeze to death in the dungeons. Don’t concern yourself about tonight—you may keep my bed, and I’ll take Caliban’s usual place by the fire. *You* must be weary, too.”

A breakthrough! A small one, but it was a beginning. Now there was hope for the prisoners below. She seized the blankets Parys indicated, took up a candle, and left.

It was with great relief that she reached the final turn of the spiral stairs to hear the sound of voices from behind the heavy oak door. Lord Anthony sounded well—God be praised! The servants were mumbling, but perhaps that was from the drink.

She went down another step. Caliban raised his head, examined her, then settled his chin on his paws again, glaring. She hesitated—was she truly safe from the great dog?

“Hush! The hound may not understand your words, but if the bird is about, he could easily relate them back to his master.”

Her ears pricked up. What matter were the prisoners discussing that Parys mustn’t know about? It was only to be expected that they’d be plotting their escape, but it would make it harder to resolve matters between the brothers. What if harm should come to either one? The thought was unbearable.

“Get out of here, you unnatural creature.” Lord Anthony’s voice reached her as a hatch in the door slid open, and the parrot swooped out. Caliban growled, and the hatch was closed instantly. Minerva pressed against the wall as the

flustered Ariel swept past, but his flight extinguished her light. The pitch-dark stairwell became a place of haunting chill and horrid imaginings.

“If only we could poison the master as well as the beast. But I doubt our captor would be tempted by a dead rat.”

Why was Pascoe talking about poison? He must still be drunk, surely, if he was thinking of poisoning poor Caliban. The dog only did what his master commanded. And did Pascoe carry poison about his person? No—he could have no reason for it.

She held her breath, listening intently.

“We needn’t kill the dog.” Thank heavens! Lord Anthony spoke with the cool voice of reason. “We need to bait it, make it set up a ruckus which will bring the mad hermit who’s imprisoned us running.”

Mad hermit? Lord Anthony spoke as if he didn’t know Parys.

“Besides which, we cannot be sure that this lichen of yours is truly *Vulpicida*. It might just dye the dog’s tongue yellow.”

“And the rat may be too long dead to tempt the animal, my lord.” That was their footman, George, speaking. They were all in on the plot, then. But desperate men sought desperate remedies, didn’t they? Would *she* behave like that in the same situation? If threatened, perhaps.

But Parys wasn’t threatening them—he merely detained them. For now. If she had any hope of persuading him to be merciful, the prisoners must behave themselves. Perhaps, when she gave them the blankets, they’d think more kindly of Parys.

“George—we can leave nothing to chance. As soon as the fiend comes down to see what’s amiss with his dog, use that rock to best advantage. Then, if the man dies, we can claim that we acted in fear of our lives.”

Shock and betrayal numbed her. She must stop this madness at once before it went too far! She stepped forward, forgetting the remaining stairs, and tumbled down with a scream.

Caliban filled his chest and emitted an ungodly howl.

A door was flung open above, and she heard footsteps. As she struggled to rise and warn Parys, she realized she'd just created the deadly diversion she'd been hoping to prevent.



CHAPTER EIGHT

PARYS' HEART WAS in his mouth as he staggered down the spiral stairway in response to Miss Harte's scream. Of all the moments for his malaise to come upon him! Cursing all the powers on earth, he ricocheted from wall to wall in the darkness, grabbing at the central pillar more than once to avoid a neck-breaking fall.

He only slowed as he reached the bottom, realizing he might be about to thrust himself headlong into danger. But that didn't matter—what had they done to Minerva? He should never have sent her down alone. If they'd harmed her, mistaking her for him, they'd feel the full force of his wrath.

Caliban pressed a wet muzzle into his palm, whining softly.

“Prospero?”

Minerva's voice. She was safe. He could breathe again.

“Stop calling me Prospero. My name is Parys.” The jest no longer amused him. More than anything, he wanted to hear his real name on her lips.

He gave himself an inward shake. “What happened?”

There was a moment's silence. He reached for her in the darkness to reassure himself that she was unhurt, and fastened his fingers around her wrist. Then clung to it like a drowning man clutches a spar.

“What happened to your candle?” His strength was returning, little by little, thanks to his sorrel and elderberry potion, but he was still no match for Anthony.

“Ariel had found his way into the cell, and they pushed him out. He extinguished my light as he flew past. Caliban

was wrong to raise the alarm—they've done nothing wrong. I was about to see if I could push the blankets through the hatch to them.”

Despite the pounding of his heart in his ears, he could tell she had raised her voice. So that those within the dungeon could hear? Was it a warning of some kind? His jaw stiffened.

Still clasping her wrist with one hand, he dropped to one knee and felt about for her candle.

“Don't move. I have a tinder box in my pocket—I don't want there to be any... *accidents*.” He, too, spoke loud enough for the prisoners to hear.

After a moment, light flickered around the walls of the dank passageway. Minerva failed to meet his inquiring gaze. Caliban remained on the alert, staring at the closed door. There was a silence from beyond it that spoke louder than words.

He released her and pressed his cheek against the oak panels, speaking through the hatch.

“It was foolish of you to open this for Ariel—if my accursed parrot has managed to find his own way in, then he can find his own way out. You quite upset Miss Harte, who was bringing you blankets.”

“Won't you let us out now? We swear not to hurt you. Let's talk about this reasonably, now that everyone has calmed down.”

The sound of his brother's voice made Parys anything *but* calm. He flexed his muscles—power was returning to them.

“It's too late, and Miss Harte needs her rest. We're going to open the door now and throw some blankets in. Be grateful for what you have. If you try any tricks, I'll forget all chivalry, and Miss Harte will be thrown right in there with you.”

She paled, so he winked at her and saw an intriguing array of emotions cross her face.

When she nodded, he opened the door just wide enough for Caliban to poke his nose inside, and threw the blankets in.

Pulling the dog back, he thrust the door closed, and made a great deal of noise dropping the bar back into place. Those within must be in no doubt that they were still incarcerated.

There was a cacophony of complaints from inside. Minerva turned to him with a pleading look. “Could you not at least leave them a candle?”

“Men who can see are far more dangerous than those who cannot. It’s best they have nothing to do but fall asleep. Even though I hold all the cards, I don’t trust my brother. Go up and make yourself comfortable. Throw down a blanket for me if you can spare one—I’ll stay here with Caliban and watch the prisoners through the night. Perhaps you’d better bring me a candle, too. There are several in the box above the old sea chest.”

“Can’t I persuade you to come up? No, wait. If you insist on keeping these men prisoner, it’s only right you should share their discomfort. Perhaps I won’t bring you a blanket, or a candle, after all.”

Something in her posture belied the boldness of her words. She was afraid—but not of him, surely? She’d set her will against him more than once already.

“Miss Harte—”

“Minerva.” Her voice was a whisper.

“Minerva.” The name tasted delicious on his tongue. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m cross because I’m tired. And you put strange things in my drink, which has made me extremely confused. Very well—I will find what I can to make you comfortable.”

She took the candle, and he watched as both she and the light diminished while she climbed the stairs. When the darkness returned, it seemed deeper than before, and even the comforting warmth of Caliban pressed against him couldn’t quell a sense of devastating loneliness.

It had never been a problem for him. Not for the past three years, at any rate, even though he was more alone than he'd ever been in his life. Minerva Harte had destroyed his equanimity. She was making him soft.

Now that everything he wished for lay within his grasp, and now that his brother was at his mercy, he couldn't risk distraction. Not even the most appealing kind.

Tomorrow, as soon as the causeway was high and dry, Minerva Harte would be leaving.



CHAPTER NINE

WHEN PARYS AWOKE from a troubled night, gray light filtered down the stairwell, accompanied by a tantalizing smell. Was that—*cooking*?

He scrambled upright, then groaned at the aches in his body. Oh, well—there was comfort in the knowledge that his brother and his cronies probably felt worse, especially the pair who'd helped themselves to his rum last night.

It was a relief to see Caliban still alert at his post, staring at the door. The piece of wood with which Parys had barred it would probably break, given enough force from within. But his prisoners had not attempted it, knowing he and the dog were just outside. For all they knew, he was heavily armed—two of them had already learned not to test his patience.

He listened at the door. No sound. Good. He must go up and find out what Minerva was doing and grab a marrow bone to reward Caliban's obedience.

When he reached the kitchen, the aches and weariness left his body, and he halted to appreciate the scene before him. A finger of pale winter sunlight stabbed through the narrow window, illuminating Minerva as she knelt before a cheerful blaze. Her hair was pulled back from her face in an untidy plait, and her sleeves were pushed up as she stirred a pot over the fire. She hadn't noticed his arrival, so he took that moment to glance around him.

Incredible! She must have been up for some hours already. The flagstones looked as if they'd been swept, the dust-blackened cobwebs which had spanned the vaulted ceiling were gone, and everything was arranged in an orderly fashion. Fortunately, pretty much where he liked to keep it, or he'd never have been able to find anything again.

But that sort of consideration never bothered a woman intent on organizing, did it? His lips rose in a wry smile.

Then his lips fell again when he realized that she must be plotting something. She wanted to soften him up and change his mind about her guardian.

“Good morning, Tremar.”

He froze and stared in astonishment at Ariel, sitting primly on his perch.

“Parys!” Minerva rose in a single, graceful movement and smiled at him.

He grimaced. “What have you done?”

“Only cleaned and tidied a little. I have tried to teach Ariel some alternative phrases. His normal language is, shall we say, a little ripe. Oh, and I’ve used some of your provisions. I hope you don’t object.”

What was the point of objecting? Once the provisions were used, there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn’t exactly *un-cook* them. If only he’d woken sooner, he could have prevented her well-meaning actions. She’d wasted her time—nothing she did or said would change his mind about Anthony.

“I found some pickled eggs—not chickens’ eggs, so I assume they are from gulls.”

They were. He’d almost broken his neck trying to get them. He bit back a retort.

“There was some smoked fish and a sack of rice. I wasn’t sure what your herbs or spices were as they’re not labeled. I thought it best not to risk poisoning anyone.”

Her cheeks pinked disarmingly.

“Well. It seems I have no control over the matter.” His stomach informed him that a hot meal would be most welcome, even if it *was* likely to be the worst kedgereee he’d ever tasted.

He settled down on the barrel while she served him a bowlful of her concoction. The first taste confirmed that she was not so inexpert a cook as he'd expected. How had she managed it?

“Don't look so surprised. I found your copy of Mrs. Raffle's cookery book. I had to make do with what I could find, so don't judge me.”

He continued eating, stealing glances at her as she did the same. There was a good deal left in the bottom of the pot—doubtless, this ministering angel meant to feed the prisoners below as well.

A deep sigh escaped him, and she glanced up questioningly. Then her look clouded, and he wondered what troubled her thoughts when she'd been so determinedly cheerful a moment ago.

His bowl empty, he left her to finish her own meal and went to perform his ablutions. He washed thoroughly, despite the freezing water, and ran some through his hair, which made him gasp. Good. He needed some sense knocked back into him. He paused then, cold-reddened fingers flexed on the edge of the bowl, then pulled out his knife and gave his beard a rudimentary trim.

When he returned, Minerva was sitting in the chair, her hands clasped together. She cast him a look of entreaty. “There's so much left over—I know you live hand-to-mouth here, so it would be wrong to waste it. My guardian and our servants must be hungry and thirsty by now.”

“They must be. I'll take something down to them shortly.”

“Thank you.” Her gaze on him felt like a caress. “You've cut your beard. Why?”

Not to please *her*. She would be leaving today. But he'd earn more respect from Anthony's servants when they realized that he was far more the gentleman than their current master. And if he was going to hand felons and murderers over to the authorities, he needed to look more convincing than they did.

“I’m taking you to the mainland today. As soon as the causeway is clear, we can go over.”

“You’re sending me away?” Was that a hint of hurt in her voice? Because she didn’t want to be separated from her friends, because she still hoped she could influence him to be merciful. Or was there something else?

“But I need to stay. My guardian is here.”

“There’s nothing to worry about. I’ll leave you with a family in the village and send a message to Tremar Park so that someone will come and fetch you. You can’t stay here under such circumstances without risk to your reputation. I know you don’t believe me, but my brother is *not* to be trusted. If something untoward occurs, I want you well away from it all.”

She twisted her hands in her skirts, and the knuckles whitened. Her hazel eyes gazed into his, full of trouble. Was she trembling?

“Oh, Parys, I know you mean well, but—I don’t know how to say this. I want to stay. My guardian has been plotting to kill you, and I may be the only person who can stand between you.”

This news was less upsetting to him than it seemed to be to her. That she cared at all about his sorry hide pleased him more than it should.

“What is he planning to do?”

Her eyes were moist. “They are going to poison Caliban. When you came down to find out what had happened to him, they mean to cave in your head with a rock.”

He grimaced. As plans went, it was hardly sophisticated. It could easily have failed. But what did Minerva mean by betraying her guardian? *Why* had she done it?

There was a lump in his throat as a myriad of delightful possibilities flashed through his mind. But *that* way, madness lay.

He coughed. “Just how were they planning to poison my poor, innocent wolfhound?”

“It sounded like they had a toxic lichen to feed him, stuffed inside a dead rat.”

“Ha! They must have mistaken Golden Lichen for *Vulpicida*. I’m pleased to say that no harm would have come to my dog from *that*. Besides, I’ve trained him not to eat carrion. We earn our meat from the people of the village and share it between us.”

“That is because you have a good, kind heart.”

She mustn’t say such things when they were evidently untrue. Parys Pendorran’s heart was as black as a midwinter night—it had decayed over the months and years.

“You’d better take the food down, if you want them to eat it hot.” He turned his face away, trying not to regret the harshness in his tone.

She must have understood his need for silence; shortly thereafter, she was gone.

He moved around the room, collecting up his club and dagger, should they be needed. But if Anthony had any sense, he and his servants would accept the food and await developments. It was not in their interest to use Minerva as a bargaining counter. Surely, Anthony would never do anything so base? His chest hurt at the very idea of his brother threatening Minerva in order to win his own freedom.

His fist hit the table with a thump, grazing his knuckles. Enough of this stupidity! He had no heart—he’d made that plain enough. He had no conscience either, as far as Anthony was concerned. Removing Minerva from danger was of paramount importance—then, he could deal with the prisoners however he wished.

Ariel shuffled on his perch. “He’s a good man. Parys Pendorran. Parys Pendorran. He’s a good man.”

Parys froze. Where had Ariel learned that? He'd never said it before.

“Everything will come right in the end. Everything will come right. He's a good man. You chowder-headed bilge rat.”

Parys rolled his eyes. No one would ever be able to cure Ariel of his swearing. Had Minerva been trying to teach him the phrases he'd just uttered, or were they words of comfort she'd repeated to herself as she worked? If so, she had more faith in him than he had in himself.

He sank onto a seat and pushed a hand through his hair. Foolhardy, irksome, disturbing woman! Her light footsteps on the stairs were eagerly awaited. He longed for the moment when she would be in the room with him again, flooding it with her breezy expectations of a successful outcome, and her misplaced faith in his better nature.

He recalled the feel of her lips against his as if it had happened an instant ago. No! Not irksome and disturbing—she was a lovely, precious creature, and he hated the idea of her being in Anthony's power. Could he persuade his brother to relinquish her? What if he were to offer Anthony his freedom—and that of his servants—in exchange for Minerva?

Never! He'd rather she came to him of her own free will, with no thought of self-sacrifice. Why should she give up *anything* in exchange for the freedom of three men who didn't deserve it?

Perhaps she'd accept his terms more readily when he took up the reins of power again. He would be Duke of Tremar once more, and could make her a duchess. The family name would be tainted, of course, because he'd have accused his own brother of attempted murder. Ah, but there was also the risk that Minerva would become the subject of gossip—he could remember how brutal the tabbies of the *ton* could be. Especially if they found out Minerva was born on the wrong side of the blanket.

No—this was the utmost folly. If Parys Pendorran fell victim to the shackles of love, that would make him weak and easy prey to his enemies.

By the time he heard Minerva returning, his mind was made up. Nobody was going to come out of this situation unscathed, but he knew exactly what he must do in order to protect her.

And himself.



CHAPTER TEN

MINERVA COLLECTED THE bowls and stacked them neatly in the empty cooking pot. Both Pascoe and George had picked at their food, but Lord Anthony had made a good meal of it. He gazed at her, sucking the end of one well-manicured finger.

“So, my dear—it seems you have been softening up this brother of mine. Well done, Child. At least we have a hot meal inside us now, which will give us strength for what’s to come.”

Her stomach churned. She didn’t like being called “Child”. And she didn’t like Lord Anthony’s tone.

“Far be it from me to speak against you, sir, but I sincerely hope that whatever happens won’t involve hurting Parys or his animals.”

Her guardian lifted an eyebrow. “Parys, is it? I can’t believe you’re calling him Parys after so brief an acquaintance.”

“I know it’s improper—” No. She *wasn’t* going to apologize. The rules had been rewritten to reflect life on this remote, rocky promontory. Things that seemed important at Tremar Park had no meaning here. Nothing mattered here but the basic requirements of human existence.

She chewed on her finger. Was *love* one of those basic needs? Feeling her cheeks heating, she busied herself reorganizing the dishes.

“I only mean that there is to be no violence. There must be no more talk of poisons or smashing in skulls, or any other vicious nonsense. You and Parys are both adults and gentlemen, and you can settle this feud sensibly.”

Lord Anthony’s jaw dropped, but before he could respond, heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs, and a moment later,

Parys strode in with Caliban at his heels.

The two servants stood straighter, pressing their backs against the wall. Lord Anthony put his hands on his hips but made no retreat. He stared at his brother—the only sign of his uncertainty was the muscle working in his jaw.

If it had been cold in the dungeon before, then it was freezing now. Minerva pulled her blanket tightly around her shoulders. Caliban nosed at her hand, and she comforted herself by stroking his head. He would never hurt *her*—she knew that now. They were friends. And maybe, if he were called upon to attack, she could counter his master's command.

Everyone was staring at Parys. He didn't even glance at Minerva—his gaze was focused on his brother. As she looked from one to the other, she was struck by the family resemblances she'd missed previously. Both men had inherited the eyes of the woman whose portrait she'd found in the beehive hut—their mother. The pale, intense blue marked them out from common Cornish stock.

Despite his apparent calm, Minerva sensed the tempest raging in Parys' breast and noticed that his breath was coming thick and fast. His hands were tightly clenched.

His voice held no rage or malice when he eventually spoke. "I have come to hear you out, Brother."

Lord Anthony lifted his chin. "What is it you expect to hear?" He looked uncowed, and she was impressed by his bravura. Parys was the taller and broader of the two, and he radiated power.

"We both know what happened that night. I want you to admit it before these witnesses. And then you will beg for my forgiveness."

"Forgiveness? Is that all you want? Surely, there's more at stake here than that."

Parys flicked a glance at Minerva, and she shivered beneath his gaze.

“Your ward has spoken in your defense. But I need to hear the full facts from *you* before I make my final decision. Forgiveness is just the beginning. A huge beginning, in fact, as far as I’m concerned. But much depends on the enormity of your crime.”

“You want to know why I pushed the boat away?” Lord Anthony’s expression was bleak. “It’s not what you think. I panicked. I saw that you had the pox or something even worse. I dared not touch you.”

Parys threw his head back. His laugh dripped with bitterness. “A pretty story. You’ve had plenty of time to concoct it. No—the truth is that you had too much to lose and that it was far better for you if I remained missing, presumed dead.”

“I understand why you might think that—I’ve never given you reason to think well of me. But I haven’t just invented that excuse. You will note that, had I wanted you dead, I could have rendered you so. I had my sword on my person, and you were too weak to resist me. But I didn’t kill you—I pushed the boat away because I didn’t want you bringing the pestilence into the house. I’d just returned from Italy, with my new ward in tow. Someone had to manage the duchy after you disappeared, so I stepped in to do so until you were found. And then I saw your light, and there you were, on the beach, close to death. All I could think of was Minerva. I wasn’t ready to part with her yet but I knew eventually she must be married. Who would take her if she were ravaged by the pox, her face horrifically scarred? That is, if she even survived it. There was the rest of the household, our tenants, too. I had no wish to risk their lives.”

“So, you decided to risk *mine*. I have an alternative suggestion. You needed to ensure that if my body were ever found, it would not have the marks of your sword upon it.”

Lord Anthony paled. “Trust me—I’ve suffered the sting of guilt ever since. But I couldn’t find the boat, and none of the inquiries I made thereafter revealed any trace of you.”

The tension in the room was so palpable that it pressed on Minerva's breast, impeding her breathing. She moved closer to Parys.

"I can confirm that my guardian did, indeed, send out agents to find his missing brother. If that's any help."

Parys bestowed a look on her so intense that she stumbled back in confusion.

"You have the perfect advocate in Miss Harte," he stated, turning back to his brother. "I know, even from our brief acquaintance, that she's not one for pretense. I trust every word she says—and she has endeavored to change my heart toward you."

If there had been a fan to hand, she would have made great use of it. Parys' words of approval penetrated her very core.

"The character of Miss Harte is the greatest achievement of my life—she's most precious to me. I've always made certain that she wants for nothing, yet she's never been spoiled. She has the sweetest nature."

Praise from every direction! What had she done to deserve it? The truth was—she didn't.

Parys nodded. "I agree. She believes the best of people—even the most undeserving. Her hope that I can find it in me to forgive, makes me do what I'm about to do."

Minerva couldn't imagine how Parys must have felt when Lord Anthony pushed the boat back out to sea. Instead of pulling it in and finding a physician to help his brother, he had made the problem simply vanish. Would she have done the same when there was so much at stake? She sincerely hoped not. There should have been *some* way to bring the Duke of Tremar home without risk of contagion. Lord Anthony ought to have moved heaven and earth to find a way. It showed a deep flaw in his character that he had *not*.

Now, she had to live with the guilt of knowing that her guardian had been protecting her at the time. All Parys'

sufferings, his despair, his bitterness, were because of *her*. She blinked away tears.

Lord Anthony remained alert, evidently not trusting his brother. When he cast a look at Caliban, he was rewarded with a growl.

“Easy, Caliban. So—the causeway is clear now and will be for half an hour. Go. You are free—*all* of you.”

“Without conditions? Are you not going to pursue us with the law or come and reclaim your rightful place as Duke of Tremar?”

A pulse throbbed in Minerva’s temple, and her heart felt like a lead weight. They could *all* go? Parys Pendorran had shown his worth, had decided to forgive, and abandoned all thought of vengeance.

He was letting *her* go, too, without a word? She had won—he was doing what she’d asked. But it tasted of a Pyrrhic victory.

Lord Anthony’s shoulders relaxed as he moved forward and shook Parys by the hand. “You have my thanks.” He glanced around the cell. “The thanks of all of us. I must clearly surrender the duchy to you. Minerva and I can return to Naples and resume our lives there.”

She’d be going back to Naples? Then she would never set eyes on the tormented, charismatic Parys Pendorran again. She pressed her lips together and stared at him, willing him to meet her gaze.

He didn’t. “If that is what you want, then go. But I don’t wish to force Minerva from Tremar Park, since it is her home.”

Good. Because she didn’t *want* to be forced from it. She didn’t want to go back to Naples either, though she shied away from examining her reasons.

Lord Anthony frowned. “I suppose we could move to one of the more distant Pendorran properties—you needn’t have

anything more to do with us. But I have done you so much harm, it will be found out eventually, and how will Minerva and I bear the shame? It is best we leave the country and you return to the duchy—you'll find it in excellent order."

No! If Parys accepted, she'd have to go back to Naples with Lord Anthony. Which was much too far away. What did it matter what the gossips said? Why did men care so much about their honor, their reputations?

"I don't know if I'll have the strength to take up the reins of nobility again—that sickness did me more harm than you can imagine. Return to Tremar while I think about your offer—I'll send word when my decision is made."

There was still hope, then, that she wouldn't be sent abroad. If only she could speak to Parys in private—maybe she could reassure him that a cure would be found for his recurring illness. She could offer to tend to him when he felt weak. But if he didn't want her as part of his household, that was his decision to make. She was Lord Anthony's ward, and Parys Pendorran owed her nothing.

And even if the brothers *could* find a way to coexist as neighbors, she loathed the idea that Parys might think of her as his niece.

There was nothing for it. When Lord Anthony and the servants were ready to leave, she would be forced to leave with them.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE WIND HAD picked up again, and the sound of the waves lashing the rocks gnawed at Parys' soul. To protect Minerva, he'd told Anthony he could remain at Tremar Park, and continue as Duke of Tremar. It meant Parys would be alone once more, save for his animals and the occasional encounter with a villager. But there were no friends for him in the village—he sometimes wondered if there was anyone in the entire world who would understand him.

He shrugged—this was a time for strength, not self-pity. He glanced at Anthony, swaddled in one of his precious blankets—the shipwrecked men had lost various items of clothing, and he'd felt obliged to replace them from his meager stock of beach-combed bounty. He'd given Minerva the boots. She was far too delicate to make a midwinter journey, albeit a short one, without decent footwear.

A shaft of agony pierced his heart. He'd been all but destroyed by his brother's behavior—now, he feared to be brought lower still by Minerva's departure. His feelings made no sense. They had known one another but a day and a night and had been enemies for most of that time.

The men were waiting at the head of the steep rock-cut steps leading down to the causeway. Minerva wasn't with them. Could this mean—? No. He mustn't trust to hope. Drawing in a breath, he bolstered his resolve. He must bid her farewell, and if he could do it in private, all the better. Waving at Anthony to wait where he was, Parys strode back into the courtyard and headed for the castle kitchen.

As he expected, she was there, crouched by the fireside with her arms around Caliban's neck and her cheek pressed against him. Bathed in the firelight, she had become a

miraculous creature gifted by the gods. He knew he would never forget her—her innocence, her beauty, her courage.

She had taught him the power of forgiveness, and he knew that, in time, he'd be the better for it. But at this moment, he knew more despair than when his brother had pushed him out to sea.

“Miss Harte? Minerva—they're waiting for you.”

She raised her tear-stained face. Caliban licked the moisture away, accursed animal. If only he, Parys Pendorran, could have kissed away her tears. There was so much he wanted to do, to say, but only a few moments remained to them.

He gazed at her, trying to commit her image to memory, knowing that it was something he would treasure and redraw in his mind whenever he needed solace. There could be no future for them—he was a broken man—twisted, resentful, and uncomfortable to look at with his facial scar and constant scowl. Minerva, of course, would have no difficulty finding a husband worthy of her.

His mouth twisted. She immediately got to her feet and came toward him, clasping his hands in hers. Her fingers trembled, but he resisted the urge to chafe them. Too much contact would be his undoing.

What was there left to say? He couldn't find the words, so he gazed into her eyes and hoped she would see what was in his mind and what lay in his heart.

“I am sorry to leave Caliban.”

Good. Safe ground for now. But what about *him*? It would be folly to ask. Why rip to shreds a heart that was already breaking?

“You could take him. I'm sure he'd go with you.” What was he saying? Forgiveness was one thing—giving away everything that was precious to him, quite another! Still, knowing Caliban was with Minerva would give him comfort.

It would keep a connection between them, however slender the thread.

She raised an eyebrow. “I hardly think my guardian would approve of *that*. And I would never deprive you of him.”

She still held his hands. He brought them to his lips and kissed them before letting go.

He was shattering into a thousand pieces. If only she would stay! He would give anything to make her stay. Things might not work out between them, but at least he would have tried; he would have taken his one shot at happiness.

He couldn't speak. As she continued to gaze up at him, it seemed that she had no words, either. Instead, she raised a hand to his face and traced his scar with her finger.

“I will never forget you, Parys. I will always remember this face—one that has seen so much. I just wish—”

Her voice broke on a sob, and he could resist no longer. He drew her into his arms and pressed her tightly against his chest. Whoever knew love could be *this* painful?

She clung to him as she wept, and he stroked her back and tangled his fingers in her hair, half-comforting, half-caressing. With every touch, he knew he was driving the wound deeper into his heart. Once she'd gone, could he ever hope to find love again? No—he had missed his chance.

Summoning all his strength, he held her away from him. “We must say goodbye, you and I. Thank you for your company and for what you have done.” He pressed his palm to his heart and bowed.

Her expression was desolate. Neither moved until a new voice broke the charged silence between them.

“I have never met a better man than Parys Pendorran.”

Ariel? That wasn't his usual screech—it was a more measured tone. There was only one place where he could've picked up such a phrase.

Parys laid his hands on Minerva's shoulders. "Did *you* teach him that?"

Her cheeks colored charmingly. "Not deliberately. I *may* have been talking to myself while I was cleaning and cooking."

She didn't deny the sentiment, then. Did he have cause to hope?

"You think me a good man?" Why had he asked her that? One should never fish for compliments. Or maybe one *should*, when it mattered this much.

She nodded and straightened. "I think you're the most interesting, splendid, impressive, impossible, generous, *infuriating* man I have ever met. You can make of that what you will."

The look of hopelessness had gone, and light sparkled in those hazel eyes. She liked him! She actually, genuinely *liked him!* He felt as if some supernatural power had lifted him several feet from the floor.

"But you barely know me." How inane! If only he hadn't shunned human company for so long—he'd forgotten how to speak.

"I'd need more time for that, wouldn't I?" She was smiling softly.

His head swam. Could she truly want him? But he had so little to offer—even if she liked him as a person, he had nothing but dark secrets, a grim past, and a ruined castle to share with her. Or would she only be his if he took back his title and his responsibilities? What if his weakness made that impossible? Although, perhaps with access to skilled physicians...

He looked down at her expectant face and knew there was nothing he wouldn't do to keep her by his side.

He finally managed to find the words he needed.

“Minerva Harte, would you be prepared to take a chance on me? I offer you every ounce of my soul, every last drop of my love. I will labor both day and night to give you the life—and the happiness—you deserve. Is there any hope that you might care for me in return?”

Her tears were flowing freely again, but this time, they were tears of joy.

“Isn’t that what I’ve been trying to tell you, you foolish fellow? Now, stop talking and kiss me.”

So, he did.



EPILOGUE

HALF A YEAR passed before Minerva saw Prospero's Castle again. She hadn't known what she would feel—would it be a sense of horror, knowing her new husband, the Duke of Tremar, had spent three years in tortured isolation there? Would it be nostalgia for that remarkable night and day which had brought them both such intense happiness? Or would it be regret that they had decided *not* to remain there in splendid, selfish isolation, indulging in their mutual love and passion?

Minerva's cheeks heated as she walked across the causeway toward the steps. There certainly *had* been passion since their wedding. Parys had proved himself a tempestuous and energetic lover—perhaps because he had been celibate for so long. His hunger showed no sign of abating, and she hoped it wouldn't because every night spent in his arms was an ecstasy beyond all imagining.

She stared at the rocky spit of land, crowned by its gloomy castle. "Should we have stayed here? My dowry would have paid for numerous improvements."

Before Parys could answer, Ariel started fussing on his shoulder, then soared upward and made for the castle.

Parys brushed a loose feather from his arm. "It seems Ariel, at least, misses his old home. I wonder if we should have brought Caliban, too."

"Caliban is more than happy bullying the hounds at Tremar Park, sleeping in front of the kitchen fire when he manages to get past Cook, and stealing scraps from the table. Now that he lives like a king, I can't imagine him wanting to return to the haunted, draughty passageways of Prospero's Castle."

Parys smiled at her, and her heart melted. It was his new smile, and now that he wore his hair short and shaved his face every day, she could see the appealing dimples that accompanied it. Those dimples appeared to be there most of the time, which pleased her. He worked hard for the tenants and dependents of the duchy, but he didn't resent a single moment.

"I love that you have called my hermitage Prospero's Castle, although I'm certain the Shakespearean reference won't impress the villagers. We Cornishmen consider our ways and traditions the best and are much disinclined to change them, so it will remain St. Tudy's monastery to them."

They had reached the steps, and he sent Minerva up ahead of him, his hands resting lightly on her hips in case she slipped. The heat of his skin penetrated the thin fabric of her summery muslin gown, and she wondered wickedly what it would feel like to make love amongst the shivering harebells and gently bobbing heather.

When they got to the top, Parys waited for her to regain her breath, then announced, "A letter came from Anthony today."

His face had taken on that grave quality it always did when he thought or spoke about his brother. One day, maybe, she would find out if it was guilt, distaste, or merely a lack of affection that lay behind this expression.

She drew in a breath. "Good news, I hope?"

"It is mostly gossip about the royal court at Naples—you can read it yourself. It will mean more to you, as you may know some of the names, and I know none. It sounds as if he is behaving himself, although we have only his word for that. Pascoe and George have settled in well and are trying to learn Italian—to the entertainment of all who hear them. Anthony shows no inclination to return home—he says there would be too many questions asked about what happened between the pair of us. He sends you all his love and felicitations."

“All’s well that ends well, then.” Minerva had expected to miss her guardian, but Parys had filled her horizon from edge to edge, and there was no room for anyone else—until their children were born. They’d been working hard at that, and she suspected she might have some good news for her husband in the not-too-distant future.

Prospero’s Castle looked so different now, in the soft, burgeoning light of summer. The rock reflected golden sunshine, heather lay in a purple swathe like a coverlet, while birds’ nests and ivy festooned the walls of the building. The castle looked more like a magical, fairy tale palace than the prison it had been to Parys and—for a far shorter time—his brother.

Despite her desire to discover where the incorrigible Ariel had gone, she took Parys’ hand and led him away from the castle and down the grassy slope toward the beehive huts. Ignoring his puzzled expression, she stooped in front of the hut where Parys had once kept the mementos of his past life, and tugged up a handful of heather and yellow toadflax.

“What are you doing?”

“Your mother may not be here in spirit, but your memories of her are strongly associated with this place. I’m making an offering to that memory.”

To her surprise, he, too, plucked a small posy and laid it on the slab below the spot where his mama’s portrait had once hung. Then he led Minerva back out into the sunshine.

“We must always look after this place. I’ll employ a gardener to remove the weeds and ensure the grass doesn’t grow too high. I shall see about raising the causeway so that people can come here and enjoy the ruins, and picnic on the grass, no matter how high the tide. Who knows—the place might even inspire a novelist or a poet.”

“I know it has inspired me—” Minerva began but was interrupted by the return of Ariel, who screeched in annoyance until Parys offered his arm as a perch.

“You are my angel, my Venus, my goddess of love, and I sacrifice my heart to you, now and always.”

“I think I preferred him when he swore.” Parys shoed the bird away. “You’ve been listening outside our bedroom door again, you unconscionable creature. Are all our intimate secrets and words of love to be broadcast to the rest of the world?” He turned to Minerva with a helpless gesture.

Laughter bubbled up in her throat. “I’ve no objection to hearing your love talk repeated. Perhaps we should keep him only in the bedroom from now on and thus maintain our privacy.”

Her husband’s discomfiture was entertaining. “We can never have secrets from one another with Ariel around.”

“And that is exactly how it should be. No secrets, no doubts, no regrets.”

Parys pulled a wry face. “I think I’d rather keep him out of the bedroom if you don’t mind. He would disturb my—er—concentration.”

And she wouldn’t want *that*. “Perhaps we shouldn’t confine him at all—he should remain a free spirit. It was, after all, he who brought about the shipwreck that threw us together.”

He looked astonished. “You mean, you don’t believe it was my magical powers that brought you to me?”

“No, because you didn’t realize at the time how much you needed me.”

“That is true, my beloved wife. Something more forgiving, more generous than Fate, had a hand in our meeting. We may never know what happened. But from now on, Prospero’s Castle will be a place of magic and mystery, although the only spirits will be high ones. Perhaps, one day, the creative Cornish will spin a legend about the place, tell a tale of a dark and brooding wizard like Shakespeare’s Prospero, and the fairy woman who sacrificed everything to save his rotten soul.”

As the tears welled up, she threw her arms around Parys and embraced him.

“The tale had better have a happy ending. Do the Cornish believe in happy endings?”

He lifted her chin and kissed her gently on the lips. His expression sent waves of heat crashing through her body.

“I believe they do, Minerva. In fact, I’m absolutely certain.”

And she gazed at Parys, smiling benignly at the endless sea, and knew that their two souls were now one, and not even death could part them.

The End

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About Elizabeth Keysian

Elizabeth Keysian is an international bestselling author of heart-pounding Regency romances, set mostly in the West of England. She is working on a fresh series for Dragonblade Publishing called Trysts and Treachery, which is set in the Tudor era. Though primarily a writer of romance, she loves to put a bit of mystery, adventure, and suspense into her stories, and refuses to let her characters take themselves too seriously.

Elizabeth likes to write from experience, not easy when her works range from the medieval to the Victorian eras. However, her passion for re-enactment has helped, as have the many years she spent working in museums and British archaeology. If you find some detail in her work you've never come across before, you can bet she either dug it up, quite literally, or found it on a museum shelf.

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THE SIXTH HENRY

Caroline Warfield

Part One

The Rose War

Unbidden guests are often welcomest when they are gone.

—Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part 1*



CHAPTER ONE

Lancashire, December 1818

WRAPPED IN A heavy greatcoat and swathed with scarves against the cold, Henry Bradley, sixth of that name, attended his grandfather's funeral with a leaden heart. The chapel, tucked into the curve of a hill overlooking a river valley and surrounded in the spring by masses of brier roses, had served the Dukes of Roseleigh as a family chapel for generations. Today snow blanketed the roses, the hill, and the valley beyond.

Sitting in the front pew as was expected, he grieved the old man's passing, grateful at least that the suffering of the past few months had come to an end. Henry had no doubt the Almighty welcomed the old duke with affection, good man that he had been. Grandpapa had enjoyed a long and happy life marred only by the passing of his beloved wife and the premature deaths of two sons and his oldest grandson.

The latter three deaths were the reason Henry sat in the front pew where his cousin Harry should be, daunted by the weight of Roseleigh and its dependents. *The duke is dead; long live the duke.* Power and fortune had fallen on Henry Bradley, sometime rakehell, former soldier, more recently impecunious physician to a small village in Yorkshire. He could only hope it didn't flatten him.

The bishop, who had been invited up from Chester, the Episcopal seat for Lancashire, finished his chanting, and Henry rose to follow the casket to the crypt. Turning, he saw the mass of people filling the chapel, every one of them with some claim to his attention, assistance, finances, and care, and almost bolted.

The crypt, oddly, felt a bit less cold. Henry peered around at the tombs of his ancestors, landing on that of his great-grandfather. The family arms had been carved into one side of the marble slab covering it. A single carved rose adorned the other side. In the middle lay the proud name, Henry Bradley, 7th Duke of Roseleigh. Someday, he thought morosely, they would lay him here as well. Henry would be the ninth duke but the sixth Henry, there being a few Richards sprinkled in. He shook off the thought as the bishop droned on and bearers lifted the casket into the niche prepared for it. Grandpapa would need a slab to cover his tomb, and Henry would see to it.

Moments later the grand Roseleigh carriage pulled away with Henry and his Aunt Blanche, the senior member of the Bradley family. The lane to Roseleigh Hall had been cleared, and the journey was short but not, in Henry's opinion, short enough. Blanche had faced the loss of her father-in-law, her husband, and her son—taking with them her dreams of a duchess's coronet—in a few years. Disappointment had left her bitter. He suspected she had been born overbearing. Neither of her personal traits made for a pleasant ride.

“Whatever you do, see to the glasshouse! The roses will not sustain so cold a winter without care,” Blanche proclaimed, putting that demand right above her demand to keep her grand suite with its view of the valley, the necessity of sacking the impertinent butler, the importance of redecorating the blue drawing room before spring, and numerous other directives.

Henry nodded vaguely, sighing with relief at the sight of the Hall. Relief was short-lived. Other carriages followed on, and soon the throng from the chapel trailed Henry inside the crepe-draped door.

Givens, Aunt Blanche's impertinent butler, efficiently greeted one and all and directed them inside. Henry's sister, Mary, fretful in late pregnancy, leaned on the arm of her husband, Martin Scolish, Viscount Eckelston, who watched Henry avidly, eager to reap the benefits of the dukedom now

that Henry had succeeded. George Bradley, a distant cousin and Roseleigh's autocratic steward, moved to a corner with Howard Morton, Roseleigh's secretary, and Amos Jones, the head gardener, all three casting speculative eyes at Henry. Baron Wolfton, a neighbor with whom Grandpapa had a boundary dispute, glared from across the room. Various tenants, servants, and hangers-on all eager to speak to the new duke milled around. It was all too much. Even Bishop Bowyer, who would spend the night, deserved Henry's attention.

Roseleigh's inner core, a remnant of the medieval castle it once was, boasted a central hall with stone walls two stories high. A roaring fire gave off more light than heat in the massive hearth, the light reflecting off the miscellany of weapons that had been hung from the stone walls. A simple meal had been set up along one of them. Footmen took hats and bonnets, but no one seemed in a hurry to remove their outer garments. They milled about uncertain, waiting for someone to take leadership.

Henry looked around and realized, with a start, that that someone was him. He climbed two steps up the worn stone staircase that emptied into the hall, and a hush immediately fell. "Thank you, all of you, for coming to honor my grandfather. If Bishop Bowyer would be so kind as to say a blessing, please join us in a light repast."

The bishop raised his voice in a blessedly brief prayer, but still no one moved. Givens hovered by the food, shooting him pained glances. Henry sighed and advanced, allowing servants to pile pastries, ones he probably would not eat, on a plate. A footman approached with a hot toddy in a mug. *Praise God!*

Givens gestured toward the formal drawing room that opened to the left, and Henry followed, aware—not for the first time—that he might have the title but he wouldn't always give the orders. His sense of his own place in the universe was further confirmed at the sight of Aunt Blanche already seated in a plush chair near the fireplace, sipping a warm drink, a heavily laden plate beside her. She pinned him with her gaze,

and the temptation to take a seat at the opposite end of the room faded.

“I ordered the blue suite for the bishop, it being the finest available. Mary and Eckelston will have to make do with the lily room but can move over when he leaves,” Blanche said.

Henry waited for her to assign his quarters, but of course, she already had. His valise had been moved to the duke’s quarters as soon as Grandpapa’s remains had been removed. He couldn’t even sleep the first night.

“The kitchen will provide a late supper for those who remain once the rabble clears out,” his aunt went on. “I meet with the cook daily to approve menus.”

The new duke had begun to mentally list things needing immediate attention. “Dislodge my aunt” moved to task number one. Or at least, “Gain control of my own household.”

“You will focus on the estate, of course, and on the roses. It may be winter, but they take careful tending if we’re to put the Earl of Edgecote in his place in June.” Blanche ordered him around with no shame, as if he were one of her minions.

“The honor of Roseleigh lies in your hands,” she sniffed, certain, no doubt, that he was unworthy. “Jones will have to bring you up to snuff quickly.”

Of course she believed him unworthy. Her son, his cousin Harry, had been raised as the eventual duke. Henry had been allowed to fiddle away his early twenties before he settled on medicine. He was never expected to inherit. She never expected to be dependent on a nephew.

“Edgecote?” he murmured, trying to recall something about a competition.

Blanche’s glare turned to ice. “The fool’s rose was judged finest last year at the York Rose Show. We cannot let him win two years in a row. That honor is ours and has been most of the past twenty years. Your grandfather saw to it,” she said.

People began to filter in; others stayed in the hall or, he suspected, wandered into the dining room. Henry drank down his toddy, letting the heat warm his insides and the alcohol steel his nerves.

“If you’ll excuse me, Aunt, I should greet our guests,” he said, turning to a couple that appeared to be farmers, tenants no doubt, who were gazing about the room in wonder.

“They come to you. You do not go to them.” Blanche sniffed.

Henry ignored her and approached the couple. “Thank you for paying your respects to my grandfather,” he said.

The woman cast her eyes to her feet and pinked up. The husband said, “O’ course. Our duty. I’m wondering, Yer Grace, since we’re talking. The winter being fierce this year, if you’ve had a chance to speak to Mr. Bradley about the allotment of wood. An increase would be a blessing. If you’ve had time to think on it.”

“I’ll speak with him,” Henry murmured and moved on.

One gentleman assured him that he would continue to supply the Hall with groceries “as we always have, though, things being tight prices could change.” The vicar hinted funds for the village church would be welcome. Another tenant lamented that, with the late duke being ill, the annual roof inspection hadn’t happened.

Amos Jones caught his eye. “I know this isn’t the day, but if you have time tomorrow, let me show you the glasshouse and the state of this year’s roses.” He leaned in confidentially. “You’ll want to know Edgecote’s tricks, if we are to guard against his cheating.”

By the time he had worked his way through the throng two hours later, several people had wished him good luck with the blasted roses as if nothing else mattered. To his great relief, some people requested their belongings, preparing to leave.

Henry returned to the food table, which by then appeared as if a cloud of locusts had done their work on it, and piled a

few broken pastries and the sad little sandwich that remained on a plate.

Givens rushed over, his expression making it very clear that Henry had breached protocol. “We’d be happy to assist, Your Grace.”

“No need. And no need for supper. It has been a long day. I will just carry this up to my room. More hot toddy would be welcome, however.”

“I’ll have fresh prepared and send it up,” Givens said with a bow.

Henry sighed and smiled. “Thank you.”

He found Mary at the foot of the stairs. “I don’t see the bishop,” he said, juggling his plate.

“He retired early,” she said.

“I’m about to do the same.”

Mary looked stricken. “I hoped to speak with you at dinner.”

“I’m exhausted, Mary. Can it wait?”

“Of course. It’s just, I’m so proud of you. I made a decision today,” she said, patting her tummy. “If this is a boy, we will name him Henry.”

The new duke was horrified. He’d spent his youth being confused with his cousin, his uncle, and his grandfather. “Please don’t do that to the nipper. Call him Edgar, or George, or Algernon. Anything. We don’t need another Henry.”

She laughed. “Don’t be silly. It is a Lancaster County tradition. Did you know Aunt Blanche put us in some poky room?”

“I understand the blue suite will be available when the bishop leaves,” he said.

“Also, Martin wants to talk to you about a parliamentary position, but that can wait.”

It can wait for years... Henry had his hands full right here at Roseleigh. “I’ll see you in the morning,” he said. Would they decide to stay in residence? He wasn’t sure what he hoped.

Through the drawing room door, he caught sight of Aunt Blanche on her feet and approaching him. He climbed the stairs quickly before she had time to confront him.

A brisk fire warmed his suite, the first benefit of being duke that he had appreciated all day. He put his plate on a table and sat next to it, allowing heat to seep in and clear his head.

Soon after, a scratch at the door presaged the promised footman. “Enter,” he said.

Givens did so, one of his underlings in tow with a steaming pitcher of hot toddy, a porcelain cup, a plate with ham sandwiches, another with fresh biscuits, and a clean linen towel. Henry’s mouth watered. He hadn’t eaten all day and was grateful the butler had ignored what he’d said downstairs.

“Will there be anything else, Your Grace?” Givens asked.

“No. Thank you. This is excellent.”

The old man left looking satisfied. He removed Henry’s sad little plate of broken pastries as he went.

One sandwich and a cup of toddy later, Henry felt much more the thing. He poured another cup and went to the writing desk against the wall. He always found that, when confronted with a confusing or new situation, a bit of list making helped organize his thoughts.

He took a piece of paper and wrote, “Immediate Problems to be Addressed.” Number one... As tempting as it was to make evicting Aunt Blanche his first priority, that was neither wise nor kind.

Number one—find the study and review records. Make it his own. While he was at it, he’d want to redecorate this bedroom to expel the ghost—or at least the memory—of his

grandfather. The workings of the estate, however, took priority. Perhaps he'd find something about the boundary dispute. He preferred to explore the work alone at first, but he would probably have to lean on his secretary for a while.

He tapped his finger on the desk. Number two—learn estate management, and how to adjudicate tenant concerns. George Bradley had given him space so far, but he ought to meet with him as soon as possible.

Number three—face all the official nonsense. He had to petition the lord chancellor to be confirmed in the title for one. He wondered if he could avoid going to town for official functions for a year or so, but doubted it. He'd likely be forced down to London when Parliament went into session. In the midst of that, he would have to deflect Eckelston's encroaching demands. They would keep.

Number four—the damned rose competition. If it had been vague in his mind earlier, memories had flooded back. As a boy he'd attended the fair in York with its annual flower show at which Grandpapa's roses frequently took first place. It had been the pride of the valley now that he thought about it, and he would dismiss it at his peril. "Meet with Amos Jones and get the lay of the land," he wrote. The sooner he learned the details, the sooner he could delegate it to someone else.

Number five—Aunt Blanche. "Toss out in the snow..." did not sound appropriate. He didn't see how he could live with the woman trying to order his house and his life, however. He wrote, "Pension off Aunt Blanche and find her a comfortable cottage of her own." Givens would probably help him do it or at least cheer him on.

He reread that last point. Someone needed to manage the household, however, so perhaps he shouldn't rush. He had to find someone else. Someone loyal to Henry himself. A partner. He sighed.

He picked up the pen and wrote, "Number six—find a wife."

Satisfied with his list, he wandered back to the fire. Mountains were climbed one step at a time. Henry would grow into the dukedom the same way. One step at a time. Heat flowed down with his toddy. *Problem number six may be my biggest challenge, but tomorrow I'll tackle number one.* He smiled to himself as he dozed off.



CHAPTER TWO

HENRY ROSE AT dawn, tempted to shake off the cobwebs with a ride. Duty flooded in, however, and he recalled his list. He would dress and find his newly acquired study. As soon as his feet hit the floor and he fumbled about for water to soothe his throat, Carter, the stern and upright valet who had served his grandfather, appeared to assist in his every need. The man had a weary air, one Henry suspected owed much to both age and grief. Another problem needing attention but not yet.

On his way to his study, he passed Givens, carrying a pile of serviettes to the breakfast room. The old retainer blinked away a startled expression. “Breakfast can be served soon, Your Grace. Shall I fetch coffee or tea for you?”

“Do not rush the meal on my account, Givens. I will be in my study. Do alert me when Bishop Bowyer, my sister, or Viscount Eckelston appears,” Henry said. He suspected that would be a while. “Coffee would be welcome, however.”

The glow of walnut paneling and the smells of beeswax and old leather engulfed Henry when he shut the door behind him. Under all of it, his grandfather’s affection and wisdom flowed through him.

“You are a Bradley, Henry. You will make a fine duke,” the old man had rasped toward the end. “Be patient. You’ll grow into it.” There had been no other advice than that.

Be patient. “I’ll try, Grandpapa,” he whispered. “If they let me.”

The massive walnut desk had been placed at right angles to bank the mullioned windows set in one wall. Some long-ago ancestor had built bookshelves into the walls on either side of the entrance. A glass-fronted unit lay behind the desk to the right of a door. That door led to a storage closet with a

honeycomb of document niches above and drawers below. A quick check showed him that the wide drawers contained maps and the short ones, supplies.

Across from the desk, a large painting of Grandpapa and his two sons, one of them Henry's father, hovered above two leather chairs separated by a small side table. A door next to the chairs, directly across from the one to the closet, opened onto the magnificent Roseleigh library with its two-story windows, resplendent with sunlight flowing through them. Evenly spaced panels of stained glass added jewel tones to the beams. He shut the library door; that would be a pleasure for another day.

Just then Givens arrived with coffee service on a silver tray. He put it on the table and poured with great ceremony.

"Thank you, Givens. That will do. Alert me when the others come for breakfast," he said.

Givens bowed out with rather more obeisance than Henry found comfortable. Henry took his place behind the desk, studied the portrait for a long while, and stiffened his resolve. He began to sort through the drawers on either side. To his immense relief, his grandfather had been a careful man with organized habits.

On his left the top drawer had correspondence, much of it from family, both close and distant. Henry suspected they waited for answers that never came.

The lower left-hand drawer appeared to be dedicated to the old duke's work in Parliament. Folders were labeled with topics of great interest to his grandfather: the Corn Laws, civil disorder, the Catholic question, and so on. The one labeled Ottoman Empire intrigued Henry, but he had no time for it. The most urgent lay on top of the others; Petition for Inheritance, it read. He took that one out and glanced through it. "Thank you, Grandpapa," he whispered. The old man had known the day would come soon, and he'd outlined instructions for confirming Henry in his title. *That will ease*

my way through problem number three, all the official nonsense associated with my accession.

He set that one on the corner of the desk, sipped his coffee, and turned to the right. The lower drawer was dedicated to estate business. It had the current ledgers, and folders marked Jones, George, and Roses. The three of them covered problems two and four. He took out George, which as he assumed referred to George Bradley, his steward, problem number two, and closed the drawer.

The top, right drawer, less organized than the rest, held a mixed pile of things such as bills, missives from solicitors, investment opportunities, and notes. He suspected that drawer held things pending action on the duke's part. He went through them carefully. Among the motley collection, he found a summons from a solicitor in London on behalf of Baron Wolfton, the contentious neighbor. He put it on top of the folder of issues to discuss with his steward.

He also found a letter from the Earl of Edgecote, groaned, and put it unopened into the file labeled Jones. He would get to his head gardener and the matter of roses in due time but not today.

He rose to pour himself another cup of coffee. When a servant scratched on the door, he almost suspected Givens had assigned someone to hover out there lest the Duke of Roseleigh commit the great misstep of pouring his own coffee. Two months ago, he'd brewed his own in the cozy little kitchen of his bachelor establishment.

"Enter," he said. It was not Givens.

Howard Morton bowed and greeted him formally. "I wished to alert you that I have arrived. I see you are already at work. I assume you will need me, but Givens asked me to inform you that breakfast has been laid out in the family breakfast room."

"Thank you, Morton. I think I will meet with the steward first. Perhaps this afternoon?"

“As you wish, Your Grace.” Morton bowed out backward as if Henry were some sort of medieval princeling. Henry tried to control his irritation, and set out for breakfast, hoping to find George.

Eckelston rose and inclined his head. “Good morning, Your Grace,” he said.

“Stubble it, Martin. I was Henry when I saw you a month ago,” Henry said.

“That may have been well a month ago, but it is utterly unacceptable now. Given that Lord Eckelston is family, he might address you as Roseleigh, however.” Aunt Blanche entered behind him.

His back still to her, Henry rolled his eyes. “Very well, Eckelston. We’ll stay on a formal footing. For now. Has George Bradley arrived?”

“Mr. Bradley broke his fast in the estate office earlier and is at work as is his custom,” Givens advised.

“Thank you, Givens. Kindly send someone to inform him that I will meet with him in my study in one hour.”

“Very good, Your Grace,” Givens said, putting fresh coffee down in front of him. “May I ask your breakfast preferences?”

Aunt Blanche stood behind her chair, glaring at the old butler, while Henry answered him and a footman was dispatched to fill his plate. Givens then assisted her to sit and asked the same question.

“Don’t behave like an imbecile to impress the new duke. You know very well my preferences. I’ve eaten here every day for twenty years,” the old woman growled.



CHAPTER THREE

LADY MARGARET ANSEL, eldest child of the Earl of Edgecote, loathed unexpected events that upended her plans. She certainly didn't plan to be stranded in a third-rate inn on the edge of the moors on her way to the Duke of Roseleigh's funeral, but stranded she was.

Snow and a bad axle dumped her there to brood. After two days, another delay occurred that morning. She stood staring out a dirty window in the public room, dressed for travel, reliving her departure from Dove Abbey, her father's words ringing in her ears.

"We owe Roseleigh nothing, girl! We aren't precisely friends!" he had shouted.

Margaret had held her ground and done as she pleased as she always did. She'd believed then, and still did, that old rivalries were pointless. People in both estates suffered from it. Paying respects to the old duke might help bridge the gap. Or so she thought.

Still, she didn't look forward to seeing Harry Bradley. Oldest son of the oldest son, he'd been bred to succeed and knew it. They met at least once a year at the York Rose Show and occasionally at other events in the northern counties. She'd found him both arrogant and frivolous with no concern for anything but his own comfort when they were in their teens. He didn't give a damn about the roses, their ostensible reason for rivalry. Roses were merely one more reason for Harry to preen over his superiority and lord it over others.

The only one who'd seemed to tolerate him as a boy was his cousin Henry, but the younger Henry was rarely around. Harry's father's death while he was at university had done little to improve his personality. He grew into a stern and

intolerant man who kept mistresses in Leeds and York and thought women ought to keep opinions to themselves. He'd have banned Margaret from the Rose Council, organizing board for the York Rose Show, if he could have. The last she'd heard of him, he had racketed off to the continent with some of his rakehell friends. With his grandfather's death announced far and wide, she was certain he would have scurried home.

The more she remembered, the more she suspected she had set out on a fool's errand, but pride kept her to her course once decided. She would not go back to her father and admit it had been useless.

"Ready, my lady." Her coachman stood in the doorway, hat in hand.

"Let's get on with it, then," she said, walking with determination to her coach.

They reached Roseleigh Hall late that afternoon, two days after the funeral. It would be rude to expect lodging. She had stopped in the nearby village and bespoken a room at the Red Rose Inn. Unfortunately, the friendly innkeeper turned cold when he saw her name and the white rose badge on her cap. The stupid rivalry infected people at every level. She expected cold water on her washstand and damp sheets when she returned.

Now Margaret climbed the steps to the rambling old Hall with a determined stride. The footman at her side rapped on the door, and it swung open to reveal a grizzled little man as old as the hills around them. He eyed her ensemble and the fur trim on her pelisse and gestured them in. He took her card and glanced up sharply.

"I have come to pay my respects to the late duke and convey the sympathy of my family. Unfortunately, the weather and a faulty axle delayed me from arriving for the funeral," she explained. "If I could speak to His Grace, I will be brief and then on my way."

“I’ll inquire,” the old man said. He escorted her to a finely appointed drawing room whose chief attraction was a brisk fire. She went to it to warm her frozen hands.

“What do you want here?”

Margaret turned at the sharp words to see a woman, gray-haired, well dressed, and straight backed, glaring at her from across the room. She recognized her as Lady Blanche Bradley, Harry’s mother. Margaret made a polite obeisance.

“A condolence call only. I meant to attend the funeral but was delayed en route,” Margaret replied.

Lady Blanche breathed in slowly, causing her nose to pinch and her chin to rise. Before she could unleash whatever it was she meant to say in response, someone else entered.

“Welcome, Lady Margaret. Kind of you to call,” the gentleman said. “Have you sent for tea, Aunt Blanche?”

Shocked, Margaret groped for a reply. “You aren’t Harry!” she said without thinking.

The man smiled sadly. “I most certainly am not. Henry Bradley, Duke of Roseleigh, at your service.”

Margaret curtsayed deeply. *Henry*. On the heels of relief came the realization that, if this amiable young man was the new duke, his cousin had died. “I’m—”

He waved her formal calling card. “Lady Margaret Ansel, daughter—unless I’m mistaken—of the Earl of Edgecote.”

Lady Blanche’s frown deepened beyond what Margaret might have thought possible. The old lady was grieving not only for her father-in-law but for her son. How awkward. Margaret could hardly congratulate the duke on his good fortune in front of the grieving mother.

“I—” She glanced back and forth between them. “I’m so sorry for your loss. I came to offer condolences. Apparently, you’ve had even more losses than I was aware of.”

Her words seemed to please the new duke but did little to settle the ruffled feathers of his aunt. He stepped to the door and spoke to the servant waiting outside it. “Kindly take the lady’s bonnet and pelisse and order tea sent,” he said.

The elderly butler doddered in and did as he had been asked, a courtesy that ought to have been done as soon as she’d arrived. The duke gestured to a chair near the fire, and Margaret sat. Lady Blanche took the wing chair on the opposite side and frowned at Margaret as if she had appropriated the lady’s favorite chair. Perhaps she had.

An awkward silence followed. Margaret had no idea how to break it, and the other lady appeared frozen in icy calm.

The duke glanced from one of them to the other and said, “I gather you’ve had some difficulty,” a comment leading to a safe topic.

Margaret gratefully picked up the thread. “I set out four days ago, meaning to attend your grandfather’s funeral, but underestimated the weather. The roads became impassible, and my coach broke an axle.”

“Why didn’t you simply go home?” Lady Blanche snapped.

“By the time we came to rest at an inn, it was closer to come on than to go home,” Margaret replied.

“Then you made a wise decision. This isn’t good weather for travel,” the duke said. “You are of course welcome to stay until the weather improves.”

Welcome? “You are kind to suggest it, but I’ve bespoken a room at the Red Rose Inn,” she replied.

Lady Blanche sighed. In relief, Margaret assumed.

“Surely you will be more comfortable here than at the inn,” the duke said.

“Your Grace, if I may say, this soon after the funeral, it is hardly proper to—” Lady Blanche began.

“Not at all, Aunt. At least not under these circumstances. The weather shows every sign of another storm. We can’t leave a well-bred young lady to the mercies of an inn. What would her father think of us?” the duke said.

Lady Blanche snorted. “But I doubt this particular lady would be so comfortable under the roof of the Bradley family.”

She snorted! Margaret fought to keep from laughing.

The duke waved his aunt’s comment away. “Old nonsense. I never did understand it. Besides, aren’t we branches of a single family? Related somehow, generations past?”

“Much too long ago to have any meaning today,” Lady Blanche said sourly. Given the woman’s attitude, Margaret wonder if the breach was so very long ago.

“So will you accept?” he asked.

The urge to slam the front door of Roseleigh Hall behind her almost upended Margaret’s common sense. If the weather resumed its onslaught, more days in an inn was a dismal thought. It would be uncomfortable for her servants as well, particularly in the light of the poor service she expected at the Red Rose. She would be better off here. Besides, it would irritate Lady Blanche. That was reason enough.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I would be honored.”

He smiled back, and the room warmed with the strength of it.



HENRY RETURNED TO his desk, satisfied that he had behaved as a proper host, and sank back into his study of the plan for spring husbandry left by George. His peace lasted almost an hour.

Mary barged in without knocking. “What were you thinking, inviting that woman in?” she demanded.

Henry set the papers down with a sigh. He had been struggling with formulas regarding acreage and yields. He

frowned at his sister. “Lady Margaret? She’s a perfectly acceptable personage and seemed pleasant. I can’t turn her out in this weather. If that is the only purpose of this visit, I would appreciate—”

Mary flounced into one of the plush chairs. “Aunt Blanche is in a tearing temper. She’s hard to bear as it is without you consorting with the enemy.”

“Enemy? Don’t be ridiculous, Mary. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have—”

“Aunt Blanche says you haven’t even given Jones any of your time yet. She says you need to rethink your priorities.”

Torn between frustration over Mary’s complete lack of understanding of his situation and their shared irritation with their most difficult relative, he focused on the latter. “Since when do you care what Aunt Blanche thinks?”

“Never! But, Henry, the roses are your responsibility now.”

Roses again. Henry gritted his teeth. “Roses? I have sheep to shelter in the fiercest winter in a decade, a summons from Wolfston’s solicitors, a drunken groom causing a ruckus in the village, spring planting to plan, two tenants in a dispute over fields, and four more tenants worried about fuel. The fourth housekeeper in five years just quit. There is more to learn than I studied in university. I have no time for the damned roses. I probably won’t until spring, and by then I’ll be dragged down to London to prance around in ermine while they confirm me to be what you all already think I am—the Duke of everlasting Roseleigh!”

“But that’s exactly it, Henry. *Roseleigh*. The Roseleigh rose matters. I want to bring little Henry to the flower show some day and show him the family heritage,” Mary said, patting her belly.

“Little Algernon will see them in his time. Jones can manage it. He grows the blasted roses,” Henry said, disordering his hair in disgust.

At “Algernon,” Mary rolled her eyes. “But you know Margaret Ansel came to spy. You must know.”

“Our guest is *Lady* Margaret. Has she said she came to spy?”

“Of course not!”

“Has she mentioned roses, red, white, pink, or otherwise?”

“No, but—”

“Has she rifled through my files when my back was turned?”

“N... How would I know? You should protect Grandfather’s secrets.”

“I wouldn’t know where to look or what’s hidden away about this rose business. It doesn’t matter. She can’t. I have the keys.”

“If you’d let Jones...,” Mary started.

Henry waved her words away. “Don’t judge Lady Margaret until she gives you reason. Please, Mary. Aunt Blanche will say and do what she pleases no matter what I say. I’m asking you to be a buffer for our guest. Do you hear me? Guest.”

Mary tried to rise and sank back, casting a Henry a pathetic glance. He rolled his eyes and came around the desk to hold out a hand and help her rise. He peered down with a smile. “It won’t be much longer, will it? Little Algernon will be running around the ancestral pile in no time.”

“Try to show some dignity. You’re Roseleigh now, Henry. Aunt Blanche may be a formidable old tartar, but she isn’t wrong.” Mary heaved a deep sigh, one Henry thought belonged on the stage. “Very well. I’ll be so sweet that Lady Margaret’s teeth will ache, but I’ll stick as close as a Scottish thistle. If she goes anywhere near the glasshouse or Jones’s workroom, I’ll have her out of here on her aristocratic bum and her white rose badge with her.”

“You have a glasshouse?” A muscle in Lady Margaret’s cheek twitched, as if she was holding back anger. Or laughter. She stepped further into the room. “A Scottish thistle?”

Henry wondered how long she had been in the doorway.

Mary blushed deeply. “Our aunt expressed some concern. She—”

“Let me guess. She thinks I’m here to steal the family secrets, the Blood Red rose? Or is it to be Cardinal this year, or Ruby Queen, or—but wait, you wouldn’t tell me, would you?”

Her eyes danced. Definitely amused, Henry thought. He really ought to go to Mary’s rescue, but he was inclined to let her flounder in some well-deserved discomfort.

“I. We. That is, you must admit...”

“That people at Edgecroft would behave as rudely as you all have if you turned up unannounced? I fear that is likely. All for this foolish feud. Can we call truce, Lady Eckelston, and allow your brother to continue grappling with the strands of his newly acquired duchy?”

Lady Margaret understood his predicament better than anyone at Roseleigh Hall. Henry smiled at that. She smiled back, and something around his heart gave a squeeze. *Foolish feud indeed.*

“I actually came to ask if I might make use of your library while I’m waiting for the weather to turn.” Lady Margaret leaned confidentially toward Mary. “If I confine myself there, you won’t have to worry that I’m prowling about seeking to uncover your secrets.”

“Of course. I’ll show you.” Mary walked to the door.

“We’ll leave you to your work, Your Grace,” Lady Margaret said with a graceful curtsy. “You have much weighing you down.”

How could she know that? he wondered. He longed to follow her to the library. He turned back to his desk instead.

Perhaps he would have five minutes after dinner for something other than sheep, pigs, turnips, and corn. And roses.



CHAPTER FOUR

THE FAMED ROSELEIGH library did not disappoint. Soaring a full two stories, it contained books lining three walls, broken in the center by a balcony reached by stairs on each of the two ends. One of the book-lined walls sheltered a fireplace—an Adam, she suspected—with a valiantly, if ineffectively, burning fire. She wrapped her woolen shawl tighter.

The fourth wall had a foundation of low bookcases over which soared three towering mullioned windows, their blocks of clear glass were interspersed with frosted and stained-glass panes. Each of the panes of colored glass was a five-petaled rose—red, of course. The Bradley family wasn't shy about proclaiming their prizewinning ways.

Chairs and tables broke up the broad room into conversational groupings or, more likely, comfortable spaces for reading. Upon closer examination, she noticed that the shelves on the wall facing the windows were open on the lower half to accommodate a nook of sorts. Not wide enough for seating, it created a shelf on which were presented recent newspapers and magazines.

The dark paneling above the shelf featured a grid of nine paintings, each eighteen inches square. She gave a wry laugh. They were, of course, paintings of roses. In this case, the most famous of Roseleigh's winners in the York Rose Show. Small metal plates on the bottom of each proudly revealed its name. *Passion's Dream*. *Her Majesty's Ruby*. *Scarlet Princess*. *Bradley's Cardinal*. And of course, *Blood Red*, the queen of them all. In recent years, Roseleigh had been breeding for dark red. Perhaps they had gone too far. *Midnight Wine* had lost last year to Margaret's father's *Innocent Sprite*, a lovely little ecru-white province rose with tight blossoms, to the earl's everlasting delight.

She scanned the publications and found them a predictable collection of political and horticultural titles. She picked up *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* with a fond smile. Her most recent article, a description of the precious *Anemone pratensis*, more common in the north than previously believed, wouldn't be published for another month. What would the Bradleys think if they knew? Since it wasn't about roses nor in her true name, they would never notice. She set the magazine back down and gave it a fond pat.

Margaret was surprised to find that the bank of shelves to the left of the nook was devoted broadly to agriculture and horticulture rather than merely to rose cultivation, although all the classic titles and some surprising, more obscure titles on rose cultivation also caught her eye. The collection had been assembled with great care, by someone who knew what they were doing. They had every edition of Abbé Rozier's *Cours complet d'agriculture*, including the latest. From what she'd heard moments before about his woes, including spring planting, the duke could benefit from that one. *Dare I point it out?* She wondered if he read French. If he was to continue the family tradition, he would be well advised to learn. The best modern books on rose cultivation were in French.

She ran her hands over familiar titles, pleased to see the latest edition of H. C. Andrew's *Monograph of the Genus Rosa* as well as his other horticultural writings. A lower shelf held annual editions of *Le bon jardinier*, the great French almanac. The books near to hand were current and practical. She cast her eyes upward, wondering what obscure treasures, ancient and foreign, regarding roses and gardens, she might find on the upper levels.

"If you are looking for novels, they are hidden on the top level to the right," Lady Mary Eckelston, her Scottish thistle, said as she waddled in.

Caught snooping? Margaret grinned. "What is to the left?"

Lady Mary waved her hand airily. "Who knows."

The treasures must be shelved there, above the horticulture collection. An itch to explore overtook Margaret, quickly squashed. The very pregnant Lady Mary might feel obliged to trail up the stairs after her.

The duke's sister continued, "There are fine-art prints to the right of the windows, though, and ladies' magazines just below them. History on the other side."

History would do for a long afternoon in the library. Margaret scanned the shelves, slipping past books from ancient Rome to Britannia to West Africa until she spied a stretch of books just above eye level dedicated to Lancashire. She pulled off a general history of the Lonsdale Hundred and another on the Ribble Valley, both of which dug deep into prehistory for their starting points. She replaced them and settled on *Lancashire: Summary History and Description*.

She glanced over at Lady Mary impatiently paging through *La belle assemblée*. A summary history seemed to promise a skim along the high points, perfect for what promised to be a distracting time.

Margaret adjusted a chair near enough to benefit from the fire but turned so that it also received the sun beaming down from the windows. The smile she sent Lady Mary felt a bit tight, but her shadow had become tiresome. *In any other household, I'd guess they thought I planned to steal the silver. They guard their roses as tightly as Castlereagh guards state secrets. As if I know nothing and need their wisdom to cultivate ours.*

She set her eyes to the book and refused to glance around again. She plodded through sheep and cotton, sea and sands, mills and fields, rewarded when she came to descriptions of the great houses. She paged over to Roseleigh. An artist's conception of a Norman keep, the central block of the house, decorated the first page. The conqueror's minion Henri Bradleigh, appointed Earl of Roseleigh, had built it as a part of the Norman campaign of terror. Soon she was absorbed in various sides in assorted conflicts and their impact on the

family fortunes as well as the house. The Bradleys seemed to land on their feet no matter what happened.

At some point, she must have dozed off. When she opened her eyes, the sun had sunk too low to warm her chair. Lady Mary was gone. She blinked twice at the man leaning on the mantel, Roseleigh himself. Watching her. She realized to her horror that sometime in the afternoon, her slippers had come off; her feet were tucked under her skirts, and her gown was askew. She froze.

“I—That is, I’m sorry if I woke you. I came in for a book,” he said. She found his discomfort at being caught out ogling her reassuring. She sat up slowly and wrapped her shawl around herself, crossing her arms while she tucked her toes in her slippers.

Reassuring and adorable. His hair was mussed as if he’d run his fingers through it in frustration. His waistcoat was crooked, his cravat askew. He had obviously come directly from his desk, hadn’t seen to his appearance, and hadn’t expected to find her. He hadn’t left her or made his presence known either.

“I, ah, I’ll just...,” he stuttered.

“Take your time, Your Grace. It is your library.” She bit back her grin. When she stood, a bit of mischief overtook her. She stretched, her arms up over her head in a most unladylike move. If the man was going to look, she may as well give him something to see.

When their eyes met, his were dancing. “If your reading put you to sleep, perhaps I should take care. I’m too busy for a nap.”

“Fetch your book, then, and be quick. I can recommend a few.”

His brows rose.

She smiled sweetly and walked to the shelves covered with agriculture, husbandry, and horticulture. She handed him Rozier’s *Cours complet*. “How is your French?”

“Well enough, madam.” He took the book from her. “Agriculture, Lady Margaret? Are you an expert in estate management?”

“My dear duke, you would be surprised.”

He caught his bottom lip in his teeth and studied her face before he said, “I begin to think nothing you do would surprise me.”

His dancing eyes did strange things to her midsection, and she found she couldn’t look away.

Lady Eckelston chose that unfortunate moment to return. “Henry! I didn’t expect to find you here.” She darted glances between the two of them, both disheveled, hair disturbed, and cheeks pink.

Oh dear. Lady Eckelston is leaping to unfortunate conclusions. Margaret feared a scandal was brewing.

“I’ve pored over planning until my eyes crossed. I need a walk. Lady Margaret was about to join me,” the duke said before Margaret could think of a diversion.

His sister cast a suspicious glance at Margaret. “In the snow?”

He gazed at her, brows raised in challenge.

“Don’t be silly, Lady Eckelston. You won’t want me near that glasshouse of yours. He meant to give me a tour of this great pile of a house.”



THE SIGHT OF Lady Margaret Ansel, shoeless and curled up like a puppy, asleep in his grandfather’s library poleaxed Henry. He couldn’t breathe; he gaped at the sight like a foolish schoolboy who’d never seen a woman before. Henry knew he had never seen one quite like this one: tall and lithe, strong and confident, clever and aware. To that list, he added alluring. Enthralling. Beautiful.

When she'd woken and he had been caught intruding on her privacy, he had frozen in place, too mortified to speak yet too fascinated to turn his back as a gentleman ought. He stuttered some monosyllables without knowing what he meant to say.

Now he found himself swept along with Lady Margaret on his arm, delighted if a bit uncertain how he had managed it.

"You've already seen the great treasure of Roseleigh, the library," he said.

Her amused lift of a brow shot through him. "Not the glasshouse?" It was a challenge.

"That is a treasure of a different sort," he replied.

"One you don't plan to show me," she teased.

"Why, Lady Margaret, it is a good distance from the house. I wouldn't risk your slippers on the walk." He returned her teasing grin.

She opened her mouth to retort to that bit of nonsense but obviously thought better of it. She fell back on history instead. "I gather this was originally a Norman keep," she said.

"It still is, at least in part," he laughed. "You saw the entrance." He led her back there. "This great block of stone walls is the center core of the house. I think it is meant to remind all and sundry what great medieval warriors we were," he said.

"Were or are?" she asked.

"Bradley men do their service to king and country in every generation. I did," he said, pushing memories away.

"Harry didn't," she said, using his cousin's given name.

What sort of relationship did she have with Harry if she made free with his given name? An unexpected rush of jealousy lent bitterness to his voice. "The heir couldn't possibly be sent into danger. Ironic, isn't it?" he replied.

“Lady Mary told me what happened. Irony is him killing himself in some damned fool attempt to jump a fallen tree without making sure what was on the other side.” She shook her head. “Typical of him. Too arrogant, too impulsive, too impervious to advice.”

“Ah. You knew him well.” *Not fond of him, then.* Relief brought a smile. Henry had been fond of his cousin but knew his faults all too well. He didn’t like to think that Lady Margaret might be blind to Harry’s character.

She gave him a peculiar glance under her lashes. “Well enough. We both served on the York Rose Council. He tried to have me removed.”

“Why would he do that?” Henry asked.

“He said that a woman didn’t belong on the council. The truth is I challenged his opinions too many times. He didn’t succeed.” She spoke while peering around at the weapons adorning the walls of the medieval entrance. “Is that halberd as old as it looks?” She touched one finger to the particularly nasty weapon. Less decorative than later examples of the type, it had a sharp ax on one side, a viciously jagged hook on the other, and a sharp point for jabbing on the end.

“If you think it looks five hundred years old, then yes, it is. Grandfather told me it is the pride of the collection. Some early Bradley carried it into battle.”

“Richard III was cut down by a halberd,” she murmured.

As well read as she is intelligent. “Only if they knocked him off his horse first!” he retorted.

“Grim era. As interesting as the ancient stones are, I don’t think I would have cared to live in the keep.” She shuddered. “When were the changes made?”

“The set of drawing rooms on one side and the wing on the other that houses guest rooms now were added under the first George. Building continued through the last century, culminating in the massive construction across the back.

Family suites parallel the guest wing, and major public rooms were added. You've already seen the library and dining room."

"When was the glasshouse built?" she asked.

He refused to be baited on that subject. "Let me show you our modest ball and music room. The floor is particularly lovely."

Lady Margaret duly admired the parquetry in the ballroom, and Henry admired Lady Margaret. She swirled in a silent dance all her own, taking in the crystal chandeliers and wall sconces, the musician platform, and the French doors. He didn't know what she imagined, but his mind's eye saw her. In his arms. Her attention entirely his.

The heat in her smile when they continued gave him cause to wonder if her thoughts had been similar. He might have been mistaken. "I read there is a gallery of family portraits."

"Above us. I'll show you the family stairs."

"If it is part of the private family quarters..." she demurred.

"Not at all. In fact, it opens onto the upper level of the library. There are sitting rooms as well upstairs." He led the way.

The stairs let out into the gallery, which ran the length of the George I build and the older portion of the house. "Then where are the ducal quarters?" she asked.

"My rooms are—" He made a vague gesture, meeting her eyes. "—beyond." He swallowed hard. "The, ah, pictures are roughly chronological. The oldest are, ah, at that end."



CHAPTER FIVE

MARGARET REMEMBERED HENRY as a lanky, half-grown boy running wild in York while his cousin Henry strutted through events like the princeling he was. Even now, she found it hard to picture Henry as the Duke of Roseleigh. And yet his confident masculinity drew her. She found his faint flush at the mention of his private quarters charming; something deeply feminine inside her responded to his obvious attraction. It would give her father palpitations.

They began in the middle, among lush paintings of men in armor and women with plunging necklines and voluminous gowns. She peered at each, searching for this Henry's rugged good looks in their faces but finding little. "Not much family resemblance," she murmured.

Henry, who appeared to know them well, introduced each as a so-many-times great-grandparent or -uncle, sometimes with a naughty story.

They moved toward the beginning and came to a few sixteenth-century courtiers in Tudor doublets and hose, necks bound in ruffs. And the ladies... "It is a wonder they could move, much less dance, in those boardlike bodices and farthingales," she murmured.

"But dance they did if what the histories tell us is true. Their headdresses look like they are in boxes," he replied, eyeing her as if imagining her head wrapped in one.

She tipped her head coyly, and he laughed. They came to men in flowing robes and big hats, grim-faced next to wives with hair bound by linen strips under stiff head gear. "Those must be the lot who lived in the keep," she said.

"No doubt. Damp and cold." He grinned, and her heart took a leap. "Look at this one. The keep itself, seat of the Earls

of Roseleigh, fierce defenders of Norman sovereignty in this part of the island.” He indicated a small painting of the ancient castle, executed in a strong hand and portrayed with a stormy sky behind.

“That looks like the illustration in the book I read.”

“It has been much copied. Last of all is the grandson—or perhaps great-nephew—of its builder, Adolfus Bradleigh, the second Earl,” he said.

“We have a copy of his portrait in our gallery,” she murmured.

He cocked up an eyebrow. “Should I be surprised? Maybe not. I’m sure both of our families sprang from two of his branches.”

She gazed at him directly. “Do you know when we went our separate ways and why?”

“It is in the natural order of things for families to expand into different directions, isn’t it? At some point, a younger son must have been rewarded with a title. Henry VIII sold enough of them.” He paused, glanced back at the line of paintings, and bit his lower lip as if considering the matter. He’d revealed that endearing habit before. “Are there any others you have copies of?”

“None, though a few bear some resemblance in the sixteenth century. Perhaps you’re correct,” she said.

He offered his arm. “Shall we go to the other end and take a look at the most recent ones?”

She studied the passing generations as they walked to the other end. They came to what she suspected was the early Georgian time, perhaps when work on the manor had flourished. Roses began to appear; she’d been watching for them. From that point, every painting had one, or a vaseful, or an entire bush, usually in shades of red. She gazed at them sharply and was certain. Every one. She stopped in her tracks and walked back. “There. That’s where it starts. Can you see it?”

He peered at the painting of the third duke. After a moment, he shrugged. “Still little resemblance.”

“He’s holding a red rose. Every painting from this one on has roses,” she said.

“Are your family’s the same?” he asked, his warm eyes boring into her.

She couldn’t have lied if she wanted to. “I have no idea. I’ve never noticed. Perhaps we take them for granted.”

“Perhaps we do,” he replied. “Do you think this is where the competition began?”

“Competition? You mean feud, don’t you, Your Grace?” she said bitterly. “Sniping, cheating, gloating...”

“I didn’t realize how bad it had grown until I became Roseleigh. I’ve heard nothing since the day of the funeral but roses. Roses and, frankly, cautions about your father and your family.”

“As a child, I found it amusing, a little friendly competition. Then I began growing them. When my father realized the quality of my work, he began pressuring me to create winning cultivars. From the time I first attended the York Rose Council, I’ve been horrified by the cutthroat competition. Since our two families win the bulk of the time, it is always engendered or fed by one or the other of us. Your cousin Harry—” She bit back her words.

“What about him?”

“It is not good to speak ill of the dead. Suffice to say he liked to win. By the way, the flower show dates to the 1750s. I would guess the feud began soon after,” she said.

“Feud.” His brows drew together.

“What would you call it?”

“War?” he suggested.

She chuckled ruefully. “Perhaps. You’re the head of your family now. How do we call a truce?”

“I may be the duke, but I doubt if I could stop it. Would your father listen?”

“Not likely.”

“There we are, then. Let’s go back down, and I’ll show you my favorite painting. It is in my study. I suspect it has roses. I always thought the roses everywhere were a play on our name.”

She reached over and put a hand on his arm. “It probably is. I’ve heard my father complain that your title gave your family an unfair advantage.”

His eyes met hers, and he covered her hand with his. “Do you suppose you and I could declare our own truce? Do you think the others would follow?”

He swayed a bit, and she thought he might kiss her. When he turned away and led her in the direction of the stairs, her heart sank.

Don’t be a ninny, Margaret. You’ve been here less than a day. Besides, that way lies heartbreak and no end of conflict. She didn’t care. She really wanted his kiss.



HENRY STARED INTO his shaving mirror while Carter, the valet he’d inherited along with the title, stood stoically behind him, waiting to finish grooming him for dinner.

His familiar features always struck him as unremarkable, yet he’d caught Margaret—Lady Margaret—studying him several times the day before. She looked for family resemblance, of course; that must be it. There wasn’t much. Henry got his looks from his mother. Bradleys passed on many things, but their features were not among them.

Did she find him pleasing? For a moment at the top of the stairs, he’d thought so. He certainly found her so. He had almost kissed her. Wouldn’t that just fuel the feud?

He turned and let Carter see to his unruly hair and create a masterful knot in his cravat.

Would a kiss do harm, Henry? Surely not. And what if it led, as such things do, to more? Would a relationship between you cause dissention? Or would it heal old conflicts? He wouldn't have thought about it before, but now he wondered. Problem number six still loomed over Roseleigh: Find a wife. If he'd drawn up a list of the qualities he wanted in a partner, he suspected Lady Margaret would fit the bill perfectly. It was too soon, but worth considering. He went down to breakfast with a spring in his step, whistling.

Aunt Blanche held court at the head of the table, Mary to one side and Eckelston to the other. *Did they all hasten down to face me as a group?* His aunt glared up at him. "Roseleigh. I didn't expect you; I thought you'd eat in your office."

He bowed respectfully. "As you see, I decided to eat with family."

"You haven't met with Jones yet." Aunt Blanche got down to grievance quickly.

"I have had too many other things to do," he said, nodding to Givens, who made haste to pour his coffee while he sent the footman scurrying to fill a plate.

His aunt sniffed. "You had time to parade that woman around the manor."

"I did indeed. Lady Margaret had been left on her own all day. I thought one of us ought to make her welcome," he said.

Aunt Blanche pursed her lips and frowned at him. "From what Mary told me, you made her very welcome indeed."

Mary blushed and kept her eyes on her food. What was that about? He had to think for a moment, but then he remembered his disheveled state, Margaret's disarranged gown, and the look on his sister's face when she'd come in. *Oh dear. Scandal already and I haven't even done anything.*

“I notice our guest isn’t here this morning,” he said. “She must be sleeping late.”

“Up with the birds, that one. I told her the snow is melted and the weather improving. I suggested she leave this morning while she can,” his aunt said. She raised her chin in self-satisfied defiance.

Henry threw down his serviette and pushed himself up, both hands on the table. “Suggested? I won’t be surprised if you have footmen assigned to assist her out the door.”

A flash of disquiet crossed his aunt’s face so quickly he may have imagined it. He didn’t wait to find out. He was out the door, his breakfast uneaten.

He found his guest’s quarters in an uproar. He did not, of course, enter her room. He spoke to the maid at the door. “Kindly ask your mistress if I may have a word.”

Lady Margaret’s face appeared over her maid’s shoulder. “Spoke to your aunt, did you?”

“Listened, more like. I apologize for my family’s rudeness. Please don’t leave.” He wasn’t certain that was proper; he didn’t care.

She glanced at the maid, who scuttled discreetly away. “I never intended to stay at all. If the roads are clear and the skies no longer threatening, I am best advised to be on my way.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“That I should leave? Yes.”

“That the roads are clear,” he said, holding his breath.

Her brows rose slowly, and a naughty grin bloomed as slowly as a rose. “It never hurts to be careful.”

“Perhaps we should investigate. We could walk,” he said.

“Outside?”

“I’ll give you a tour of the Roseleigh gardens,” he said. *She’ll need her imagination. Snow covers everything.* He bit

his lower lip.

She raised a finger, and for a moment, he thought she meant to touch his mouth. “You did it again,” she murmured.

“Will you go?”

“How can I resist Roseleigh...gardens?”

Within minutes, she was dressed in her warmest cloak and sturdy boots. Her soft bonnet, he noted, had a white rose badge created in skilled needlework. He glanced at it pointedly, lips twitching. He winged his arm, and with a pause while a footman fetched his greatcoat, they were on their way.

Gardeners had cleared paths through both the formal and the casual gardens, leaving the plants under their warm blanket of snow. He led her to the eastern rose beds. Mounds of snow lay over the bushes, some of which were higher than his shoulders.

“The roses are arranged by variety. This bed features various damask roses, for example, and on our other side is a bed of various Gallica roses. As you can see.” He bit back a laugh and his joke.

“But, Your Grace, your roses are all white! I would not have expected that at Roseleigh. When did you begin breeding white roses?” she asked, batting her eyes in faux innocence.

“Threatened that we might steal your thunder, Lady Margaret?” he asked.

“Flattered, I would say!” she replied.

He sighed dramatically. “Alas, under their fine white coat, you would find a riot of color come May—maroon, pink, every possible shade of red—but no white.”

She shook her head. “Such a pity, to cut your joy off that way. Come to Dove Abbey. The shades of white will astound you in their variety. But no red.”

Henry sobered. “It truly is a pity. The whole thing has reached ludicrous proportions.”

“Would you come, then?”

Yes. The word was on the tip of his tongue. He sighed. “Not this year, not next spring. Roseleigh needs me, and Parliament will likely demand my presence to confirm me in the title. I may not even make it to York next June, or I would say I’d see you then. Someday, perhaps.”

Was the regret in her eyes real or a reflection of his own? “Someday, then. It would go a long way to put period to this stupid feud.”

He loosened his arm, letting her hand slide down until he took it in his, and they continued their walk. Without conscious thought, his feet carried him, still grasping Margaret’s hand, beyond the taller bushes and the stand of trees. To the glasshouse on the south-facing slope.



CHAPTER SIX

DISAPPOINTMENT THICKENED IN Margaret's throat. *Did you really think he would come to Dove Abbey on the basis of an informal invitation? His family would have his head.*

Neither one of them had much to say after that. Wrapped up in her own emotions and conscious of the sensations flowing from her hand wrapped in his, she paid little attention to their direction until he led her past the mounded snow of the gardens to a path through trees, skeletal in their winter sleep. The well-trodden ground told her this path led somewhere important. Her heart quickened.

Roseleigh was situated on the north side of a slope. He led her south, through a walled garden she assumed to be the kitchen garden, and over the rise, and there it was, Roseleigh's magnificent glasshouse glittering in the sun.

There he paused, his gaze filled with pride, and she couldn't fault him. The central block rose two stories high, long wings stretched east and west, a shorter one south. The center and long wings were made of glass from the foot-high foundation, a palace of crystal. The south wing was brick halfway up. Taken as a whole, it made Dove Abbey's modest glasshouse look like a potting shed.

"Come," he said. "Let's get warm."

Snow disappeared as they neared the place, revealing paving stones all along the glasshouse. When he opened the door, the same stones continued to form the floor of the central conservatory. It was, as she expected, more orangery than palm house, filled as it was with fruit trees. A tall apple tree sat in the middle, surrounded by small ones she thought were apricot, pear, and orange. Berry bushes lined the walls.

“The west wing grows pineapples, herbs, and vegetables for our table. Would you care to take a look?” he asked.

Margaret couldn't reply. She stared up at the gracefully arching glass ceiling and the bountiful trees. “Miraculous,” she murmured.

As she circled the conservatory, she could feel his eyes following her. He stood patiently by the door to the west wing, arms folded. When she approached, he held out his hand, and she gave him hers. He searched her face with tender concentration. He had promised warmth, and Margaret felt the heat of his eyes and hand.

“You're flushed,” he said without breaking eye contact. “You must be too warm.”

She took back her hand and unwrapped her scarf. Her fingers went up to unbutton her cloak, but he got there first, removing it and folding it over his arm. “There is a coal-fired steam heater at the far east end. You'll have noticed the iron grillwork along the floor. It isn't there for decoration.”

She hadn't. She studied it now, peering along the length of the west wing. The grill work ran the entire way down the center. It circled the central conservatory. She leaned over and gasped when she felt the warmth rising from it. “A modern marvel,” she said.

“It is that. Grandpapa was always fascinated by progress. And of course, updates came to the glasshouse first before the manor.” He shrugged ruefully and held out his hand again. “Shall we look at pineapples?”

She glanced back toward the east wing. The door that she noted was shut she was certain housed rose cultivation. She nodded and let him lead her in the other direction. A gardening assistant watering an herb bed bowed to them. Beds of fresh vegetables pleased eye and soul. “No wonder meals at Roseleigh are so wonderful.”

“A brilliant cook doesn't hurt,” he replied. “Kitchen staff work out here as well.”

The pineapples smelled wonderful, and their appearance amazed her. “We haven’t tried to grow them,” she murmured.

Henry turned to the worker. “Edward, see that there is pineapple at dinner tonight.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the boy said.

“Now you have to stay,” Henry said, turning to Margaret.

“You’re very sure of yourself.”

“I am. I’m a duke. It is part of the job.” He ran a hand across the back of his neck. “How I wish that were true. I had only the vaguest idea how much Grandpapa carried on his shoulders. Now it all falls on mine.”

“I know. Family pressure and feuds don’t help. I should leave,” she said.

“Please don’t. Our walks are the most relaxing times I’ve had since they called me home six weeks ago. You’re the only person who doesn’t want something from me,” he said, grasping her hand more tightly.

Do I want something from him? Surely not, or at least not what his aunt fears. She found she very much wanted the feel of his hand holding hers. She wanted his kiss. “I’ve enjoyed them too, Your Grace, but I can’t stay forever. I should go.”

His free hand cupped her cheek. “Are you sure, Margaret?” he whispered.

No good can come of this. “Maybe one night. I’ll leave in the morning.”

He glanced sideways at the gardener studiously concentrating on the planting beds, before dropping a kiss as tender as it was brief.



I CAN GIVE myself one morning, he thought rebelliously. The pleasure of a beautiful woman, her hand in his, soothed his

weary soul. It wasn't a stroll through a park or even a garden, but the Roseleigh glasshouse came close.

At least it would if they weren't staring at lettuce and eggplant. He picked up the pace back toward the center. With sun pouring through the roof, and surrounded by trees, he could imagine they were at Hyde Park—or at least a country orchard. They came around the center with its stand of trees and found Jones posted in the entrance to the east wing with a pained expression. He bowed correctly when they approached.

“May I have a moment, Your Grace?” Jones asked.

Henry gestured Lady Margaret toward an ornate bench between the berry bushes. “This will be brief,” he said. The smile she returned warmed his heart.

Jones stepped back into the east wing of the glasshouse and pulled the ornate glass door shut, scowling at it as if it was Lady Margaret. “I had hoped to meet with you before this, Your Grace. Did Lady Blanche forget to convey my requests?”

“My aunt has been vociferous on your behalf, Mr. Jones, but as you can imagine, there are many seeking my attention. I simply haven't gotten to it yet.”

The little man rocked up on his toes, huffed out his chest, and gazed up at Henry directly. “Cultivation efforts are of primary priority at Roseleigh, Your Grace, as I'm sure you will realize when you have been in place longer,” he said.

“I am inclined to put seeing to the well-being of my tenants ahead of my flowers, Mr. Jones.”

Jones gave a dismissive sniff. “You may not be aware, but that woman is not at all the thing. She should not be here.” The man gave Henry the impression that Lady Margaret's presence in his domain shocked him to his toes.

Henry ignored his discourse on Lady Margaret. “What is so urgent that you must speak to me immediately? Is the grass breaking? Mold running amok? Weasels tunneling under the floor?”

Jones blanched, as if any one of those disasters would give him palpitations. “I should say not! We care for the glasshouse and its contents punctiliously. It is vital, however, that we have the support and attentive care of the Duke of Roseleigh.”

“I repeat, Jones, what is it you wish to show me so urgently?”

“You must be informed about our current cultivation effort, the rose we will announce in York in June. You must understand our processes and challenges in order to...”

“Give you the respect and attention you crave?” Henry asked. It was unnecessarily cruel.

Jones turned a shade of maroon that struck at Henry’s conscience. He had let irritation override his sense. *You’re not everyman now, Henry. The words of a duke cut deeply.*

“Very well. I will lay aside tomorrow afternoon. The entire time is at your disposal. Will that work for you?” Henry asked.

Only slightly mollified, Jones nodded. Henry would have work to do if he wanted to soothe this man’s feelings. He wasn’t entirely sure he cared. The pompous gardener grated on his nerves. Henry peered down the east wing, searching for something else to say. A wooden wall closed off the end. “Am I right in assuming that is your laboratory, Jones?” he asked with a gesture toward it.

“Of course, Your Grace! It is vital that it be kept private. I would beg you not to walk your guest around it,” Jones replied.

Obviously, the walls were glass. A walk around would be as good as a trip through the door. Already sick of all the secrecy, he was tempted to do exactly that. Henry’s irritation with Jones and with the entire competition over the benighted roses grew. He swallowed the reprimand on the tip of his tongue. There was no point in antagonizing the man until he knew more.

“The rest of this wing is devoted to flowers. Would it be possible to give our guest a tour? You could explain your

various triumphs.” Henry regretted that last comment, one sure to bring out the head gardener’s worst.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Jones replied through tight lips.

Henry opened the door and beckoned his guest. “Lady Margaret Ansel, may I introduce Mr. Amos Jones, Roseleigh’s head gardener.”

Jones inclined his head in an obeisance that was almost proper and murmured, “Honored,” under his breath.

“I’m honored, Mr. Jones. Your fame precedes you. I read your article in *Curtis’s Botanical Magazine* last summer. Well done, as always.” She gazed around in awe at the long gallery lined on both sides with roses of various sizes and shapes, most of them red, sometimes bordered by smaller plants.

Jones preened a bit. “We maintain a collection of our most successful cultivars in this gallery of the glasshouse. For our own use. Occasionally—rarely—we share the hips with discerning breeders who request seeds.”

Lady Margaret’s eyes widened, and Jones looked entirely too smug. Henry didn’t understand the byplay, but the lady smiled sweetly. “I won’t expect you to share with the Earl of Edgecote’s daughter,” she said.

Jones gave a slight bow, a smile teasing his lips. “Actually, my lady, I would be happy to share the seeds of Blood Red, the queen of our collection, with you.” He set action to words, clipping three orange rose hips from the plant.

“I’m most grateful, Mr. Jones,” she said. “I know you guard your generational charts closely, but I don’t suppose you would share the parental cross for Blood Red.”

“Why, Lady Margaret,” Jones said coyly, “that would be telling.” What was the man up to?

They walked the length of the wing down one side. Margaret asked questions Henry didn’t understand or care to. He preferred listening to her demonstrate expertise while

flattering Jones. The man became quite vociferous when encouraged to show off his knowledge.

Margaret gave the firmly closed door no attention at all when they reached the end. Jones turned to the other side, speaking confidentially to Henry, leaving their guest briefly next to a small shrubby bush with bright-red single-petal blooms, one Jones hadn't bothered to mention. Moments later, she swept up the other side and joined the conversation.

"May I say, my lady, you ask excellent questions. For a woman, you are quite knowledgeable. You must spend time with your father's expert staff," Jones conceded with obvious generosity—and no little pretension.

Lady Margaret's face became a mask of humility. Henry suspected he might be the only one who caught the gleam in her eye. "My dear Mr. Jones. I bow to your superior status, but I must make a confession. I am my father's expert staff. I am Edgecote's head rose breeder."

Color drained from Amos Jones's face. "You? A woman is Edgecote's breeder? Did you create Innocent Sprite?" he gasped, shaking with outrage.

She bit her lip and tipped her head down. "For my sins, yes."

Henry intervened quickly before Jones could explode. "We best be on our way, my lady," he said.



AN HOUR LATER Henry escorted Margaret to her traveling coach with her maid and a hamper of delicacies from Roseleigh's kitchen and orangery. She had changed her mind, and he couldn't convince her otherwise. He extended a hand to help her up.

"Are you sure I can't persuade you to stay?" he asked.

The pleading in his voice warmed her heart almost as much as the feel of his hand—holding hers much longer than

needed—warmed the rest of her. She definitely needed to leave before they became more entangled.

“Jones will have told all and sundry that I bred the rose that took the crown from Roseleigh last year. It was a knife to his heart. I best leave, or you’ll have time for nothing else but rescuing me. Thank you for your hospitality, and for showing me Roseleigh’s magnificent glasshouse.”

Moments later she sank against the cushions, and the coach pulled away. It was just midday, and they could make good time before dark. Her mind swirled in circles, and plans began to form. Her father would, of course, be furious.

She opened her reticule and pulled out the rose hips wrapped in a scrap of lace, Blood Red’s offspring. She would germinate them, of course, but given Jones’s generosity, she felt certain they would not breed true. There’d be color anomalies or perhaps disease-prone seedlings. She rewrapped them, put them in a drawer of her traveling desk, and reached into her pocket, pulling out three little cuttings, two with rose hips attached.

A slow smile came over her. Jones had given her just enough time to grab her small pruning knife from her reticule and cut them from the shrubby little rosebush with the bright-red single-petal blooms, the one Jones didn’t bother to describe. The mother plant of Roseleigh. The variety behind their many successful crosses. She was sure of it. She wrapped them in a piece of tissue, labeled it MR, and put it in a different drawer. She would find a way to keep the rose hips moist when they stopped.

What she had in mind might take a season or two to manage, but she looked forward to it with relish. She wondered if Henry would reconsider her invitation. She wondered if he would welcome her back. After today, she wondered if he would forgive her.

Part Two

Henry's Sixth Problem

For thou hast given me in this beauteous face a world
of earthly blessings to my soul.

—Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part 2*



CHAPTER ONE

York, June 1819

THE DUKE OF Roseleigh, duly confirmed in his title, strode through the York Rose Show with confidence and grace, his eyes scanning the crowd. He reached the council table, and the staff scrambled to their feet to bow and welcome him.

“Your grandfather is sorely missed, Your Grace,” the master of the Rose Council, Martin Grey, said, eyeing the black armband on Henry’s sleeve. “May we hope you will attend our spring meeting next March with Mr. Jones once your year of mourning is over?”

Spring meeting? Henry groaned inwardly. How much of his life would these roses take? He handed over the entry papers Jones had meticulously prepared.

“The Earl of Edgecote will attend, of course,” the master continued. “One wonders if his new head rosarian will be up to snuff.”

Rosarian? Of course—one who cultivates roses. Edgecote has a new one? What about Margaret? Henry panicked momentarily. It was the thought of seeing her again that gave him motivation to come. It was on the tip of his tongue to demand that the sycophant explain what he meant, but he held back. The man’s entire purpose in mentioning Edgecote was to pressure Henry into attending his blasted meeting. Henry wasn’t about to reveal his interest in Lady Margaret Ansel.

“Jones manages ably. I will, of course, discuss the council with him,” Henry said, accepting an owner’s badge and ribbon with an inclination of his head.

Grey spoke before Henry could walk away. “We hope half mourning won’t keep Lady Blanche from the Rose Ball this

evening. We so look forward to seeing her every year. Do you know if she plans to attend?"

Napoleon's army couldn't keep her away. "I believe she plans to attend at least briefly. She assures me she will not dance but simply put in an appearance. I promised to escort her."

They had come to an agreement, Aunt Blanche and Henry. She would continue to consult with Jones in matters having to do with roses and the glasshouse, and Henry would escort her to York for the Rose Show and Ball. Aunt Blanche for her part would remove herself to a comfortable cottage ten miles from Roseleigh as soon as they returned. It was ready now. Henry had made sure of it. In the meantime, Mary would oversee his house, though she pouted about leaving her husband in London before the Season ended so she could accompany Henry home.

He returned to the Roseleigh box on the garden grounds.

"Is all well? You submitted our entry?" Aunt Blanche asked. "What did Martin—Mr. Grey—have to say?" She blushed—a faint pink but definitely a blush.

Well, well. Now that he thought of it, there'd been something wistful in Martin Grey's question about Aunt Blanche. Whatever it was, Henry planned to encourage it. "He asked if you were going to attend the Rose Ball. I assured him you would put in an appearance."

Aunt Blanche frowned.

"Pity we can't dance. I've never been to the Rose Ball," Mary said. Aunt Blanche's frown deepened.

"There will be other years," Henry sighed. "I understand Grandpapa also attended some sort of spring meeting. Something about planning the June show. Are there parties then too?"

"Of course!" Aunt Blanche snapped, her expression calculating.

“You are obviously welcome to attend. My presence is expected, I gather. I was informed the Earl of Edgecote will be there.”

Mary bounced in her seat. “That reminds me. I heard a bit of delicious gossip in the ladies’ withdrawing room an hour ago. That daughter of his—the one that claimed she came for Grandpapa’s funeral—parted ways with Edgecote after she went home.”

Aunt Blanche frowned and pursed her lips tightly. “Unmarried ladies of breeding do not ‘part ways’ with their father’s house. It isn’t done, even if they are a bit long in the tooth as Margaret Ansel clearly is. Besides, I assumed that she gleefully shared every secret she managed to pry out of Jones with Edgecote. I expect her here preening over her accomplishments.”

“That’s the thing. She isn’t even here this year, and the rumor is she maintains an independent household. She’s at least twenty-five; she came of age over winter and came into a bequest from her grandmother.” Mary leaned in and whispered, “Edgecote was reputed to be furious with her.”

Henry’s mind raced. His hope of seeing her that day disintegrated. “Where?” he asked.

“Where did I hear it?” Mary asked.

“Where does she live?” Henry asked.

“Northumberland,” Mary responded.

“Disgraceful!” Aunt Blanche spat at the same time. “I knew that woman was not at all respectable. Her behavior at Roseleigh was—”

“Unexceptional.” Henry glared her into quiet. He’d gotten adept at that in the past several months.

Mary shot a knowing glance at Henry but kept quiet. She stood and pointedly avoided glancing at Aunt Blanche. “I am going to look in on the baby.”

By “look in,” Henry suspected she meant feed. Mary had taken the unfashionable decision to breastfeed, one Henry applauded and Aunt Blanche vociferously disapproved. “Kiss little Algernon for me,” he said with a teasing grin.

“You may kiss Henrietta yourself this evening before the ball,” Mary retorted. “Your niece loves it when you do.”

If I go to the ball. With assurance Margaret Ansel would not be in attendance, he wasn’t entirely sure he would go. He sighed. Of course he would go. He had agreed to escort Aunt Blanche.

Jones rushed over just then, and he had no more time to consider the matter. Judging had begun. Following Jones and a shockingly fluttery Aunt Blanche, he discovered the winners were to be announced at the ball. He had to attend.



MARGARET, IN A plain gray dress and dark cloak, slipped into the York Assembly Hall through a back door, then the offices, to the recess between the offices and the kitchen, where a narrow door opened to the grand assembly room and a musicians’ gallery had been nestled between the columns. She flattened herself against the wall and ignored curious glances from the musicians. From there she could hear the announcements and perhaps see the raised dais at the far end of the room, where the council officers would sit.

She had come to hear the results, unable to stay away. She’d managed a quick look in late afternoon when the crowds had thinned and the cream of society had already returned to their lodgings to prepare for the ball. The Edgecote rose, a washed-out white, had none of the life she’d put into Innocent Sprite, with its faint blush of peach in its heart, the previous year. Father disapproved of that blush. He’d pushed the gardeners back to bright white.

Staring at her toes, she berated herself for the tenth time. Coming to York had been a terrible idea. She’d walked out of

her father's house in January to his irate disapproval. If he saw her here, he'd chastise her publicly and cause a scene.

The music continued, soothing her jangled nerves until she saw something that made her heart speed up. Henry strolled past the musicians with some delicate flower of York womanhood on his arm. At least he wasn't dancing. *Of course he isn't—it is less than a year since his grandfather's death.* She wanted to pull the little miss's hair out.

Margaret's heart sank. Could she be so jealous of some debutante she'd never even met? Over a man she'd spent one lovely afternoon and one even lovelier morning with? Of course he would look over the current crop. A duke required a wife and heirs, and he would inevitably look for a young woman of breeding.

You're an earl's daughter, for heaven's sake. Perfectly eligible. If only you weren't too old, too tall, too intellectual, too busy about your own project. Perhaps she could finish what she'd started on time for next year and she would come and enter on her own. *Then... But by then, he will likely be married.*

He strolled past, and she absorbed him with her eyes. *You should have told him what you did and why. You should have told him what...*

He walked by again. Odd, that. She didn't have time to think about it. The speaker called for attention. There was a flurry of movement and a hum of voices. She couldn't hear as well as she'd hoped. They always began with fifth place. She strained to hear, and then she was sorry. Edgewise's Shining Light came in fifth to tepid applause. The others went by in a blur, and then...

"This year's prize rose is La Reine Rouge, the Duke of Roseleigh's entry."

Of course it is! The council lacks imagination. She shook her head. One more red rose. She slid along the wall, around the corner, and back the way she'd come.



WITH HIS ATTENTION on Margaret skulking behind the musicians, Henry almost missed the announcement. Jones hurried to the dais, preening and bowing. A shove from Aunt Blanche sent Henry forward too.

Much bowing, hand shaking, and congratulating kept him at the dais longer than he would have liked. He pushed the ribbon and certificate into Jones's eager hands and made his way through a crowd keen to congratulate the new duke, avid debutantes batting their eyes, and disappointed competitors pretending to be noble in defeat. When he reached the musicians' gallery, she was gone.

He had seen her as soon as she slipped behind the clarinet players. No one else had noticed her, and she seemed eager to avoid that, so he had suppressed the urge to seek her out then and there. He'd been patient long enough.

He went through to the recessed hall between the offices and the kitchen but saw no sign of her. The kitchen lay at the front of the building, and he doubted he'd find an outside door there. Certain she'd come in through the back to avoid being seen, he hurried down the corridor of offices and out into the back street, searching in all directions. Nothing.

Discouraged, he considered returning to the ball, but he couldn't leave any woman alone on the streets at night. Guessing that she would be staying in one of the respectable, but lesser, inns across the river rather than in her father's town house, he set off toward the river at a run. She would have to take a ferry, the lone bridge being at the other end of York.

His guess proved correct. He reached the bank just as a ferry, Margaret on board, pulled away. One great leap landed him on it.

"That'll be extra for the rocking!" the boatman complained. Henry paid him what he asked.

Margaret sat at the stern, her body tense.

He sat down next to her. “Afraid of a scold?”

“Better you than my father, I would guess. I meant to stay in Northumberland, but I couldn’t resist hearing the announcement. Foolish start.” She relaxed a fraction.

“Foolish is walking alone in the city at night,” he said.

“No more foolish than you leaping into the boat,” she retorted tartly.

“Fair enough.” He grinned.

“Did the entire world see me sneak out?”

“Only me. I’d have come directly, but I was being assaulted with applause,” he said.

“I heard that. Let me add mine,” she said.

“You don’t sound particularly enthusiastic. I’m sorry Edgecote didn’t do well.” Her subdued reaction intrigued him.

“Don’t be. This year’s entry was terrible. I worked hard to breed in the peach blush in the heart of Innocent Sprite, last year’s winner. Father had it bred out. As to the council judges, they have no imagination. Red a decade ago. Red two years ago. Red again. If they have their way, it will be red next year.” Her shoulders sagged.

Henry puzzled over her words and her discouraged tone. He suspected her breeding program had an abundance of imagination. He groped for a way to ask.

“Northumberland? Why? Do you enjoy dark, damp winters?” he asked.

“Northumberland because that is where my house is. My grandmother left it to me,” she explained.

“Is it a comfortable house?” he asked, genuinely curious.

“Very,” she replied.

They reached the far bank and clambered out.

She peered up at him slyly. “But it lacked a glasshouse.”

“Pity, that.”

“I made do. Glass can be built into a leaning bed on a south-facing wall,” she told him. “Why did you chase me? I’m perfectly capable of seeing myself home.” She nodded at a man emerging from the shadows. “My footman.”

He had in fact pursued her to see to her safety. Or so he told himself. “I haven’t seen you since December. I wanted a word. Where are you staying?” He took her hand in his.

She let him. A nod had her servant fading back, and she led him up a shadowed street. Joy rose in his heart at her trust. They came to a corner, and she indicated a well-lit hostel across the street. “My inn.”

He pulled her back into the shadows, wrapped one arm around her waist and kissed her well and firmly.

“What...,” she sputtered.

“That’s why I followed you. Unfinished business from your visit to Roseleigh. I’ve longed for it ever since.” He kissed her again more tenderly.

After a moment of hesitation, she responded, her hand coming up to slide into the hair at his temple. His exploration of her mouth grew more intense, and he ran his tongue across her lips until she opened to him. At his entry, she froze, and he stilled. Then she moved on a moan and began to imitate his actions. He leaned back against a brick wall and pulled her against him, his arousal tight against his belly.

When she gave a gentle shove, he loosened his hold but didn’t let go.

“You are kissing me on a public street,” she whispered.

“So I am. Thank goodness for darkness. But yes, this isn’t the place.”

She sighed and leaned her head against his chest. “This will never do.”

“Do you think your father would let me court you properly?” he whispered in her ear.

She stiffened and pulled away. “Never. Nor would your aunt and sister tolerate it.”

“They have naught to say about it. Neither does your father. You’re of age, are you not?” He cupped her cheek with his hand, startled to realize it shook. “We need to put an end to this ridiculous feud. Maybe I can convince the Rose Council to disallow red roses,” he said with a smile.

She started. “I hadn’t thought of that. It might work. No plain red or white. Perhaps a temporary ban. You might be able to convince them. Then I’ll—”

“You’ll what?”

“Come back next June. I’ll show you then. I’ll be here whether I’ve succeeded or failed. We can talk again then. If you still want—”

“My dear Lady Margaret, you are no dewy schoolroom miss. You can tell very well that I want you. I will want you next summer too. But why wait?”

She kissed him then, a swift salute, before pulling back. “We’ll see how you feel next June. I have something to finish. It means too much to me. I need another year.”

“Another year.” He tried to rein in his galloping attraction. “If you need a year, then a year you shall have.”

He tried to pull her close, but she wiggled away. “If you start that again, I won’t leave. I’ll let you toss me over your shoulder and have your wicked way. But I’ll regret it. I know I will.”

He sighed deeply and tweaked a lock of her hair that had come loose. “I’ll give you your year, Margaret. But I will be waiting in York next June, and I’ll expect you to keep your word whether you succeed at what you’re doing or not.”

“I promise,” she whispered and darted across the street. Her loyal servant emerged from the shadows and followed her.

Henry turned on heavy feet to return to his so-called triumph and the Rose Ball.



CHAPTER TWO

SUMMER FADED INTO fall, and Henry still lay awake night after night thinking of Margaret. His life as Duke of Roseleigh had settled in comfortably. His grandfather had left him a prosperous and well-run estate, and Henry took pride in caring for tenants, managing investments, and overseeing operations with his stellar staff. He even looked forward to the next parliamentary session, confident there was good to be done there.

Aunt Blanche had moved into her new home with less fuss than he might have expected, pleased to represent Roseleigh on the Rose Council. Henry suspected Martin Grey might have something to do with her contentment. Jones, thrilled with another win, went about his work in consultation with Aunt Blanche, happily with little impact on Henry. Mary and Eckelston had been convinced to return to their own home, a process made easier with the expectation of another child. He missed little Henrietta though. He enjoyed teasing Mary by calling her Algernon.

He also missed Margaret. Henry went about his work with confidence and efficiency, but the days loomed long and the nights longer. The truth was he as lonely. He still hadn't addressed problem number six—find a wife. Or, to be accurate, he felt certain that he had found the one he wanted, but had yet to secure her hand.

December brought holidays. Mary, Eckelston, and the wee one came to brighten Henry's days. Aunt Blanche contented herself with a brief visit and even acknowledged with a sniff that the household staff managed well enough in her absence. "You need a wife, Henry. See to it this spring," she ordered as she left. For once, Henry agreed with her.

Twelfth Night passed, and Henry, alone again, sank into gloom with little to look forward to in the long months ahead except the spring meeting of the everlasting Rose Council. His presence, Aunt Blanche and Jones insisted, would be vital. He had also promised Margaret he would request a moratorium on red or white rose winners.

Winter seemed to drag interminably, but like all darkness, eventually came to an end. March came timidly into life. Restless and in need of both exercise and time alone to think, he decided to ride to York for the meeting. The true goal wasn't banning red. No. While it would be wonderful if the minds of the judges should broaden to consider the full palette of colors, the far greater goal was to end the ridiculous feud and court Lady Margaret Ansel without family interference. That was a matter for Lord Edgecote, Aunt Blanche, and the others who continued the nonsense.

Those were Margaret's goals too. At least, he hoped so. He meandered slowly, lost in thought, seeking the best way to approach the council.

You need help, Henry. You can't do this alone. He needed Margaret. He came to a fork in the road and took the way north, to Northumberland.



MARGARET STOOPED TO enter the makeshift glasshouse she'd had built against the side of her carriage house. She added wood to the stoves at both ends and thought of Roseleigh's heating system with envy. Footmen could be trusted to keep the fires burning, but she preferred to do it herself twice a day. The modest space required crowding, but it met her needs. Seedlings at various stages, spaced correctly, filled beds. Healthy examples of her sturdy parental cultivars were at the far end of the little room. Her cuttings had taken root quickly. She used both the Roseleigh and Edgecote heritage samples as well as two older cultivars for size.

Bed three, in early bloom, had produced single-petaled pink blooms. She would have to burn the samples as she did all her failures. She would freshen the soil and try again.

Bed seven held her current hopes. The small plants, which had germinated two months before, had tight white buds. In a day or two, she would know if she had succeeded in her primary goal.

The lush blooms in bed five, a dark raspberry sort of pink with gray overtones, pleased her; she would keep them. They weren't what she'd set out to do, however. She continued to strive. In two beds, seeds had yet to germinate. In three, sprouts and young plants as yet had no sign of budding. There was time. The York Rose Show was still six months away.

"Lady Margaret? Wilson sent me to fetch you." Jeremy, her youngest footman, carefully closed the door and came around the flap designed to keep cold air out.

"What is it, Jeremy?" she asked.

"A gentleman has come to call, my lady. A duke." The boy's awe vibrated in his words.

Duke. It can only be Henry. Her heart raced, and her thoughts skipped between delight and irritation that he hadn't allowed her the full year she'd requested.

"Send Miss Mullens to the drawing room, Jeremy, while I clean up." Her mother's cousin Ellen Mullens, a quiet, contented sort of woman, had come to be her companion. She met Margaret at the door to the drawing room with a serene nod.

She found him pacing the room, dressed for riding and obviously weary from travel. Even travel-stained with a day's growth of beard, his attractiveness made her senses tingle. "Tea, Wilson, and sandwiches too, I think. His Grace must be hungry."

He spun toward her at the sound of her voice, his avid gaze devouring her. *Hungry indeed.*

She curtsied properly and introduced Ellen, who scurried to a chair in the corner and picked up her needlework. Margaret held out a hand. "Come, sit. Tell me why you are here."

"I'm on my way to the spring meeting of the Rose Council," he replied.

She raised a sardonic eyebrow. "You're taking a circuitous route. Unless you spent the winter in Scotland."

His amused grin went straight to her heart. She had no resistance to his good humor.

"I made a promise to you that I'm not sure I can keep. I imagine myself standing up in front of that group (Aunt Blanche plans to attend, by the way) and demanding a ban on red roses. They'll think I've lost my senses," he said.

"Even if you frame it in terms of respect for the creativity of the northern rose breeders?"

"I thought of that. Even Jones must be tired of red, red, red. But our real goal is a truce. We need to convince your father above all. He might agree to a ban on red, but to be fair, we'd have to ban the pure whites. He won't have it," he said.

Tea arrived. The speed with which he grabbed a sandwich confirmed her suspicions about his hunger. She took her time preparing to serve the tea, giving herself a moment to consider what he'd said. "You actually plan to go through with this," she murmured.

"Ending the everlasting feud, yes. Competition is good. If we broaden that competition, it would take pressure off our families and leave the two of us..." He paused, catching her eyes, his hand holding a sandwich halfway to his mouth. He put it down.

"The two of us where exactly?" she asked.

"Free to pursue courtship. Publicly."

She glanced over at Ellen and down at her hands. "I don't think the judges' problem is the color."

“What is it, then?” he asked.

“You,” she retorted.

“Me? I know next to nothing about roses, even my own. I like them, but—”

“Yes, but your entry comes under the aegis of a duke. No one wants to offend a duke. Worse, your title is *Roseleigh* for goodness’ sake. The odds are stacked in your favor as soon as you enter.” She handed him his tea.

He sipped it, frowning. “I could refuse to enter. Would that help?”

“Probably not. But it might if you made a show of wishing the judges to be broader in their thinking,” she said. “Humble pie?”

“I’m good at humble.” He preened when he said it, making her laugh. He devoured another sandwich.

“Why did you come here?” she asked.

“I told you. I need your help. This meeting will set the rules for next June. I have to make some sort of statement, but what kind? And I need to win over your father, but how?” He sank back, his gaze fixed on her face.

Margaret tapped one finger on the arm of her chair. *A statement*. Did she dare? Her fantasy had been to waltz into the contest in June with an entry that would set tongues wagging. Maybe now would be a better time.

She returned his gaze. *Oh, how I’ve longed to see him.*

“I have no idea how to soften my father. If I did, I would have done it long ago,” she said. “But a statement is an idea with merit. I may have something that may help, but it isn’t ready. Can you stay for a day or two?”

She’d shocked him. Shocked and pleased. She could see it in his expression. A woman in an independent household did not ask a single man overnight.

“Why, my dear Lady Margaret. Are you attempting to compromise me?” His irresistible amused grin accompanied his words, and her face heated.

Ellen, in her corner, gasped and looked up, her gaze skittering away quickly.

Margaret’s lips twitched together. “You are horrifying my companion, Your Grace! What you imply would certainly put a period to my father’s objections, but no. Not that. What I need to show you won’t be ready for another day, and there is no respectable inn within ten miles of here. You’ll stay.”

“Of course I will.” His heated gaze set her insides on fire.

She pulled her eyes away, stood up nervously, and yanked the bellpull. The butler entered so fast she knew he’d been hovering. “Wilson, kindly take His Grace to the large guest room. He’ll be with us for a night or two and will want to dress before dinner.”



CHAPTER THREE

HENRY KEPT MARGARET laughing all through dinner. He even gave Ellen a fit of the giggles over his description of Roseleigh's mischievous potboy who'd gotten his head stuck between two chair rails while crawling under the table to snatch gingerbread. It had taken copious amounts of soap to free him and earned him two days of bread and water. "Though, I suspect several people in the household were sneaking him food." If Margaret had a guess, Henry was chief among them.

"How is your sister's baby?" Margaret asked.

"Little Algernon flourishes," he said.

"Did she really name him Algernon?" Margaret asked.

He chuckled. "*Her* name is Henrietta, over my objections. Thank goodness she wasn't a boy. I fear for the next one. Our family has had entirely too many Henrys. 'Algernon' is my little protest."

He went on to describe the delights of a baby, crawling well, just pulling herself up, the joy of all and sundry. "Even if teething did keep her out of sorts when they visited, I adore her."

"Your family sounds close," she said.

"Very. We had a contented childhood. The whole family cares for one another—even Aunt Blanche in her own crotchety way," he said with a wistful glance at her.

"I envy you that," she murmured, and his gaze narrowed.

After dinner, Margaret described her seven siblings, a contentious bunch, under Henry's questioning, beginning with her brother Paul, the heir, three years younger than she and

“rather too self-important just now. He has a good heart though, and I have hopes he’ll even out.”

“And the youngest is six? How delightful! Children are a blessing. I’ll look forward to meeting her. What is her name?”

“The poor girl is called Ethelberta. We call her Birdy,” Margaret said.

“She’s a sweet child if a bit insecure about herself,” Ellen put in.

Henry would do Birdy a world of good, Margaret thought. He will be a wonderful father one day.

At a lull in the conversation, Henry closed his eyes.

“You must be exhausted, Your Grace,” Margaret said.

His slow smile made her heart speed up. He didn’t open his eyes. “I’m merely resting my eyes.”

“Up with you. We’ll all turn in early. Hopefully tomorrow I’ll have something to share.”

He sat up brightly at that. “I’m awash in curiosity about this project of yours. It is what had you haring off to this sweet little house in the wilds of Northumberland, isn’t it?”

She rose, and he did too. “It is one of the things; freedom is a great attraction, insofar as a woman can hope for freedom.”



MARGARET’S COTTAGE WAS a square building, three stories in all, with the more public rooms below stairs. The sitting room in which they’d enjoyed their after-dinner tea was on the first floor up. When Ellen scurried into a room on that same floor to the rear of the house, leaving them alone by the stairway, Henry realized they stood next to Margaret’s own bedroom. He’d been given a room one more floor up. *Wise, that.*

He took her hand in his and kissed her fingers.

“Good night, Your Grace,” she whispered.

“Enough ‘Your Grace,’ Margaret. It was well enough in front of your companion, but you know my name. I want to hear it on your lips.” He tugged her hand, bringing her closer, raising his eyebrows in a challenge.

“Henry,” she said.

“I like that. Say it again,” he said, lowering his head, bringing his mouth within inches of hers.

“Henry,” she breathed.

She leaned ever so slightly forward when she said it. It was all the invitation he needed. He captured her mouth with his in a kiss as intense as it was gentle. One hand came up to cup her face, and his thumb caressed her cheek. She opened for him then, and the kiss heated. As her breathing sped up and she moaned under his ministrations, blood drained from his brain to pool in his male organs, aroused and on full alert.

His arm snaked around her back to pull her flush against his body with a groan, and they sagged against the wall. No, not the wall. A door. The door to her bedroom.

“Henry,” she said again, against his mouth this time.

He captured it in his and whispered back, “Margaret. My Margaret.”

She stiffened just the slightest bit, but he loosened his hold and moved back just enough to allow air between them, and to study her face. “Not yet,” she murmured, her eyes on his.

It took a moment for his brain to process her words. “Not yet,” he repeated. “But soon.” He took a step back. “If I don’t go upstairs this minute, you will be forced to marry me and quickly. I won’t take away your choice. We’ll talk tomorrow.” He left before he could change his mind. It may have been wishful thinking, but as he climbed the steps, he thought he heard her deep voice echo, “Soon.”



AFTER A SLEEPLESS night, Margaret rose at dawn, dressed in one of her older gowns, and put on her gardening smock. She had time to work before breakfast.

Plagued by heat from Henry's kisses, and the acute awareness of him just above her, she'd stared at the ceiling most of the night, wishing her gaze could penetrate the wood and plaster. The foolish man had nattered on about taking away her choices, yet he'd fled up the stairs. She wasn't sure whether she regretted her "not yet." She suspected if he'd given her a choice there in the hallway, she'd have flung open her bedroom door and dragged him in.

She wanted him, of that she had no doubt, but he was wiser. They needed to proceed carefully. If he'd stayed, they would have been boxed in.

"More's the pity," she muttered to herself as she ducked into her glasshouse.

Yet she was certain he wanted her just as much. As a woman who had aged past the marriageable stage, who had frightened off the ninnies who'd courted her at nineteen, who had resigned herself to lingering spinsterhood with only her roses for company, she found his desire overwhelming. Somehow, she had attracted the notice of a handsome young duke, the greatest catch in the united kingdoms. Far better than that, she had attracted the attention of a man who liked and respected her. One who gave her choices. She couldn't stop smiling.

She picked up a trowel, prepared to loosen soil in several beds, but another joy awaited her in bed seven, stopping her in her tracks. The first of the little white buds had opened most of the way.

"I knew I'd find you here, in your haven." Henry's voice rumbled through the glasshouse and vibrated in her body. Standing in front of the door he had carefully closed, his hair mussed and nightly stubble on his chin, he took her breath away. She cursed the impulse to run out here in her old smock,

her head bound in a scarf, before dressing for breakfast. *What must he think?*

He glanced around him, studying her operation. “This is where you work your magic?” He peered at her, his face solemn. “And keep your secrets.”

Fixed in place, her trowel still in her hand, she came to her senses. “Yes!” she exclaimed joyfully. “Yes, on both counts. Come and look.”

He came so close she could feel the warmth radiating from him as he leaned to see where she pointed with her trowel.

He breathed in slowly. “That rose is—”

“—striped. Red-and-white striped,” she said, grinning with delight. “Exactly what I set out to do a year ago. With a little help from Roseleigh’s roses.”

“It looks like a gift wrapped for a lover,” he murmured. “Red ribbon on white paper. The perfect blend of our families’ passions.”

He lifted his head, and his eyes bore into hers. A smile began in the corners of his mouth and, she suspected, deep in his soul. It bloomed into an expression of joy so great it filled the glasshouse as well as her heart. When he opened his arms, she went into them without hesitation. He kissed the side of her head and whispered in her ear, “You did it.”

She wiggled a bit to peer up at him. “Do you think it will motivate the council?”

“Perhaps. It will most certainly send our families the message we mean to give them. A joining of red and white.” He dropped to the dirt floor, sliding down her front and sending waves of longing through her. “Will you marry me, Margaret? That’s the best end of the feud. Marry me and join our families. We’ll take your roses and announce our betrothal in York and—”

“Yes, yes, yes. Of course I’ll marry you,” she cried, pulling him to his feet and giving him a great smacking kiss.

“You’ll come with me to the council meeting in York? We’ll ambush them with striped flowers and our love, taking family and observers alike off guard. We’ll have their attention, and they’ll have to listen then!”

She pulled off her smock. “We will rock York rose society to its foundation,” she murmured, “but first kiss me, Henry. I can’t get enough of them.”

Long moments later, when the scarf he’d pulled from her head lay on the ground and she was breathless with passion, he tickled her ear with his tongue before asking, “What did you mean about help from Roseleigh’s roses?”

“Ah.” She pulled away. “I stole your rose hips. And a cutting.”

“But I saw Jones give you hips from Blood Red,” he said, adorably puzzled.

“He gave them so freely I suspected the seeds wouldn’t breed true. They didn’t; it was too hybridized. I did get a lovely peach damask from them though. No, on our way past the heritage rose at the end, I made cuttings behind his back.”

He wrinkled his brow, confused.

“The scrubby, dense little bush at the end with simple deep-red flowers. I suspected it was Roseleigh’s foundational red. I was right.”

“Devious as well as clever. I’m a lucky man,” he said.

She poked his arm for that.

He ducked on his way out of her little workshop, her hand in his. “If you hadn’t said yes so quickly, I was prepared to bring out my big weaponry.”

“And what is that?” she asked as they made their way to the house.

“Marry me and you’ll have the Roseleigh glasshouse,” he said.

She grinned at him. “What makes you think I wasn’t aware of that? Your library too, Your Grace, compelling attractions both.”

He stopped right there on the path and took her in his arms to kiss her, pouring passion on her so strong it curled her toes in her half boots.

“Oh yes,” she sighed. “And that too.”

He leaned in and kissed her again.

They made it to breakfast eventually, entering hand in hand. Ellen looked from one to the other. “Are congratulations in order?” she asked.

“Oh yes. For what you see and much else.”

“Joy, Miss Mullens. Joy now and always,” Henry added.

They described Margaret’s triumph and explained their plans.

“But how marvelous!” Ellen said. “What do you plan to call it?”

“The Peace Rose,” Henry suggested.

“I have a better idea. Remember how you described it? We could call it Gift for a Lover.”

“Good,” he mused. “Or perhaps Love’s Gift.” He raised an eyebrow in question. When a smile lit her faced, he kissed her, and that confirmed it. They would ambush both families and the Rose Council with Love’s Gift.

Part Three

Love's Gift

My crown is in my heart, not on my head.

–Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part 3*



EPILOGUE

The York Rose Show, six years later

RICHARD BRADLEY, VISCOUNT Lansdale, aged five and a half, ran to his father, filling Henry with pride. “Papa, Ned has escaped nurse’s attention because Algie made a mess and she has to go back to the town house with him. Ned is crawling under the tables. Aunt Birdy is trying to catch him.”

Edward Ansel Bradley, now four years old, had proven to be as adventurous as his brother Richard was reserved. Henry wondered about Algernon’s personality, which had yet to emerge fully. Strong-willed, he suspected.

“Come quickly, Papa. Mr. Jones will have a fit,” Richard urged.

“Worse, Dickon. If anything happens to the roses, Ned will have your mother to deal with,” Henry said, putting down his ale and nodding to his father-in-law, Martin Grey, and the other gentlemen in the refreshment tent. Grey had married Aunt Blanche the year after the great rose ambush and Henry’s marriage, making Henry and Margaret’s life much more peaceful. Grandsons, as it turned out, had finally won her father over.

His son pulled him by the hand toward the entry displays. Margaret and Amos Jones had proven to be a formidable partnership once they’d made their peace. Not only fixtures of the York Rose Show, they published widely, had developed a brisk business in supplying seeds and cuttings to enthusiasts, and were working on a book. Margaret had become a force to be reckoned with on the Rose Council.

When they reached the tables, Mary and Birdy had Ned in hand, each of his in one of theirs, two of Mary’s children at their feet. Henry grabbed the boy around the waist and threw

him in the air. “Bedeviling Mr. Jones, are you, Ned?” he asked, taking him in his arms.

“No, sir. I just wanted to see the Roseleigh rose, and there were so many people crowding around I thought I could get there faster under the table.” Ned laid his head on Henry’s shoulder. “The Rose Show needs an omnibus to pull people around. Or one of those steam locomotives.”

Heaven help me, Henry thought. Ned had inherited his mother’s creative energy.

To Henry’s relief—and everlasting joy—Margaret hurried up, with Jones at her side. “We’re all registered,” she said.

He leaned over and kissed her, Ned wiggling between them. Not to be left out, Dickon inserted himself between them as well. Jones bowed with a grin and took himself off.

“Isn’t it time these little rogues had their tea? And maybe a nap.” Henry waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

She gave the shoulder not full of mischievous boy a gentle smack with her fist, but the gleam in her eyes told him she had the same idea. He put Ned down, and they walked, the four of them hand in hand.

“Besides, we’ll need our rest for the Rose Ball,” she told him.

“How so?” he asked, though he knew the answer.

“I plan to waltz with my husband. Twice.”

“Shall we have three dances?” he asked.

She grinned back. Scandalizing York was their custom, after all.

The End

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[The Wayward Son \(Book 1\)](#)

[The Defiant Daughter \(Book 2\)](#)

[The Forgotten Daughter \(Book 3\)](#)

[The Upright Son \(Book 4\)](#)

About Caroline Warfield

Award winning author of sensuous, family-centered romance, Caroline Warfield has been at various times an army brat, a librarian, a poet, a raiser of children, a nun, a bird-watcher, an Internet and Web services manager, a conference speaker, an indexer, a tech writer, a genealogist, and of course, a romantic. She has sailed through the English Channel while it was still mined from WWII, stood on the walls of Troy, searched Scotland for the location of an entirely fictional castle (and found it), cruised Milford Sound, found Renaissance ruins in Malacca, climbed the steps to the Parthenon, floated down the Thames from the tower to Greenwich, shopped in the Ginza, lost herself in the Louvre, gone on a night tour of the Singapore zoo, walked in the Black Forest, and explored the underground cistern of Istanbul.

By far the biggest adventure has been her richly blessed marriage to Beloved, a prince among men. Having retired to the urban wilds of eastern Pennsylvania, she reckons she is on at least her third act, happily working in an office surrounded by windows while she lets her characters lead her to adventures in England and the far-flung corners of the British Empire. She nudges them to explore the most perilous territory of all, the human heart, because love is worth the risk.

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**WHAT THE FALSE HEART
DOTH KNOW**

Elizabeth Ellen Carter

“False face must hide what the false heart doth know”

– William Shakespeare, Macbeth



PROLOGUE

Tunbridge Wells

Spring 1819

THE MAN ON the gray horse was a gentleman. A man of quality. Of that there could be no doubt.

Lady Sapphira Galbraith watched him approach, her heart beating in time with the sound of hooves coming ever louder. Finally, the man drew near, and Sapphira let out a breath.

“I hope my unannounced presence hasn’t caused you too much inconvenience,” he announced.

She gave him a warm smile but didn’t trust herself to speak – not when her family started to gather outside at the sight of an unexpected visitor.

There was no reason why the presence of Anthony Redthorpe, Earl of Taunton, could be considered untimely by anyone. As the son and heir to the Duke of Denby, most families would give their eyeteeth to be so inconvenienced.

And it was no conceit on Sapphira’s part to believe that he had come to see her especially.

Her father, Edward, stepped forward to greet the Earl and assured him that his lordship’s presence was most heartily welcome. After which, to Sapphira’s relief, he wisely gathered up the rest of the family – mother, sister and two young brothers – and ushered them inside.

Out of view, but not out of earshot, Anthony took Sapphira’s hand and kissed it. His lips on her exposed wrist sent delightful tingles down her body. His expression told her full well that he knew the effect his touch had on her.

How desperately she wanted to kiss him, a long, lingering caress like the one they shared at Lady Hatton-Sykes' ball just a few weeks ago.

"I've missed you," he said softly.

"And I you," she replied.

He offered his arm. Sapphira accepted it, and they entered the house.

The drawing room was a hive of activity with brothers Robert and Peter hastily marshaling their tin soldiers into order. A maid cleared away tea things that lingered from that morning while *Maman* waved her handkerchief back and forth.

Where her sister Margaret had got to, Sapphira didn't know.

Beside her, Anthony smiled, politely ignoring the to-do.

"My lord, our gardens have done exceedingly well this year, would you like to see the success Mother has made of the peonies?" she asked in order to distract him for her mother Geraldine's sake, rather than his own.

"I'd be delighted, Lady Sapphira," Anthony answered, his expression telling her he knew the reason why his attention was being diverted.

Father gave her a nod of approval, so she led their guest out onto the back terrace and into the garden.

Bless Anthony. Pretending not to notice the chaos that reigned in the Galbraith home.

Was it any wonder she was in love with him? He had confessed *his* love and desire for her also, so she had allowed him liberties – a kiss or three in the moonlight – that would have outraged her mother.

His heart was true; she knew it more than anything else in the world.

A marriage proposal was in the offing, perhaps even today since there had been no time at Lady Hatton-Sykes' ball for him to have approached her father, not after Margaret caused them to leave early after she started to feel unwell.

Anthony led her to a bench under the shade of a chestnut tree. They sat.

"The days since our first meeting have been the happiest of my life," he began.

Sapphira's heart started thumping madly.

"My regard for you has only grown over time, and I have come ardently to love and admire you. My dearest wish, with yours and your father's consent, is to be married."

Sapphira held her breath, waiting for the question that would seal their futures.

A shadow fell across Anthony's face. "However," he said. "It matters little what *my* heart desires. My choice of bride has to meet with my father's approval before he will consent."

Sapphira caught the warning in his voice. She swallowed. "And the Duke will not approve of me?" she asked, pleased that she didn't sound too strained.

The shadow disappeared. Anthony's face brightened and he took her hand in his.

"He will adore you as I do, but until I can win his consent, I am not free to offer marriage to you."



CHAPTER ONE

*“Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break.”*

Norfolk

Winter 1819

THE COACH SWAYED on its suspension, hit broadside by an easterly gust made bitter by the chill of the roiling North Sea.

Sapphira watched her mother reach for the leather strap to steady herself, her normally placid face betrayed by an anxious glance through the window.

“I really wish your father wouldn’t do things like this,” she muttered. “This weather is no good for his arthritis. Why on earth does he insist on riding outside?”

Sapphira shared a glance with her younger sister who hid a momentary smile before she addressed their mother.

“You know how father is always going on about the benefits of fresh air and exercise,” Margaret said.

The explanation was greeted by a small frown.

Sapphira hastened to cover for her sister. “I think what Margaret means, *Maman*, is that we’re nearly at Greybridge Castle, and father is keen to make the best possible time before we lose the afternoon light. So, if he rides outside, the carriage might get there quicker.”

Sapphira knew Margaret had meant no such thing but didn’t want to tell *Maman* what they both suspected – that their usually even-tempered papa had been close to throttling his nine-year-old twin sons, Robert and Peter, after they decided to entertain themselves on the long journey by punching each other in the arm with increasing violence.

For one awful moment a few miles back, Sapphira wondered whether papa would make good his dire threat to have the boys walk outside, tied behind the servant's carriage which followed them.

Now the lads were angelically asleep, having worn out the last of their energy about three miles back.

Three miles farther north. Three miles farther away from Tunbridge Wells...

Sapphira rubbed her hands together before removing her cashmere-lined leather gloves to pick up her knitting. So far she had gone four hours without thinking of *him*.

Anthony.

But once the vision was conjured in her mind's eye, it was there and couldn't be forgotten.

She shifted in her seat and busied her hands with the knitting needles, using them to distract herself from falling into tears again.

In a few short weeks, Anthony would marry.

And it wouldn't be to her.

Still, she vowed to be of good cheer. She made that promise to her family who had worried about her ever since they'd received word of Anthony's engagement. Her father had suggested another season in London to get over her disappointment. But how could she justify her father's expense and joyfully attend balls and soirees knowing the man she loved – *would always love* – would soon be married to someone else?

If it had been *her* heart alone that had been broken, she might have borne it, but it wasn't.

Anthony loved her too.

Oh yes, Sapphira knew how that sounded. She wasn't so much of a goose to not know there were men who vowed to be in love and played women false.

How could she possibly explain any of this to her parents and not have them think worse of the man?

So, she said nothing of Anthony's private vows to her. Let them think the disappointment was hers alone. Sapphira shifted in her seat, stretching neglected muscles, and willing the journey to be over. As she adjusted her scarf, a delicate chain tugged at her neck, a tangible token of his once ardent regard...

Margaret caught her eye and offered a slight furrow of the brow in silent question.

Sapphira replied with a smile and returned to her knitting.

Since she did not wish a second season, father had arranged for them to come north. North to Norfolk by the sea to spend a few weeks over winter with their cousins, the Weycliffe family.

Sapphira set down her knitting and moved the thick curtain that covered the window. Outside was all gray – the sky and the sea before her, but there, silhouetted black against the leaden sky, was their destination, Greybridge Castle, out on the promontory overlooking the village of Tebbing-by-Sea.

The carriage slowed as it began the incline up the exposed headland. The horses struggled against the weight of the carriage and the relentless gale that threatened the poor beasts' footing.

The boys woke from their slumber but had the good sense to keep their enthusiasm under control as mother was beginning to look decidedly ill. Her grip on the leather strap tightened as the carriage was blasted again, not just by wind but now by pelting rain.

"Sapphira, do close the curtain," she instructed. "You're letting the cold in."

Was she?

She hadn't noticed.

Everything had felt cold for months.

Outside, the coachman yelled over the top of the wind to urge the horses up the road. From the gap in the curtain, Sapphira noted the first large spots of rain on the window that heralded an impending storm.

She put her knitting away and braced herself not just against the squalls, but also the whirlwind of activity that would occur when they arrived at Greybridge.



CHAPTER TWO

“And nothing is, but what is not.”

IN HER HEAD, Sapphira counted off the family they would soon be greeting. There was Lady Katherine, the dowager duchess, her mother’s second cousin. Then there was her eldest son, Lord Lawrence Weycliffe, the current Duke of Greybridge, and his wife Lady Beatrice. They had two children, Lady Caroline, who was near to Margaret’s age, and George, who was the same age as her brothers.

Then there was Innes, Lawrence’s younger brother by ten years, who had returned home after three years on the Continent.

A houseful of people.

Family.

What better place to bring in the New Year? They would help her forget her disappointment.



“THEY’RE HERE!”

The boyish yell made its way down the stairs to the entrance hall and was rapidly followed a few moments later by not one, but two sets of galloping footfalls. Young George Weycliffe, his blond hair shining like a new sovereign, bounded down the stairs, quickly followed by a slightly younger boy whom Sapphira didn’t know. He was introduced as Simon Rivendell, a friend of George’s, who was staying for the winter.

At seeing their cousin and another boy their age, Peter and Robert broke ranks with the family, although Peter cast a glance back at his father for approval before doing so.

“Boys! Manners,” he said. His voice rumbled like the thunder outside. The four boys stopped, remaining as still as statues while the rest of the Weycliffe family descended the stairs.

The Duke was the first to approach them. Lawrence took her mother’s hand while his pretty wife kissed father’s cheek.

Sapphira stood back and let the younger children express their enthusiastic welcome. She found a smile when the dowager duchess caught her eye.

She swallowed apprehension, wondering what her mother might have written about her. The look of pity in the older woman’s face told her everything she needed to know.

Lady Katherine extended her hands. Sapphira stepped forward to take them, bracing for those words, no doubt meant in comfort, but offering little because they would cut deep into her soul. The dowager got no further than speaking Sapphira’s name before gleeful laughter echoed from the top of the stairs. The bounding footsteps that followed mirrored those of the two boys just moments before.

The man who descended was aged about thirty-two. Slender in build and good looking, hair golden like all the members of the Weycliffe family, he came to a stop at the bottom of the stairs.

“Innes, for heaven’s sake, have a bit of decorum,” said Lady Katherine with great exasperation.

Innes blew a kiss in his mother’s direction and promptly turned his attention to the boys who had gathered around him.

“You promised, Uncle Innes,” said George. “You promised we could open your gifts as soon as Robert and Peter got here.”

“And indeed, I did, my little sunshine, but you must first ask your mama and your papa if you might take your leave. That’s what a gentleman does.”

George did exactly as instructed and in such a flawless manner that Sapphira could see Lady Beatrice preening. The boy's father, on the other hand, shared a look with his brother that let him know perfectly well that he knew he was being manipulated.

"When you have finished greeting our guests, then you may go," Lawrence instructed his son.

Sapphira found herself mobbed by two boys who were doing their very best to do properly as instructed. Sapphira spoke just a few words with each of them, so as not to deprive them unduly of their play.

Upon being released from their obligations, all four boys bounded up the stairs and were met on the landing by a woman Sapphira presumed to be George's governess.

The poor thing would have her hands full minding four boisterous lads.

"Cousin Sapphira," said Lady Caroline artlessly, "you must tell me of London and your season."

Over the girl's shoulder, Sapphira saw her mother raise her eyes with alarm. Caroline carried on obliviously, "Papa says I may have my season, but I shall have to wait for another two years and go with Margaret."

So, news of her disappointment had not been shared with *all* the members of the family, it would appear.

Sapphira was glad for it.

"I shall tell you all I can over supper," she promised.

"You must be exhausted from your long journey," said Lawrence. "My children's curiosity must wait to be sated. Do refresh yourselves. We keep a very informal household, particularly at this time of year, so we'll dine early."

THE GALBRAITH FAMILY were shown to their rooms. The boys would be housed in the nursery where they could play together under supervision. Lady Caroline had invited Margaret to share her room, leaving Sapphira with a room of her own.

She found her maid, Alice, already there unpacking. Sapphira went to the window and pulled back the curtain. The room had the easterly aspect which looked out over the beach and the sea beyond. Directly below, along the seafront, wild waves crashed over the seawall and onto the cobbled road which led to the little township a few hundred yards further up the coast.

“It’s bleak out there, my lady, I’m glad the walls of the castle are strong,” her maid observed. “And it’s such a nice room. I’m sure it will be even lovelier when this bad weather is gone.” Alice chatted away about the journey to Greybridge Castle, as she finished unpacking and hung up a dress for Sapphira to wear to dinner.

“I’m sure you’ll want to rest, miss. Would you like me to help you undress?”

Sapphira shook her head.

“Leave that Alice, I can manage. You must be just as exhausted.”

The girl showed her relief. “Thank you, my Lady, that’d be most welcome.”

After the door closed behind the maid, Sapphira let her posture sag. This was the first time she’d been alone in three days, and the niggling edge of a headache might have a chance to ebb if she was simply left be.

Not that she could blame her family for *not* wanting to leave her alone.

On hearing news of Anthony’s engagement, she had fallen into a dead faint. Once she woke up, she wouldn’t eat for three days. And, in the couple of weeks following the news, she could hardly bring herself to speak his name. To her shame, she’d even written to Anthony, begging him to tell her that the news wasn’t true.

There was no reply.

Mother warned her against lowering her dignity by chasing after a man who had clearly made his choice with another. A week later, Alice, via one of Anthony's footmen, had handed her a note in Anthony's handwriting.

It said, simply, "I cannot express to you how sorrowed I am."

Sapphira slipped off her travel dress and took one last look at the sea before closing the curtains. She caught her reflection in the lamplight, the gleam from the fine gold necklace she wore caught her eye.

She touched the chain.

Oh, that beautiful summer's day.

Anthony had given it to her only a week before news of his betrothal. She closed her eyes tightly, feeling the bite of the links in the palm of her hand. She conjured up the day in her mind, that time when they—when she—had been so very, very happy.

There had been a treasure hunt at Aizlewood Hall, and a party of four young men and four young women had elected to start their hunt in the woods. They'd stayed together as a group for as long as it took to reach the tree line before, pair by pair, they split up into their courting couples.

Anthony had taken her by the hand and led her towards the sound of a babbling brook. The dappled shade was cool against the sun and the bright blue sky above. After a moment or two of walking, the woods opened out onto the bank of a stream. The stump of a long cut-down tree was wide enough for two people to sit on.

Sapphira was mindful of the treasure hunt that brought them there and was looking out for the bright red paper lantern onto which was written their next clue.

There was nothing here. Nor was there any clue in Anthony's expression.

He'd been reserved for most of the day. To anyone who didn't know him as well as she did, there was naught amiss. Only she noticed.

Now they were alone, she could ask.

"All is not well, is it?"

He offered a half smile.

"I finally got an audience with my father."

Sapphira held her breath. Hope welled in her breast. He *would* ask her to marry him!

But Anthony's expression didn't lighten; it grew darker still. He caressed her cheek.

His eyes fell to her lips, and they parted, anticipating the kisses that followed. She returned them measure for measure until she was breathless with them.

It was passionate and arousing.

It was *wrong*.

"I love you, Sapphira," he said after a long moment. "He pulled a small box from his pocket. It contained a long delicate gold chain.

"Please, accept this as a token of my love for you. It belonged to my grandmother. It's one of the few pieces of jewelry I have which is mine alone to give."

Not knowing what to say, Sapphira nodded which Anthony took as her acceptance. He slipped the chain over her head. The end of it of it nestled between her breasts.

"Your father has refused his permission, hasn't he?" she said.

Anthony rallied. "Yes. For now. But I won't let this be the end of the matter. There's more to this than my father is willing to concede. I intend to find out."

"What is it?"

Anthony shook his head and smiled. "It's nothing that should spoil a day as beautiful as this and company which is even more lovely."

Before Sapphira could press for more, a couple from their party entered their glen.

"Percy and Cynthia have found the next clue! Come on!"

"Then lead the way!" said Anthony brightly. As he aided Sapphira up off the tree stump, she squeezed his hand which caused him to look down at her.

"I love you, Anthony, for better or for worse."

"For richer or for poorer?" he asked.

She nodded.

He offered a wry smile before kissing her tenderly on the cheek.



CHAPTER THREE

“O, full of scorpions is my mind!”

No. She wouldn't cry, not any more...

SAPPHIRA TURNED TO the bed and tucked herself beneath the covers.

The tears sprang regardless. She squeezed her eyes tightly and listened to the ceaseless roar of the pounding sea competing with the wintery squalls that penetrated even this fortress of stone.

How like her heart it was, now locked up forever in a tower protected from the battering of the world outside – but not entirely.

To her surprise, her sleep was a deep and restful one until she was awoken by the sound of thunder.

Or at least she *thought* it was thunder.

When it continued, accompanied by the stomping of feet, she realized that her room was below the nursery, and the boys, with their boundless energy, were playing.

A moment later, a clock in the hall chimed five, and her maid knocked at the door. Given entrance, Alice set the lamps. Another maid entered with a steaming ewer of hot water.

“You’re looking quite refreshed, Miss,” she said. “You seemed quite done in when we arrived.”

“Thank you. I slept well.”

Alice was watchful. She knew, perhaps better than all of her family, how Anthony’s engagement affected her. And, if she didn’t pull herself together, the girl would feel obliged to speak to her mother about her. Another lecture, no matter how well-meaning, was not what she wanted.

Sapphira got out of bed and stretched.

“The red dress for tonight I think,” she decisively. “It’s close enough to Christmas to have some cheer.”

The decision was met with swift look of surprise before being subsumed by a more deferential expression.

“Very good, Miss. Red’s a very becoming color on you.”

Sapphira began to wash while Alice considered the jewelry and accessories that would look best with her attire.

“Miss, given that we’re at Greybridge for three weeks, and there are few social engagements, I was wondering whether you’d mind if I offered my services to Lady Margaret and Lady Caroline as well as yourself? I learned from Lady Beatrice’s maid that the Duchess is not quite ready to let go of the apron strings, but if I could work with the two misses, I think it would be quite a treat for them.”

Alice’s powers of observation were most acute indeed. Sapphira knew her sister too wanted a lady’s maid, or at least a companion of her own instead of a governess, and mother and father had yet to relent.

“I think that would be a wonderful idea, I know Margaret adores you, and I think you would be good for Caroline as well. You have my permission. I will ensure that mother approves also.”

In truth, there was a reason other than altruism that caused Sapphira to agree so readily. If her maid was otherwise engaged, it would mean more time to spend alone and escape the well-meaning enquiries of family and sympathetic glances of servants.

Upstairs, a herd of elephants stomped across the floor – or at least it seemed so to Sapphira. Now washed, she allowed Alice to help her into her gown.

“What on earth are the boys doing up there? Restaging the Battle of Waterloo?” she inquired with amused exasperation.

Alice laughed. “Boys like that need to be outside, not cooped up indoors.”

“It’s a pity the weather isn’t any better.”

“The housekeeper, Mrs. Hopkirk, swears we’re going to get snow for the New Year. She can feel it in her waters. Or so she says.”

Sapphira took a glance at the curtains. “Judging by the water outside my window, I think we’re going to get nothing more than sleet. We’ll just have to make the best of it, I suppose.”

“What are you planning to do, Miss?”

“Nothing. I’ll shall glory in doing nothing at all. Finish my knitting, perhaps. And there’s nothing stopping me from going into the library and finding a good book to read and read until the first buds of spring emerge.”

Sapphira felt the final pull of the ribbons cinching her into her gown and the tug of bows being tied.

“You can leave me now; I can see to myself. Go see to the other misses.”

Alice set down the brush, bobbed a curtsy, and left.

Sapphira took the slender gold chain that she had set aside and watched her reflection as she put it around her neck once more. Brown eyes stared back at her. She touched a hand to her dark brown hair to set a pin in place.

What was Anthony doing now?

She swallowed back emotion. If her heart was ever to mend, she needed to think of Anthony less. As she turned on her stool, the gold chain glittering in the lamplight, she raised a hand to touch it.

Would she ever get over him if she kept wearing his token of remembrance? She ought to take it off...

The thought of doing so made her chest heave with still raw emotion.

Removing the chain for good would be like ripping off a healing scab. It would make the scarring worse. Her hand fell from her neck.

The clock struck six, Sapphira started and took one last look at her reflection. She pinched her cheeks to add color before she left the room.

On her way to the staircase, she glanced in an open doorway and caught Innes' reflection in the long glass. There seemed to be quite the performance going on as his valet fussed over the folds of his master's cravat.

Sapphira smiled. Now, the door opposite opened, and Alice emerged with a satisfied look on her face. Behind her two girls—no—two young *women* emerged.

Margaret's chestnut brown hair was styled half-up as was Caroline's blond hair. Each wore a simple piece of jewelry to complete their ensembles—Margaret a cameo choker, and Caroline a brooch. It was grown-up, yet appropriate.

Sapphira gave her maid a nod of appreciation. Alice had done well indeed.

Lady Caroline took Sapphira's hands.

"Thank you so much for letting your maid help us, dear cousin. This is my first time in real adult company – with people who aren't my parents, that is."

"What about Innes?"

"Uncle Innes only returned from abroad a few weeks ago. Grandmother is going on and on about his unwed state, as if it were a crime to be a bachelor! Not everyone has to marry."

Sapphira recognized the artlessness in the girl's remarks. She meant nothing by them and indeed would not have realized at all that they had wounded.

I want to marry.

Sapphira quashed her self-pity, borrowed some of her sister and young cousin's *joie de vivre*, and followed them

down the stairs to join the others in the drawing room.

The fire in the hearth was inviting, but Sapphira noticed something amiss the moment she entered, although she couldn't quite put her finger on it. She accepted a glass of ratafia from a footman and sipped the thick, sweet liquid. She studied her mother's expression and knew.

She was being talked about her behind her back.

Sapphira glanced to the duke. Lawrence was in conversation with her father, but Lady Beatrice gave her a smile that seemed over-full *and* over-welcoming.

Mother!

As she was pondering what to say, Innes swept into the room behind them. He was dressed to perfection in the latest fashion – perhaps even a little overdressed, considering it was just the family at home.

“Hello, my lovelies,” he announced. “So glad to be in here. It's not fit for man nor beast outside.”

He picked up a glass of sherry and halted before Margaret and Caroline. With a flourish, he pulled out a quizzing glass.

“Why, who's this? Not one, but *two* young ladies? When did this happen? Beatrice you should have warned me that your lovely daughter was all grown up.”

Both Caroline and Margaret dropped curtsies.

The dowager duchess was having none of it.

“Do come over here, Innes, and stop playing the fool,” she said, waving her hand in his direction. “If you flattered other ladies half as well as you do your own family, you might even settle down and marry at last.”

Innes let out an exaggerated put-upon sigh and did as he was bid. He kissed his mother on the cheek.

“Oh Mummy, you know how hard it is for me. I have yet to meet a woman who is as perfect as *you* are.”



CHAPTER FOUR

“Sometimes when we are labelled, when we are branded, our brand becomes our calling.”

SAPPHIRA REFUSED TO suppress a grin at Innes’ theatrics. There was something about it which helped thaw a little of the ice she felt inside.

And, to her surprise, she found herself caught up in the convivial family atmosphere. For the first time since the news of Anthony’s engagement, she took part in conversation without prompting – in no short measure thanks to Innes, who had a knack for holding court.

How different Innes was from his older brother, the duke.

That was not to say Lawrence was dull or without wit. Far from it, but Sapphira recalled that even as a boy, he was a lot more studious and serious than Innes, who, by contrast, was very much a puckish character.

To Lawrence’s credit, he let his younger brother play the raconteur, and so he regaled the table with tales of his time in Vienna, skillfully veering from discussions of architecture and fashion to business and politics.

There was so much laughter and discussion at the table that it came as a surprise to Sapphira when the final course had been served, and it was time for the ladies to retire to the drawing room.

There, Margaret and Caroline played the spinet while Sapphira joined in a game of whist with her mother along with the dowager duchess and Lady Beatrice.

“It’s so nice to see the girls getting along,” said Lady Geraldine, laying down her discards and picking new cards.

“Caroline will be ready for her coming out soon, won’t she, Bea?”

“Too soon,” lamented Lady Beatrice. “Perhaps the season after next I might feel ready for her to be presented in London.”

“Very wise to let her enjoy society here in Norfolk as a way of easing her entry,” Lady Geraldine agreed.

The duchess turned to her. “And what of your season just past, Sapphira?”

Opposite, her mother froze. Mentions of the season might bring memories of Anthony which in turn might release the melancholia.

Sapphira drew a breath and examined her cards. “I was so overwhelmed by my first two events that I cannot remember anything other than the desperate desire not to step on anyone’s toes.”

She shuffled her cards, then lifted her head and smiled.

“But after the first ball, I managed to find my feet, so to speak. In the end, I would say I enjoyed it.”

“Enough for a second season?” the duchess asked gently.

“Ah... I don’t know. London is such a large city. While there was plenty to see and do, I don’t much like the crowds.”

Or the risk of seeing Anthony again.

“Oh, but you will accompany Caroline when she makes her debut, won’t you? I shouldn’t let her go unless I knew someone sensible was in her company.”

Mother raised her eyebrows, played her card, and picked up another.

“What am I, Bea? Too old to manage bringing out two young ladies?”

The duchess wrinkled her nose playfully at her and set down a card.

“You know I mean nothing of the kind, Geraldine. Besides, you will have your hands full with Margaret. You will go, Sapphira, promise me?”

“Yes. Of course, I will.”

It was an easy promise to give, mainly because she was sure Beatrice would forget all about it when the time came.

Outside, the sound of the wind rattled the window loudly in the lull of the conversation.

“That’s a good thing,” announced the dowager duchess, glancing over to the windows. “This wind will blow the rain away. I hope for fine weather after so many days inside.”

Still, by the end of the evening, Sapphira was not confident that she could drift off to sleep and sought a book from the library.

She considered poetry and dismissed it. Unfortunately, there were few novels on the shelves. Most of what she found were almanacks and histories. There was one she considered about the reign of Charles the Second.

Perhaps by reading about those who lived in the past, she could make sense of the present.

“Ah, so I’m not the only night owl.”

She turned to Innes, who had entered the room silently. He scanned across a shelf full of titles, and selected one, a history of the Greeks.

“You must find Norfolk exceedingly dull after spending so many years on the Continent,” she offered.

He shrugged. “It was time for me to come home. Mother isn’t getting any younger, and I know she would like me to settle down.”

Sapphira pondered a moment. “Will you? You don’t strike me as the settling down type.”

“Mother says all I need is to find the right woman,” he said evenly.

Sapphira smiled sadly. “Sometimes it takes more than finding the right person. Love isn’t always enough.”

“That sounds like experience talking.”

Her hand fell on a slim volume of Saxon mythology. She kept her eyes fixed on the cover.

“I’m sure you’ve been told everything,” she said, squarely.

“I haven’t heard it from *you*.”

She swallowed and lowered herself onto a leather chair, placing the book in her lap. In truth, she’d never spoken to anyone about her feelings. No one knew how much she and Anthony had been in love. All they knew was the Earl was a marriage prospect who had switched his allegiance to another.

The slim gold chain around her neck seemed to itch against her skin, making its presence felt.

“Did you love him deeply?” Innes asked.

Sapphira squeezed her eyes shut tightly to control her emotions. She didn’t want to speak to Innes or to anyone about the deep wound in her heart.

He didn’t press for an answer. He went over to a desk, rummaged for a key in a drawer, then opened up a cabinet and poured two small glasses of a deep brown liquor.

He returned, pressing the glass into her hand. He sat in the chair opposite, saluted her, then drank from his glass without waiting for her to drink first. She woodenly raised the glass – sweet sherry her nose told her. It was confirmed with a sip.

Innes still watched her, waiting for an answer.

“I did...” she confessed, “I still do.”

“He doesn’t deserve you if he plans to wed someone else.”

“He doesn’t want to. He is obliged.”

“How so?”

“It’s his father. Anthony has no independent wealth of his own—at least not enough to support a wife.”

“So—his father demands he weds an heiress.”

His words made Anthony sound weak and callow.

Sapphira swallowed against a lump and covered it by bringing the glass to her lips once more.

“Now don’t look like that, puss,” said Innes, gently. “I’m not here to judge. I know full well that not everyone gets what they want. The fact that they don’t get what they *deserve* is sometimes a kindness.”

He cast her a meaningful look. She glanced down to the volume in her lap once more.

“You never intend to wed?” she said.

“I’m more than happy to stay a bachelor, but I’d consider it to make my mother happy.”

“Even if you don’t love your bride?”

“Never mistake love for being *in* love.”

“Are they not one and the same thing?”

Innes slowly shook his head.

Sapphira sighed. “I don’t think I could marry someone I wasn’t in love with.”

“It happens all the time in our class,” he returned, “you know that.”

She did know that. And yet, having been in love with a man who answered her affections in full, she could not back down now and make a simply transactional marriage.

“Have you ever been in love?” Sapphira asked.

Innes looked suddenly introspective. Surprisingly serious, in fact.

“I thought I was once,” he said. He finished his glass of sherry in one long sip. “Then I realized that the mistake was mine.”

“What happened?”

“I discovered I wasn’t the first among equals.”

He set the glass down. Sapphira intuited that she would gain nothing more by prying.

She laughed unsteadily. “What a fine pair we make. Our parents both wish us wed, and the ones we want the most are lost to us.”

After setting down her own glass on the side table, she rose to her feet. Innes stood with her. The look on his face was kind and sympathetic, but not without the hint of impishness.

“Let’s make a pact,” he said, after a moment. “If you have not married by the time Caroline has had her debut, then we will marry.”

Sapphira frowned. “You jest.”

Innes grinned, stepped over to pick up her glass, and poured another sherry. “It’s a practical arrangement,” he shrugged. “One that would please my mother and your parents. I am considered quite eligible, you know.”

“You don’t love me.”

Innes handed her the refilled glass.

“You wound me to the quick, puss. Of course, I love you. You are a dear second cousin, twice removed, or whatever it is. I’ve known you since you were a girl. You are beautiful, charming, intelligent, and witty. Any man would be lucky to have you for a wife.”

“But I don’t love *you*.”

Innes smiled and spread his arms wide. “See? I am not at all wounded. Don’t you see how that could have its advantages too? We would get on famously, and our hearts would never be in danger.”

The whole thing was ridiculous, quite preposterous. Sapphira regarded him closely, looking for the tell-tale quirk of the lip that revealed he was joking even though his words were serious.

She found it.

At that moment, she felt her own expression change. It revealed itself on her face clearly because Innes' smile broadened into a grin.

Ooh! No wonder he got away with so much mischief.

Perhaps she should teach him a lesson. Sapphira saluted him with her glass.

“Then I accept your kind offer. If I have not wed by the end of Caroline's season, then the confirmed spinster and the determined bachelor should marry.”

Innes swiftly kissed her on the cheek, an act as comfortably familial as one from a favorite maiden aunt.

“There's the face I like to see,” he said. “You weren't made for sadness, puss. Put this man out of your mind. He's not worth a moment's more of your time.”

Sapphira set the glass of sherry down untouched and turned the book over in her hand.

“I cannot promise to not think of him occasionally,” she said.

“Then let it be only occasionally,” he said.

She nodded.

As she stepped past him to leave the library, he took her hand.

He looked as though he was about to say something more. His expression became more thoughtful than Sapphira had ever recalled it being. She waited for him to speak, but he did not. An instant later the grave expression was gone, replaced by the affected haughtiness that was his usual mien.

“Sleep well, puss,” he said and released her hand.



CHAPTER FIVE

*“The love that follows us sometime is our trouble,
which still we thank as love.”*

SHE DREAMED OF Anthony that night, of that early spring day in Hyde Park when dormant trees were beginning to bud and heads of daffodils and snowdrops were about to burst forth.

It was when Sapphira knew she was in love with him.

It had been a small thing really – not a grand gesture or extravagant gifts – but rather a testament to his character. They had been riding on the fine, if cold, afternoon. Everyone was out to glean as much sunshine as the short-lived day would allow.

She and Anthony had been speaking of little of consequence, just small talk really, when there was a cry from somewhere ahead of them.

They spotted a little boy, not older than five, alone in the park searching about for someone. His parents, or more likely his nanny, given how well he was dressed. People rugged up against the cold passed by, paying the little lad no heed.

Anthony immediately dismounted and approached the youngster. His groom rode forward and took the reins. Sapphira signaled to her own to take her horse as she dismounted too.

She instructed her groom to look about for someone who would no doubt be frantically searching for the boy before she joined Anthony and the lad.

“This poor little chap is lost and has hurt his knee as well,” Anthony told her.

“Do you know where your mama is?” she asked.

The boy shook his head and fresh tears welled in his eyes.

“He’s well dressed,” Anthony observed. “Someone must know who he is.”

“I’ve sent my groom to look about to see if there is anyone looking for a lost child,” she said.

Anthony shot her winning smile.

“Will you tell us your name?” Sapphira encouraged.

“Geoffrey,” the boy whispered, his attention now distracted by Anthony’s chestnut horse.

“Do you like my horse?” he said, addressing the little boy once more.

The child nodded.

“Would you like to ride?”

Geoffrey started to nod before he slowly shook his head.

“Ah, is it because we’ve not been properly introduced?”

The boy nodded.

“Ah, you’re a well-brought up gentleman,” Anthony said approvingly. “My name is Lord Anthony Redthorpe, Earl of Taunton, and this is my friend, Lady Sapphira Galbraith.”

Sapphira hid a smile as the boy performed a little bow. Clearly, he was well-educated in social etiquette.

“Now we’ve been introduced, may I invite you to join me on my horse? You’ll be sitting so much higher, and it will be easier to spot your nanny.”

Sapphira watched the boy consider the proposition then nod. Anthony aided her up onto her horse before getting on his own horse. His groomsman lifted the boy onto the saddle ahead of him.

They took the horses at a gentle walk through the park and exchanged a glance of shared amusement when those who recognized them did a double take at the bachelor Earl of Taunton with a child.

Sapphira spotted her footman hurrying towards them, leading his horse. At his side was a distraught young woman.

Geoffrey sat up straight and waved, tears and scraped knee long forgotten.

“Nancy! Nancy!” he called. “Look at me!”

Nancy, a maid not older than sixteen, Sapphira judged, wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Oh, sir! Oh, Madam! Thank you, thank you! I only turned around for a moment, and he’d run off after a dog, and I tried hard to keep up.”

Anthony set the child down. Geoffrey ran immediately into his young woman’s arms and hugged her tightly.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you cry,” he said.

“You’re safe, and that’s all that matters, my little poppet,” she said, kissing the top of his head. Then Nancy looked up at them.

“My lord, my lady, I can’t ever thank you enough.”

“Think nothing of it,” said Anthony.

Sapphira observed Anthony watch the two head back down to the entrance of the park. When he turned to her, his face held the trace of a smile.

He was not conceited or vainglorious as were some of the other young aristocrats who showed off more for public adoration than out of genuine kindness.

That was the moment she knew she loved this man heart and soul. His kindness and consideration towards others truly marked him out.



“YOU CAN’T FIND me!”

Sapphira held her breath, too far away to do more than watch helplessly as the seventeenth century vase rocked

precariously on its plinth as Simon scampered under the small table on which it sat.

Lady Katherine, the dowager duchess, shook her head and tsked. “Those boys are going to destroy the house,” she observed.

“Boys aren’t made to sit cooped up inside,” Sapphira’s mother added, continuing with her embroidery.

“It’s a pity the weather hasn’t broken. They could be outside playing,” said Lady Beatrice.

“And getting muddy,” said Lady Caroline.

Lady Margaret sat down heavily onto a chair. “If this rain continues, how on earth are we going to spend our time?”

“There is no shortage of things to do,” said her mother. “Your embroidery for a start.”

Margaret wrinkled her nose, letting her mother know how she felt about that idea.

Innes stretched his arms and legs. “I would tell you more about the fashions on the Continent, my dears, but you’ve already ferreted out every scintilla of detail I can give you.”

He sighed and announced dramatically, “Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow creeps on this petty pace...”

Sapphira cocked her head. “That’s Shakespeare... *Macbeth*. I haven’t read that play in years. I found the witches terrifying.”

Peter emerged from his hiding place. “Witches?”

“Plays are boring,” announced George.

“Ah, not this one, my little buttercup,” said Innes. “This play is full of swordfights, intrigue, and... *murder*.”

“Is there a lot of bloodshed, Cousin Innes?” Robert asked.

“We can make it so, if you like.”

Caroline clapped her hands excitedly. “A play! We’ll put on a performance. What a marvelous idea. We can use the

school room upstairs!”

Young George seemed less enthused. “I’ll only be in it if I can have a sword and kill someone,” he said.

His mother looked with alarm. “If you’re going to behave like a little ruffian, you stay upstairs! Go on, all of you.”

Lady Beatrice rang for the housekeeper.

“The children have elected to put on a play. Could you see they have everything they need, including a cast, if you’d like to give your pick of servants to assist.”

“Oh yes,” said Lady Caroline, “we’ll need sets and costumes. Everyone must help!”

Margaret approached and patted Sapphira’s hand. “You too. We’ll need you for sewing, and you know the lines as well as anyone. You *will* help us, won’t you?”

Sapphira frowned. The only other option was sitting quietly by the fire with little to occupy her other than her own thoughts and a conversation between her mother, Lady Beatrice, and the duchess that would invariably return to London and the season...

“Of course, she will,” Innes announced before she could. “I will volunteer my services also. I find myself rather partial to the Scottish play.”

The younger members of the family trooped up to the third-floor school room.

“We’re going to need a stage,” Lady Margaret observed.

“I can arrange the carpenters to put something together, Miss,” said the butler.

“Yes, please,” said Margaret. “It needn’t be high off the ground, just enough to elevate the performers.”

Lady Caroline gasped. “Scripts! Oh, we’ll need scripts. We’ve only got one copy of the works of Shakespeare. We shall have to copy the entire play. It will take ages.”

“Not if I make a start on copying the pages,” said Sapphira. “Then when I have a few completed, we can all take turns copying out the lines from my document. Besides, it will be good for Peter and Robert to practice their writing. Their schoolmaster will be most impressed to see an improvement.”

“But I want to make swords,” Peter protested.

“There’ll still be plenty of time for that,” said Innes. “I suggest that we make a plan. While we accept Sapphira’s kind offer to begin copying our scripts, we will work out what else we need.”

Sapphira was pleased her suggestion had been taken up. She was not quite ready to rejoin society, even if it was only the society of her family. By volunteering as copyist, she could spend much needed time alone and still be part of this mad, fun scheme. It might be the tonic she needed to finally pull herself out of her slough of despond.

She fetched the copy of *Macbeth* and sat at one of the school desks to begin work. She smiled listening to the sound of Lady Caroline and her sister bossing about the other band of players, drafting in both family and servants alike.



IN THE DAYS that followed, Lady Geraldine and Lady Beatrice, along with Beatrice’s lady’s maid and the housekeeper, trooped up to the attic looking for old clothing which might be turned into costuming.

Lawrence and Sapphira’s father had begged off having anything to do with the play, but she wasn’t sure how long the resolution would last. For now, Lady Caroline accepted their excuses, given the worsening weather.

Floods looked more and more likely, and both men were kept busy on urgent estate business and meeting with the townsfolk to discuss whether sandbags would be required to protect the homes and shops of the seaside village. Soon the road north would be impassable, if not from the mud, but from

the strong likelihood of snow on the main road to York if the temperature dropped.

The weather might be horrible outside, but it didn't touch them at all inside Greybridge Castle. In fact, the mood was very merry, indeed.

Sapphira was persuaded to put down her pen for dinner, and her aching fingers were glad of it. There was one complete script, and she would write another tomorrow and persuade the boys to sit down for an hour at least to practice their penmanship.

By the time she readied herself for bed, Sapphira realized that she'd gone a whole day without a thought of Anthony.



CHAPTER SIX

“Something wicked this way comes.”

THREE DAYS LATER, Sapphira awoke to the sound of hurried footsteps along the hall outside her room. She frowned. It was morning, but early. Alice, her maid, hadn't yet come to attend her.

Sapphira got out of bed and headed to the door. Out in the hall, servants were bustling in and out of the north wing, which, to the best of her knowledge, had been closed up for the winter.

Curious, she dressed hurriedly. Perhaps someone downstairs would know what was going on.

She entered the dining room in search of Lawrence and found a man standing in front of the fireplace with his back to her. He was dressed plainly, and his brown hair was damp, his sleeves, and indeed his entire lower half, wet from riding through the savage weather.

Who was he? A local tenant, perhaps, invited to rid himself of the chill before seeing the Duke? But why the commotion in the north wing?

As the man turned, Sapphira's heart chilled. The surprise on his face matched her own.

Anthony.

All she could do was stare. Was he a ghost, a figment of her imagination?

He blinked rapidly at her and was opening pale lips to speak when Lawrence and her father rushed past her.

“Good God, man! What a hellish ride! You're lucky you didn't break your neck.”

Anthony tore his eyes away from Sapphira and addressed the duke.

“I apologize for the imposition, my lord, but yours was the nearest suitable residence.”

At that, a series of shudders went through him. Instinctively Sapphira stepped forward, then Lawrence turned to her.

“Sapphira, tell a footman to bring dry clothing for Lord Anthony,” he instructed. “And ask my wife to let the housekeeper know that we’ll have four extra staying with us along with their servants.”

Still stunned at Anthony’s most unexpected arrival, Sapphira simply nodded and headed out of the room, but not before overhearing his next words to Lawrence.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “Lady Frances will require rest.”

Lady Frances Sheppard was the mother of Elizabeth Sheppard, Anthony’s fiancée.

They must have been travelling north to the Sheppard’s grand estate in Yorkshire.

Preparing for the wedding.

Sapphira faithfully delivered the message, but her appetite for remaining at Greybridge was gone. How could she possibly survive being under the same roof with the man she still loved, while he was here with his family-to-be by marriage?

Tears sprung to her eyes despite her best efforts to thwart them. She made her way toward the library unseeing until she ran straight into Innes.

“My little gem! What ails you on such an auspicious day?”

She took in a shuddering breath, embarrassed that the words wouldn’t come, and equally embarrassed to notice Innes’s valet had been trailing behind him.

Nonetheless, she let Innes steer her by the shoulder into the library and ease her into a chair. She dabbed a handkerchief to her eyes before looking up at him.

“Anthony is here,” she managed to whisper.

Innes’ normally open countenance closed. He turned to his valet who had followed them into the room and asked him what was going on.

“It seems the coach of the Earl and Countess Sheppard broke an axle on the York road,” the man said. “The earl and countess were slightly injured and a gentleman of the party, Lord Anthony, rode directly here to seek aid.”

Innes nodded, and the valet left discreetly.

Sapphira took in a deep breath and attempted a shaky laugh. “You’re going to tell me that I shouldn’t let myself get upset.”

“No.” he said, tapping her lightly on the wrist. “I would never tell you such a thing, puss. It will have been a shock to see him. But never forget, this cad broke your heart. Of course, you may grieve for him, but never let him see you do it in public. Let him think you’ve forgotten all about him. Treat him as the stranger he ought to be!”

“Then what should I do about Lady Elizabeth?”

“You do nothing at all. You just behave like the lady you are. Throw yourself into the world of make believe. Pretend you are a duchess... the *queen*, if you like and treat her as it pleases Your Majesty to do so.”



SAPPHIRA DIDN'T FEEL particularly majestic, so she spent the morning in the schoolroom where she could hide from the rest of the house and pretend her full attention was on the production at hand. She painted a piece of scenery, then joined a party of chambermaids sewing some backdrops.

Thank goodness that Margaret and Lady Caroline were so distracted by putting on the play that knowledge of the new arrivals had not yet come to their notice.

Sapphira was safe in the “Greybridge Castle Playhouse”, where the players readied to fret their hour upon the stage. But the world of make-believe couldn’t last for long.

“Where’s *Maman*?” asked Margaret after a time. “She said she’d be up here to help.”

Sapphira raised her head from her sewing.

“There was an accident out on the road to York. The Earl Sheppard’s carriage broke an axle. His party will be staying here until the weather clears.”

“Oh, good! An audience,” said Lady Caroline.

Sapphira watched Margaret take in the news. The girl blinked rapidly, then her brow furrowed.

“How many are there in the party?” she asked.

“Four,” Sapphira announced, pleased at the way her voice did not betray her. “The earl and countess, of course, their daughter, and Lord Anthony.”

Margaret looked as though she might say something, but, to Sapphira’s relief, did not.

Innes was right – she should put on a performance. If she was convincing enough to others, then surely it couldn’t be long before she actually *would* be fine.

She returned to her sewing. It didn’t require her to do much other than attend to the task while considering how she would face the days to come.

She glanced out of the window into the miserable gray and hoped that the weather would break soon. A line from the play popped into her thoughts.

By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes...

Sapphira shuddered and drew her shawl around her.

PREPARING FOR LUNCH, Sapphira had been left by Alice to finish dressing herself while her maid went to attend to Caroline and Margaret.

She was dressed in a green gown which she thought was her most becoming. Whether that had been a deliberate choice by her maid or just coincidence, Sapphira couldn't be certain, but there was one thing she *could* be sure of, and that was the gold chain Anthony gave her could *not* be worn with this dress.

For the first time in four months, she removed it and placed it on the dressing table. Perhaps she should leave it off for good. Was it a chain around her heart? If so, it had to be broken, otherwise she would never be free.

She snatched it up and thrust it in her jewelry chest. She drew out a cameo, one of her grandmother's, and slipped it on to a ribbon.

There. She could be regal.

She encountered Innes in the hall, his valet trailing behind him once again, fussing with the shoulders of his jacket.

Innes regarded her with an exaggerated look of approval before frowning. "You're missing an accessory or two, puss," he said.

Sapphira laughed. "I think I should dismiss my maid and hire you instead. What is it I'm lacking, sir?"

"You've recovered one with that radiant smile."

"And the second?"

"Me, of course! Give me your arm, and we'll go down together and give my mother a thrill."

Sapphira did as instructed but leaned into him to whisper.

"You don't have to do this you know."

“Nonsense!” he dismissed waspishly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. We’re going downstairs for luncheon and exceptional conversation with old friends and new.”

They followed the sound of talking into the drawing room.

The Earl and Countess Sheppard, it was announced, would not be joining them; they sent their regrets, pleading exhaustion from their ordeal. They had been injured, but not badly, Lady Elizabeth hastened to report.

Sapphira was formally introduced to Anthony’s fiancée. She recalled that Lady Elizabeth was considered a beauty and thought her so when seeing her in passing at a number of events during the last season in London. But now there was a set to her jaw that lent a harshness Sapphira didn’t recall.

They greeted each other with indifferent cordiality.

Next to her, Anthony might as well have been made of marble for all his expression and posture showed. She greeted him formally, betraying no hint of their being anything more than simply acquaintances.

This performance was for her parents, whom she knew were watching her keenly. Sapphira knew the family would take their cue from her. After the greetings, Innes deftly steered her away.

Was there a rising tension in the air? Or had she imagined it?

If there was, no one else noticed. Guided by Innes, she joined him as he flitted to each of their party in turn, engaging them in small talk until the call for luncheon was made.

Thank goodness for her garrulous second cousin by her side. He spoke enough for the both of them, and all she had to do was show amusement and accept the conversational gambits he passed her way – all the while conscious of Anthony’s eyes on her.



CHAPTER SEVEN

“Present fears are less than horrible imaginings.”

AT THE LUNCH table, Sapphira observed that Lady Elizabeth Sheppard was exactly as she imagined her to be – a self-confident young woman, sure of her beauty and her status. And yet, Anthony did not look besotted by his bride-to-be. There was a gravity in his expression which he took no pains to hide.

Innes, who had seated himself next to Sapphira, leaned in.

“Keep that smile up, puss,” he whispered. “If it helps, just think of her itching all night with the bedbugs.”

She giggled at the absurd and unkind thought.

“What amuses you, Sapphira?” the dowager duchess asked.

Not knowing what to say, she cast a panicked glance toward Innes who came to her rescue once more.

“Just a private joke, *Maman*. Nothing that would interest anyone here.”

Anthony’s brow furrowed, although he said nothing, Sapphira watched discreetly as he instead allowed himself to be drawn into a conversation with Lawrence and her father.

The meal drew to a close. Before long the men joined the ladies in the drawing room.

Innes made his way towards her. Sapphira offered a slight shake of her head. She couldn’t lean on him all the time. Instead, she went to join the ladies seated by the fireplace.

“I was just telling Lady Elizabeth about our impending performance of the Scottish play,” said Lady Caroline.

“Yes indeed, what a charming amusement.” There was something about Elizabeth’s smile which didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m sure it will be a creditable performance. Will you be taking part, Lady Sapphira?”

“Only backstage.”

“Sapphira has copied our scripts and is assisting with costumes,” Margaret said helpfully.

“Perhaps you should ask Lord Anthony to take part in your play,” said Lady Elizabeth. “I’ve very recently learned he is good at acting.”

Her remark was loud enough for Anthony to turn from conversation with the men and give his fiancée a level stare.

Sapphira saw Innes raise an eyebrow. So, she was not the only one to observe discord between the couple.

She stood. “Excuse me. I want to check on the boys,” she said softly.

Innes snagged her elbow as she passed and whispered, “They’ve only been engaged for a few months, and they’re already acting like an old married couple.”

The acerbic comment was more than she could take in one day. Sapphira cast him a glare and left the room.

Upstairs in the schoolroom, the boys were playing Nine Men’s Morris.

“What are you doing up here?” she asked.

“We’ve been banished until tomorrow morning,” said George, matter-of-factly. “Do you think nanny will send up some biscuits and afternoon tea for us?”

“Who are the new people?” asked Peter. “We’ve been told we have to be quiet.”

“Well, yes, playing quietly would help the Earl and Countess Sheppard. Their carriage broke. They were hurt and had to huddle in the storm until your papa and mine went out with some men.”

Four sets of wide eyes looked at her.

“Are they badly hurt?” asked Simon.

“No, not badly hurt from what I’ve been told, but they are older and will need time and rest before they feel up to company. Until then, we have four guests to stay until the weather clears.”

With their curiosity sated, Sapphira found her suggestion of spending the next hour copying out scripts for the cast well received when it included the promise to send up some cream cakes and hot cocoa. It was tempting to spend the rest of the afternoon here with the excuse of sewing costumes or painting the set, but she knew that she couldn’t hide.

On her way back to the drawing room, Sapphira spoke to one of the maids about attending to the boys’ treats in a little while. Instead of continuing down the stairs, she turned towards her room to pick up a shawl against the wintry chill.

When she emerged, Anthony stood alone in the hall.

He had not seen her yet, so she turned away before he noticed her presence. She only got a few paces before he called her name.

Sapphira squeezed her eyes shut a moment. Even after so long, his voice saying her name had the power to affect her – to recall his touch, his kisses.

She turned. Anthony was as handsome as when she’d last seen him six months ago. But he had also changed somehow.

Her gaze fell. It was too painful to look at him. To disguise her discomfort, she bobbed a curtsy and murmured, “My lord.”

“Is that where we are with one another, Sapphira?” There was an edge to his voice that verged on anger.

“It has to be this way,” she said, playing with the fringes of her shawl to ease the agitation that thrummed through her.

Anthony tipped his head with a moue of disgust. “If that’s the case, you’d better have my title. I’m now the Duke of Denby.”

She raised her gaze to meet his. *Duke? That would mean his father...*

Her heart softened immediately. “Oh Anthony, I’m sorry to hear your father has passed.”

A rueful half-smile cut across his features. “Don’t grieve for me too much. As you’re well aware, there was no love lost between my father and I.”

She took a couple of paces toward him to avoid their voices carrying and drawing attention.

“When did it happen?”

Anthony let out a breath and stood at ease. His posture relaxed and her beloved’s face softened.

“A week ago. We were on our way to York when the messenger finally caught up with our party. I was going to continue as far at the next coaching inn, then return to London from there, but I can’t now while the weather’s so bad. Only Elizabeth, the Earl and Countess know.”

At the sound of his fiancée’s name on his lips, Sapphira withdrew half a step. Anthony reached out and took her hand.

“When I saw you this morning, I thought the clouds had broken and pierced my heart with warmth for the first time in months.”

“Don’t...” she said. “You can’t say these things to me, not when...”

The sound of voices came up the stairs. “Oh, those boys have probably coerced her into playing one of their games,” said Lady Beatrice. “I’ll go rescue her.”

Sapphira withdrew her hand. Anthony released it with reluctance and walked away.

Margaret and Lady Beatrice entered the hall as he disappeared down an adjoining hallway. Sapphira made a show of settling her heavy oxblood-colored shawl on her shoulders as soon as the women appeared.

“There you are!” said Lady Beatrice. “I thought you might have need of some relief from the boys.”

“Oh no, no – they’ve been lambs, truly, although I did have to bribe them with tea cakes and hot cocoa, I’m afraid.”

Lady Beatrice laughed. “I’ve found bribery works well with them too.”

The duchess went up the stairs, while Margaret put her arm in Sapphira’s. “You will come to join us downstairs, won’t you? I think you have mother and father convinced that you are quite unaffected in seeing Lord Anthony again, but you can’t quite fool me.”

Sapphira gave her sister an embrace. “I’ll be all right,” she said. “It was just a bit of a shock seeing him unexpectedly.”

Margaret squeezed her arm.

“That’s the spirit. Cousin Innes is telling us the most amusing stories. Now I’m pretty sure, judging by papa and cousin Lawrence’s faces, Innes also speaks some innuendos, but I cannot figure out for the life of me what they’re supposed to mean. Perhaps you’ll be able to work them out and tell me.”

When they entered the drawing room, Innes was leading a group in a game of charades.

“Ooh, I know! *Othello!*” said Sapphira’s mother.

“How on earth do you get Othello from that carry on?” her father announced. “Clearly it’s *The Merchant of Venice.*”

Innes shook his head slowly.

“Come on, do it again, from the beginning!” she entreated.

“The first word... the,” everyone spoke in unison.

“Second word... two.”

“Two words!”

“Two syllables!”

“No! The number two.”

“*Henry V Part II,*” called Lawrence.

“Nooo!”

“Third word... Lawrence! John! Men!”

Innes tapped a finger to his nose.

“Lords!”

“Gentlemen!”

“*Two Gentlemen of Verona!*”

Innes threw his hands in the air indicating that that answer was correct, and everyone cheered and applauded Lady Caroline’s guess.

Lady Elizabeth rose from her place. “I shall go attend to *Maman* and Papa, if I might take my leave of you,” she said.

Sapphira knew that part of the young woman’s mission would be to find her missing fiancé. Anthony had not come back downstairs.

The clock struck four, and the dowager duchess announced her intention to rest before dinner. Sapphira decided likewise.

Entering her room, she allowed Alice to loosen the ties of her dress. She frowned.

A neatly folded note sat on her dressing table.



CHAPTER EIGHT

“Let every man be master of his time.”

SAPPHIRA PICKED UP the note. “Who is this from?”

Alice set out a dress for dinner. “I don’t know, my lady. I found it slipped under your door.”

Sapphira unfolded it and recognized the handwriting immediately. She had a small chest full of notes and letters from this hand, tied together with a blue velvet ribbon.

“What does he say?”

Sapphira turned to Alice. “You mean you haven’t read it?”

The maid returned a look of disdain.

“I wouldn’t do anything like *that*. Besides, there was no need to, I *knew* it would be from him. Here, let me pretend to be one of those witches in *Macbeth* and tell the future...”

Alice closed her eyes and put three fingers to her forehead. “Mmm... He wants to meet you tonight to pledge his undying love.”

Sapphira pulled a face and returned to the note. Her eyes fell on the words. The paper shook in her hands.

“You may go,” she said. “Attend to the girls.”

The maid sobered. “I’m so sorry, miss, I was joking. I didn’t mean to cause offense.”

Sapphira shook her head. “None taken. Just leave me be.”

Alone, she unfolded the note.

My dearest Sapphira,

Seeing you today has only reinforced what, in my heart, I already knew. I still love you. I’ve never

stopped loving you.

So much has occurred since our parting, and I beg a moment of your time, alone, to learn if your heart has so much changed from six months ago.

If it has, then so be it. My life will have been the richer for once having your love and so much the poorer for having lost it. But be at liberty to burn this note, and I shall say nothing more to cause you discomfort.

But dare I hope for Love and its precious twin, Trust?

Should there be reason to hope, I beg you to give me some small sign.

The death of my father has changed my course and fate has led me to your door. I stand at a crossroads and only you can give the direction.

My love and my heart always,

Anthony.

The note shook in her hand. She lowered it to the dressing table and stared back at her reflection, pale and wide-eyed. All the scars on her heart which had begun to heal were ripped open once more.

Of course, she loved him. But hope once extinguished was not so easily rekindled.

She took in a steadying breath and read his words once more.

The surprise of his arrival at Greybridge Castle was no less shocking for her as it was for him. Still, he was a man engaged to another, although in the brief time she had seen him and Lady Elizabeth together there had been no obvious signs of affection between them.

What to do? What to do...

The cheery cracking fire beckoned. It would be so easy to toss the note in the fire and pretend its contents never existed. Their party would be gone within a week or two, and she would be back where she was before soon enough.

But what if... The little voice from her heart whispered.

Becoming the duke did change things. But to what degree? Surely a contract once put in place could not be easily broken. And why had he not resisted his father's dictates? She would have married him if he was penniless and disinherited. He knew that...

Did he?

The thought roused her to action. She took out another gown, the color of mulberries, and donned it. She retrieved the delicate gold chain that had been Anthony's gift and wrapped it twice around her neck so it sat as a choker, visible over the neckline of the dress.

That would be her answer. If he recognized it, then he'd know her answer was yes – there was hope.

DOWNSTAIRS EVERYONE HAD gathered. She searched the drawing room and found Anthony in conversation with Innes and her father. Innes was the first to spot her.

“Darling Sapphira, dare I tell you that you look positively radiant this evening?”

“Your flattery will go directly to my head, cousin,” she said.

“Does that color not become her admirably, beloved Maman?”

The duchess looked up. “Very admirable, indeed. I wish you would show as much devotion to the fashion of other young ladies as you do to Sapphira's. It's time you stopped gallivanting around the Continent and wed. Lady Elizabeth here looks particularly fetching as well. Do you not agree?”

“I do agree, mummy dear, but you should know that Sapphira and I have a special understanding.”

“An understanding?” she asked.

Lady Caroline gasped. “You’re engaged?”

“Who’s engaged?” Margaret frowned.

Caroline’s expression quickly matched her cousin’s. “Innes said... oh, but you were joking, weren’t you, Innes?”

To Sapphira’s infuriation, the man offered only an enigmatic smile in return.

“Sister Sapphira and Cousin Innes are getting married?”

Peter raced from the room to be the first to tell his brother.

Sapphira had to say something before this got out of control.

“It’s *not* an engagement,” she said.

“But it *was* a promise,” Innes countered.

“One made in jest!”

Sapphira turned to her mother, the dowager duchess, and Lady Beatrice to explain.

“Innes made an offer of marriage should I not find anyone to my liking by the end of Margaret and Caroline’s season.”

“And do you mean it, dear boy?” said Lady Katherine, turning back to her son. “You will finally settle down?”

“Indeed, I do mean it, Maman. I’ve found no woman like dear cousin Sapphira. She will suit me quite well.”

“It should be noted,” Sapphira protested, “that I have not given Innes an answer, let alone any encouragement!”

Lady Elizabeth’s honeyed tones entered the fray. “An engagement? How lovely...”

Sapphira turned. Elizabeth’s arm was entwined possessively with Anthony’s. His face was expressionless. How she wished she could tell his mood right now. And what reason could Elizabeth have to be jealous? None. After all, Anthony was engaged to her.

Innes gave an exaggerated flourish with one arm. “I can only hope that we will be as happy as you are, my dear!”

If Sapphira hadn’t been watching Elizabeth so closely, she would have missed the brief downturn of her mouth and the tightening of her jaw.

Innes whispered in her ear. “Trouble in paradise, do you think puss?”

Before she could retort, the gong sounded for dinner.

Innes escorted her in. It wasn’t a formal affair, so save for Lawrence seated at the head of the table, the guests sat where they pleased. Innes placed her right next to Anthony and seated himself beside Elizabeth opposite.

Innes gave Sapphira an indulgent smile then engaged Elizabeth in conversation.

Across the way, Margaret spoke to Sapphira.

“That gold chain you wear tonight. Is it new? I’m sure I haven’t seen it before.”

“Are you in the habit of going through Sapphira’s jewelry box?” teased Robert.

Sapphira shot a quick glance in her parents’ direction and hoped she could dodge the truth without attracting their attention.

“No,” she said breezily. “This is something I’ve had for a while. I’ve just doubled it around. I’ve not worn it like this before which is why it looks different.”

“It becomes you well,” said Anthony. The low tone of his voice sparked remembrances of intimacies past. When she turned and looked into his eyes, she could see that he recalled the day he put it around her neck, perhaps even the way the length of the chain dipped between her breasts.

The memory of it bloomed unbidden. Her cheeks flushed. Anthony’s countenance lightened, and his lips curled upwards in a knowing smile.

“Dearest A!”

The expression on Elizabeth’s face was not a happy one. It seemed she had been trying to attract her fiancé’s attention for some seconds.

“Yes?” said Anthony, his smile fading.

“Do you remember that most amusing tale Lord Blanchfort told at the house party in Windsor? Lord Innes just told a story that reminded me very much of it.”

Obliged to hold court for the whole table, Anthony told the story, and, as it unfolded and he relaxed into the telling of it, he became once again the man Sapphira remembered – bright, engaging, and carefree.

But once the tale was told and talk had moved on, he drew back into that serious and reserved mien that she had noticed earlier in the day.

Sapphira turned her attention to Elizabeth. She knew the woman was only giving half an ear to Innes’s prattle.

Yes, she had been regarded a beauty of the *Ton* last season, and, in truth she *was* a pretty girl. But the newly hard edge to her expression that Sapphira had seen in her earlier prevented her from being truly pretty. She also seemed as tightly drawn as a bowstring.

Was she always like that? Is that why Anthony had become like that?

Did she know about their past romance?



CHAPTER NINE

*“...Who could refrain,
That had a heart to love, and in that heart
Courage to make love known?”*

SAPPHIRA WAS AWARE that Elizabeth regarded her carefully as the ladies entered the drawing room after dinner.

Lady Geraldine and Lady Beatrice excused themselves to help tuck their sons into bed. The dowager duchess made her way to her favorite chair by the fire.

Margaret found her spot on the settee. Caroline joined her at the other end of it while Sapphira decided she would claim a seat at the spinet. Elizabeth glided about the room – like a crow, Sapphira thought unkindly – before settling for a highbacked chair.

“I had no idea you were friends with Lord A,” she said, continuing her use of the affected term for Anthony. “How fortunate for us that you were in residence in Greybridge. I should have had no idea that anyone of any quality would be here instead of enjoying the delights of London.” She let out an affected sigh. “How I wish we were there right now.”

“You prefer more lively company?” enquired Lady Katherine.

Realizing her *faux pas*, Elizabeth hastened to clarify her meaning. “Not at all. Of course, the country has its charms too. With luck, the weather will turn tomorrow.”

“Will you and Lord Anthony retire to the country after you’re married?” asked Lady Caroline.

The young woman’s lips pursed a moment.

“That is still under discussion.”

Sapphira idly picked out a tune on the spinet, only half-listening to the conversation.

Did Elizabeth know about the parlous state of Anthony's ducal fortunes? Moreover, did her parents? Or was the title alone enough compensation?

If what she suspected was true, Anthony had his work cut out to restore the family's riches. And Elizabeth was a woman with expensive tastes. Her dress was *au courant*, and she wore expensive jewelry – a tasteful amount, to be sure, but expensive, nonetheless.

Sapphira suspected Anthony would be likely unable to keep her in the manner she was accustomed to expect.

“...and when I arrived today, I was confronted by two young hooligans brandishing wooden swords!”

At that, Sapphira jumped in, determined to defend the young boys.

“You'll forgive them, of course,” she said. “They're rehearsing for a production of *Macbeth* that my sister and Lady Caroline are staging for our entertainment. The whole household is involved, from the family through to the carpenters who are building sets.”

Lady Elizabeth sniffed. “I'd have thought your carpenters would be better served repairing our coach.”

There was a moment's awkward silence.

“The men can do both,” said the dowager duchess.

After a moment's more silence to emphasize the point, the older woman turned to her.

“Play something for us, Sapphira.”

She obliged, a lively little air to dispel the souring of the atmosphere, and counted down the minutes until the men joined them.

AN HOUR PASSED before the men returned to the drawing room. Innes entered first with a mischievous look in his eye, while

Anthony looked reserved once more. Lawrence and her father followed behind.

Aware of the growing tension, Caroline and Margaret gave an accounting of the progress of their play. They were not convinced that everyone would have their lines perfectly memorized, but they declared they would be satisfied if the main cast could deliver their soliloquies without the use of a script.

“Who is to be Macbeth?” Anthony asked.

“I am,” said Caroline. “I’m the one who knows the play best. Margaret plays lots of other characters. In fact, everyone will have to play multiple roles which will be confusing—”

“And all the more fun for it,” Margaret added.

Lady Elizabeth jumped in. “Ah, the *Scottish* play... I know it well; in fact, I had the leading role as Lady Macbeth at Mrs. Fortum’s Ladies Preparatory.” She rose from her seat and threw out her arms. “*Out, out damned spot, out I say...*”

Her dramatic rendering received a round of applause. The young woman preened.

“Perhaps if you need another member of your troupe, I could be prevailed upon to oblige.”

Caroline looked awkward. “Well, you see, we never expected guests to join us. This was to be for the household only, so we already have our Lady Macbeth, and it was going to be a surprise. I hope I’ve given no offense.”

Elizabeth’s gaze fell away from Caroline and fell back to Sapphira. Elizabeth plainly thought *she* should be cast as Lady Macbeth when who it was to be was a mystery even to her.

Sapphira raised her chin. The woman was determined to identify her as a rival in everything.

Lawrence spoke before Elizabeth could, “Well now that’s settled perhaps we should have some entertainment. Perhaps the young ladies would like to dance—” Caroline and

Margaret nodded eagerly – “Sapphira, something lively, if you please.”

She obliged, playing lively country tunes that could be danced in a circle given the uneven numbers of males to females. After a couple of dances, Lady Caroline fanned herself and announced she’d had enough.

“Sapphira, you play so beautifully,” she announced.

“Did you know she sings well also,” said Margaret.

Innes, standing with his hip resting against a table, regarded everyone with faint amusement. “Then we should entreat Sapphira to sing for us. You’ll do that, won’t you, puss?”

“Oh, my Lord A sings wonderful well too,” said Elizabeth. “You should hear him at some at the at-homes we’ve had. You *will* sing, won’t you darling?”

“A duet!” announced Innes. “I *insist* on hearing a duet.”

Sapphira turned to Innes with alarm, and then to Anthony.

“Oh, no. I think it would be asking too much of Lord Anthony. We have nothing rehearsed and...”

For the first time since his arrival, a familiar, feline smile spread across his features. It was a smile that never failed to set her heart racing.

“Nonsense,” he countered. “I’d be delighted.”

He turned to Lady Beatrice, “My lady, do you have some sheet music that Lady Sapphira and I can peruse?”

“Why yes, in the library.”

Anthony bowed and held out his hand to Sapphira.

“Come, my lady. Let’s go look for a suitable piece.”

Sapphira rose without taking his hand.

“You know where they are, don’t you?” Lady Beatrice called. “They’re in the right-hand cabinet.”

Sapphira took a lamp from the drawing room and made her way down the hall to the library, feeling Anthony's presence as though he'd actually touched her rather than following a respectable distance behind.

She held her breath as she walked and only let it out when they reached the room. If he wanted to talk, then he would have to begin. She would not.

She went directly to the cabinet where the music sheets were held and pulled out a folio, set it on the desk, and began perusing, unable to look at him.

"Sapphira," he said.

"Speak your piece," she said breathlessly. "We do not have much time before someone will come to look for us."

"I beg your forgiveness for the hurt I caused you..."

"You said as much in your note."

Anthony let out a sigh. "Will you not at least look at me?"

Reluctantly, she raised her eyes to his. His expression was dark.

"You think me a coward for not standing firm against my father when it comes to the matters of my own heart."

Sapphira swallowed.

Yes, she *had* thought that, and Innes had even said as much.

Anthony continued, his voice low and urgent. "My life has, in effect, been over since the day I left you. I returned home to find my father had signed a marriage contract with the Earl. Moreover, he forced me to accept. He made specific threats about ruining your father."

The sheet of music slid from Sapphira's fingers.

"What? How?"

Anthony took her hand and gently squeezed it, earnestly entreating her to look at him.

“As I learned, my father might have been without funds, but he was not without influence, particularly with members of the syndicate your father uses to insure his ships. Without insurance, no one would book passage or cargo. I didn’t believe it at first, but he showed me the letter he had drafted. He said a copy also was retained by my family’s solicitor.”

At the sound of footsteps, Sapphira caught a glancing view through the open doorway of a footman passing down the hall. Startled, she let go of Anthony’s hand and rifled hurriedly through a selection of music until she found a simple country tune.

“Sapphira, speak to me please! Do you believe me?”

“Of course, I believe you,” she said. “You’ve always been a man of honor, that has never been in doubt. But it cannot change the way things are between us now.”

She picked up the sheet music, walked out of the library, and back into the drawing room, Anthony following behind.

“Ah, there you are,” said Innes, his expression speculative. “I thought we might have to send a search party for you two.”

“Tosh,” Sapphira answered without missing a beat. “We weren’t gone above a minute or two.”

“Stop teasing your cousin, Innes,” said the dowager duchess. “You’re making Lady Elizabeth most uncomfortable, and for no need.”

Sapphira didn’t dare venture a look in Elizabeth’s direction.

“Not at all, your Grace,” said the woman in question. “No one knows my dear Lord A’s constancy better than *I* do.”

Sapphira returned to the spinet and opened the music. She glanced over her shoulder. Anthony scanned the page, familiarizing himself with the song. He gave a nod, and Sapphira played the first notes.

Hesitantly at first, then with growing confidence, she sang the tale of a young maiden who pined for her absent lover,

wondering whether he thought of her too. In answer he confessed his undying devotion and, while miles kept them apart, he entreated her to look up at the sky at night and know he was looking at the same constellation, using it to guide his way back to her.

Their voices harmonized beautifully. Even without rehearsal, his pitch complemented hers, and, when they came to the end of the chorus, he leaned over and turned the page.

The warmth of his skin and the familiar aroma of his cologne struck her anew. And in that moment, she knew that her love for him hadn't dimmed.

It was still as bright as ever.



CHAPTER TEN

“Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires.”

AT THE END of the song, the room burst as one into genuine applause – except for one pair of hands, those of Lady Elizabeth.

She did not appear as much angry or jealous as, rather, thoughtful and wary.

Sapphira glanced away. No matter Anthony’s feelings for her, nor hers for him, he was still engaged to another woman in this room.

Nevertheless, the evening went on pleasantly.

At eleven o’clock when the butler silenced the clock chimes for the night, the older members of the household excused themselves and went to bed, leaving only Sapphira, Innes, Elizabeth, Anthony, Caroline, and Margaret around a table.

After a while, Innes withdrew a set of large playing cards from his pocket.

“I’ve never seen cards like those,” said Elizabeth.

“They’re tarot cards from Italy,” said Innes.

“They’re different to our playing cards,” Sapphira observed. “How did you get them?”

“I won them, of course,” he said, running his hands across the colorfully illustrated pictures. “It was in a rather intriguing game with a most fascinating Frenchman.”

He offered them an impish grin. “Shall I teach you how to play tarot?”

“Are you going to do a card reading?”

“Divination? No. I thought you might want to learn the card game instead.”

Margaret nodded slightly. “I’ve heard of it; it’s sort of like whist, isn’t it?”

“There are a lot of cards,” Lady Caroline observed.

“Seventy-eight,” said Innes.

At that, Caroline shook her head. “It’s getting late, the servants turned off the longcase clock bell ages ago. I’m not sure I’m up for learning a new game.”

Innes leaned forward.

“Then perhaps I should read fortunes instead.”

Margaret’s eyes widened. “You know how to do *that*?”

“Of course, I do. I learned it on the Continent.”

“From the Frenchman?” asked Caroline.

Innes put a finger to his nose. “A gentleman never tells.”

Margaret was nearly bouncing in her seat.

“Oh! Do me! Do me! I’ve never had my fortune told before. I was at a *fête* once, and I wanted to see the gypsy, but *Maman* wouldn’t let me. You remember, Sapphira?”

“I do remember, but you soon found another distraction amongst the tumblers.”

All the while, Innes was shuffling the palm-sized cards.

“Then you shall be first, *ma petite*.”

Innes passed the cards over to her.

“Think about the question you would most like an answer to while shuffling the deck.”

Margaret did so.

“Draw three cards face down. Take them from anywhere in the pack that you wish, then place them on the table side by

side and turn them over, so we can see.”

Margaret did as she was bid.

“What do they mean?”

“They represent your past, your present, and your future, but nothing in or of themselves right now because you’ve not finished yet. Take nine more cards at random from the deck, shuffle them, then place three of each face down in a column beneath these cards.”

Margaret followed the instructions and took her time as well, taking the whole thing far more seriously than she ought, thought Sapphira, but she said nothing.

“How do you feel about the cards?” Innes asked gravely. “Do they feel they are *your* cards?”

Margaret nodded.

Innes turned the first column of new cards over and scrutinized them. “This tells of a happy childhood, and an adoration for a close family member. A sister?”

Margaret glanced her way and smiled. Sapphira reached out and took her sister’s hand briefly.

Innes revealed the second column. “The cards in the center depicting the present express uncertainty,” he continued. “You desire love and security. You are hopeful, but nervous.”

Margaret nodded enthusiastically “But the future – ooh, please do tell me my future.”

Innes turned over the remaining cards and was silent for several moments. Sapphira shook her head indulgently at his theatrics. Poor Margaret was on tenterhooks.

“This card,” he said, tapping the top one, “represents growth, but I also see in the others love as well and future great happiness.”

Margaret clapped her hands and laughed joyously before hugging Caroline who was seated next to her.

“Oh, do my mine next, Uncle Innes, please!” the girl begged.

Innes looked past the giggling younger girls and focused on Lady Elizabeth.

“What about *you*, my lady? Are you not interested in knowing your future?”

The woman raised her chin.

“My past I already know. My present is right before me; and as for my future –” she laid a hand on Anthony’s arm – “I know everything I need to know.”

“Then what about you, Sapphira?”

She narrowed her eyes at her cousin. What mischief was he up to?

“No, let Caroline have her turn.”

Innes relented and led the girl through the same rigmarole. As Sapphira expected, Caroline’s fortune was everything a young girl dreams of.

By this time, Sapphira’s lids had grown heavy, and she began to excuse herself off to bed, but Innes insisted she stay.

“Pick three cards,” Innes instructed. Sapphira did so with no great interest. Innes tapped them from left to right, speaking as he did so, “Past, present, future...”

He turned the cards over.

The Lovers was her present. The death card was her future. Flushing, she cast a hasty glance to Anthony, excused herself, and fled to her room.

ALONE UPSTAIRS, SAPPHIRA touched cold hands to heated cheeks. This was just *far* too much. Innes must have done something to the cards.

What must Anthony think?

Good Lord – what must Lady Elizabeth think?

Did she suspect her husband-to-be's affection was placed in her?

She quickly undressed for bed, not even calling for her maid.

What was she to make of Anthony's astonishing claim that he was blackmailed into his engagement with a threat against her father? She wouldn't believe Anthony could make up such a claim, and she didn't know the duke... the late duke... well enough to know if he would stoop so low. Did her own father know anything about this –

And what now that Anthony was himself the duke?

Outside on the landing, she heard voices and paid little heed to them, but as they approached her door she could hear them, male and female, muffled fuming words spoken in hisses, but no less angry for the lack of volume.

It was far too late to be the servants. Then who?

Sapphira drew her dressing gown around her, padded to the door, and listened.

"You should have told me!" hissed the female voice. Sapphira didn't recognize it immediately.

"I had no idea until I arrived. My concern was for you and your parents to find suitable accommodation."

That was Anthony.

"But *here* of all places! How could you?"

"I'm hardly to blame for the vagaries of the weather."

"Well, the weather is breaking now. I want to be away from here at the soonest opportunity."

"Elizabeth!"

"No! I don't want to hear any more. Leave me alone."

Feet padded away on the carpet runner, then silence for a second or two before a door slammed somewhere down the hall.

Sapphira opened the door a crack and peered through. Just a few feet away, Anthony stood with his back to her, no doubt staring after his fiancée.

She leaned against the door and it opened another inch, causing the hinges to squeak, drawing his attention. He spun round. The harshness of his expression softened at seeing her.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop,” she whispered, opening the door another few inches on purpose, this time.

Anthony’s expression turned to anguish. The look speared her heart through. She stepped out and, before she could say another word, he pulled her into his arms and backed her into her room, closing the door behind them.

“I’m not sure I can take much more of this,” he said. “I’ve been walking on a razor’s edge for months, and now I…” He huffed in frustration, raking his hand through his dark brown hair. “Hell! My life is a mess, Sapphira. The last thing I want to do is to drag you into the midst of it.”

“You and Lady Elizabeth were arguing about me?”

“I’d not told her about you, but she knew that I had an attachment to someone before her. Your cousin Innes and his stupid parlor trick with the cards tonight put everything into place for her. She accused me of being unfaithful with you.”

“But you haven’t.”

“Not physically at any rate,” he said ruefully. “But I dream of you constantly. I remember what it was like to hold you in my arms and kiss you.”

“As do I,” she said breathlessly.

Anthony clasped her to him, and Sapphira wrapped her arms around him, clinging to him as though he were her only refuge. He stroked her hair.

“I didn’t think anything could be worse than not seeing you again. But I was wrong. It’s torture to be under the same roof as you, seeing you every day, and not being able to touch you like this.”

Tears pricked in her eyes; every word resonated through her. Anthony took her face in his hands, his eyes searched hers. She wanted so much to tell him that she loved him still, but the tightness of her throat, constraining her voice, betrayed her.

His lips did not. They descended swiftly on hers in a possessive kiss which she returned with equal fervor.

How easy it would be to surrender to his arms, to his passion, and to her own, and let it carry her away on the tide until they found themselves on different shores. But she broke the kiss and drew a lungful of air, enough to wake her from the fever.

Anthony's face had taken on that grim expression that she'd witnessed only in the past two days.

"God, Sapphira – tell me before I lose my mind that you're not in love with him."

Sapphira blinked rapidly, confused.

"In love with *who*?"

Anthony looked frustrated. "Innes!"

She stared at him blankly.

"If he is your intended, tell me now."

"Innes isn't in love with me," she said.

"That's not the question I asked."

"He has offered to marry me."

Anthony let out a huff of air. "So, a marriage of convenience only."

"I love him as a family member, and he holds me in the same affection." Sapphira pulled together a small measure of pride. "Is there a reason I should not marry him?"

"Dammit, Sapphira! A loveless marriage? That's not for you."

"And it is for *you*?"

He turned away briefly. “That’s different. You know why I had to agree.”

“And now *you* are duke?”

He shook his head. “It’s a hell of a mess.”

Sapphira nodded slowly. Yes, she could agree with that. “Does my father know about the intentions of the late duke?”

Anthony shook his head once again.

“There’s something else you should know. In addition to his financial woes, my father left the estate in poor condition. Very poor. Worse than I suspected when I mentioned it to you. It’s going to take two to three years before it is profitable again. He knew this and expected me to use Elizabeth’s dowry to mend it.”

“Is there no other way? Is there no hope for us?”

“Before I saw you again, I didn’t believe there was. Now I know your feelings for me are unchanged – as are mine for you – I want to believe there is hope.”

Sapphira wiped away tears that danced at the ends of her eyelashes. “What are we going to do?”

“I wish I knew.”

Anthony cocked his ear. Sapphira also heard the sound of footsteps coming down the hall. They passed by.

“You can’t stay,” she whispered.

Anthony took her hands and kissed them one at a time. “I can bear anything if you believe in me.”

“I do, but...”

He pressed a finger to her lips.

“Say no more; let that be enough. I love you, Sapphira. I always have and always will. I cannot go on like this any longer. I intend to break my engagement.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

“What’s done cannot be undone.”

“NOW REMEMBER PETER – you’re MacDuff, and you come in from the left. No, no, no – not your left, *my* left.”

“How am I supposed to know that?”

Caroline sighed in frustration. Sapphira hid a smile and completed the hem on Robert’s costume.

“Very well. You enter from your right. Begin!”

Simon was playing Ross.

“They did so, to the amazement of mine eyes. That look’d upon’t. Here comes the good MacDuff.”

Peter entered on cue and looked down at his script.

“*How goes the world, sir now?*” said Simon.

Peter frowned and gestured outwards. “*Why, see you not?*”

Simon approached. “*Is’t known who did this more than bloody deed?*”

Peter brandished his sword. “*Those that Macbeth hath slain.*”

Simon faltered on his next line, distracted by the arrival of two strangers accompanied by Lawrence.

“And, as you can see, my family is planning entertainment for us all,” he said to the couple.

While they made the rounds of the room to be introduced, Sapphira waited her turn although she knew who they were on first sight – the Earl and Countess Sheppard, Elizabeth’s parents.

Elizabeth favored her mother in looks, although there was something about the aristocratic bearing of the father that his daughter also carried.

Ah, the lady in question appears...

Sapphira returned to her sewing in an attempt to make herself as inconspicuous as possible to avoid Elizabeth.

Why? Guilty conscience?

She swallowed and picked up another garment.

Yes, in part. Anthony was engaged to another, no matter how much they loved one another. Until that situation changed, until he did as he said he would, there could be no future for them.

She glanced up. Elizabeth appeared to be looking for someone.

Anthony, of course.

He wasn't here. In fact, Sapphira hadn't see him at breakfast either. The last time she saw him was when he left her room last night, and she was hardly going to confess to *that*.

She watched Elizabeth leave.

"I hear you have some particularly fine bloodstock, Weycliffe, that might rival even some of mine," Earl Sheppard said. "Now the weather is breaking, would you consider letting me examine the horseflesh to see for myself? We can leave the women and children to play."

"Play?"

All eyes turned to Innes who now stood in the doorway.

"Why, the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."

Caroline flipped through her script.

"I don't see that in here, Uncle Innes."

“It’s *not* my dear. The line’s from *Hamlet*. I say it only to let you all know that playacting should not be disparaged as *play*.”

Sapphira saw Lawrence grit his teeth against his unruly brother, while the Earl’s face flushed with anger. Innes, however, ignored them all and swept into the room.

“Now, Caro, my little buttercup – where would you like me to stand?”

“Enter from over there if you please. We’re just rehearsing the end of Act Two, Scene Four.”

“Very well, let me get in my costume.”

Caroline clapped her hands and brought her little company to order.

Sapphira set down her needle and thread and rummaged through the clothes pile to find Innes’ costume.

“Well, what a fine morning it is, puss.”

He wore a half-smile that put her on her mettle immediately.

“Oh, how so?”

“It’s stopped raining for one, and, secondly, Prince Charming dressed to go for a ride today, which suggests that he will be some time away.”

Innes continued to regard her speculatively. Sapphira felt a flash of annoyance. It might amuse him, but her future happiness was at stake. She refused to bite and returned to her sewing.

If it wasn’t raining, why *shouldn’t* Anthony go for a ride? It was no business of Innes or her what he did.

Innes stood immobile, watching her.

Good, let him watch.

A few moments later, Margaret ordered him to the stage. He slipped behind the dressing screen, quickly donned his

costume, and approached the stage.

Damn him!

Why did Innes *do* these things? Did he simply enjoy creating drama off-stage as well as on? He wasn't a cruel man, so why couldn't he see what this was doing to her?

A new thought sprang to mind. Was Innes doing this so she'd be through with Anthony and take his marriage proposal more seriously?

Her eyes slid across to where the dowager duchess sat asleep in her chair.

Surely his mother could see through him.

Still, there was the question of where Anthony had gone. When would he return? He had to. Perhaps it was nothing, just something to do with the Sheppards' carriage.

Yes, that was it.

It had absolutely nothing at all to do with the kisses they shared last night. It couldn't be. How could it?

She stabbed the needle through the fabric – and into her thumb. She hissed. A drop of blood welled. She stuck her thumb in her mouth to soothe it.

A FEW HOURS later, Caroline and Margaret announced they wished to continue rehearsals past midday, so a repast was brought up to them, and the school room became a seemingly endless stream of patiently forbearing amateur performers rehearsing their parts before getting back to their duties.

Sapphira found herself sitting next to the dowager duchess, who had asked her to pour tea.

“Tell me more about this arrangement you have with my youngest son,” the older woman said abruptly.

The question took Sapphira by surprise. She tightened her grip on the teapot to steady herself.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said. “He jokingly proposed marriage at some future point, and I agreed, hypothetically, that should I be unwed at the same time I would consider marrying him.”

The dowager took her cup and sipped from it, taking her time to do so, all the while regarding Sapphira thoughtfully.

“So, not a love match.”

Although it was phrased as a statement rather than a question, it still caught Sapphira off-guard. She giggled.

“No. *Not* a love match.”

The dowager shook her head. “That son will be the death of me yet,” she said with equal amounts affection and exasperation. “Well, at least I know where things stand. He’s a good boy, and he loves his mother, but he can be *so* vexing!”

WHEREVER ANTHONY HAD gone that day, he had returned in time for dinner. He was distracted. Sapphira tried to catch his eye a couple of times, but he seemed to look right through her.

For a moment, the dark cloud that had enveloped her for months threatened to descend once more, and she fought the urge to feign illness and excuse herself from the gathering. Whatever was to happen, she needed to remain aware, to steel herself for whatever the future might bring.

She needed to be strong, like the seawall that had held against the tempest.

She watched Lady Elizabeth opposite. Nothing appeared amiss. In fact, everyone at the table was acting normally. Innes looked at Anthony, then back to her with a raised eyebrow. She quickly shook her head.

No, she didn’t know what was going on.

And no, she didn’t want him to draw attention to it.

When the meal had come to a close. Anthony had not looked her way once.

As the ladies retired to the drawing room, Sapphira used it as an excuse to go to her room to fetch a shawl. On her return, she found the door to the study ajar.

Instead of lingering at the dining table with their brandies, all the men – with the exception of Innes – were huddled at one end of the table and appeared to be examining documents of some kind. Anthony was speaking, but his voice was low, and Sapphira was too far away to hear.

A tap on the shoulder made her jump. She turned, and Innes regarded her with wry amusement.

“You frightened me!” she hissed.

“Eavesdroppers never hear anything good of themselves, puss.”

“I wasn’t eavesdropping. I just happened to be passing by.”

Innes nodded his head in an exaggerated fashion. Sapphira wrinkled her nose at him.

“Do you know what they’re talking about?”

“No. Your Anthony said he wanted to speak with your father, my brother, and the earl. I took that as my excuse to have Preston do something about my cravat.”

“He must be speaking to father about—”

Innes put a hand on her shoulder, leading her away from the door and towards the drawing room.

“Don’t fash yourself, my pet. There’s nothing to be gained by speculation.”

“But—”

Innes paused at a mirror in the hall and started fiddling with his cravat once more.

“Did you notice over dinner that this didn’t sit right?”

Sapphira glanced back to the study. Innes’ hand was on her shoulder once more.

“Don’t. Remember Lot’s wife.”



CHAPTER TWELVE

*“Look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under it.”*

ALICE AND TWO upper housemaids huddled together in the middle of the stage.

“When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning, or in rain?” asked Alice, dressed as the first of the three witches.

The second maid started her line, greatly relishing her role, *“When the hurly-burly’s done, when the battle’s lost and won.”*

“That will be ’ere the set of sun,” added the third.

Today was the first full-dress rehearsal, and Sapphira was glad for the distraction of it. Last night the men joined the ladies two hours after dinner, and the party broke up not long after that. The earl was florid; the self-confident man she’d seen yesterday now reminded her of a simmering pot ready to boil over. Her father looked as though he’d been slapped; he sat beside *Maman* and said little. Lawrence looked grim.

Sapphira’s stomach plunged with sudden realization.

Anthony had told them everything.

Not that a word of their conversation was spoken about, although she had no doubt that behind closed doors tonight a lot *would* be said.

Anthony looked positively exhausted. She desperately wished she could go to him openly and give him a touch of comfort.

Fortunately, Margaret and Caroline were completely oblivious to the atmosphere, and Innes, to his credit, worked to keep the atmosphere light.

Sapphira idly played solitaire as she half-watched the rehearsal. She set down a card and looked to Elizabeth who had joined Innes and the girls in a light-hearted conversation. If she was aware of Anthony's state of mind, she gave no indication.

Sapphira excused herself and hastily wrote a note to Anthony, asking him to meet her in the drawing room at midnight. She slipped it under his door and returned to the rehearsal in the schoolroom.

Innes's valet appeared on the stage, and Sapphira quickly flipped to the correct page in her script to follow as prompt.

“Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear things that do sound so fair? I' the name of truth, are ye fantastical, or that indeed which outwardly ye show?”

The young man knew his lines perfectly. The scene continued without interruption. Sapphira hid a yawn behind her hand.

Lady Beatrice noticed and approached. “I shall take your place for a while,” she said. “Your mother wishes to speak with you downstairs.”

Sapphira found her mother in the drawing room, a haven of tranquility compared to the chaos that reigned in the schoolroom.

“Are you aware of the conversation Lord Anthony had with your father and the Earl of Sheppard last night?” her mother asked.

“Not directly, but I can guess at the substance of it,” Sapphira admitted.

“So, you have spent time alone with Lord Anthony.” The disappointment in her voice was palpable.

Sapphira nodded, not trusting herself to speak, knowing she would need all of her remaining fortitude to bear the inevitable rebuke. It was nothing that she hadn't already told

herself. Regardless of his profession of love, Anthony was contracted to another and a reprimand must ensue.

She could see her mother's expression change, weighing the words she wanted to say. She held out her hands. Sapphira took them and allowed herself to be led to a settee.

"You love Anthony very much, don't you?"

Sapphira nodded as she fought back tears. She swallowed and began in the steadiest voice she could manage, "He said he loves me and I believe him..."

"But blackmail!" her mother said. "And from no one less than a duke. I can't bring myself to believe that a peer would stoop to such low behavior."

In Sapphira's anxiety, her mother's word seemed suddenly amusing. Giggles bubbled over. On reflection, a much better alternative to tears. "Mother, you *do* realize we're staging a production of *Macbeth* where the titular character murders his king, don't you?"

Mother waved her hand dismissively.

"Oh, that's just the Scots. It's not something an Englishman would do."

Sapphira raised an eyebrow in disbelief. Her mother gave her a self-aware grin in return.

Sapphira sobered. "I believe Anthony."

Her mother nodded. "So does your father. It seems Lord Anthony furnished correspondence with the late Duke which outlined the plan."

"Did father say how the Earl reacted?"

"Not well, he said, although he found the man difficult to read. But whether or not the late Duke misrepresented his fortune to the Earl, it does not alter the fact that, as of this moment, the marriage contract is still valid."

"I know. It would be a dreadful scandal if Anthony broke it off."

“And you are mindful of the fact that it might be no less disastrous to our family should a scandal attach to you as a result?”

Sapphira acknowledged the question with a rapid nod.

Her mother’s smile softened, then turned melancholy.

“Then I’m going to give you advice that no mother wishes for her daughter,” Mother took her hand. “Walk away. This cannot end well. All the wishing and all the love in the world cannot make a difference.”

“I know that!” Sapphira protested. “I have already borne so much heartache. I was ready to move on despite my disappointed hopes, but seeing him here at Greybridge and knowing that his feelings for me are unchanged... If Anthony is willing to fight for us, then I can do no less than stand by him.”

Mother said nothing during her impassioned speech and waited several long moments after she had finished before speaking. “Then what will you do if Anthony cannot honorably detach himself from Lady Elizabeth?”

“I cannot allow myself to think about it.”

She patted her daughter on the knee.

“Perhaps it is something one *ought* to think about.”

SAPPHIRA REFUSED TO think about it, and she had the excuse of the play to justify her. She watched Lady Caroline, dressed as Macbeth, pace the stage in agitation before Alice, who had taken on a second role as Lady Macbeth’s doctor.

“*Ay, my good lord; your royal preparation makes us hear something,*” said Alice.

“*Bring it after me,*” Caroline as Macbeth announced. “*I will not be afraid of death and bane, Till Birnam forest come to Dunsinane.*”

The “doctor” glanced at “Macbeth”, approached the edge of the stage, and addressed the audience in an aside:

“Were I from Dunsinane away and clear, profit again should hardly draw me here.”

Thus ended the scene and the small audience, comprising Lady Elizabeth, the dowager duchess, Mother, and Lady Beatrice applauded.

“Oh, your father will be *so* impressed Caroline. You and Margaret have done a wonderful job, so far as I have seen. I’m looking forward to seeing the full production.”

“The day after tomorrow will be our premiere – and our final curtain.”

“Which is why we’re making an occasion of it,” said Mother, significantly.

“How so?”

“Get changed from your costume. Your father has something he wishes to show you.”

Caroline and Margaret both changed and followed their mother downstairs.

Sapphira smiled. It had been difficult to keep a secret from her sister and cousin, but Lawrence, her father, and the manservants had transformed a barn into a playhouse for the occasion.

Furthermore, now that the inclement weather had cleared, an invitation had been sent out to the villagers of Tebbing-by-Sea to enjoy respite from the work needed to help restore the seafront after the storm and to come be entertained by the play.

With the secret of the barn out, Sapphira lingered with the maids in sorting the costumes to take downstairs and out to the new playhouse. She pondered the events of the last few days and what might happen in those ahead.

With the roads becoming passable again, Anthony and the Sheppards’ departure was planned for two days hence. The tension between the group had been palpable today. What had been worse was not being able to do anything about it.

Sapphira was grateful that Anthony had been scrupulous enough to avoid anything that hinted of an attachment between them. Her head knew the reasons and agreed with them, but her heart... Oh, how it ached and cried out about the unfairness of it all!

Folding costumes, she hadn't realized Elizabeth lingered also in the schoolroom. Now the young woman approached with a serious expression on her face.

This was the moment Sapphira had been dreading. The last thing she wanted was a confrontation.

"I always knew Lord A and I were not a love match, and I was fully accepting of it," Lady Elizabeth began. "My parents' marriage wasn't either. I'm not like you. I'm not a woman given much to sentiment. I know my duty, and I do it."

Sapphira wasn't sure if she was expressing a criticism or merely a fact.

"You must understand," Elizabeth continued, "that Lord A has been nothing but chivalry itself, but I do not know him any better today than I did at our first meeting. However, there is one thing I *do* know. He is in love with you."

Sapphira was shocked. "What an extraordinary thing to say."

"Why not? It's the truth. Not that he's said any such thing to me, but he became a different man when he arrived here. I see how he looks at you, and I see a man who is a complete stranger to me."

"You must be mistaken..."

Elizabeth shook her head. "And I see the way *you* look at him."

What could Sapphira say to that? She lowered her gaze.

Elizabeth cleared her throat. "Don't think this changes anything. My father is determined to have our family connected to the peerage, and, as for myself, a marriage with title and wealth will suit me quite admirably."

“What of love?”

“What of it? It doesn’t keep the cold out when the windows are broken.”

“You might find it keeps the hearth warm when there is nothing else,” Sapphira offered. “And if you’re marrying for wealth, I’m afraid you’ll be greatly disappointed.”

Elizabeth frowned.

“What do you mean by that?”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more, is none.”

WITH THE FAMILY occupied, Sapphira ventured out of the castle, picking her way through the puddles of water in the yard until she reached one of the side gates. From there she could see the North Sea glinting silver in the winter sunlight.

The day was still and sunny. The storm that had battered the stone walls had exhausted itself, taking away the wind that howled and howled. Now it was peaceful, and Sapphira could hear herself think in what seemed like the first time in nearly three weeks.

She looked south to the village of Tebbing-by-Sea where a momentary glint of sunlight signaled the opening of a window. The flapping white banner that next appeared suggested a woman shaking out a tablecloth.

Life went on, returning to the timeless ebb and flow that existed before the tempest as though nothing had changed. Yet everything had changed.

Hadn't it?

Sapphira had waited in the drawing room for an hour after the appointed time. Anthony did not appear.

She raised her face to the sun and let its faint warmth touch her face. This was a day of new beginnings; all that was required of her was to make her choice.

She closed her eyes and considered the first path, on which Anthony was forced to marry Lady Elizabeth out of duty and honor.

What then? She imagined herself accompanying her sister and young cousin to their debuts. She could throw herself into the amusements and perhaps find a heart that would make hers pound as Anthony's had done. Would that day be much like this? Where the storm's fury had left scars on the landscape that would become its character? Could she be happy there? Yes. Perhaps. In time.

The road also had another branch, one she knew led to bitterness and loneliness. Did she love Anthony enough to let him go? Did she have enough faith in *herself* to let him go?

A shiver went through her. *Aye, there's the rub.*

She sensed rather than heard the presence of someone nearby. She opened her eyes.

Anthony made his way towards her with purpose. Everything within urged her to run into his arms, but she did not. What if his arms did not open to her?

She waited until he reached her side.

"I've been looking for you," he said. "You can't know how much I wanted to come to you when I got your note, but I couldn't. After I revealed everything my father had done, Earl Sheppard had things he wanted to discuss further."

"There is nothing you need to apologize for," she said dully.

Anthony frowned. "Is anything amiss?"

Sapphira righted her expression and shook her head. "No. Nothing amiss."

Anthony traced a finger down her arm to her hand, then gently took it.

"Are you sure? Are you having second doubts about us?"

Emotion swelled in her breast, threatening to break the banks of the control she had shored up for so long.

"Help me to see a way out!" she begged. "I have tried but cannot. You can't know how much I've missed you, Anthony.

It's been agony to be in the same room with you and not have others know how I feel."

He pulled her into a swift embrace and held her tightly, saying nothing until the surge ebbed away, and Sapphira was able to breathe again without sobbing.

He kissed the top of her head and murmured against her ear.

"You have my vow, Sapphira – you own my heart and no one else. The Earl and I have begun negotiations to break off my father's arrangement. It will not be easy, and it will not be quick. If you have any doubts about us, then let me know now, but it will not change my plans; I will not wed *anyone* under false pretenses."

"Elizabeth still believes you are engaged?"

"She has not yet been told. Her parents will speak to her after they leave. And I return to London. I have my father's affairs to manage." Anthony's expression hardened a moment. "Now that I have his title, I'll get a full accounting of the estate, and, believe me, changes *will* be made."

Sapphira closed her eyes and allowed herself to relax into his arms.

"Do you trust me to do what I need to in order to come to you as a free and unencumbered man in both body and soul?"

She squeezed him tight in silent answer, but it was clear it was not enough. Anthony released her from the embrace and asked her to look at him. She did so and saw love shining in his eyes.

"I trust you," she said. "I love you, and I will wait for you."

Anthony swept her into his arms once more and rained kisses on her face and her hair, sweeping her into a maelstrom of another kind – of optimism, love, and of the rainbow's promise of sun on the morrow.



KING DUNCAN LEFT the stage. Sapphira the prompt turned the page. Act One, Scene Five, the first appearance of Lady Macbeth. She held her breath and waited.

Dressed in skirts and a wig of golden curls that most likely belonged to the dowager duchess, Innes Weycliffe stepped to the center of the stage and paused, letting the audience recognize who stood beneath the guise.

He unfurled a scroll and read out Macbeth's letter. Young Robert, wearing a grey knitted cowl that resembled chainmail, entered with sword in hand as the messenger and delivered his lines.

Sapphira set down her script and watched her cousin perform.

"The raven himself is hoarse that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements," he said softly before thrusting out his arms. *"Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty!"*

What did the audience make of his performance? After all, back in Shakespeare's time, men and boys played all the parts. Sapphira cast her eyes about. Everyone was riveted as Innes delivered a performance worthy of the great stages of Europe. Lady Caroline entered the stage once more dressed as Macbeth, but the final word of the scene belonged to Innes who delivered it masterfully:

"Only look up clear; to alter favor ever is to fear: Leave all the rest to me."

As one, the audience stood and applauded, a few of the villagers whistled their approval as Innes and Caroline left the stage.

The rest of the performance was as enthusiastically received, and the company of players received a rousing

ovation at the end of the play before the audience went outside to enjoy refreshments provided by the duke.

The fine weather continued as did the celebration under winter sun and pale blue skies with the promise of conditions continuing fine for the Sheppard's departure the following day.

Sapphira half-expected Elizabeth to approach her again, but she did not, and seemed far more circumspect on her leaving than she had been on her arrival.

Had she already been told about the discussion Anthony had with her father? Elizabeth had Sapphira's heart-felt sympathy. How difficult it was to have all one's expectations turned upside down.

She observed Elizabeth in conversation with Innes. It seemed they were getting on very well, so much so that Innes presented her with his calling card – well-received, judging by the full smile Elizabeth offered in return.

Sapphira waited for Anthony to appear. They had managed a private farewell early this morning, but still, she needed to see him atop his beautiful white horse – one last image to keep in her mind while she waited for him to keep his promise.

And she would wait, this time with joy and optimism, with hope and love renewed.



EPILOGUE

All's well that ends well

Tunbridge Wells

Summer 1820

THE MAN ON the gray horse was a gentleman. A man of quality. Of that there could be no doubt.

Lady Sapphira watched him approach, her heart beating in time with the sound of the hooves of his horse coming ever louder. Finally, the man drew near, and she let out a breath.

“I hope my unannounced presence hasn’t caused you too much inconvenience,” he said with a twinkle in his eye that let her know he recalled their conversation some fifteen months prior.

She gave him a warm smile but didn’t trust herself to speak – not when her family gathered outside at the sight of an unexpected visitor.

There was no reason why the presence of Anthony Redthorpe, Duke of Denby, could be considered untimely by anyone. Most families would give their eyeteeth to be so inconvenienced.

And it was no conceit on Sapphira’s part to believe that he had come to see her especially.

Her father stepped forward to greet the duke and assured him that his grace’s presence was most heartily welcome. After which, to Sapphira’s relief, he wisely gathered up the rest of the family – mother, sister, and two young brothers – and ushered them inside.

Out of view, but not out of earshot, Anthony took Sapphira’s hand and kissed it. His lips on her exposed wrist

sent delightful tingles down her body. His expression told her he knew full well the effect he was having on her.

How desperately she wanted to kiss him, a long, lingering caress like the one they shared all those months ago at Greybridge Castle.

“I’ve missed you,” he said softly.

“And I you,” she replied.

He offered his arm. Sapphira accepted it. They entered the house and followed the rest of the family into the drawing room.

“Sir,” said Anthony, addressing Sapphira’s father. “I would like a private word, if I may, on a matter of great importance to me and your daughter...”

The End

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About Elizabeth Ellen Carter

Elizabeth Ellen Carter is an award-winning historical romance writer who pens richly detailed historical romantic adventures. A former newspaper journalist, Carter ran an award-winning PR agency for 12 years. The author lives in Australia with her husband and two cats.

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THE DUKE'S LOST LOVE

Ruth A. Casie



CHAPTER ONE

December 16, 1815

Sommer-by-the-Sea

THE WIND WHIPPED Lord Morgan Fitzhugh's hair as he galloped across the park. The air was thick with unexpected snow. Baron, his stallion, enjoyed the adventure, kicking up the snow as they raced along the familiar path back to the stable.

The heavy snowfall was unusual for Sommer-by-the-Sea, even at Christmastide. But that didn't stop their morning ride. Fitzhugh gave the animal his bit, laid out along Baron's neck, and spoke softly, encouraging him along.

"Gallop like the wind."

He reveled in Baron's thundering hooves, bunching muscles, and playful spirit as they powered along.

Up ahead, the park fence came into view. Their fun over, Fitzhugh shifted in his seat and picked up the reins.

"Ease up. No jumping today, my friend. Not in this weather." Rather than take the fence, he slowed Baron to a trot and brought him through the gate into the estate drive.

Winded from the ride, Fitzhugh rode up to Preswick Hall. He dismounted and rubbed the horse's neck as the stable boy approached.

"Thank you for an exhilarating ride. You earned your prize." He took an apple from his pocket, held it in his palm as the horse smiled in its fashion and gently took the offered treat.

Fitzhugh gave him a final pat, handed the reins to the stable boy, and hurried across the porch as the butler opened

the door.

“Good morning, Your Grace.”

Fitzhugh stomped and knocked the snow from his boots before he stepped into the vestibule.

“Mr. Keats.” Fitzhugh brushed the last of the snowflakes from his greatcoat before the man helped him out of it. “Where’s my brother?”

“Lord Matthew is in the drawing room with your guests.”

Fitzhugh took the three vestibule steps in one stride. The click of his Hessian boots echoed as he hurried across the black and white marble reception floor.

The white walls made the sizeable area, grand enough to host a modest-sized soiree, look even larger. A balcony, where he and his brother had once spied on their parents’ routs, encircled the area. But the soaring sky blue dome with its gold trimmed oculus was the most striking feature. He imagined it a magical looking glass into the world beyond. Now, he enjoyed the flood of light it provided.

Six doors encircled the hall’s perimeter. They led to the dining hall, drawing room, library, parlor, conservatory, and a hallway to the estate office and steward’s rooms. Twin staircases, one to his left, and the other to his right, met at a landing in the middle and continued to the first floor.

“Your Grace.”

Fitzhugh, his hand on the door latch to the drawing room, turned and glanced to his right. Mr. Jennings, his steward, came through the hallway door carrying a journal.

“Just the man I wanted to see. I’d like to see a report of the Count de Moyne’s mountain holdings. I went as far as the Dunamara pass this morning. De Moyne will be here today for his annual review. I want to make certain everything is in good order.”

“Right here, Your Grace.” Jennings handed Fitzhugh the accounts.

“Good man. You best be on your way. Send my regards to your father and the rest of your family.”

“I’ve already packed the brandy. We will all drink to your good health.”

A brandy together had been the senior Jennings and Fitzhugh’s father’s favorite drink after seeing to the accounts.

“Enjoy your holiday. We’ll see you back here for Twelfth Night.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. And a good holiday to you.” Jennings returned to the estate office.

Young Jennings had served him well while he was in London. The man was accurate and timely. He returned his attention to the task at hand and entered the drawing room.

This was one of his favorite rooms. The room held the personal essence and character of the Fitzhugh family. Christmas. The room reminded him of Christmas ever since he was a young boy.

The warmth of the room went beyond the green wallcovering that reminded him of the outdoors, red drapes that picked up the color from the carpet, and the oversized hearth with its welcoming fire. He was surrounded by leatherbound books in the bookcases that faced the fireplace, and the walls and surfaces were filled with artworks and personal collectibles his father had brought back from his travels.

The two green and white striped sofas that faced each other in front of the fireplace were soft and comfortable, whether one was reading or relaxing. A pianoforte waited to be played in one corner of the room, while a round table with four chairs were in the other.

“Ah, there you are.” Three gentlemen sat around the table with their morning beverages. Lord Matthew put down his cup of coffee and wiped his mouth with a serviette. Lord Anthony Linton and Sir Edward Drummond halted their conversation and gave him their attention.

“Good morning, gentlemen. I hope you slept well.” Fitzhugh put the journals on his desk as he made his way to the hearth to warm his hands. “You should have joined me this morning. There is a beauty and serenity to the snow. It’s quite invigorating.”

“You must have been up before dawn. Despite your early activity, you appear to be energized. You make me tired just looking at you.” Linton shook his head and took a sip of his coffee.

“You should come riding with me. That would be enough to get your heart racing and set you to rights for the day. It certainly gave me an appetite.” He turned away from the fire and glanced at the sideboard. “Come. Eat. Mrs. Howard’s breakfast will inspire you.” Fitzhugh stepped to the buffet and took a plate.

“Ride? In this weather? I don’t think any of us expected this much snow.” Matthew joined him at the sideboard. “Although it is fitting for the season.”

Fitzhugh opened the chafing dish, spooned eggs onto this plate, and passed the spoon to his brother. “I’m sure it will stop soon. The sun will come out and melt it all away. By tomorrow, the snow will be a fleeting memory.”

He looked at his brother then glanced over his shoulder at the others. He turned away and stifled a smile having glanced at his guests’ narrow squinted eyes. “What time did you go to sleep? Or have you been up all night?” Fitzhugh moved on to the pork.

“While you took to your bed last night, we continued our discussion.” Matthew popped a piece of morning cake into his mouth.

Their plates full, Fitzhugh and Matthew took their seats. Linton and Drummond went to the sideboard and portioned out their meal.

“What kept you out of your beds?” Fitzhugh gave his eggs a dash of salt and a sprinkle of pepper.

“We deliberated which historical figures are the embodiment of chivalry.” Matthew placed the serviette on his lap.

Fitzhugh stared at Matthew, his fork, loaded with eggs, poised in midair.

“We congratulated Drummond on his knighthood.”

“Teasing him, no doubt.” Fitzhugh ate his eggs.

“Of course. We likened him to the knights of old. One topic led to another.” Linton brought his plate to the table.

“And that’s how you came to chivalry.”

Fitzhugh nodded to Drummond who took the seat across from him. “Again, congratulations on your appointment. New knight of the realm. It is well deserved.”

His friend had proven himself on the battlefields in Spain and had the wounds to show for it.

Fitzhugh turned his attention to the footman and motioned to him for coffee.

“You really should have remained with us last evening.” The smile on his cousin Linton’s face warned him of something afoot.

“Am I to assume that your enthralling discussion continued into the morning?” Fitzhugh shook his head as he glanced at the others. They didn’t meet his glance. He schooled his face not to give himself away. *What are they up to?*

“Indeed, we did stay up to the early hours of the morning,” Matthew announced with a bit of pride. His gaze ran from Linton to Drummond, and back to Fitzhugh. “It was like being back in philosophy with Professor Eliot. Our discussion ran the gamut. From chivalry, to friendship, to happiness, to the purpose of life.”

“Today is a time of great change in art and literature, much of it driven by the Prince Regent himself.”

“Linton, you sound like you’re giving a lecture.” Fitzhugh chuckled and continued eating.

“You laugh.” Linton kept eating. “We discussed the impact of the wars in America, as well as the domination these last years with the war with Napoleon. Let’s hope he’s captured, and soon.”

“Everything around us seems to be changing. People are moving to the cities in droves, and industry is creating a new wealthy class not dependent on land.” Matthew joined the discussion.

“In the midst of all this, our social systems are changing.” Linton put down his fork and motioned for more coffee.

“Ah. We’re back to your discussion on chivalry,” Fitzhugh offered.

“You mock us, but I tell you we are quite serious. We thought to establish an academy. Mrs. Bainbridge has her Female Seminary that sparks debates on topics that are most interesting. We would like to develop our own and hope you will join us.” Matthew kept his eyes on his plate.

“All this from discussing chivalry.” Fitzhugh slathered Mrs. Howard’s warm bilberry muffins with butter and glanced at Drummond.

Drummond put his fork down. With his elbows on the table, he tented his hands, and stared at Fitzhugh. “We went on to discuss chivalrous love.”

“Chivalrous love?” Fitzhugh finished eating and sat back with his cup of coffee.

“What do we know of such things? Look at us.” No one raised an eyebrow at his assertion. “What a sorry sight we are on that topic.”

All of them were suffering from one form or another of feminine defeat. Matthew lost his love to a rival. Linton made his career a priority and drove his love away with indifference.

Drummond, off serving his king, was never in one place long enough to fall in love.

Yes, they were a sorry sight. It was the reason he invited them for Christmastide, to bolster their spirits. Although, to be honest, Fitzhugh didn't want to spend another holiday alone. He believed this time of year was for new plans, new beginnings. But to move forward, the past had to be buried and forgotten.

Matthew shook his head. "You may be right, but you are one of us, my dear brother. Your isolation here at Preswick Hall doesn't fool us. You remain sequestered, hiding behind the family obligations ever since—"

Fitzhugh turned toward his brother with his unmistakable hard glare. The incident was no longer the talk of the *ton*. Only the guilt remained.

Matthew didn't flinch at his brother's scowl. Fitzhugh's unfortunate incident had happened two years ago. They never spoke of the episode, and Fitzhugh had no intention of doing so now.

"You threw yourself into managing the family affairs and I am in awe that under your guidance, they have grown substantially. There are enough houses and properties to give one to each of us, as well as one to each of the staff. How many houses and farms must we have? Is wealth the purpose in life, or it is happiness?"

"That would be a good topic to study." Fitzhugh and Matthew shot Linton a glance, surprised the man would think the topic was appropriate.

"Study?" Fitzhugh glowered at Linton. *What is Matthew up to?* His brother knew some topics were not for discussion. Was this a way of Matthew wheedling information from two years ago out of him? At the moment, he kept what he wanted to say behind his clenched teeth.

"Yes. The academy Matthew mentioned." Drummond nearly jumped out of his chair. "We agreed we wanted to

commit to a life of study and self-improvement. We simply need to decide on a topic and commit ourselves to the task.”

“Drummond is right.” Linton’s face lit with excitement. “We spent most of the night discussing happiness. You remember. What was the question?”

Linton gestured to Matthew while he rubbed the back of his neck. “You must remember it. We spent time researching in Fitzhugh’s library.” At last he remembered and pointed to the others. “Is happiness the most important purpose in life?”

“We all agreed we enjoyed the evening studying and debating.” Matthew’s eyes sparkled. He grabbed Fitzhugh’s arm.

Fitzhugh hadn’t seen his brother or friends this enthusiastic in a long time. Since his Cambridge days. And nights. The four of them had been close. Exploring. Researching. Debating. Nothing was impossible. Everything was an adventure.

It would be good to feel that alive again.

“The discussion went better than we expected. Drummond, you found the quotation from Aristotle, ‘Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.’”

Matthew stood and paced in front of the fireplace. “We said finding happiness requires a life in which every aspect contributes toward personal fulfillment. It is a decision an individual makes. Yet.” He stood still and faced Linton. “You brought a different point of view into the discussion.”

“Happiness is an emotion based on a positive circumstance that happens by chance. Nothing more.” Linton motioned to the footman for more coffee.

“I can see you are all committed to returning to Cambridge.” Fitzhugh smirked, knowing returning to the university was not what they intended.

Matthew went to the desk and took out writing materials. Sitting with the others, he scratched some words onto the parchment, crossed some out, and wrote some more. Finished, he put down his quill. Content with his writing, he glanced at his friends, and handed the declaration to his brother.

Fitzhugh took the document. He shook his head when he finished it and glanced at his brother.

“Go on. Read it to everyone.”

Fitzhugh nodded and raised the document.

“We the undersigned, members of the prestigious Preswick Academy for Men, agree to the following: for the period of three years, we will abstain from women, fast one day a week, eat but one meal on the other days, and sleep no more than three hours a night. All our waking hours will be spent in the pursuit of knowledge.”

“No women is one thing, but that is barely enough food to survive. What will Mrs. Howard think of that?” Fitzhugh looked at Matthew.

Drummond got to his feet. “And no sleep to allow more time to study. Exhaustion and starvation is what this is. We’d have no strength to think about eating *or* a woman, for that matter. You go too far.”

Fitzhugh draped his arm around his friend. “Our time will be well spent. No distractions. I will tell Mr. Keats to turn all guests away. Think of all we will learn. And we will learn together.” He took up the quill and signed his name, then stood and held out the writing implement to the next taker.

“I’ll sign.” Matthew took the quill and signed, Linton behind him. When Linton finished, he turned to Drummond.

The knight looked at his childhood friends, men he respected and trusted. Shaking his head, he took the quill and signed his name with a flourish.

“Well done.” Linton and Matthew pounded the knight’s back.

Fitzhugh handed a glass of port to each of them. He raised his glass. "Our hunger for knowledge will soothe our appetites for all things. This holiday will be different. We will enjoy our time with peace, study, and discussion."

"And no women," Drummond added.



CHAPTER TWO

“WHAT DO YOU mean, we are not allowed to enter?” Lady Nanette de Chappell, the daughter of Count de Moyne, sputtered as she sat in the carriage with her friends Lady Rebecca Allen, Lady Marjory Cranford, Lady Charlotte Wynnstan, and Lord Michel Marchant outside Preswick Hall. “Who would dare turn away an emissary from the Count de Moyne? Let alone his daughter.”

“I don’t know what to say. The footman clearly said that His Grace was not accepting callers.” Lord Laurence Bayer, who returned from his encounter with the butler, scratched his head. “Female callers in particular.”

“Perhaps we should drive on to Sommer-by-the-Sea.” Lady Marjory pulled the rug around her legs. “Lord Fitzhugh’s reception is colder than this blasted snowstorm.”

“Don’t be absurd. I have no intention of driving on.” Nanette glared at Marjory as she took her gloves from her lap and stuffed them into her reticule.

Marjory had the good sense to refrain from offering any additional advice. Nanette’s other companions remained quiet while she pushed the carriage door open, catching Bayer by surprise.

Quick to recover, he held out his hand and assisted her ladyship from the vehicle.

The squeak of the carriage as Bayer handed her down drew Nanette’s attention. She glanced at the wheel and a devilish gleam settled in her eye.

“Oh, dear.” She examined the rear wheel more closely then turned to Bayer. “I do believe the rear wheel may be damaged.”

Bayer raised his eyebrow as he tried to stifle a grin. He nodded to the coachman who at once scrutinized the wheel in question.

“Begging your pardon, my lady, I dare not go one more turn on this wheel until I remove it and examine it.”

She rewarded her coachman with a brilliant smile well aware the man could be counted on. She turned to her entourage.

“Ladies, please wait here. Lord Marchant, you will escort me. We will see why the way is barred.”

“Of course.” He gave her a brief nod and extended his arm.

They went to the door. It didn’t take long before the butler answered.

“My lady, I regret—”

Nanette swept past him and went up the vestibule steps. She turned toward the vestibule stairs as the butler rushed past Marchant and came up the stairs. She gave the servant an icy stare that stopped him in his tracks.

A prickling sensation at the back of her neck made her aware someone had entered the hall and stared at her.

“That will be all, Mr. Keats.”

Nanette let out a breath at the familiar deep voice of Lord Morgan Fitzhugh, 5th Duke of Preswick.

The butler glanced at Fitzhugh, an unspoken apology on his face. His strained face smoothed. He nodded and hurried away.

“Madam, I regret we are not Thomasing today.”

She faced the vestibule. He tested her patience. “Thomasing. I assure you that is not the case.”

She nodded to Marchant.

“Lord Fitzhugh.” Lord Marchant’s voice sounded low, confident, and demanding. When he spoke, people listened,

even Lord Fitzhugh. “I believe you are acquainted with Lady Nanette de Chappell, the daughter of Count de Moyne. I understand we are expected.”

Nanette turned and faced him.

“Anne?”

The shock in his voice didn't surprise her. Other than a brief glance at her grandmère's gala a year and a half ago, they had not been in the same room for ten years. At that time she had a mass of curly auburn hair with a touch too much red. To make a bad situation worse, freckles covered her face. They started on one cheek, bridged her nose, and ended on her other cheek.

A bit of a hoyden, she traipsed through Dunamara Castle and the surrounding grounds investigating every nook and cranny. She didn't act or appear to be a person of privilege. On the contrary. She prided herself with taking the role of a commoner and fending for herself. She managed to get into, and out of, tight situations. At least, most of the time.

But there was one time when even she was aware she may have overestimated her ability. A bully, known for his fisticuffs, backed her into a corner. Nanette knew being a girl wouldn't stop him. God's wounds, she never acted like a girl. She stood her ground with her hands fisted as he sneered. As scared as she was, she refused to be intimidated.

He threw his punch. Rather than freeze in fear, she turned sideways, denying him of his target. His fist slammed into the rock wall behind her. Taking full advantage of his surprise and pain, she punched him hard in the stomach. Angered and yelling, he raised his other arm to strike her when someone behind him tapped him on his shoulder.

He turned and met the full force of Morgan Fitzhugh.

That was when he became her gallant protector.

Standing in front of him now, she didn't expect him to take her into his arms. God's wounds, not that. But she certainly

didn't anticipate he would think she was there begging and worse, throw her out.

She withstood his scrutiny as his focus changed from her to the vestibule.

Nanette followed his gaze, glanced over her shoulder, and then returned her attention to him.

“Are you expecting someone, Your Grace?”

For a moment, he studied her without speaking. “No. Well, yes. I expected your father.”

“Unfortunately, Father remained with mother in Newcastle. I hope you are not disappointed.” She didn't give him a coquettish glance. No. Her countenance was more direct. More commanding. More challenging. She had no intention of letting him off lightly after his man tried to turn her away.

“Not at all. I hope you had a comfortable journey. I can offer a change of horses, so you needn't be delayed.”

Her nostrils flared as her temper rose at the cut. Yet, she refused to let him see her reaction. Instead, she busied herself running her hands down her cerulean pelisse, chasing away imaginary wrinkles and avoiding his eyes until she had her temper under control.

“I have never had an invitation withdrawn before.” Finally, she lifted her head and smiled sweetly. “I can't say I like the feeling. Is that the new rage in London? It may take some getting used to.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He looked more like a beached fish than the lord of a grand estate.

“I assure you we will be gone as soon as our business here is completed. I have no desire to stay where I am not wanted.”

To the duke's credit, he blanched. Nanette took that as a small victory.

One of the three men who had slipped behind him bent close to him. “Uninvited? Business? I don’t understand? What does she mean?”

Nanette nodded to Marchant. He withdrew a document from his folio and handed Fitzhugh the invitation the count had received to Twelfth Night, with Fitzhugh’s personal note to arrive on December 21st.

Fitzhugh stared at the invitation, then at her, unable to put two words together.

“We do have the correct date, don’t we?” She peeked over the top of the document.

The man still didn’t say a word.

She stepped back and examined Fitzhugh, and conjured what was going on in his mind.

“You expected my father for his annual visit.” She turned toward the other men who were reading over His Grace’s shoulder. “I’m certain he didn’t know this is a men’s-only fete. If he had, I’m sure he would not have asked me to take his place. I’m certain he would have spared me the embarrassment and made other arrangements.”

Fitzhugh handed the invitation back to Marchant. “Not at all. I did not expect—”

“An invasion of women.” She gave him a coy smile and batted her eyelashes.

“I will find you and your companions accommodations.” He wisely didn’t take her bait.

“That won’t be necessary.” She took her gloves out of her reticule and put them on.

“Where is she going?” the gentleman at Fitzhugh’s side questioned him.

She didn’t need to look too carefully at the young man to know who he was. He had the Fitzhugh look about him. Fine facial features, dark wavy hair, with the signature clear

sapphire blue eyes beneath thick eyebrows. He was well built and carried himself with the family's air, not arrogance, but rather, confidence. She stared at Matthew, Fitzhugh's younger brother.

"I'm going to inspect my grandmother's estate." She spoke directly to Matthew. "We'll leave at once. I'll let my father know about our warm welcome."

Fitzhugh's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Nanette did all she could do not to laugh. It was his "uncomfortable" stare, the one he gave to put off others. She had always found it laughable. He couldn't intimidate her ten years ago and couldn't now.

"Dunamara?" Fitzhugh's question was an innocent one.

"Yes. It still stands, doesn't it?"

"Of course it does." He spit out the words, the expression on his face as angry as his words. "You're going to inspect the estate now? In this weather? Your father always trusted my evaluation. Our meetings are more social than business."

She lifted her face and met his gaze. His striking eyes showed flecks of silver when his temper rose, just as she remembered.

"Lord Fitzhugh." She dismissed his outburst and let out an exasperated sigh. "My father's mother, Lady Fiona Gordon de Chappell, is gravely ill. As you know, she owns the Dunamara estate, which you steward on her behalf. She left Dunamara in September intending to return. It appears that is not God's will. She left an item in the castle that she keeps requesting. Father dares not leave her side. I am here to retrieve the item and bring it back to her in Newcastle."

She took a step forward.

"I will come to the point, Your Grace. My grandmère's days are few in number. I must retrieve the item and be back to Newcastle as soon as possible. I can only hope that I return in time to speak to her. That is my mission here. Regarding your invitation, I am here to extend my father's regrets." She looked

past him to the men with him. “And not to disturb your men’s-only fete.”

“I’m sorry to hear that Lady Fiona is ill. She has always had a special place in my heart. I understand your urgency.” His left thumb worried the black onyx signet ring on the ring finger of the same hand. Fitzhugh returned his attention to her.

“But this weather makes it—”

“Mandatory that I leave for Dunamara at once.” Her voice was gentle, but her words were firm and unyielding.

A muffled chatter at the front door made its way into the reception hall.



“WHO THE DEVIL...” Fitzhugh stood with both hands on his hips. His brother, Linton, and Drummond stepped forward for a closer look.

“Lord Fitzhugh, let me introduce Lord Bayer.” Nanette gestured toward the man who stepped into the reception hall. “You may recognize him. Your man turned him away earlier.”

Reproached. In his own home. He bit the side of his cheek to hold back his retort.

“Your Grace,” Lord Bayer gave a formal nod.

“Lord Bayer.” Fitzhugh returned the nod with one of his own. “Welcome to Preswick Hall.”

“You are... most gracious.” The slight pause did not go unnoticed. Nor did Fitzhugh’s reaction. The muscle along his jaw tightened giving his chiseled jaw a more pronounced severe appearance.

“It is my pleasure to introduce you to Lady Rebecca Allen.” Bayer held out his hand as a woman in an emerald green pelisse, with long blonde curls and green eyes, came up the last step.

“Becky?” Matthew’s whispered voice startled Fitzhugh.

Fitzhugh swung around and faced his brother. Matthew had never mentioned any *Becky* to him. From the expression on his brother's face, the woman was more to him than a passing acquaintance, but now was not the time to ask questions. He'd find out more about her later. He wheeled around and faced Bayer and Lady Rebecca.

"Lady Rebecca. Welcome." Fitzhugh forced a smile, but it began to fade. Did he see *another* skirt at the vestibule steps?

"Lady Marjory Cranford." Bayer took the lady's hand. The woman floated into the hall dressed in mauve. She had striking black hair and clear blue eyes.

Linton, who stood next to Fitzhugh, groaned.

He would never have thought Linton cared about a woman, or would groan so wantonly at seeing such a vision.

"Lady Marjory. Welcome." Fitzhugh gave her a gracious nod.

"And Lady Charlotte Wynnstan." The brown haired, brown eyed beauty in a primrose travel costume entered the hall from behind Lady Cranford.

Fitzhugh turned to Drummond. *How likely...?* He observed the expression on the newly-made knight turn from indifference to longing. *How is this possible?* He returned his attention back to the new arrivals.

"Lady Charlotte. Welcome." He looked past the group at the vestibule.

"Your Grace?" Once again, Nanette followed his gaze.

"Are there more?" He gave Nanette a questioning stare, if not a pleading one.

"No one else, I assure you."

"Your Grace, if I may." Marchant stepped forward. "I'm here representing Lord de Chappell. He's asked that I review the Dunamara estate accounts with you, or your steward, if you prefer."

“Yes, the journal is ready.”



CHAPTER THREE

“LADIES, YOU CAN wait in the—”

“Thank you, Your Grace, but we will remain right here. I see no need for us to get comfortable if we are not welcome.” She didn’t miss his flash of anger.

Served the man right. *Who turns anyone away from their door, man or woman, especially in this weather?*

Nanette went to the recamier at the side of the hall and sat down. Her friends remained clustered where they stood.

“I’m sure we won’t be long.” Fitzhugh gestured toward the drawing room. “This way, Marchant.”

As Fitzhugh and her solicitor disappeared into the drawing room, Matthew and the two other gentlemen took to the stairs. Once they reached the second floor, Matthew disappeared at once through a door on the right, while his friends went into the room on the left.

“How odd.” Nanette stared at the closed drawing room door.

“Odd indeed.” Lord Bayer took a seat near Nanette. “I overheard the footman tell the coachman that His Grace and his friends have taken an oath. They call themselves the ‘Prestigious Preswick Academy for Men’ and have agreed that, for the next three years, they will eat and sleep at a minimum and totally abstain from women. They intend to spend all their time studying.”

“Three years studying. That is admirable.” It explained his lukewarm greeting.

Bayer let out a chuckle.

“Please, let me in on what you find so funny.”

“Three years without women. It’s been my experience that young men their age cannot do without women for three hours.”

Nanette was inclined to agree with him.

“Do you have any idea who those men are with Lord Fitzhugh? The one who went into the door on the right is Matthew, Fitzhugh’s younger brother.”

“You’re quite correct.” Rebecca still gazed up the stairs where Matthew had gone.

Nanette turned to her friend. “You know him?”

Rebecca pulled her attention away from the upstairs balcony and sat on the other side of Nanette.

“I met Lord Matthew at my sister’s wedding. His is a sad story. He lost his love to a rival a year ago February. His bride-to-be fell in love with one of the new governors in the Caribbean. The two secreted away in a ship a few weeks before she was to marry his lordship.

“His bride left him a note, hoping to end on good terms. Gossip ran rampant throughout the *ton*. Theirs was not a love match, but rather, a marriage of convenience. The explanation for the cancellation that circulated said something about a mutual decision to call off the relationship. But the lack of her presence and the scandal sheets tell a different story, one of rejection and abandonment, and another that he begged her not to leave him.

“Since that unfortunate event, Lord Matthew still attends galas and balls dancing with the ladies. While mothers are eager to capture him for their daughters, he refuses to get involved with anyone.”

Nanette didn’t miss Rebecca’s wistful expression. “He appeared to recognize you. You danced with him, of course.”

“Of course. He’s a fine dancer.” Rebecca’s glance returned to the stairs. “Better than fine. He is a very pleasant man.” Her

friend spoke so softly, Nanette could hardly make out what she said.

A door opened on the balcony. Everyone glanced up as Matthew came stealthy down the stairs and stood in front of Rebecca.

“I wanted to apologize for my brother’s...” He gave a nervous glance at the balcony.

Everyone followed his gaze. When nothing happened, they brought their attention back to Matthew.

“When I was in London, I hoped to find you at the circulating library on Leandenhall Street and again at Hyde Park. I found myself concerned about your health.”

“My health? Thank you for your concern, my lord. I assure you I am fine.”

“That is a relief. I’m glad you’re well.”

Another door upstairs opened, then closed.

Matthew gave an anxious glance upstairs.

“You must forgive me.” Without another word, he hurried into one of the doors in the reception hall.

“How odd.” Nanette patted Rebecca’s hand. “He certainly did recognize you. I know Matthew, but I don’t recall meeting the other two gentlemen. Do any of you know who the others are?” Nanette glanced at Marjory and Charlotte as they took seats by her.

“One gentleman is Anthony Linton.” Marjory sat quite still, not looking at anyone.

“Rothschild’s protégé?” Lord Bayer interrupted. His surprised expression startled them.

“Lady Linton is my aunt’s close friend.” Marjory faced the others.

Like Bayer, Nanette was surprised by Linton’s connection to the Rothschilds as well.

“The woman constantly complains to my aunt about how she keeps encouraging her nephew to choose a wife and settle down.”

“I thought he looked familiar. You danced with him at the Prime Minister’s ball.” Nanette, who had glanced at the balcony, turned to Marjory. “You danced well together.”

“He dances at events to appease his aunt. Mr. Linton is set against marrying for land and position. Actually, he is set against marrying, period. As for his service to Rothschild, he has experience with gold bullion. He participated with the team who recovered the gold bullion in the stolen Walmer Chest theft. But that is another story. Suffice it to say, that escapade caught the attention of Rothschild.

“In business and social circles, Mr. Linton’s reputation as a loyal, honest, and trustworthy man is respected and honored. Linton’s success should come as no surprise. He earned his position with Rothschild. The man is everything you want... in a friend.”

“I can’t blame him for not wanting to be driven to marry. I certainly wouldn’t want to be told who to marry.” Nanette spoke from experience. Her grandmère kept her parents from making that demand of her.

How did Rebecca and Marjory keep these secrets to themselves? Along with Charlotte, the four shared everything. *Well*. Nanette took a deep breath. *Obviously not everything*.

“I fully agree. He is enjoyable company but...” Rebecca paused and took a breath. “Nothing more.”

Mr. Keats appeared and went into the vestibule. A moment later, Linton appeared with Mr. Keats, who placed a message on a silver tray by the reception hall entrance.

“Keats, not a word to the others. I’ll let Sir Drummond know he has a message.”

“Yes, my lord.” Keats disappeared as Linton came up to Marjory.

She glanced at him, then at the balcony with a baffled expression.

Linton followed her gaze and gave her a sheepish grin.

“Lady Marjory, it is good to see you. This is the last place I would expect you to be. I hope you are enjoying the holiday season.”

“I am, my lord. Will you be attending the New Year’s party in Sommer-by-the-Sea?”

Nanette stifled a smile and used all her strength to keep from chuckling. Marjory was well aware of the pact the men had signed. How she reveled in tormenting him.

“I regret that I may not be remaining in the north that long. However, if you are, I will do my best to attend.”

Muffled voices from behind the closed drawing room door reached their ears.

Linton’s eyes darted around the room. He took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

“I must go.” He nodded to the small assembly and hurried to the vestibule. The front door opened and quickly closed. No one made a sound in the reception hall.

“Before you ask,” Charlotte said, with a silken thread of warning that had everyone’s attention. “The other gentleman is Sir Edward Drummond.”

“God’s wounds, Charlotte, not you, too?” Nanette mumbled, shaking her head. Then she gazed at the woman. “He’s the young man who the king recently knighted. I see Fitzhugh travels with a fine circle of friends. How do you know our new knight?”

“He served in Spain with my cousin, Captain Reese Barrington. They both retired from the service because of battle wounds. The two helped each other with their rehabilitation. I would think Sir Drummond is in Sommer-by-the-Sea to visit with Barrington. The two have remained close.

“Sir Drummond has devoted his life to serving his king. He cares for nothing else.”

Once again, their attention went to the balcony.

A door closed and Sir Drummond hurried down the stairs. He came to an abrupt halt when he noticed the small group in the reception hall.

“Lady Charlotte.” He came up to her with a welcoming smile. He turned to the others and nodded.

“I understand congratulations are in order.” Charlotte’s entire aura shifted from stiff to subtle, from bitter to sweet.

“I am embarrassed by the overtures. I did what needed to be done.”

“You are too modest. It is because of you that the regiment survived. That was not a simple task. Many men, women, and children owe you their gratitude for the return of those men to their families.”

“Thank you for your kind words.” Drummond shifted from one foot to the other. “If you will excuse me. Ladies, Lord Bayer.”

He returned upstairs without retrieving his message.

Charlotte’s gaze followed him all the way up. She didn’t look away until he closed the door behind him.

“I can understand why these men have sworn off women. They have their manifesto; perhaps we should have ours.” Charlotte leaned close to Nanette. “Men cannot live without women. I propose we make our own challenge.”

“Charlotte, let them be. They will find out soon enough what women mean to them.”

“You say that, Rebecca, but if you concentrated on Lord Matthew...” Charlotte gave her close friend a devilish smile.

“You should make him fall in love with you just to prove our point,” Marjory teased.

“If I entice Lord Matthew, then you must do the same to Sir Drummond.” Rebecca gave Marjory an impish glance. “And you with Lord Linton.”

Rebecca turned to Nanette. “Yes, and what of His Grace? He shouldn’t be left out.”

Nanette answered with an unladylike snort.

“You should never play cards, Nanette. Your feelings are written plainly on your face for all to see. What are you keeping from us? I know you’ll tell us it was for Lady Fiona’s request, but your father was more than willing to travel here. This journey was your idea and, if I remember correctly, not Lady Fiona’s. Did she speak up for you to please you? What are you not telling us? We’re not on this journey for the comfortable weather.”

“Loss is never easy. The woman whom His Grace’s family encouraged him to wed lost her life in a carriage accident in London two years ago. He blames himself. I know him well enough to say he thinks he could have saved her.”

“That is a sad story, but that doesn’t answer why we are here now.”

Nanette glanced at Rebecca. Sometimes her friend was like a dog with a new bone, unwilling to let it go.

The door to the drawing room opened. Fitzhugh and Marchant joined them in the reception hall.

Would her friends believe her? While each of them longed for someone, she longed for no one. Her first Season had come and gone, five years ago. She took the measure of each suitor and found them lacking. None fulfilled her expectations. Her parents thought her too harsh, but her grandmère told them and her... *Don’t settle. Go with your heart.*

Last week, her mother arranged a small dinner party. She invited another available aristocrat, the son of a business friend’s brother. Luckily, her mother postponed the event due to her grandmère’s illness.

Her grandmère insisted she leave Newcastle at once to avoid a disaster, but she warned her that her options were dwindling, along with her parents' patience.

And there was grandmère's gala. She closed her eyes. Thinking about how she walked away from Fitzhugh still caused her pain, and she had no idea why. Now that she was here, she couldn't get away from him fast enough.

Nanette got to her feet and avoided Rebecca's question. "Lord Marchant, we are ready to leave."

"Where are you going?" Fitzhugh held her papers in his hand.

"To Dunamara Castle. I'd like to leave as soon as possible. Besides, I have been informed that you and your friends have signed a pledge against women, which explains why you..." She held her tongue. There was no need to remind him he refused to let them in and add salt to that wound. "Withdrew your invitation. I do not want to compromise you in front of your entourage."



CHAPTER FOUR

FITZHUGH GLANCED AT Marchant, who shrugged and said nothing. She was correct, of course. He had signed the document. But hearing her scathing cut made declining her admittance sound scandalous.

“I have reviewed the ledger.” Lord Marchant addressed Nanette. “I can attest that all is in good order. Jennings has left some notes that need to be reviewed.”

“You can review the notes at your leisure. No need to spend time on that now.” Nanette made it clear she wanted to be gone, and while he was just as eager as she, he had doubts about the weather.

Fitzhugh hesitated for a moment debating how to address her. Anne? Nanette? Lady de Chappell? The former two were too casual while the latter was too formal.

“You were about to say something, Your Grace?” Nanette waited patiently, although any moment her foot might start tapping.

“There are barely any supplies at Dunamara, and the staff is on holiday. Jennings has closed the castle for the winter.” Fitzhugh realized at once she was not here to ask his permission. Lady de Chappell was going to Dunamara whether he liked it or not.

“Thank you for your concern.” She gave him a scathing glare, then let out an annoyed sigh. “I have no intention of staying at the castle, or here at Preswick Hall if that soothes your ruffled feathers. I do have every intention of going to Dunamara. I’m sure I can retrieve the item and be on my way to Newcastle before the day is out.”

“I did not mean to insinuate that you stay at Dunamara.” That was a lie, and she knew it. This was going from bad to worse.

“Thank you for clarifying.”

He had never heard her so irritated.

He turned to Marchant. “Are you sure this cannot be postponed until the weather clears?”

“Lord Fitzhugh.” Nanette didn’t give Marchant a chance to respond. “I must return to Newcastle as soon as possible. I will not forgive myself if I don’t fulfill my grandmère’s wishes as trivial as it may seem to you and, more importantly, be with her one last time.”

Fitzhugh gave her a sideways glare. He didn’t like being told what to do, especially by a woman, and at the moment, she didn’t care.

After several silent seconds that seemed like hours, he made his decision.

“I’ll escort you to the castle.” Fitzhugh folded the papers, handed them to her, and then glanced at the others.

“Will the others be joining us?” Nanette asked, her eyes raised toward the balcony.

“Others?” Fitzhugh closed his eyes. He could feel Matthew, Linton, and Drummond standing at the balcony railing looking down at them. He returned his attention to her. Before he said anything, the three men hurried down the stairs as if they were young boys on Christmas morning eager to open their gifts.

The ladies adjusted their coats and made their way outside. Fitzhugh and the others followed behind.

“Where is your coach?” Fitzhugh stood with his friends in the empty drive.

“Begging your pardon, Your Grace.” The footman approached Fitzhugh. “Her ladyship’s driver brought her

coach to the carriage house to examine the wheel. It is being fixed and should be ready by late afternoon.”

Nanette’s mission was getting complicated, but he could not deny Lady Fiona her request any more than her granddaughter could. Fitzhugh made his way to her side.

“Your coach is being repaired and will not be ready until the end of the day. If you tell me what the artifact is, I will go and retrieve it for you. I, too, wouldn’t want to disappoint Lady Fiona.”

Nanette tilted her head, her stare softening. “That is very kind of you, but I need to do this myself. If I can have a horse saddled, I won’t bother you any longer.”

Fitzhugh motioned to his footman. “Have Baron and Duchess saddled and brought here.” He felt more than heard Nanette’s satisfied sigh. Maneuvering all these people through this storm and the pass would be next to impossible.

“There is no need for all of us to traipse through the snow. You and I will go to Dunamara while the others remain at Preswick Hall.”

“That really isn’t necessary.”

He bit the inside of his cheek and counted to ten. She was still the same stubborn and contrary girl he remembered. At least she had dignity and did not have on those farmer’s breeches she insisted on wearing all those years ago.

“I insist. The weather is not predictable. At a minimum, riders in this weather should be in pairs.”

He left her with little to say and was glad for it.

“Very well. I’ll tell the others about the change in plans.”

As Nanette went to speak to her entourage, Matthew approached his brother.

“Are you sure you want to take on this task? Now? She’s a woman.” Matthew gave his brother a wary glance... or did he hide a smirk behind his innocent expression?

“She’s not a woman. She is Anne, de Moyne’s young daughter. You remember her. She always got into trouble. The faster we find what Lady Fiona has sent her to retrieve, the faster our guests will be gone, so yes, I want to do this.”

Matthew was already focusing on something else. Fitzhugh glanced across the porch to locate what captured his brother’s attention. He was not surprised that he stared at Lady Rebecca.

“Would you rather go in my place?”

Matthew swung around and faced him. A playful smile touched his lips. He put his arm around his brother. “Not at all. This is definitely a duty for the lord of the manor. I will stay behind.” He surveyed the new arrivals. “And suffer entertaining our visitors.”

“Of course you will.” Fitzhugh chuckled and was saved from reminding Matthew about their signed manifesto by the appearance of the stable boy. He brought Baron and a grey mare, the stallion’s stable mate to them, saddled and ready.

Fitzhugh took his riding gloves tucked between the saddle and blanket, walked to Nanette and looked her up and down. “Will you be warm? It’s a two-hour ride. You’re not riding in a coach with a hot brick under a lap rug.”

With a delicately raised eyebrow, Nanette returned his critical stare. She wore a woolen, fur lined cerulean blue pelisse and a small, black velvet hat. She wound a Gordon plaid wool scarf around her neck.

“I appreciate your concern. I assure you I will be warm.”

Fitzhugh opened his mouth to comment, but closed it at once. She had blossomed into a beauty, but she clearly remained the headstrong girl he remembered from years ago. So be it. He slapped his gloves against his thigh and gestured toward the horses.

“My lady, remember our discussion. If we do our part, you must do yours. You do agree, don’t you?” Rebecca gave her an innocent smile.

Nanette glanced at her and the other ladies. “I’ll take it under consideration. Do be careful while I’m gone.”

“Oh, we will. You as well, my lady.”

Nanette and Fitzhugh mounted their horses, headed to the lower gate, and the mountains beyond.



BETWEEN THE THICK snowfall and whipping winds, they had difficulty seeing where they were going or where they had been. The snow fell heavier now than when Fitzhugh rode out only a few hours ago.

They had been out twenty minutes and reached the edge of Baycliff Woods. Fitzhugh leaned over to Nanette. “We should go back. This wind is brutal, and the snow is much deeper than I expected. This weather does not appear to be stopping.”

“We’ll go on.” Nanette kept riding.

He didn’t try to change her mind. He righted himself in his saddle and continued on.

The gusts of wind grew stronger as he led them out of the shelter of Baycliff Woods and across the meadow. He caught a glimpse of her shivering. Strands of her rich mahogany hair glistened with ice. Her pert little cap, now covered with snow, didn’t provide any protection. At least she repositioned the scarf around her mouth and nose.

What possessed her to refuse his assistance? He didn’t remember her being so prideful, no, stubborn. She was a small slip of a thing and unlike any other girl he knew. He remembered her independent nature and beautiful curly red hair you wanted to put your hands in. Their conversations were always charged with understanding and questions. He found nothing dull or deceptive about her.

He and Matthew took it upon themselves to make sure she didn’t get into trouble. Although, at times, that was a losing battle.

Now, they trudged along the mountainside caught in the swirls of snow and wind. He brought them to a halt when they reached the Sommer River Bridge.

“What is it?” She stared at the other side of the crossing, searching for a reason to stop.

“The river marks the halfway point to the castle.” Fitzhugh gave their situation more thought and decided to try again to convince her to turn back. “If we cross, there’ll be no turning back.”



NANETTE GLANCED AT Fitzhugh. His back was stiff, yet he moved lithely on top of Baron as if he was one with the horse. His question didn’t surprise her. She was beginning to think that dinner with someone’s distant cousin would be better than this excursion.

Nanette urged Duchess on and rode the twenty yards across the bridge. She glanced over her shoulder at Fitzhugh. “I’ve crossed the Rubicon, the point of no return. As you said, there is no turning back now.”

Go with your heart. Both her grandmère and mother found their perfect mate. As big as London and Newcastle were, she hadn’t found anyone. With all her heart, she wanted to return to the castle. Dunamara was where she had been the happiest, where she could think clearly, where she needed to be. She couldn’t believe her luck when her grandmère had asked her to fulfill her request.

Like crossing the Sommer River, she’d reached her Rubicon the moment she left Newcastle. She was way past the point of no return. Now, she had to weather through to the end.

Fitzhugh rode up next to her and together, they climbed the ridge.

The closer they got to the top, the more the wind buffeted them. They kept moving on. Icy blasts hit them from all

directions as they reached the top. Fitzhugh hurried them along and down the other side without stopping.

Forty-five minutes later, he pointed up ahead. “The pass is the only way in and out of the estate. We’re not far from Dunamara now.”

They made their way through the snow-covered narrow pass and the wider chasm beyond. The steep cliff walls kept the snow and wind to a minimum, at least limited enough for them to talk comfortably.

“I know you lived here, but are you familiar with the castle’s history?”

She removed her scarf. “Grandmère told me bits and pieces of the story. A Scotsman, Duncan Gordon, was a trader who visited Sommer-by-the-Sea monthly. He met and fell in love with the mayor’s daughter, Margaret Whitaker, and after several months, asked the mayor for Margaret’s hand.”

Fitzhugh and Nanette left the pass. The storm had died down to a gentle snowfall as they started across a meadow.

“The mayor wouldn’t hear of his daughter marrying the Scotsman. The next time the highlander’s boat came into port, the mayor locked his daughter in the dungeon in Sommer Castle.

“Duncan Gordon stole into the castle, rescued his love, and took her to Edinburgh where they married and lived very happily.”

Nanette and Fitzhugh came to the edge of the meadow and rode through a copse.

“Over time, she missed her friends, but she vowed never to see her father. Her husband could not deny her anything. You see, he came from a great line of Scottish lairds. Dunamara Castle, a medieval castle, belonged to his family. He thought Dunamara the perfect solution for his wife. It had all the attributes he needed. Dunamara was close to his wife’s friends, hard to find, and easy to defend.”

After a pause, Fitzhugh spoke again in a sarcastic tone. “A chivalrous, valiant highlander.” He spit out the words as if they were poison.

“You don’t believe in chivalry? You *do* know you’re hosting the newest knight of the realm? Are you sure you don’t believe the old folktale?” His skepticism didn’t surprise her. “You, my lord, are not a romantic. More’s the pity.

“Lady Alicia Hartley Caulfield crafted a novel about Margaret and Duncan, *Miracle at Sommer Palace*. In her book, the Scottish pirate rescued his lady through a secret passage in the castle dungeon. The book was a great success all over England. I have it with me if you’d like to read it.”

He said nothing. They both moved on in silence and came through the trees.

Nanette brought her horse to a halt and stared in front of them, stunned by what they faced.



CHAPTER FIVE

DUNAMARA CASTLE. THE thirteenth-century, medieval stronghold built in the fashion of a castle was more the size of a manor house than a grand palace. Nestled at the end of the lane among the snow-covered trees, the iced-over building twinkled in the weak sunlight, creating the appearance of a fairy castle.

Fitzhugh glanced at Nanette. He didn't see a bedraggled woman. He was struck by the passion on her face as she gazed at the old building. He felt like an intruder, seeing her inner thoughts, observing her love for the place. For a moment, a single fleeting moment, he yearned for someone to look at *him* with the same admiration, the same passion.

He quickly looked past her face and at the entire woman.

He had a hard time reconciling this beauty with the girl he remembered. Gone were the riotous curls and freckled face. Beside him rode a stately woman whose beauty went far beyond her appearance. He pushed his thoughts aside.

His lot in life was determined some time ago. He had his life, healed, and recuperated for his war wounds, but at a price. He had lost his passion and affection, if he ever had any. He thought he could make do. Who would notice?

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He was sure it was his lack of affection for Lady Linda Newton that led to her accident. He was supposed to be with her. He should have been with her. He could have prevented the incident.

His destiny was set that day. He wasn't fit for any woman. He would die a bachelor. Thankfully, Matthew would continue the family line. That decision made, he went on to instruct his

younger brother, prepare him to become the 6th Duke of Preswick. He was very satisfied indeed.

“I understand you recently returned to Preswick Hall.”

He turned to her, surprised she had spoken. “Yes, I returned in October. I stayed in London these last three years after leaving the service.” He let out a breath. Why was he being so chatty with her? Why did he feel compelled to tell her anything?

From the moment he saw her standing in his reception hall, she stirred something in him. Something familiar and sweet. A great deal of time had passed since a woman interested him. Not physically, although... He straightened in his saddle. He didn't want to go down that lane.

After the university he served in the navy. He would have stayed there forever, but fate had other plans for him. Upon the death of his father and older brother, he bought out his commission and retired from the service. In its place, he took on the responsibility and duties required as the 5th Duke of Preswick.

Nanette stirred next to him. She didn't say anything, simply nudged Duchess on toward the castle gate.

Baron decided to accompany his stable mate. Fitzhugh didn't object.

They passed under the archway into the courtyard. Vacant buildings stood on the east and west walls. The solid north wall in front of them enclosed the courtyard and was part of the large outcropping of stone on which the castle was built.

The family resided in the tower on the right side of the entrance. A second tower stood to the left of the entrance and held the kitchen and guest rooms. The great hall over the archway linked the two towers together.

Fitzhugh moved them on to the stable on the north wall of the courtyard.

Nanette didn't wait for him to speak. Before he could help her down, she dismounted, dusted the snow from her shoulders, and shook out her skirt.



THEY CROSSED THE courtyard and headed toward the tower entrance and the stairs that led to the great hall. Their footsteps echoed in the stone stairwell as she hurried up the steps. The landing on the first level opened onto an anteroom and the great hall beyond.

Nanette's heart pounded as she rushed into the great hall. She stood in the center of the hall as her chest tightened, and her body tingled with excitement. She closed her eyes and let images of the past wash over her.

Her mind settled. She opened her eyes and took in the well-maintained room. The family crest and crossed swords on the wall across from her were nestled between two arched windows, with the hearth to her right and grandmère's paneled tapestry above it. Older tapestries telling the story of everyday people hung on the other walls. Faded pennants with family crests hung from the rafters. Benches and tables stood ready for staff to serve the evening meal. The dais with a table and three chairs waited at the front of the room for its occupants.

The tightness in her chest began to ease.

Fitzhugh walked across the room to the tall arched window and opened the shutters. A burst of light filled the room like a celebration.

"What do you need to retrieve?" He came up next to her. His direct question brought her back to her quest.

Nanette removed a sealed envelope from her reticule and waved it gently. "Grandmère left Dunamara in September for a visit with the family in Newcastle. At the time, she thought she would be away a fortnight.

"She became ill, and Father told her she could not come back here. She made her demands, but deep down, she knew

the truth. Travel was impossible. To quiet her, I offered to bring her whatever she wanted. That eased her mind. My father brought her paper and a quill.”

“You haven’t opened her instructions?”

“She told me not to open the envelope until I stood in front of the tapestry, the one over the mantel.” Nanette looked up at the four-paneled needlework. “This is her handiwork. No one helped her design or stitch these panels. She called the tapestry a map of her courtship with Grandfather. She made every stitch lovingly.”

Fitzhugh looked over her shoulder as she broke the envelope’s seal and pulled out a single piece of paper.

“My dear Nanette,

I was a fortunate woman. I loved one man, a man who loved me deeply in return. We married and had a wonderful life. He spared me nothing, but his love was the most precious thing he gave me. When he died, well, you know how I mourned him and still do.

I have sent you to my beloved Dunamara on a quest to retrieve my gems. They are yours to keep. That is, all but one. There is one I want to hold one more time before I give it to you. The piece is simple and plain. I imagine it is paste, but that gem is the one thing your grandfather gave me that means the most.

You are a clever girl. Can you find the right piece? As soon as I saw it, I had no doubt your grandfather and I were meant to be together.

Bring the gem to me to hold one last time.

Your loving grandmère.

“A riddle rather than directions. It is so like her.” Nanette let out a small laugh.

Fitzhugh stared at the page. He tilted his head, frowning, then looked across the room.

“Is something amiss?”

“The crest isn’t accurate.” He held out his hand. “May I?”

She gave him the paper.

“The crest at the top of the message is not printed onto the paper, but hand drawn.” He showed her the paper to see for herself.

“Yes. Why is that important?”

“The charge on the Gordon coat of arms is a horse. This drawing has a rearing lion wearing a crown.”

“You’re certain?” She looked over her shoulder and examined the crest.

Fitzhugh gave her room as she leaned in and examined the paper and breathed in a whiff of lavender. He couldn’t help but gaze at her, and for the first time since she’d appeared in his reception hall, he caught sight of the familiar gentle nature that lay beneath her determined expression.

She tilted her head toward him, their lips a breath apart. For a moment, neither of them moved.

“Yes. I am certain.” His voice was soft and warm.

What spell did she weave? Little Anne. The spirited girl who took care of herself and didn’t give ground to anyone. Her chest heaved and he fought an overwhelming desire to take her in his arms, hold her close, kiss her lips.

That would lead nowhere. They had already broken every rule of the *ton* being here alone. He stepped back.

“See for yourself.” He nodded toward the engraved relief on the wall between the windows, half-hoping she’d take his hand and pull him along with her.

She walked up to the crest as he stood where she left him, and gazed at the emblem.

“The horse symbolizes battle readiness. The lion represents strength and valor.” He glanced at her for a moment

then added, “Perhaps Lady Fiona’s memory played tricks on her.”

“You could be correct. I would like to think that she’s drawn me the picture as a clue where the gem is located.”



LADY FIONA GORDON de Chappell was full of surprises. When Nanette lived at Dunamara, her grandmère called her wild. Curious and on her own, Nanette explored the estate, hiking the knolls, watching the sunrise, and even leaving the castle for the right spot to experience the sunset – much to everyone’s annoyance. That might as well have been a hundred years ago.

“The cold weather is odd this early in the season. However, seeing the castle iced over was breathtaking. I’ve been away from here for a long time.” She remained quiet for a moment. “I’d like to stand under the covered parapet. It’s the best view—”

“Of the valley and lake.”

Nanette nodded. “I thought it was my private place.”

“It is if you want it to be. I’m not sure you’ll be able to see very much in this weather. We can at least try.” She beamed and they walked to the stairs that led to the upper level.

They stood at the bottom as he looked up. “The arrow slits don’t allow much light onto the stairs on the best of days. Without much sun, it will be dark and difficult to navigate the steps. I don’t have a torch.”

“I have climbed these steps a thousand times. I can maneuver them in my sleep.”

Reluctant, but knowing when a battle was lost, he gave way as Nanette started up the circular staircase with him close behind.

When they reached the top, he reached in front of her and opened the parapet door. The covering kept the buildup of

snow to a reasonable depth. Nonetheless, he took her arm and brought her to the edge of the parapet. They stood quietly looking out at the land beyond.

“The view is breathtaking, even with the thin veil of snow falling. I can make out the summerhouse by the lake. Time stands still here. No outside influences.” Her voice was almost a whisper as she stood next to him.

“Is life that difficult that you need an escape? I would think the life of a count’s daughter is one of luxury and—”

“Change. I stand by idly as farmers are forced to move off the land that they, their fathers, and their grandfathers worked. Clan chiefs abandoning their people, ignoring their responsibility or more to the point, unable to fulfill them. The way of life is changing, people change, and, in some cases, I’m not sure it’s a change for the better.”

“Yes, the world is changing. We can’t stop it.” He turned to her. “And would we really want to? I always thought you were the one who rose to the challenge and faced things squarely.” He lifted her chin with the crook of his index finger and looked deeply into her eyes. “It’s not easy giving up what you hold dear.” Fitzhugh let out a deep sigh, removed his hand, and looked out at the valley. He knew how she felt. “You’re right about Dunamara being special. At least here a person can keep the world at bay a little longer.”

For a few moments it was ten years ago, before he left for Cambridge, before he went into service, before he lost his father and brother, before he became duke, before his world changed.

A blast of icy wind striking his face like sharp needles brought him back to the present.

“As much as we both love Dunamara, we can’t stay here. We need to find Lady Fiona’s gem and leave the valley.” Fitzhugh studied the sky. “In the short time we’ve been here, the sky has taken on a deeper shade of gray. I fear the storm will reach us soon.”

A bracing breeze tugged at the neckline of her pelisse and made her shiver. She pulled the collar close around her.

Fitzhugh put a protective arm around her and drew her to the door. Once they were through, he soundly closed the door behind her.



CHAPTER SIX

NANETTE STUMBLED ON the landing as the hem of her skirt caught on a hinge.

Fitzhugh caught her and held her close. Her hands pressed against his chest as they both looked down the steep circular staircase. Neither said a word. She didn't want to think of the consequences.

"You have my thanks." She still looked down into the dark staircase. When she turned and looked at him, she realized he hadn't been looking down at all. He had kept his eyes on her.

Nanette stepped out of his arms and tugged at her skirt, but couldn't pull it loose.

Before she could stop him, he grabbed the bottom of her skirt and yanked it free.

She took a deep breath to ease her racing mind. He stared at the soaked bottom of her dress and her leather shoes. The nonchalant smile she pasted on her face would not deter him.

Fitzhugh put his hand over hers, not a tender endearment.

"You're ice cold. Why didn't you tell me? No." He put up his hand to stop her from speaking. "I know. You didn't want me to turn back to Preswick Hall."

"I wouldn't have listened to you."

"I am well aware of what you would do." He didn't hide his anger. "I'll light the hearth in the great hall. A bit of warmth would do us both good."

"I appreciate your help." Relieved Fitzhugh had accepted their plight, there was nothing to be gained by riling him more. "I'd best do something about this pulled hem."

He gestured for her to continue down the stairs.

“Jennings put all the valuables in the vault. While you repair your dress, I shall see if Lady Fiona’s jewels are there.”

Nanette didn’t think he’d find anything in the vault. Her grandmère specifically told her to go into the great hall. There was no need to argue with him, nor was there any harm in him looking in the vault.

She left him on the second floor and listened as his footsteps echoed down the stairs. Nanette hurried along the hall to her room, leaving damp footprints in her wake. As soon as she stepped inside, a flood of emotions washed over her.

The last time she stood in this room had been four years ago when she packed her trunk. Now she stood among the shadows for several heartbeats as unexpected tears welled up. A soft chuckle escaped her lips as the tension from the last hours, weeks, and months melted away.

Opening the curtain for some light, she caught a glimpse of Fitzhugh trudging across the courtyard. He was a complex man. At times, the weight of the world seemed to be on his shoulders and at other times, he was the boy that came to her rescue.

Nanette de Chappell, admit it... if to no one else, at least to yourself. What is the real reason you’re here? Are you hiding?

The last time she saw Fitzhugh, she’d walked away from him, barely saying a word. That incident overshadowed every social event she’d attended.

Instead of encouraging possible suitors, she searched for Fitzhugh at every event intending to make amends.

The reason she came to Dunamara was to face him and bring this, *this*, whatever it was, to closure. Then, and only then, would she be able to move forward.

She gave herself a good shake. Now was not the time to worry about Fitzhugh.

Hiding? Reticent to speak to him? She sagged against the windowsill. *Afraid* was a better description. Of what? Afraid

their friendship would grow even further apart. Perhaps they already had. He certainly didn't welcome her with open arms.

She pushed herself away from the window and headed into her dressing room. As she expected, the wardrobe was empty. The drawers were also cleaned out except for the errant hairpin or button. Turning to leave, she spotted her trunk in the alcove next to the door.

Heaving a sigh, she opened it. The temptation to linger while she went through its contents teased her, but there was no time for that now. Instead, Nanette dug toward the bottom, past party and day dresses, and pulled out the clothes she wanted. Rummaging a bit further, she found a pair of sturdy boots.

She stepped to the mirror and let out a wry chuckle. Her small hat was in a sorry state. Not only was the velvet soaked through, but the feather hung down bent and broken. She pulled off the hat sending her pins in all directions. There was no sense in trying to find them. Spurred on by the cold room, she changed into dry clothes.

Another look in the mirror and she frowned at her hair. There wasn't much she could do without pins, comb, or brush. The tamed simple ringlets from this morning had become an unruly mass of curls. She combed her fingers through her hair, but soon gave up. It didn't matter. Best she hurry along, find the gem, and be on her way to Newcastle.

Back in her bedroom, she closed the curtains then hurried down the stairs and entered the empty great hall.

Her grandmère had kept her jewelry case in the castle's safest place, the great hall. Nanette had seen the lovely case many times on the sideboard along with the silver goblets.

Besides chairs, benches, and trestle tables, the sideboard was the only furniture in the room. She stood in front of the long piece and opened its drawers and cabinets. She found the goblets and wine. She didn't find the case.

She searched the mantel and the hearth and didn't find any hidden compartments or loose stones. Perhaps Fitzhugh would have better luck.

She glanced up at the hearth tapestry, her grandparents' story.

Then she took a step back to get reacquainted with and enjoy the first panel. The vignette captured a scene at the king's court. In the background, couples gathered on the dance floor and waited for the quadrille to begin. In the foreground, a young man held his hand out to a young woman. The young couple's bright eyes and wistful expressions conveyed their anticipation and excitement.

Outstanding delicate petit point stitches detailed the faces. Their delicate hands and the embroidery on the gown, and even the Gordon emblem on the back of the prince's coat—

Nanette blinked and stepped forward for a closer look. There was a rearing, crowned lion at the top of the Gordon emblem.

Her heart thundering, she sidestepped to the next panel, the garden scene. The same two people sat in the summerhouse by the lake surrounded by cascades of roses. She wanted to hurry on to the wedding panel, her favorite, but she stopped.

This garden panel showed the young man giving the woman a gift. A small, opened box with the same Gordon emblem sat forgotten on the seat next to the woman. In her hand, she held a small pendant in the shape of a basket of flowers.

Her heart kept pounding as she went to the next panel. This had to be the clue. Trembling and laughing at the same time, she stood in front of the third panel, the wedding on the hill. Even from far below the needlework, Nanette made out the intricacy of the wedding dress. The lace gown was created by an intricate pattern of crystal beads and pearls. The fine details caught everyone's attention, but at night, in the

candlelight, the lace came alive and twinkled, turning the bride into a fairy princess.

Her eyes traced up the gown and the long veil, trying to detect if a crowned lion was hidden in the beadwork. The crest had to be on this panel. She glanced at the bodice of the dress, examining each bead and pearl. She was about to give up when she stopped, changed her perspective, and took in a deep breath.

A pendant that hung on a velvet ribbon was tied around the bride's neck. It didn't twinkle from crystals sewn into the fabric. No, precious and semi-precious gemstones sparkled. Her grandmère had attached her pendant to the tapestry.

Frantic to retrieve it, Nanette searched the room for something to stand on. The sideboard was the proper height, but too heavy for her to move. A trestle table would have to do.

Without any hesitation, she pulled and tugged the table in front of the hearth. Ignoring her exhaustion, she climbed on top and stretched as far as she could. She was excited and aggravated, but the gem remained beyond her reach.

She scrambled off the table and surveyed the room. The corner of her mouth twisted in exasperation as she searched for something, anything to help her reach the gem.

One by one she ticked off the viability of each item. The heavy chairs were out of the question. The benches were too low. She was running out of options, then she noticed the plain wooden armchair with the woven rush seat tucked next to the chimney.

Nanette lifted it by its armrests. The chair was unwieldy as she half lifted, half dragged it in front of the table.

Too heavy for her to lift, she put the back against the edge of the table, picked up the front legs, and pushed the chair onto the tabletop.

Pleased with herself, she got onto the table, righted the chair, and maneuvered it under the bride. She licked her lips

and stepped onto the seat.

The sound of the rush seat stretching under her weight startled her. She quickly stepped down. Her heavy boots were the problem. She took them off and dropped them onto the floor.

There wasn't any time to waste. Nanette stepped back onto the seat. Again she stretched. The length of black ribbon teased her fingertips, just beyond her reach. Desperate, she stepped onto the right arm of the chair. This *would* work as long as she kept her balance. She stretched. Her fingertips swept the ribbon.

A flash of excitement rushed through her. Determined not to fail, she went onto her toes. The two left chair legs shifted. Afraid the chair would tip over, she tried to steady herself, but the chair legs lifted more. She tried to compensate but lost her balance.

She fell and slammed onto the edge of the table. Trying to stop herself from sliding off the slick surface, she put out her foot and landed on it hard. She crumpled to the floor.

Nanette, on her back, looked at the ceiling in disbelief. Her body ached. The goal was too close for her to give up now. She stared at the dangling gem. Surely, if she untied the bow, the gem would slide off into her hand.

Her time for resting was over. She sat up. No pain. No dizziness. The beginning of a wide smile tipped the corners of her mouth. The gem would be hers before Fitzhugh returned. She got to her feet and nearly collapsed as pain shot up from her ankle. She grabbed the edge of the table, commanding her body to stand. For a moment, she thought to put her shoes back on. The boot would provide some support, but she would lose some agility.

That wouldn't work. Instead, she ignored her discomfort and climbed back onto the table.

Wincing, she stood on the seat and climbed onto the chair, this time holding onto the stone chimney.

Gritting her teeth, Nanette stood on the chair arm, favoring her right foot, and again stretched onto her toes. She reached higher. The edge of the ribbon brushed her fingers. She stretched more.

Again, the left legs of the chair started to come off the table. Nanette adjusted her stance to rebalance herself.

More determined than before, she stretched again, this time further. Her fingers tickled the edge of the ribbon until she had a small edge in her grasp. She pulled. Nothing happened. She pulled again. The bow gave a bit, but did not untie. Desperate and her patience gone, she gave a sharp tug.

The chair tipped to the right. She froze and let the chair legs settle back onto the table. If she took her time and avoided sudden movements, she could manage the chair and the ribbon.

Grasping the ribbon, she was ready to pull again, certain that this time she would retrieve the gem.



FITZHUGH OPENED THE Dunamara vault and found an unlocked jewelry case tagged with Lady Fiona's name. He thought for a moment to bring it to Nanette for her to open. However, he wanted to know what to expect.

He opened the case and found a note from Jennings.

“What the devil?” He tossed the note back into the case. The contents had been moved to Preswick Hall for safekeeping.

He replaced the box, slammed the door, and locked the vault.

He stomped back to the great hall to tell Nanette the gems were at Preswick Hall. This entire trek to the castle was for nothing. If they started back now, they would reach the hall before tea.

He was about to leave the storage area when he stopped and rummaged through a crate. He pulled out a fur lined woolen cloak and gloves, put them by their packs, then hurried across the courtyard and up the stairs.

From the doorway he thought he saw an intruder. He realized that the person in farmer's pants and shirt standing on the chair was...

"Anne," he mumbled. Only Anne had that mass of beautiful auburn curls.

She stood holding onto a ribbon on the tapestry, balancing on the right arm of the chair, the left chair legs off the table.

"Anne," he bellowed as he dashed toward her.

She whipped around, startled by the sound of his voice. The momentum of her quick movement had the chair giving way. One minute, Nanette was tumbling in the air about to land hard on the floor. The next, she landed with a whoosh, cradled in his arms.

"What do you think you were doing?" He stared into her dazed eyes. "You could have killed yourself."

She pointed to the needlework. "I found the gem." She glanced up at the now dangling ribbon. "I almost had it."

He didn't say anything. He set her down, and oddly, she stayed where he put her.

Fitzhugh stared at the gem.

"The ribbon around the bride's neck holds it in place." Nanette pointed to the tapestry.

He studied where she pointed. Then, he turned and walked away.

"Where are you going? We can't leave it there."

He stood in front of the crest, removed one of the swords, then marched back to her.

"You're not going to destroy the tapestry?"

“Of course not, simply relieve it of Lady Fiona’s gem.” He stood on the table and raised the sword, its tip targeting the ribbon. He teased the ribbon, slitting it as he planned. The gem slid off and fell into his free hand.

He came down from his perch and handed her the jewel. She hadn’t moved.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

It had seven intricate flowers in the silver basket. Each flower had a gem in its center.

She let out a gasp.

“What is it?” Fitzhugh took her by the shoulders.

She raised her head.

“The pin is an acrostic. When you put the first letter of each gemstone’s name together it forms a word: diamond, emerald, amethyst, ruby, emerald, sapphire, topaz.”

They looked at each other. “Dearest,” they said in unison.



CHAPTER SEVEN

“**Y**OU HAVE WHAT we came for. We must leave. This storm is getting worse. We haven’t any time to waste.” He picked up her shoes. “Were you so eager to reach the prize that you didn’t take time to put on your shoes?”

She hobbled over to him with her hand extended.

“What’s wrong with your foot?” He lifted her and sat her on the edge of the table.

Nanette glanced down at her badly swollen left ankle. “A twist. That’s all. The shoes were heavy and stiff.” The right boot went on easily, but she struggled with the left.

“Here, let me help you.” He gently took her foot and slipped it into the half boot. “I’m going to tie this tight to help the swelling.”

“This isn’t the first time you bandaged me. I remember thorn bushes.”

He glanced up at her as he tugged on the laces. His soft smile went all the way to his twinkling eyes. “No. It isn’t. You cut your hands on the bushes trying to save a cat. I reprimanded you for not wearing gloves.”

“You did an excellent job. No scars.” She showed him her hands.

He shook his head and stood back. “Can you stand?”

She stood up without any trouble.

“Good.” He watched her for any signs of pain. “Try to walk?”

Nanette took a few limping steps. Pain radiated from her ankle, but it was bearable.

“I don’t think I can race you to the stable, but yes, I can manage.” She pinned the gem to her shirt. “I’m ready to leave when you are.”

They walked to the doorway.

He gave her a satisfied nod and they made their way down the stairs to the ground level. As they stepped out of the gatehouse tower, he held her back. The snow was up to his calves.

He swept her into his arms and started for the stable.

“What are you doing?”

He came to a halt and stared at her.

“There is ice beneath the snow. With your twisted ankle, I don’t want you to fall.”

“And if you fall?”

“If I fall, you’ll have a soft place on which to land.” He spoke as if falling on top of him was an everyday occurrence.

A giggle slipped from her lips and quickly grew to a full-fledged laugh as Fitzhugh’s content smile became a chortle and grew, until both of them were caught up in wholehearted laughter.

The more they tried to stop, the louder they laughed, until their eyes filled with tears.

As they settled down, Nanette let out a deep sigh.

“May I continue?” His warm breath bathed her ear.

Her heart thumped in an unpredictable rhythm.

“Anne wouldn’t allow me, or anyone else to carry her.”

“No, she wouldn’t. But Anne is gone.” She lowered her eyes.

“In her place is a beautiful woman who any man would want to rescue.” He started out for the stable. “If I knew you were so light, I wouldn’t have let you order me around so.”

They were both laughing again when they entered the stable. He set her on her feet.

“You surprise me with your tactful maneuver.” She busied herself seeing to Duchess as he prepared Baron.

“It’s definitely an acquired skill.” He turned to her. “While I rummaged in the vault, I found a warm cloak for you to wear.” He handed her the fur lined Gordon plaid cape.

“This was my mother’s favorite cape. Mrs. Howard was always mending it.” She slipped it on and wrapped her scarf around her neck, covering her mouth and nose. She put on the gloves and pulled up the hood. “I’m ready.”

“Stay close. It is easy to be disoriented in a squall like this.” He gave her a leg up onto the horse.

Nanette nodded. He took a red scarf out of his saddlebag and wound it around his neck and mouth. He brought the horses out of the barn, then mounted Baron. He remained at Nanette’s side as they made their way through the archway and down the drive.

The wind blew in strong gusts as icy snow pelted them like tiny needles. They trudged on. The distant sound of thunder startled her horse. Fitzhugh grabbed Duchess’s bridle and brought them to a stop. He pulled down the muffler from his mouth.

“I would rather be on the other side of the pass than be caught here.” He tied a lead to her mare’s bridle. “A wrong step and we could lose sight of each other. Duchess can be skittish at times. Baron keeps her calm.”

They went on with their heads down against the wind. After an hour and a half, much longer than usual, they came to the bend in the trail. The pass was up ahead.

Baron hesitated while the agitated mare pulled on the lead.

“Easy, Duchess.” Nanette did her best to soothe the animal.

They hadn't gone far when both horses resisted going further. Fitzhugh brought them to a halt in a copse and dismounted.

She pulled the scarf away from her mouth. "What are you doing?"

"There is something ahead that has startled the horses." He started to leave, but thought better of it and went back to her. "I learned a long time ago not to discount something because I can't see it. Stay here. I won't be long."

Anyone else, man or woman, would have given him a difficult time being left alone. He stared into her eyes. There was apprehension, perhaps, but not fear. *This* was the girl he remembered. Brave, trusting, and loyal.

"Stay atop the mare. And stay here." He turned and patted Baron. "Keep them safe."

Fitzhugh left without much ado. He hadn't gone far when he became a shadow with a smudge of red.

Baron moved closer, pawing the snow.

"I don't like him being on his own out there any more than you do," Nanette stroked Duchess. No, she didn't like him out there alone at all.



FITZHUGH MADE HIS way along the trail. A break in the snow and wind gave him an opportunity for a better view of the area.

He kept on high alert as he scanned the area for anything out of place. The snow took away all the landmarks. Everything looked foreign. But, according to his calculations, they were close to the bend where he should be able to see the condition of the pass.

The wind started up again. Fitzhugh pulled his scarf up and trudged on. He didn't like leaving Nanette alone. He glanced over his shoulder. He couldn't see his footsteps, only small

dimples in the snow where his footprint has been. If he didn't know where to look, he wouldn't have found those. He barely made out the copse where he'd left her. Perhaps he should have brought her with him.

He went on and came to the pass. The steep, wide slope of the mountain was to his right. From where he stood, more snow had accumulated at the top than he anticipated, but they would still be able to move through.

Although he was relieved by what he saw and didn't need to go further, he still didn't see what had startled the horses.

Baron's warnings had saved him more than once, so Fitzhugh scanned the area more thoroughly.



THE MINUTES TICKED by and to Nanette it seemed more like hours. Duchess became increasingly restless and chewed her bit. Baron stood and waited, as stoic as his master, except he continued to grind his teeth. She took off her gloves, leaned over, and stroked his neck.

“I'm concerned, too. He'll be safe.”

A crack of thunder had her half-jumping out of her skin. Both horses' necks braced upward, their eyes wide and their nostrils flared. Another crack, this one louder than the first, was followed by rumbling. Duchess pulled on her reins, trying to shy away. Baron moved closer to the mare.

While Baron calmed Duchess, Nanette fought a rising panic. Her insides trembled and wouldn't stop. In her heart of hearts, she grasped that something was very wrong and staying put was not an option.

As the rumble continued, she moved Duchess out of the copse. Baron took the point, tugging on Duchess's lead. The stallion moved them along to the bend.

Nanette came to a halt and stared in horror as snow cascaded down the hillside. The rumbling and the avalanche were over in moments, followed by a deafening silence.

“Fitzhugh,” she called. There was no response.

“Fitzhugh,” she shouted. He couldn’t be gone. He was as steadfast as time itself.

“Fitzhugh,” she screamed. Then she strained to listen.

Nothing.

“He’s here. I know he is,” she mumbled as she scanned the area. “But where?”

Nanette dismounted. Leading the horses, she made her way along the path. Had Fitzhugh made it to the other side of the pass?

Baron broke free of her hold and raced ahead, pulling Duchess with him.

Startled, she hobbled along and followed behind.

The horses came to a halt in the middle of nowhere. Moving as fast as she was able, Nanette came up to them. Baron pawed at the ground and a red scarf sticking out of the snow.

“Back.” She pulled the stallion out of the way then took the scarf, but stopped. Fitzhugh wore it around his neck. Afraid to pull it, she began to dig.

“Fitzhugh, we’re here. Hold on. Baron led us here as soon as the avalanche stopped.” Nanette had no idea what she was saying. She kept talking, hoping he could hear her and know she worked to free him.

Several long minutes went by. Her arms and hands ached from the ice, but she didn’t stop. Nanette kept digging, scooping, and tossing the snow behind her as fast as possible.

Spots of red tinged the snow.

“Fitzhugh.” He couldn’t be hurt.

She reached for more snow and noticed blood on her hands. It took her a few moments to realize the blood was

hers, but that wasn't important now. With renewed determination, she shoveled out more snow.

Baron whinnied and pushed past her to put his muzzle into the widening hole.

Nanette reached for his reins and stopped. She stared at Fitzhugh's black onyx signet ring. She gently brushed snow away and found his hand holding the other end of the red scarf.

How was it possible to be relieved *and* panicked at the same time? Time was of the essence. She rubbed his cold hand to let him know she was there. He squeezed her fingers and her eyes welled with tears.

"I'll have you out."

Nanette shoveled away the snow even faster, sending it in a steady stream behind her.

"Why did you come without me?" She pawed at the snow.

She found his shoulder, but didn't bother freeing it.

It was his face she needed.

"You have more sense than to investigate the slope by yourself." Working fast and with care, the snow seemed endless.

She couldn't feel her hands. She kept digging. She found his hair and worked until she found his face.

"God's wounds." She bent close to him. "Answer me!"

His eyes fluttered open and stared at her. He was smiling.

"I told you to—"

"Yes, wait by the trees. You should know by now that listening is not my best skill. Stay quiet. I'll pull you out." She didn't stop and moments later had his torso free.

"That's enough." He stilled her hand and gazed deeply into her eyes. "You've done more than enough. Stand back."

Confused, Nanette didn't move.

Fitzhugh whistled. Baron moved next to him.

“Untie Duchess and hand me the lead.”

Nanette did as he asked. Fitzhugh tied the rope around himself.

Baron didn't need instructions. The horse backed up slowly until the rope tightened.

Nanette turned to Fitzhugh with an anxious glance.

“He's done this before. In Spain. It wasn't an avalanche. A cannon ball hit an already damaged building. We were trying to remove the survivors.”

“I can guess the rest.” No, she knew what he did. “You made sure everyone was out, then went back to *confirm* everyone was out.”

He didn't say a word.

The horse took one step back, then another. The rest of the snow around Fitzhugh's body began to move. Another tug and he slid out.

The horse stopped and waited. Nanette hurried to Fitzhugh and helped him take off the rope. They both sat in the snow for a moment.

“We should be on our way,” he said. “I want to be on the other side of the pass.”

She lifted her eyes and gazed at him from beneath her brows.

He had a sinking feeling. “The pass.” He whispered the words as he got to his feet and staggered through the snow to look past the bend.

Nanette stood at his side. He didn't try to conceal his feelings as the realization of their situation set in. It would take more than the two of them with Baron's help to clear the way. They walked back to the horses in silence.

Rather than wait for assistance, she grabbed the saddle to hoist herself up. Wincing in pain, she stepped back, holding her hand.

“Where are the gloves? You risk getting frostbite!” He took her hands and turned them over.

“What have you done?” His anger caught her by surprise.

She pulled her cut and bloody hands away. “Saved your life.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

“MRS. HOWARD PACKED food for us. Thankfully...” Fitzhugh rummaged through his saddlebag. “She thought to include two serviettes.”

He didn’t ask as he took her right hand, the worst of the two. He sprinkled the cloth with a white crystalline odorless powder.

“I put alum on the cloth. Your hands are so cold they should be numb to the sting. This will prevent an infection and stop the bleeding.” He applied the cloth and glanced at her from under his brows for a reaction. There was none.

“Are you always so well prepared?” She gazed at his face, not what he was doing.

“Unfortunately, the small medical kit I carried in Spain was useful more often than I like to remember. I took it with me everywhere. Now it is a habit.” He tied off the makeshift bandage. “This should stop the bleeding.” He gestured for her other hand.

“This one is fine. Just a minor scrape.”

Her objection fell on deaf ears. He wiggled his fingers. Reluctantly, she surrendered her other hand.

“I should be ministering to you. You were buried in the snow, not me.”

The man remained stoic. He had a gentle touch, almost sensual, not that many men had held her hand. At the moment, she didn’t want him to let her hand go.

A serious crease etched his forehead as he examined the small cuts. Finally, he lifted his head and gazed into her eyes.

“I agree. This hand is not as bad, but I’ll cover it to prevent any further damage.”

He worked the powder and cloth as if he did the task often. This was a side of him she didn’t know. It made her ask herself what else she didn’t know about him.

He adjusted the bandage and put the supplies back in his kit.

How odd. *Sitting in the snow with him seems so... natural, comfortable.*

“You were very brave coming after me. You have more than my thanks.” He looked at her, his eyes warm and attentive. “You have my gratitude.”

“Bravery had nothing to do with it. You were in danger. I could not stand by and do nothing.” A smile tugged at the corners of her lips. “Not even to the person who tossed me out.”

Fitzhugh answered her with an awkward cough. He focused on putting his kit back in his saddlebag and formulating a response. He lifted his head, ready to respond, and realized she was toying with him. “I deserved that.”

“It’s *because* of you that I acted.” Her voice was low and composed.

Her statement caught him off-guard. For a moment, he thought he had misunderstood until he peered at her. “Me?” He quickly moved from embarrassment to confusion. He didn’t take his eyes off her.

“I’ve witnessed situations where people willfully rejected taking action. They looked on as if the situation was an entertainment. It’s much the same amongst the *ton*. Along with too many insulting innuendoes and uncaring, hurtful, and yes, intentional acts of total disregard at the expense of someone.

“But not you. I took notice of you all those years ago. The example you set. You didn’t walk away from others when they

needed assistance. I made a pledge to myself I would never be, nor be associated with, *that* type of person.

“No. I am not brave. I am a thinking, feeling person who doesn’t define acts of kindness as a weakness, but rather as a strength. I have learned your lesson well.”

“Don’t make me out to be something I am not. There are many more like me, better than me.” He closed his saddlebag.

“So you may think. But if you looked, I mean more than a passing glance, you would see the truth. At least that has been my plight. I haven’t met anyone who can meet my standard.”

He returned to her.

“And I will not accept anyone less,” she added before he said anything.

They were both searching for something. He hoped with all his heart Nanette would find it. She’d grown to be a beauty, one any man would be proud to have as a wife. He tilted his head as his gaze travelled over her face and searched her eyes.

His body heated as he caught a glimpse of her, the real Nanette. Aware of her intelligence and independent spirit, now he found her banter warm and enchanting. He admired her fire, her ice. Deep down, he wanted to find out more about her warmth.

“I have said too much. It’s time we made our way back to the castle.” She glanced over her shoulder at the pass. “So close.”

“Don’t look back. Look forward. Ready?” He stood, waiting for her response.

He took a quick glance at their surroundings and noticed clear patches in the sky and although the wind calmed to an occasional breeze when it blew the snow went everywhere.

She nodded.

“There is another squall coming.” He pointed to a gray patch in the sky moving across the mountains. “It would be

best if we returned to Dunamara before it starts.” They mounted and set out in single file for the castle.

It was early evening as they rode into the castle courtyard in a fresh snowfall.

Exhausted, they took care of the horses. She untied her saddlebag. Fitzhugh found the water bucket and filled it from the well. He filled the horse’s water trough then refilled the bucket for themselves. He took his saddlebag from Nanette, tossed his over his shoulder, and with a bucket of water, they crossed the courtyard into the kitchen.

He lit several candles. She took one and searched the cupboards. “I found tins of tea and biscuits,” she said. “There’s wine in the sideboard in the hall. I’ll be right back.”

It didn’t take her long to retrieve the wine and two goblets in the sideboard.

The candlelight set the crystals twinkling on the tapestry. The magic of the tapestry hadn’t weakened over time. She stood in front of the panel like an enthralled child and gazed at the couple solemnly exchanging vows. The only piece out of place was the ribbon dangling from the bride’s neck. Nanette’s hand went to her chest and the jewel pinned to her shirt.

How she enjoyed this story. One day she would tell it to her children. The idea made her smile. She glanced at the full expanse of the needlework. The fourth and final panel showed the newlywed couple leaving the castle. But her attention had never gone past the wedding.

To her, the story ended there, not with the prince and princess leading a carriage into the stable and leaving Dunamara. That scene disappointed her. They drove out of the trees into the meadow and the world beyond. She, on the other hand, never wanted to leave the valley and Dunamara. To her, the magic was here.

The click of leather boots and the shadow caused by candlelight behind her made her turn.

“I thought you might like to dine here.” Fitzhugh placed the tray on one of the tables and set the kettle on the hearth.

Nanette put the wine and goblets on the table next to the tray. She glanced at their meal, then at him.

“Mrs. Howard knew the staff would not be here. Aside from your bottle of wine, we have a joint of cold meat, apples, nuts, and bread with jam and butter. With the tea and biscuits, we have—”

“A banquet.”

He opened, poured the wine, and handed her a goblet.

“A tribute to you. I heard you talking all the time.”

“Both horses hurried ahead of me. Baron showed me where to dig. He stood by patiently. Although, if he could talk, I am certain he would have told me to dig faster.”

They drank their wine.

“I didn’t know who was standing on top of the table when I walked into the hall,” he said.

Nanette smiled and put her goblet down. “I beg your pardon.” She gave him an exaggerated, questioning glance. “Who did you think it was?”

His smile was devastating.

“Anne. In a farmer’s breeches and a shirt, not the count’s daughter who floated into my reception hall. You have changed since the last time we spoke... in Preswick Hall. I remember you pouting the day I left for Cambridge.”

“You didn’t want to leave, if *I* remember.” Nanette bit the side of her cheek to keep from smiling.

He chose to reference that time even though it was not the last time they spoke. The last time they were in the same room was at Lady Fiona’s London gala.

He stepped close to her. He raised his hand but stopped short of touching her auburn hair. “Those are the unruly curls I

remember.”

She lifted her head and stared at him.

“And the spots on your face.” He smiled at the flush that raced up her neck, and prepared for her to argue.

“They are not spots. They are—”

“Freckles. Yes, I know. You told me often enough. Where have they gone? I used to dream of connecting the dots, just to find out the secret you held in front of me that I couldn’t read.”

Her eyes widened at the intimate declaration. She stepped away from him, toward the window. “I didn’t think you would remember.”

“I remember Anne, not the daughter of Count de Moyne.”

“Grandmère was adamant that there was time enough for me to assume my title and responsibilities. She wanted me to be free, experience life. Much like boys do.”

She gazed at his reflection in the glass. His eyes twinkled as he took in what she said.

“It *is* good to see you, but I can’t help but feel you are here for more than Lady Fiona’s gem. What is the real reason you are here?”

His smile was warm, not threatening. She should have known to anticipate his question.

“I’m not sure you would understand.”

“I’m listening.”

“I became a different person living in Newcastle and London. I wasn’t the daughter of a count when I lived here. I was Anne in name as well as in spirit, free to be me. I lost all that when I left Dunamara. Somehow, I lost myself along the way.

“When Grandmère needed someone to come here, I was eager to help, and personally, I wanted to return...” Nanette

stared out the window past his reflection. “To find what I had lost. If that was even possible.”

“I do understand. I had lost some of myself when I served in Spain. Returning here was the medicine I needed. I am happy to share a dose with you.” He stepped beside her and for several minutes stared out the window with her. “Is this how you remember Dunamara?”

“Yes.” She refocused on him in the window.

“I remember finding you sitting on the parapet thinking you were going to do something foolish.”

She spun and faced him. “Did you really think I would take my own life?”

“At the time, I didn’t want to ignore the possibility only to discover I’d misjudged the situation. I was relieved when I realized you waited for the sun to rise.”

“I thank you for your concern.” He could see the amusement flicker in her eyes as he peered into the glass.

He nodded at the compliment. “Sunrise is only outdone by sunset. Both are a quiet time here.” Fitzhugh gave a deep chuckle as a private memory flashed in his mind, so pleasant that he beamed. “Your ancestor chose the right place for his secluded hideaway, away from the rest of the world.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “I agree with you.”

They left the window and walked to the table. He helped her to her seat and played the butler, laying out plates and eating utensils. When he was done, he took his seat.

She put a piece of meat on her plate and began to spread jam on a slab of bread.

“I remember receiving an invitation to Lady Fiona’s gala at her London home. I only had a glimpse of you that evening. When I came to call on you and Lady Fiona the following day, your butler told me you both left London.” He sipped his wine, but his eyes never left her.

She ate her food and wiped her mouth with a serviette. “I didn’t stay in London very long. I left almost as soon as I arrived.” She took a bite of her bread and jam.

“I thought you were avoiding me.” He finished the cold meat on his plate.

Nanette was certain he had more than a good idea about why she’d left so abruptly. She had nothing to add.

“I’m sorry you didn’t remain longer. I’m also sorry about today. It doesn’t appear you’ll complete your quest. I know how important it is to you. We need a miracle, like your ancestor Margaret and her highlander had for their escape. At least he had a secret map.”

“A secret map?” Nanette’s face drained of all color.

He pushed away from the table and went to her side. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

She turned her gaze to the tapestry. “Did Grandmère know we would need one?”

“One what?”

Nanette turned to him, surprised he was next to her. “It’s been there all along.” She looked over her shoulder and nodded toward the wall. “A map of the event.”

She put down her goblet and stood.



CHAPTER NINE

“**A**LL THIS TIME.” Nanette glazed at the tapestry. “I thought she’d made a mistake on the tapestry. But it isn’t a mistake.”

“What mistake?”

She reached for his hand.

“You must see this,” she said in a flush of excitement as she pulled him to his feet. “There may be another way out of the valley.”

“Are you certain? Everyone knows there is only one way in and out of the valley.”

She looked from him and his skeptical expression, to the tapestry.

He took the candelabra as she led him to the last panel. He raised the candelabra and stared at the image.

Nanette tapped his arm and pointed. “The story about Margaret and Duncan living here was all conjecture. I got it in my head one summer that I would find evidence. I wanted to prove the rumor’s truth once and for all. I searched for the dungeon and came away disappointed.

“Mrs. Howard told me there never was a dungeon at Dunamara, but that Duncan built his wife a secret tunnel. After the castle gates closed for the night, Margaret and Duncan would steal out through the tunnel, sometimes stay out all night to see the sunrise.

“Grandmère insisted Dunamara Castle was like Sommer Castle in many ways. All I needed to do was look and seek out the similarities.”

He earnestly studied the tapestry. “There’s nothing similar between the two castles.”

“The prince and princess are leaving the castle, yet they are headed into the stable,” Nanette pointed out to him.

“This is an image, not a replica of the events. Perhaps Lady Fiona made other plans for the section and changed her mind. And how does that make the two castles similar?” He stared at the last section of the needlework.

“Don’t you see? It is one continuous scene, not two. One flows into the next. The prince and princess go into the stable in a carriage and come out of the other side of the mountain, in the same carriage. Margaret and Duncan made their escape from here in a similar fashion.” She hurried into the kitchen and rummaged in her saddlebag, then rushed back to Fitzhugh.

“This is Lady Alicia’s story. In the back, she recounts the legend.” She thumbed through several pages until she found what she wanted. “Yes, here it is.”

“According to the folk story, every month, the Scottish trader Duncan Gordon docked his ship at Sommer-by-the-Sea. The Highlander captain met the mayor’s daughter and the two developed an affection for each other. Neither wanted to part, but he could not stay. He promised to return to her every month.”

She glanced up at him over the edge of the book and let out a breath. He was listening. Nanette returned to the story.

“True to his word, each month he sailed into port and spent time with his love. Margaret wanted to spend every minute she could with him. So every night after the town gate closed, she would steal into the abandoned castle dungeons and slip out through a little-known supply tunnel that once brought in goods by the wagon load from the beach to the castle.”

“Some say the tunnel is the pirate’s doing...” She turned the page and continued to read on.

“Duncan Gordon would wait for her on the beach. They would stay together until sunrise, when he would escort her back through the tunnel, the dungeon, and out the castle gate.

“When her father found out about their rendezvous, he went into a tirade. The next time he spotted the ship coming into port, the mayor confronted his daughter outside the keep and accused her of seeing the brigand. She stood in front of everyone and declared her love for Duncan Gordon.

“Furious, her father dragged her from the spot and locked her in the castle dungeon. He confronted the Highlander and told him he took his daughter to a place where he would never find her and forbid him to set foot in Sommer-by-the-Sea again upon penalty of death.”

She paused to catch her breath. Nanette knew the story well and could feel Margaret’s horror, pain, and loss. The fire in the hearth snapped and brought her back to the story.

“Gordon cursed her father for treating his own daughter so badly. He returned to his ship. Worried about Margaret, Gordon’s first mate allayed his fears. While in the tavern having an ale, he overheard where the mayor held Margaret. Within the hour, Gordon sailed out of port. The mayor watched from his window, content he’d solved his problem.

“The mayor was still angry with his daughter. To teach her a lesson, he left her in the dark, dank dungeon all night. She would realize just how much compassion and honor the pirate had for her. How could anyone who loved someone let her suffer all night?

“The following day the mayor planned to shower his daughter with attention. He entered the castle and descended to the dungeon, took the key from the holder on the wall, and unlocked the door. He was shocked to find the cell empty. After searching the castle, he hurried home, angry his daughter fooled him, but he didn’t find her. He waited days, weeks, months, but she didn’t return. He spent the rest of his life missing his daughter and trying to untangle the puzzle.”

“It serves him right. You can’t call him a father, leaving his own flesh and blood to suffer. I can’t imagine...” He looked deeply into her eyes.

“Her father wasn’t a man like Duncan Gordon, or Morgan Fitzhugh.” She returned her attention to the book that she held.

“Duncan Gordon would never let his love remain in the dungeon. That night, when the village slept, Gordon went through the tunnel into the castle. He took the key from its peg and freed Margaret. He wrapped her in his plaid and took her out the same way he entered.”

“The mayor didn’t check the tunnel?” Fitzhugh asked.

“You’re getting ahead of me.”

Fitzhugh smiled at the laughter in her voice.

“As they came out of the tunnel, Gordon’s crew stood ready and brought great rocks from the stony beach and filled the tunnel to appear as if it had caved in. When the mayor found the cell empty, he ran to the tunnel. He was sure his daughter used it for her escape. But when he got to the entrance, he stood stunned to find the tunnel collapsed.

“Margaret and her Highlander were safely away.”

“What happened next?” Fitzhugh bent over her shoulder to see for himself.

She snapped the book closed. “It’s a story, nothing else.”

He took the book from her and found where she stopped reading.

“As they sailed to Scotland, Duncan Gordon stood at the bridge with his Margaret next to him. ‘My heart is yours forever and always.’ Margaret turned to him. ‘As mine is yours,’” she declared.

Fitzhugh closed the book and glanced at Nanette. “Do you think the story is accurate?”

“I like to think so.” She took the book from him. “But I am a romantic. According to the *ton*, I’m also headstrong and a bluestocking. Why else would I leave at the beginning of the Season without a husband? They can be so cruel and hurtful, turning a person’s individuality into sources for ridicule. Some

cuts are not easily forgotten. They can haunt a person for a long time.”

Surely Lady Nanette, someone would find you attractive in spite of your hair and the spots on your face, if only for your money. Any woman with half a brain understands that, my dear.

“If I am a halfwit, at least I can claim that the half of my brain I do have is the smarter part.”

He took her by her shoulders and made her look at him.

“Don’t ever say such a thing. If you say or even think that of yourself, others will too. I, for one, will not tolerate that. No. Never. Do you understand? You have a great deal in your head and beautiful auburn curls and lovely spots on your face.” His strong response surprised her. He let go of her shoulders, drew her close, and gently pressed her head against his chest. “How could you say that about yourself? The girl I know is brave, strong, but most of all, wise. If you want others to stand with you, first you must stand up for yourself. Don’t let others make you into something they want, something you are not.”

Leaning against his chest, she felt his heart pounding. She closed her eyes. She fought to remain true to herself and at times... at times, it was a losing battle. But here? In Dunamara, she was safe, secure, and could be herself. She lifted her head to gaze at him clearly.

“I thank you for your vote of confidence. I agree with you. One cannot have others direct who or what you are. I had to be true to myself. Grandmère understood my plight. That is why we left London. Now, I only travel there when I must. We both have our obligations, my lord.”

“You speak about becoming someone other than who you really are. I live the same dilemma. I’m not lord of the realm.” He shook his head in emphasis. “My older brother was to be the Duke of Preswick, not me. I was to be a soldier.” He

looked deeply into her eyes. “A warrior with a weapon, not a warrior with words.”

“Father says you’re very good with words. Much better than most, especially those men in Parliament. As a matter of fact, he thinks when you speak others listen. You must admit, destiny had something else in mind for you.”

He gave her a knowing nod.

“I don’t think destiny is in our favor this evening. I must tell you. I do not know when we’ll be able to travel through the pass.”

“While I thoroughly enjoy your company, rather than sit and bemoan our fate, why don’t we locate another way out?” She turned and studied the tapestry for the answer.

He followed her glance.

“Would you like me to be your prince and spirit you away from your wicked father through the secret tunnel to freedom?”

Nanette looked at him. Her heart turned over in her chest and her head spun with a twist of emotions. Was she so starved for a man like... him?

God’s wounds. Her insides quivered as the more she tried to deny the truth, the more it persisted. Fitzhugh was the man she measured others against. Her heart thundered as she tucked the thought away. He must never know, of course. Her jumbled thoughts began to sort out. Now she knew what she sought. But so help her... if she couldn’t have a man like him, she would have no one.

“In answer to your questions, you are loyal, honest, kind, and sensitive. In a word, chivalrous. I do believe in true love and happy endings.”

He lifted her chin with the crook of his finger and stared into her eyes.

“Those are values I also hold dear. If you are correct then we are much the same, loyal, honest, and devoted. For you, I

would add an endearing sense of humor. You make me laugh, most of the time.” He searched her face as if seeing it for the first time. “Now I understand why no one pleased me.”

Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Are you surprised? At the moment, so am I.”

She stepped away from him, letting the moment cool. His reaction was to be expected, she’d rescued him from the snow. *Once he is back at Preswick Hall, she glanced at him and smiled, he will resume his manifesto and toss her and the others out. No, that’s too harsh.* She and the others would leave and not compromise his agreement with his friends.

Nanette poured more wine into the goblets and handed one to him.

“Like you, I found London wanting as well. I was willing to compromise until...” He paused and took a breath. “Until I decided I couldn’t, not for the rest of my life. If I learned anything serving in Spain, I learned life is too short to make certain compromises. Unfortunately, sometimes that realization comes too late.”

He took another sip of wine, scrubbed the emotion from his face and glanced at the tapestry. “You really believe a tunnel exists from the stable to the other side of the mountain?”

“Yes, I do.” His change of topic didn’t surprise her. “You used to thrive on adventures. Should I get our things, while you put out the fire?”

“Very well.” He raised his wine. “A toast. To our adventure.”

She smiled and raised her goblet. “To our successful escape.”



CHAPTER TEN

NANETTE AND FITZHUGH, each holding lanterns, stood at the stable door.

“Where do we begin?” The edge of doubt in her voice was apparent even to her. “I admit I was eager to search the stable, but now? We need more people to explore every inch of the place. Aside from the stable area, there’s the coach house, harness room, feed and tools rooms, hay loft, as well as the stable master’s quarters...”

“Where to begin?” Nanette whispered under her breath. “This could take us days.”

“You’re not giving up so soon, are you?” His teasing voice made her whip around and assault him with a challenging stare.

His tone, the one he used when he had the answer, made her teeth itch.

“Of course not.” She wouldn’t give up now even if she wanted to. “But the task appears daunting. The entrance must accommodate a wagon.”

“I agree the search seems overwhelming, but not impossible. We need to eliminate the obvious places where there cannot be a tunnel.”

“That would rule out the loft and upstairs rooms.” She tapped her finger against her lips.

“Precisely. Where else would a tunnel entrance be unlikely?”

“Two walls of this building face the courtyard. The entrance wouldn’t be there.” She studied each structure estimating whether or not it suited their criteria. In no

uncertain terms, she was up to his challenge. “Regarding the other two walls, one is against the castle curtain wall. Also not a place for a tunnel entrance. And the other...”

She spun around and peered through the doorway at the coach house then at Fitzhugh. “Is the north wall. It’s part of the mountain on which the castle is built. That is the best place to search for the tunnel.”

“Yes. I agree.”

“How should we begin?”

He scratched his head and turned to her. “If we search where the floor and wall meet, we may find the bottom of a door.”

Fitzhugh entered the small harness room in search of a tool to use. Tack hung neatly on the wooden lattices fixed to the wall. He stared at the wall.

“What has you intrigued?” Nanette stood next to him.

“It’s the correct size. However, the doorway from this room into the stable is not.”

“Nothing is hanging from the stone wall. Everything hangs from the wooden structure. That section of the wall is covered with wood. I don’t see anything strange.”

“It’s too small for a wagon.” He glanced around. “And it’s small for a harness room.”

Nanette removed the tack to see what was behind the wood braces. She turned to speak to Fitzhugh, but he was halfway up the ladder to the loft.

“I thought we decided the entrance to the tunnel couldn’t be through the loft.”

He glanced at her through the rungs.

“Yes, we did.” He continued to the loft, leaving her standing with her mouth ajar.

She shook her head and went back to removing the tack from the wall, listening to him move across the loft.

Nanette tried to remove the last item, but the old harness held fast. It appeared to be fixed to the wall.

“You cannot remove that bridle, can you?”

Startled, she turned and found Fitzhugh in the doorway.

“I didn’t hear you come down the ladder. And no. I can’t remove the bridle. How did you know?”

“I had my suspicions. Move to the side.”

She did as he asked.

He pulled down hard on the reins. They heard a soft click as the wall opened.

“A jib door?” Nanette stared at him. “The door is small. You can’t get a wagon through this space.”

“I found a lever in the loft over this wall.” Fitzhugh examined the door. “Here is the peg that kept the door from opening.” He pointed to the lintel, then ran his hand down the door jam. “And here is the spring lock.”

Fitzhugh stood back admiring the work. “The door and mechanism are well hidden. I suspect this may have started as a priest hole.”

“I searched everywhere for the tunnel Mrs. Howard mentioned. My father told me the story was nothing more than an old folk tale. He said people built Dunamara long before our ancestors owned the land. I searched anyway.” She stared into the darkness beyond the opening. “I never thought to explore the stable.”

Fitzhugh filled waterskins for each of them and handed her a lantern.

“Shall we?” He offered her his arm.

Nanette, her eyes bright with excitement, gave him a broad smile and placed her hand on his arm. Together, they stepped

into the darkness and found themselves in a sizeable vestibule. Their lanterns shed light where none had been in years, possibly centuries.

He stepped forward and came to a halt, pushing Nanette behind him.

She stretched to see what had caused his concern.

He didn't say anything. He raised his lantern higher and took a few cautious steps, the light exposing what had drawn his attention. In front of them stood an old wagon.

"A mining wagon. You can tell by the tapered sides and narrow frame set between the wheels." They both glanced at the doorway.

"The wagon never came into the stable." Nanette pulled on his arm.



FITZHUGH RUBBED THE back of his neck and peered into the blackness. If this was a mining tunnel, there was a possibility that the tunnel led deep into the rock and didn't come out anywhere. He glanced at the door into the harness room. They could be standing in the only exit.

He lowered his lantern and examined the ground by the wagon wheels.

"Are those tracks?" She bent down and touched the old wooden rails.

"Yes. Horses hauled the mining wagons."

"Then the tracks should lead us out of the mountain." Nanette stood, checked her lantern, and slipped one of the waterskins over her shoulder. Without a word, she stepped past him and started walking down the wooden tracks.

Fitzhugh lunged and grabbed her. "Wait a minute. You have no idea what's ahead. You cannot simply saunter along as if you are on a country lane."

“Not saunter along. I don’t want to challenge you, but I don’t intend to stand here. We need to determine if this is the way out.”

He admired her sense of adventure and the determination in her voice. At every turn she surprised him.

“At one time this was an active mine. After so many years, there may be areas where the rock is unstable. We must move with caution. I will keep you safe, but you must promise me you will do as I tell you. No matter what happens. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I promise,” she said firmly.

“Not like in the snow.” The hint of a smile touched his lips.

“But if I hadn’t—” She stepped away from him.

“Caves and tunnels can be deceptive. I know after my experiences with them in Spain. You must promise me that no matter what happens, you will do as I say. There are consequences if you don’t. We could both perish.”

He had to make her understand without frightening her. As she stared at him and evaluated his words, he told her silently how much he was concerned.

“I promise.”

“Good.” He paused for a moment and stared past her into the tunnel. “Do you really believe this is the tunnel in the tapestry?”

“There’s only one way to find out.” She motioned to him. “Lead on.”

He hoped she was right, for both their sakes.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE VESTIBULE NARROWED to a width only inches wider than the wagon. The height lowered to roughly six and a half feet. Wooden stakes that held up the roof marched down both sides of the tunnel like London streetlamps.

They easily navigated the tunnel, following the wooden tracks in silence. She walked on the tracks while Fitzhugh walked alongside, examining the tunnel walls and roof.

His interest in the tunnel's construction had them moving at a slow pace, which suited her just as well. Her left foot ached. She did everything possible to avoid hobbling, afraid Fitzhugh would make them turn back. Controlling her excitement and eagerness to find the end, she knew slow and steady was the best way to proceed.

As they went on, they found old lanterns, pieces of broken picks and shovels, as well as wooden beams used to support the wooden structure.

"I thought it would be cold underground." She loosened the scarf around her neck.

"The rock deep underground protects us from the cold," he said over his shoulder, as he examined the top of one of the supports.

They kept up their pace and went on.

"I called on you the day after Lady Fiona's gala and found you had left London," Fitzhugh said.

Startled by his voice after the silence, as well as the topic, she took a breath.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you called." That was an outright lie. Her grandmère's efficient, dependable staff had sent his

card to Newcastle along with the other messages. She glanced at him, and she could tell that he knew she lied. “I’m sorry about your loss.”

She closed her eyes. God’s wounds, why did she say that? The *ton* ran rampant with gossip over Lady Newton’s accident. The news reached north, all the way to Newcastle and beyond.

“I received a note from your family.” He didn’t offer anything else.

She should have remained quiet. Did she really want to discuss his intended bride?

“After Lady Fiona’s gala, Linda approached me. Angry. Why didn’t I announce our engagement? Everyone waited for it. Everyone expected it. Everyone thought us the perfect match.” His step faltered.

She wished she could see his face. Help him through the pain. It wasn’t until that morning reading the gossip sheets that she had learned of his imminent marriage to Linda Newton. Everyone waited for the announcement. He must have loved her.

“Everyone but me.”

What? Nanette opened her mouth to say something, but no sound came out.

“The following morning, I told Linda and her father my true feelings. Lord Newton said we had no reason to change our plans. We could do the same as others of the *ton*, live our separate lives. Appalled, I told her that was out of the question. Both she and her father were upset. Lord Newton suggested we talk things through. There was no reason to prolong the inevitable. I told them so when I left.

“Sometime that afternoon, her father accompanied her to Hyde Park. Upset, she argued with him and commanded the coachman to stop. The coachman told me the carriage had barely stopped when the horses startled. The coach lurched as Linda stepped, unassisted, from the carriage. She fell and was caught under the wheel.”

He said nothing for some time.

“It was my fault.”

“How could it be your fault?”

“Her father took *my* place. I was supposed to be with her in the carriage. They argued over *my* change of heart.”

“Her death was not your fault. It was an unfortunate accident. Poor judgement on her part.”

“In more ways than one.”

Fitzhugh’s retort startled her. Sarcasm she could understand, even grief, but not this bitterness. Worried, she tried to see his face, but the tunnel was too dark. She quickly gave up. Perhaps that was just as well.

They walked along. Fitzhugh’s foot slid and he came to a stop. They both glanced down at his feet.

He stood in a small puddle of water.



HE RAISED HIS lantern. To their left, a slow stream of water trickled down the wall and pooled between the tracks.

Fitzhugh examined the rock walls and roof looking for the source of the water. He found it leaking from the top of one of the wooden supports.

If they didn’t reach the end of the tunnel soon, they would have to go back, no matter how much Nanette wanted the tunnel to lead to the outside.

They traveled steadily downhill for the next half hour. From the glimpses he got of her face, even she had doubts about the tunnel leading to a way out. They continued on and found more puddles of water along the way. They were both breathing hard. The air wasn’t tainted. It was surprisingly fresh.

The tunnel widened as the tracks went around a large boulder. “This is convenient. A place to rest.”

“I won’t argue with you. How far do you think we’ve traveled?”

He ran his hand through his hair. “We’ve been traveling long enough for me to be hungry. I should have brought Mrs. Howard’s basket with us.”

“An underground picnic?” She chuckled. “It may not be how long we’ve traveled, but that we’ve been going up an incline for some time?”

“Yes. I’m sure the tunnel follows a mineral vein.” He lifted the lantern, glanced at her, and froze.

“What is it?”

“I can see your breath.” He touched her hand. Cold.



“DO YOU THINK we’re near the end?” The excitement in her voice was catching. She sprang up for her perch. “Let’s continue. I don’t want to waste any time.”

She didn’t wait for him to answer; she hurried past him.

“Stop. Wait.”

Her foot struck a patch of ice between the tracks, and she skidded. Nanette let go of the lantern as she tried to keep her balance. He lost sight of her in the darkness.

“God’s wounds,” she screamed.

Her arms flew in every direction. Her feet scrambled beneath her as she tried to stay upright. She stepped to the right. Her foot, half on and half off the track, twisted.

Pain rushed up her injured leg as she lost her balance and slammed into the beam. Nanette fell to the ground, sprawled on her stomach, the wind knocked out of her. She picked up her head.

“Nanette.”

Amongst the creaking wood that echoed through the tunnel, she heard Fitzhugh’s hurried footsteps pounding the

ground. She turned her head to find the source of the squealing sounds as he came nearer.

“Stay back! Don’t come any closer.” She wasn’t looking at him.

Small stones and dirt fell in front of Nanette. Fitzhugh raised his lantern, following her gaze. They both stared at the wooden support. The creaking turned into snapping and popping. In the dim light, their gaze was fixed on the wood as it fractured one splinter at a time.

He took a step toward her.

The support next to her burst, sending splinters flying everywhere.

Nanette’s eyes darted to the adjacent supports, not knowing what would happen next. Nothing happened. She got to her feet and let out a deep breath.

“Stay there. I’ll come to you.” He took a step, and the roof came down in front of him.



THE BILLOWING DUST and debris engulfed him. Coughing, he brought up his arm and covered his face, but refused to move away.

“Nanette?” He choked and tried to take a breath.
“Nanette!”

There was no answer. He peered through the settling dust and stared in horror at an insurmountable wall of rock in front of him.

He studied the blockage, searching for a place to start. That was when he eyed a stream of light coming from the other side through the top of the rubble.

“Nanette.”

He scrambled up the rocks and began to pull down the barrier stone by stone. It didn’t take him long to make enough

room to peer through.

“Nanette?”

She lay on the ground, looking as cold and lifeless as a statue. He had to reach her.

“Nanette. Can you hear me?” Silence. “Answer me.”

She rolled over, coughing and gagging, unable to draw enough breath to fill her lungs. She laid flat on her back looking up at the roof, then turned her head toward the debris. “Morgan? Is that you?”

Relief rushed through him like an ocean wave. “Yes. Yes. I’m here. Are you hurt?”

“The noise was deafening. My head hurts.”

“Remain still. I’ll have you out soon.”

“I’ll help you from this side.” She started to move.

“No. Stay where you are.”

She laid her head down and kept watch as he worked.

He needed to keep her occupied, keep her talking.



“YOU TOLD ME about expectations of others, but what is the real reason you left London?” Fitzhugh paused. Why did he ask that question?

“Grandmère took ill and demanded we leave for Newcastle after all her guests left. And I refused to be dictated to by the *ton*. You can pick whichever you like or choose from the innumerable reasons provided in the gossip sheets.”

Nanette waited for him to say something, anything. All she heard was rocks being tossed. All she saw were brief glimpses of him at the top of the stones.

“You’re quiet.” Her voice sounded loud after the strained silence.

“It’s not polite to point out when a lady isn’t telling the truth.”

“How do you know—”

He stopped tossing the stones and peered at her through the enlarged opening.

“Because I’m not blind now, nor was I then.” He let out a deep breath.

“No? The truth. If that is what you want, that is what I’ll tell you.” Nanette stared at the broken roof. “It started when I traveled with Grandmère to London. She decided to have a party at the end of the season, a farewell of sorts. I think she was more excited than me, if that’s possible. To her, the event introduced her granddaughter to her friends and the *ton*. I told her I was a bit too old for a debut. ‘Balderdash,’ she said. At least she agreed to not include my name on the invitation.”

He kept clearing away the stones. There was a three-foot space from the roof to the top of the stone pile.

“When the day arrived, Grandmère spent the day with the housekeeper making sure the house was ready. Flowers were everywhere, the foyer, the salon, the dining room, and the ballroom.

“The house did look lovely, but not as wonderful as Grandmère in her gown. I learned you were in London and thought to surprise you. But *I* was the person who was surprised. I read the gossip about you and Lady Linda the morning of the gala but found it difficult to believe. I had met her at several parties and, frankly, I couldn’t imagine you with her. I knew if I saw you, I would see the truth.

“The evening went well. I had a lovely time. My dance card was filled. I was taking a refreshment when the footman announced a late arrival, Lord Morgan Fitzhugh and Lady Linda Newton.

“I was eager to see you. So eager that I didn’t pay attention to the gossip that ran rampant around the room as soon as you arrived.”

“You said if you saw me, you would see the truth. Did you?”

She remained quiet for several heartbeats. Should she tell him everything, or let him keep his pride? She glanced at him through tear-stained eyes.

“I observed a man who was much different than the one who went off to Cambridge. And rightly so. He had been to university, off to war, suffered a great loss, and taken on the mantle he never wanted. That is enough to change any person.” She glanced up at him. “Even a strong one like you.”

“I don’t need your pity.” He spat the words out.

The only other time she’d seen him this angry was when the blacksmith’s son raised his hand to strike her. But he had things all wrong.

“Pity?” Her voice rose an octave. “I wouldn’t waste my time pitying you. But I would spend eternity concerned for your wellbeing. Do you understand me, Lord Morgan Fitzhugh, 5th Duke of Preswick?”

Again, he peered down at her as a smile spread across his face.

“Yes, Lady Nanette de Chappell, daughter of Count de Moyne. I understand you. Very clearly. I found myself caught in something I didn’t want. Lord Newton convinced me that marriage to Linda would be a perfect merger, something my father had mentioned to him many times. Although... Father never mentioned Linda or the Newtons to me. I realized the arrangement for what it was, a business arrangement. I needed to secure my family line, and to compensate the fortunate woman, provide her with a prestigious title and funds. Nothing else.”

“Your father would never demand that of you.”

“I thought I knew what I had to do until I looked into your eyes.” He began to remove more stones. “That was a wound I could not bear. I spoke to her and her father the following day. He was very upset. Linda said what she needed for her father’s

benefit. When her father left the room, she told me she was relieved. Rather than have me take her for a carriage ride through Hyde Park, she said her father would escort her. We wished each other well and parted on good terms.”

“Lord Newton doesn’t sound any better than Mayor Whitaker. Both fathers wanted to force their daughters into loveless marriages.” Nanette yawned and closed her eyes.

“Sleep if you can. When I’m finished here, I’ll be going back to the stable for the horses.”

“Promise me we’ll keep looking for the end of the tunnel.” She tried to conceal her fear, but she was too tired.

“Do you trust me?” He leaned through the space.

“Of course I do.”

“I will try my best to find the end of the tunnel, but I cannot promise.”

She responded with a small nod.

The rhythmic sound of Fitzhugh tossing the rocks lulled her to sleep.

Music played as she stood by her grandmère at the gala. She glanced at Fitzhugh and Lady Linda, and she felt alone. How foolish. He was a boy from her childhood.

“Good evening, ladies.” Lady Farrow came up to them.

“How wonderful, Fiona, and at your gala. You’ll be the talk of the ton. Imagine, Lord Fitzhugh and Lady Linda Newton announcing their engagement here. Very clever of you, Fiona. Very clever indeed.”

Crestfallen, Nanette hid behind the potted plants and watched as Fitzhugh and Linda danced and laughed.

Foolish, foolish girl drummed over and over in her head until she had a splitting headache. Unable to bear it a moment longer, she left the ballroom and made her way to the stairs.

Halfway up, she stopped and peered over the banister. Below, Fitzhugh stood looking up at her. What could she do? A bright smile and a nod was all she could muster.

The hardest thing she ever did was turn and continue up the stairs. She hurried down the hall and into her room. Sitting on the window seat, she wished she was sitting on the parapet at Dunamara Castle. Everything would be perfect if she sat there.

In her heart of hearts she hoped, no she prayed, he would take the steps two at a time and take her in his arms...

She let out a deep sigh as her eyes fluttered open and she found herself in his arms. Startled, she glanced at the cave-in and the horses that stood next to him, and sat up.

“How did you...” The dream of the gala faded into nothing as reality settled in.

“I made enough room to bring the horses through.” He turned toward Baron and Duchess. “They navigated the tunnel well.”

“Are we going back to the castle?” The thought of not going on had her stomach in knots.

“There’s no need. I found a dusting of snow when I brought the horses through. While you slept, I went up ahead. We’re close to the end of the tunnel. We can continue whenever you’re ready.”

Excited and still in his arms, Nanette squeezed him close. She bent her head back, laughing. “You found the way out.”

“I may have found it, but it was your insistence that it was here that kept us going on.” He bent down. His warm breath bathed her cheek. And his eyes, his eyes burned with something Nanette had never seen before. A rush of contentment and warmth left her drained.

His hand gently cupped her head. His face so close now she could see the silver streaks in his sapphire blue eyes.

Her heart thundered in her chest as a gasping sound reached her ears. She had no idea whether it was from him or her.

He dipped his head closer.

God's wounds. She stared at his lips until they claimed hers and he kissed her, softly, gently, possessively at first. Her eyes closed as the heat drained from her face and the intensity of his kisses increased. She clung to him, the only solid thing she had to hold on to, wanted to hold on to.

And in that moment of excitement laced with contentment, she realized she was kissing him back.

He broke the kiss and looked at her with a gaze as soft as a caress. Her fingers touched his swollen lips. Before he could say a word, she reached up and kissed him softly, passionately, lovingly, then settled into his arms.

"I don't want this to end." A delightful shiver of wanting went through her.

"It doesn't have to end," he whispered into her hair. "I want to kiss you properly. But not here, in a cave that can fall down around us."

"We'll have to wait some time for that to happen. We should go."

He stood and helped her up. He bent down to retrieve her lantern, and didn't move.

"What is it?"

He brought the lamp closer to the wall. Nanette was next to him and examined where he pointed.

"My heart is yours forever and always." She stood up and gazed at him.

"There's more." He brushed away dirt and debris. "Here, underneath it, in another hand. 'As mine is yours.' 1644, and beside it, 1769."

“They were here.” She hugged him tight. “We found it. Margaret and Duncan were here.”

“And your grandparents. They both had happy endings.” He gathered her into his arms and held her close.

She reveled in his closeness as his hands rubbed the small of her back and pulled her closer.

He reclaimed her lips. The hunger of his kiss shattered something deep inside her. Weightless and soaring, God’s wounds, she never wanted his kisses to stop.

Raising his mouth from hers, he gazed into her eyes.

She stared into his eyes filled with warmth and passion – for her. No one else. His mouth came over hers in a heated possession. At first, his tongue traced her soft lips and as she opened them, he took full advantage, exploring every inch.

He broke the kiss and held her close. They stood holding each other for several minutes.

“We should leave now.”

She nodded in agreement.

Leading the horses, they followed the tracks. The air grew colder and the snow on the tunnel floor deepened as they went on.

As the tunnel started to widen, a cool breeze ruffled their hair and the sounds of branches scraping the rocks reached them. At last, they stood in front of bushes and rocks that hid the tunnel entrance.

Fitzhugh put down his lantern and found an overgrown path to the outside.

“The snow has stopped,” he called to her. “The moon is waning, but it’s bright. I can make out Preswick Hall.” He came through the branches and brushed himself off. “It’s quite beautiful. Come take a look.”

He helped her through the bushes.

She stood in front of him, his arms around her.

“The view from here may be better than from the parapets.” She glanced at his warm smile, then brought her attention back to the view.

“We can be back in Preswick Hall, but unfortunately *after* tea.” His voice was low and warm. “We’ll leave in the morning for Newcastle.”

“I’d rather leave for Newcastle as soon as we can.”

“If you wish.” He gazed at her. “Help me bring the horses out.”

They went back into the tunnel and brought out Baron and Duchess. They mounted up and started down the trail. Fitzhugh gave Baron the lead. The stallion would find the fastest way back to the stable. Once off the mountain, the trail wasn’t too steep, and thankfully, the snow held off.

They made their way across the meadow, through Baycliff Woods, and rode up the drive to Preswick Hall.

Before they reached the entranceway, Matthew threw open the door.

“They’re here.” Matthew hurried to them as Fitzhugh helped Nanette down. “When you weren’t back for tea, we went out to find you. We couldn’t cross the pass.”

Fitzhugh handed the reins to the stable boy. “Extra treats for Baron and Duchess. They saved the day today, twice.”

“We were getting ready to go out again now that the snow has stopped. How did you break through the avalanche?”

Fitzhugh stared at Nanette. “Lady Fiona left us a message to the secret way out.”

“It’s too cold to stand out here. Besides, everyone will want to hear your tale.”

Keats stood at the door. “Good evening, my lord. The others are waiting for you in the drawing room.” The butler faced Nanette. “My lady. It is good to have you back.”

“Thank you, Mr. Keats.” Nanette gave him her cloak and noted his gasp at her breeches and shirt.

“Keats, have Mrs. Howard bring His Grace and Lady Nanette dinner in the drawing room.”

The butler nodded and left.

As they crossed the reception hall, the door to the drawing room opened. Everyone bounded out of the room as if it had been stuffed to overflowing. They huddled around Fitzhugh and Nanette, peppering them with one question after another, everyone speaking at once.

Fitzhugh waved them off and guided Nanette into the drawing room. Mr. Keats and Mrs. Howard were already setting out food for them.

“We retrieved Lady Fiona’s gem and found our way out. Both tasks were remarkable.” Fitzhugh held the chair for Nanette.

“We’re not staying long. We’re off to Newcastle.” Nanette placed the serviette on her lap.

“The carriage isn’t ready.” Matthew’s expression showed both surprise and confusion. “Everything stopped when you didn’t return. One of the farmers on their way to Sommer-by-the-Sea told of the avalanche at the pass. Marchant and I went to see about the pass and came back for help,” Matthew said, as the footman filled Fitzhugh’s plate, then Nanette’s.

“I thank you... We thank you for your valiant attempt to rescue us. As for the carriage, in this weather the carriage will slow us down. No. I’ll take Lady Nanette to Lady Fiona. You all are welcome to stay here.” He signaled to the footman to bring the wine.



IT WAS EARLY evening by the time they had finished eating, were refreshed, and ready to start out for Newcastle. They left the others looking on as they rode down the drive.

The wind had died down and the road was passable.

“We should arrive in Newcastle before the opera is out.”

They rode on for a half hour, then stopped to rest the horses.

“Did your ladies tell you how they survived while we were gone?”

“They each have a story to tell me. I told them their stories would have to wait until we return.”

He nodded. “Same with my brother and the others. I can’t wait to hear what they have to say.”

They stood together a few more moments.

“It was you who saved me.” He hadn’t planned on telling her that, but he didn’t regret the declaration.

“I beg your pardon?”

“No one ever measured up to what I wanted in a wife. I had no idea how I had conceived that measure until I stared at you on the stairs at Lady Fiona’s.”

“That was one reason why I left London. I refused to be the cause of any pain for you or for Lady Linda.”

“You didn’t cause anything. I wasn’t honest with myself, her, or you. What was the other reason?”

“I wanted to be... I wanted you for myself. I wanted to be everything to you. I didn’t know that until I saw you with her at the gala.”

“My love, it was you I wanted all along. I don’t know how I didn’t come to that conclusion before. But I would rather do without any female companionship, eat little, and sleep less for three years than be with anyone but you.” He took her in his arms. “My heart is yours forever and always. Marry me.”

“As mine is yours.”

The passion in his eyes matched the passion in her soul. He said, “Then tell me your answer.”

Nanette gazed at him, as though she saw Fitzhugh for the first time. He was the only man she wanted. No one else would do. Finally, her lips came together in a passionate smile, and she answered, "Yes."

The End

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Ruth A. Casie

The Ladies of Sommer-by-the-Sea Series

[The Lady and Her Quill \(Book 1\)](#)

[The Lady and the Spy \(Book 2\)](#)

[The Lady and Her Duke \(Book 3\)](#)

Pirates of Britannia Series

[Donald](#)

[Hugh](#)

[Graham](#)

[The Pirate's Jewel](#)

[The Pirate's Redemption](#)

About Ruth A. Casie

There was never a time when *USA Today* Bestseller, RUTH A. CASIE hasn't had a story in her head. When she was little, she and her older sister would dress up and act out the ones Ruth creative. Today, Ruth writes exciting and beautifully told legendary historical romances that are both rich and engaging. Her stories feature strong women and the men who deserve them, endearing flaws and all. Her stories are full of, 'edge of your seat' suspense, mind-boggling drama, and a forever-after romance.

She lives in New Jersey with her hero, three empty bedrooms and a growing number of incomplete counted cross-stitch projects. Before she found her voice, she was a speech therapist (pun intended), client liaison for a corrugated manufacturer, and vice president at an international bank where she was a product/ marketing manager, but her favorite job is the one she's doing now—writing romance. Ruth hopes her stories become your favorite adventure.

Fun facts about Ruth:

1. She filled her passport up in one year.
2. She has three series. The Druid Knight is a time travel romance. The Stelton Legacy is a historical fantasy about the seven sons of a seventh son. Havenport Romances are contemporary romantic suspense stories. She also writes for the Pirates of Britannia connected world.
3. She did a rap with her son to “How Many Trucks Can a Tow Truck Tow If a Tow Truck Could Tow Trucks.”
4. When she cooks she dances around the kitchen.
5. Her sudoku books is in the bathroom and that's all she'll say about that!

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**THE MERRY WIFE OF
WYNDMERE**

**Featuring the Duke and Duchess of
Wyndmere
The Lords of Vice Series**

C.H. Admirand

Author's Note

Shakespeare's play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has a plot line that involves two married women being pursued by a man who thinks they are enamored of him. The plot thickens as mishaps and misunderstandings ensue. Faithfulness and jealousy play a part, until the wives confide the pranks they have played on the man pursuing them to their husbands.

The Merry Wife of Wyndmere has a few of these same elements in the plot line, adding in the element of fear the duke and duchess recently experienced during the terrifying kidnapping attempts the Duke's Guard thwarted. The duke and duchess did not confide their fears in one another, although perhaps if they had, they would not have had a story to tell of what happened *after* their happily-ever-after.



CHAPTER ONE

PERSEPHONE, DUCHESS OF Wyndmere, stared at her reflection in the looking glass hanging on the wall above the mahogany washstand. The woman who stared back at her shared the same blue-black hair and warm brown eyes, but that was where the resemblance ended.

She poured hot water from the pink and white flowered ceramic pitcher into the matching bowl, then reached for the round of lilac-scented soap and held it to her nose to inhale the subtle scent that always brought a smile to her lips.

But not today. Her worries weighed her down. After she washed and rinsed her hands, she reached for the soft linen cloth beside the bowl to dry them. Why had the weight she gained carrying their twins started to melt away, to reveal a hint of her former figure, only to come back?

Tears of frustration welled up, but she blinked them away. “Tears never solve anything,” she chided her reflection. Where was the determination and stubbornness that had carried her through the trials she and her husband endured during the first year of their married life? She sighed, knowing it had been buried beneath the exhaustion from feeding and caring for their twins. Thank heaven she could rely on their nanny, to care for and watch over her babes while she rested.

Sighing at the prominent jut of her overblown breasts, she reminded her dowdy reflection, “You have been blessed with an abundance of milk enabling you to feed Richard *and* Abigail.” Her mind knew her body was balancing her needs as well as those of her twins with the stubborn weight gain, but it bothered her just the same.

Stepping back, she took stock of the rest of her appearance. There was a time not that long ago when Jared

could not wait to sweep her into his arms and carry her off to their bed. The joy they shared, the loving touches, the fiery passion had been all but forgotten in the terrifying weeks the duke and his guard fought to uncover the man behind the plot to steal their babes. Once the danger passed, they had shared a few precious nights together.

It had shocked her to discover that making love was far more uncomfortable after giving birth than she had expected—mayhap they should have waited a fortnight longer. But their passion and need for one another would not be denied. Her husband had been gentle—and maddeningly thorough. Together they fanned the flames of their desire until they had tasted the ecstasy they knew awaited them as they found completion in one another's arms.

The last time they made love, Richard started wailing, and she felt the familiar tingling in her breasts as her body immediately responded to her babe's hungry cries. To her dismay, her milk started to leak on her husband's broad chest. She remembered his shocked expression... It must have been a warm, uncomfortable surprise.

With each day that followed, she saw less and less of him. He spent the bulk of his time handling matters he no longer discussed with her. Would he return to their bed once the twins were weaned? She had no idea.

Mayhap this was what life was like for those who married for duty and the coin to fill their family's coffers. Once the heir and a spare had been delivered, they would be relegated to an obscure estate while their titled husband returned to his cronies at White's, and their demireps who would once more warm their beds.

No! Jared was not like the others. He loved her. The life they were building was not on a foundation of sand—a physical attraction that would fade over time—and nor was it the coin in her dowry—once spent, forgotten. They used to share their worries, and their plans they made for the future. They shared titillating conversations over their morning pots

of tea, nibbling on sweets...before Jared closed the door and locked it to nibble on *her*!

The knock on her bedchamber door forced her to gather her worry and tuck it away. "Come in."

The maid hesitated in the doorway. "Are you feeling poorly, Your Grace?"

Her maid's concerned expression added to Persephone's frustration. She could see the question in the young woman's eyes and had heard the rumor whispered through the servants' side of their home. The question no one had been brave enough to ask: *What caused the rift between the duke and the duchess?*

"Nay, Francis. Just tired."

The duke, his personal guard, and their staff had protected their babes from the first threat to the last. Richard and Abigail were unharmed, the kidnappers behind bars, and the blackguard behind it no longer a threat. So why did the duke maintain his distance when their babes were safe? It had to be her overblown figure, coupled with the unwanted emotional highs and lows, that had cooled his ardor. How could she rekindle it?

The maid bustled into the room bearing a tray containing a small pot of tea and large glass of milk.

Eyeing the single *small* pot of tea, Persephone felt her mood swing from complacent to fractious. "I distinctly recall requesting two pots of tea."

Francis flinched at the harsh tone, and Persephone immediately regretted it.

Her maid carefully set the tray on the elegant mahogany table beneath the window that overlooked the garden, as if it contained black powder...and the duchess held the flint to create the spark that would blow it to bits. Francis paused then placed her palm against the window that looked out over the gardens. "It's bitter cold outside. Shall I fetch your heavy

woolen shawl? Merry is concerned you'll catch a chill eating by the window."

The duchess knew she should not take out her frustration on the maid, but she could not seem to help herself. "You have neglected to answer my question, Francis."

Every ounce of color drained from the young woman's face as she held the silver tray to her breast as if it were a shield that would protect her. "I... We... That is, His Grace—"

"Is behaving in an unacceptable, autocratic manner! Did *he* have to go without his precious morning pot of tea this morning, or, for that matter, for the nine months I carried our babes?"

Her maid swallowed and shook her head.

Persephone strode over to the bellpull and yanked it. Within moments, a footman appeared in the doorway. She sent him off on a quest to return with her pots of tea.

Persephone was beyond caring what anyone thought, tired of everyone treading lightly around her—or, when she raised her voice, keeping their distance—as if she were fragile. The man Persephone had trusted to always be there for her had deserted her. Without the strength she had come to depend upon, she could not think of a way to pull herself free. Instead, she felt as if she were trapped in a bog, sinking deeper every time those around her eyed her as if she were a raving madwoman...and mayhap she was. The duchess knew she needed to regain control of her emotions and her temper. If she had to resort to sneaking down into the kitchen and preparing the tea that was essential to her state of mind and her ability to function, then she bloody well would!

She drew in a deep breath and felt her strength ebbing as it had for the last sennight. Where had the strength she had regained gone? Why was she constantly tired? Was it a malady due to birthing two babes instead of one, or was something quite serious wrong with her?

The duchess hated that she was easily vexed with anyone who tried to tell her what to do. Whether their advice was out of love and concern did not matter in the slightest. Mayhap she needed to seek the advice of someone besides Jared's pompous physician. A woman she could trust. Her confidantes, Ladies Phoebe, Aurelia, and Calliope, were married now, two of them expecting. All of them unable to make the journey in such wicked weather.

How long had it been since she'd corresponded with Lady Phyllida and Lady Cressida? Before she married the duke, they had been her closest friends and constant companions. Would they be understanding, given all that had occurred, or would they be vexed with her?

Never letting go of her silver shield, her maid asked, "Shall I ask Merry for a tisane with her special herbal blend?"

"Just the pots of tea I requested, thank you."

The maid dipped into a deep curtsy and closed the door behind her.

Persephone should have felt relieved at the closing of the door. Glancing about her, the duchess wondered why the soft greens and blues of the drapes and coordinating colors on the counterpane on the bed did not soothe her as they normally would. The room she used to share with her husband had been their haven, where she and her love were surrounded by colors that reminded her of the sky and the meadow around their home. It had been their shelter from the slings and arrows of the society that had become part of their everyday existence.

She sat at the table and stared out of the window at the frozen scene. Ice and snow transformed the verdant green of the park surrounding their home and gardens into a fairytale setting. She squinted and imagined she saw the Snow Queen standing with her head held high as icicles and snowflakes danced on the air, swirling about her. The queen's eyes were the same brilliant, crystalline blue as those of the man she loved.

Vowing not to think of the man who was bent on reminding her what to do, and when and how to do it, she concentrated on the wintry scene below. Did the wood nymphs and faeries feel the cold, or did they wear coats made from layers and layers of moss and leaves? Did they brave the wintry weather or settle in for a long winter's nap?

Sipping her now-lukewarm tea did not soothe her or prod her brain to wake. *Jared knows it takes two strong pots of tea for me to wake sufficiently to face the day with any sort of good humor.*

A knock on her bedchamber door had relief flowing through her—her tea had arrived. *Finally!*

“Come in.”

“I understand you are not pleased with your morning tray.”

Persephone shot to her feet. “Jared? I thought you were closeted with Hawkins going over his suggestions for the spring planting.”

He crossed the threshold but went no further. Hurt lanced through her. Could he no longer stand to be in the same room with her?

Her husband frowned. “I was until I was told that you refused to eat until you received your pots of tea.”

Her irritation spiked and her temper got the better of her. “Why have you insisted that I be deprived of the one thing I must have every morning in order to face my day?”



THE DUKE CLENCHED his hands behind his back before he gave in to the temptation to put them on her shoulders and shake some sense into his wife. *Face her day?* Was her life here so tedious? Marriage to him such a trial? Did she regret the proof of the love they made...their babes?

He schooled his features and donned the ducal expression he often employed to keep others from discovering his true

thoughts and feelings. “Is there anything I can do for you, other than send up what our physician has expressly forbidden?”

“I was assured I would be able to return to my regular diet of—”

The duke cut her off. “I have spoken with him recently, and he has changed his mind.”

Every ounce of color bled from her face. He did not reach for her, didn't dare touch her for fear he would lose his head and give in to the desperate need that had its claws in him. Bloody hell! It had been too long since they made love. That brief taste after they thought she had healed sufficiently from the birthing had not quenched the desire he had kept a tight leash on for the last months of her pregnancy. His need had him pacing late at night, but the knowledge his babes needed her more kept him at a distance. Anyone could see she suffered from exhaustion. But God, how he was tempted to toss her onto the bed and sink into her welcoming warmth... losing himself in the ecstasy they used to share.

The hurt in her eyes pulled at him, but he could not give in when his physician had agreed with his concerns, insisting that the duchess maintain the mild diet previously prescribed with the hope she would regain her equilibrium and sunny personality.

He dug deep to regain his ironclad control. The need to be alert at all times, on guard, protecting Persephone and their babes from the bastards who had been dogging his heels from the moment he assumed the mantle of duke, was essential. There had been too many attempts on his life...hers...and their babes. He would not rest until he put his latest plan into place and hired more men to see to their protection.

Thank God for Patrick O'Malley and the men comprising his personal guard. They were now spread between his estates and those of his two closest cousins, protecting his immediate and extended family.

His contacts—Captain Coventry, his London man-of-affairs, and Gavin King of the Bow Street Runners—were in constant communication, apprising him of any hint of a threat against himself or his family.

Exhausted from the strain of being constantly on guard, he'd been at his wits' end on how to deal with his wife's malaise and mood swings. They seemed to culminate after the threat of kidnapping had been removed. Shouldn't the removal of that threat have eased her mind and prompted his loving wife to return to his arms—and his bed?

“My head aches,” she said. “I believe I shall lie down.”

“But you haven't eaten.”

“I'm no longer hungry.”

“Our babes will be in a few hours' time. The physician has warned that you must eat to keep up with our babes' needs. As a precaution, he has recommended two suitable wet nurses from the village.”

The stark pain on his wife's face gutted him, but he would not allow his wife to fall ill, nor let his babes go hungry. If she could not gather herself enough to think of them, then by God, he would!

The physician had advised him to be firm, but encouraging, with his wife. But when she stepped around him, putting even more distance between them, his gut churned and the lid on his anger blew off. Words he never intended to say, in a harsh tone he instantly regretted, burst from his lips: “I shall ask Mrs. O'Malley to send for the wet nurses at once, as you do not seem to care whether or not you are able to feed my children.”

Instead of the reaction he expected—where Persephone would fly into a rage at him, which he would counter by capturing her in his arms, soothing her with promises of anything she desired, as long as the loving woman he married returned to his arms—his duchess, who had become more of a stranger every day, walked away from him.

Guilt grabbed him by the throat. He had been autocratic, not encouraging. Harsh when he should have been compassionate.

Swallowing against the tautness of his throat, he stated, “I will speak to Mrs. O’Malley at once and return to my meeting.”

His wife did not bother to respond, nor did she slip beneath the covers. She lay down on their bed and faced the wall.

Good God! Was this the end of their marriage? He wanted to get a response from his wife—angry or happy; he would take either.

“I shall be leaving at midday.”

Persephone bolted up in bed and stared at him. “Leaving?”

He noted the worry in her eyes and decided then and there not to tell her how long he planned to be away—or why. “I have business to attend to in London.”

Let her wonder if he planned to take up residence at their London town house, or if it would only be for a short time to handle urgent business.

“How long will you be gone? What of our children’s safety?”

Pleased that she had roused from her malaise to question him, he replied, “I couldn’t possibly entertain a guess. I have a number of issues that I have neglected, due to circumstances beyond my control. O’Malley and my guard will protect the children. If something arises, O’Malley knows to send word.”

He should beg her forgiveness because of his inability to keep the bloody kidnappers from their door. But he would wait until he had the opportunity to speak with her for more than a few moments in passing.

Until then, the Duke of Wyndmere would do what those in his family had always done: protect the family name, keep the coffers filled to pass down to the next generation, and assume his seat in the House of Lords.

If his life be devoid of love from the woman his soul cried out for, then so be it. His children depended on his surviving and doing everything in his power to provide for their future.



CHAPTER TWO

THE DUKE GLARED at the head of his personal guard. “I repeat, I cannot make the journey to London if you accompany me. I need you here guarding my wife and family.”

O’Malley frowned at the duke. “I wasn’t aware a missive arrived from London.” When the duke remained silent, O’Malley persisted. “Ye’d have discussed any communication with me.” Crossing his arms in front of him, he glared. “If ye expect me to do me job, ye’ll have to tell me what in the bloody hell is going on!”

Jared had encouraged the head of his guard to speak plainly when they were alone to cut through what the duke considered useless platitudes. But right now, he wished he had not done so.

He leaned forward and rasped, “It is none of your concern.”

O’Malley’s eyes widened. “Then why are ye leaving yer wife and yer babes when ’tis plain as the nose on yer face they need ye here?”

“On this we disagree. As long as you and your men remain at Wyndmere Hall, my family will be safe.”

“Bollocks!”

“Need I remind you that you are speaking to a peer of the realm?”

O’Malley snorted with laughter. “Ye gave me leave to speak to ye as an equal. Ye cannot be takin’ it back now. I’m not the one who’s leavin’ his family behind to hie off to London. In order to fully protect ye and yer family, Yer Grace, tell me what I need to know.”

“I feel as if we are at cross-purposes—”

O’Malley inclined his head, spun on his heel, and reached for the door.

“Where in the bloody hell do you think you’re going?”

“To let me wife know we’ll be leaving yer employ. ’Tis a difficult time of year to be travelin’, especially given her delicate condition. I need to reserve our seats on the Mail Coach.”

The duke stalked over to the door and placed the flat of his hand on it. “You do not have my permission to leave.”

O’Malley met him glare for glare. “I do not need yer permission to resign from me post. I did not sign me life away when I agreed to head up yer guard.”

The duke dropped his hand and stepped away from the door. “You’d leave without a recommendation?”

O’Malley turned around to face him. “Aye.”

“If you leave, your brothers and your cousins will likely follow.”

“Not if I ask them to remain until ye hire others to take our place.”

“I trust you to guard my family as I would—with your life.”

“I know, and I’m grateful yer faith and trust have been fully restored, but I cannot do me job if ye don’t tell me everything!”

The duke inclined his head. His throat felt constricted by the emotions he held in check. He cleared it before continuing, “The kidnapping attempts on our babes gutted me. I failed in my bid to protect my wife and children. These attacks—verbal and physical—started the moment I assumed the bloody title and have not stopped!”

O’Malley listened intently.

“If I am to live with these constant threats against my wife and family, I will need a wider net of protection. I need to hire additional men for my London guard. I plan to meet with King and Coventry and finalize my plans.”

O’Malley met his gaze. “’Tis something we have discussed.”

“We?”

“Aye, the rest of yer guard.”

“You discussed it among yourselves, but not with me?” Jared could not countenance it!

“None of us could agree on the number of men needed—or where they would be most useful. ’Tis why we have not discussed it with ye yet. We prefer to have our plan in place, ready to move ahead, before we bring it to ye.”

“I believe a dozen or more men to haunt the docks, the gaming hells—”

“White’s, Gentleman Jackson’s, Tattersalls,” O’Malley countered.

Anger radiated off the duke. “Do you honestly believe additional eyes and ears spying on the *ton* alone will suffice?”

“Aye, have ye forgotten the men behind the vicious slander have been members of yer precious society? Yer peers have contacts on the docks and in the stews of London. Their coin will hire those to carry out the physical attacks and kidnapping attempts while their soft white hands remain clean.”

When the duke clenched his jaw and curled his hands into tight fists, O’Malley nodded and continued, “The men and I have discussed anywhere between fifteen and twenty more added to yer London guard. If ye want to end this *shite* and show ye’ll not stop until the madness ends, ye have to hit the bloody leeches where it hurts and turn the tables on them. ’Tis time to call out the bloody buggers!”

The duke glanced down at his clenched hands, envisioning them wrapped around the necks of Hollingford, Chellenham,

and Radleigh. He'd never experienced the need for violence until that first campaign to destroy his name, and the one aimed at ruining Lady Persephone's reputation.

Relaxing his fingers, he glanced up to see understanding in O'Malley's expression. "What would you do, if you were in my position?"

"I'd kill anyone who attacked me family—nay, mayhap only hobble them—but I'm not a member of polite society and not held to the same standards as Yer Grace."

"The chances of your being tossed into a cell at Newgate and sentenced to hang are far greater than mine."

O'Malley slowly smiled. "Aye, but I'm used to movin' about in the underbelly of society. I've more connections that would be willin' to hide me...for a price. Thanks to yer generosity while in yer employment, I can more than afford to pay any price."

"I have spent my nights pacing the floors trying to come up with a viable solution to this problem. I believe this is the answer." Jared raked a hand through his hair, then dropped it to his side. "This constantly looking over my shoulder, expecting an assault, is no way for my wife and babes to live."

O'Malley frowned. "Have ye told Her Grace ye're leavin'?"

"Aye."

"How did she take the news?"

"She appeared to rouse herself enough to be shocked. She has not been herself as of late. I know that caring for one infant would consume one's life—but caring for twins..."

He was not certain how to put his thoughts into words without damning his wife to the possibility of being sent away to be cared by someone more adept at dealing with someone with a fragile, emotional state. Hearing rumors hinting at loved ones with similar issues being locked away had him keeping that thought to himself.

“Mayhap the time away will benefit the both of us.”

“I doubt it,” O’Malley mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Talkin’ to meself, Yer Grace. Who will travel with ye, then?”

“Flaherty.”

O’Malley nodded. “Rory’s the sharpshooter of the family. Who else?”

The duke met and held O’Malley’s gaze. “No one.”

“Beggin’ yer pardon, Yer Grace, but are ye daft? Ye could be set upon by any number of brigands or thieves along the road south to London! If anything happened to ye, what would become of yer wife and family?”

“I won’t be a target riding in the state coach. I’ll be on horseback.”

“Yer stallion will have ye recognized in a heartbeat.”

“I’ll be riding one of the geldings.”

O’Malley seemed to consider the idea. His next statement was proof of that: “Ye’d have to dress as if ye were of lower birth. A mud-brown coat and trousers, worn boots, and a battered hat ought to be enough of a disguise.”

The duke slowly smiled. “I have already spoken to my valet about finding the proper clothes in my size.”

“If they were a bit on the larger side, all the better. Ill-fittin’ would be best. A common man doesn’t have the blunt to pay the finest tailors.”

“Indeed! I shall speak to my valet at once.”

“Do ye have someone in mind to fill in for Flaherty?”

“I sent an urgent missive to Finn. He should arrive tomorrow or the next day.”

O'Malley inclined his head. "'Tis fortunate ye sent me brother to Summerfield Chase in the Borderlands with missives for the baron. The distance is closer than if he were at Penwith Tower in Cornwall."

"Most fortunate," the duke agreed.

O'Malley mumbled his agreement, then queried, "Have ye had a recent report from Fenton Flaherty? I'm wonderin' how the local men they hired to take me brother's place at Penwith Tower are gettin' on."

"The change has been seamless. Having been in Cornwall for nearly a year, they have been able to assess the situation. I'm certain you are aware that at times there is a fine line between the excise men and the smugglers."

"Aye, ye have the right of it. Ye've thought of everythin'—exceptin' how Her Grace will react once ye've left."

The duke had purposely distanced himself from his wife while he'd been making plans to arrange protection for his family. "Do you foresee a problem?"

"Ye don't?"

"She did not put up an argument, which, truth be told, I expected." He met O'Malley's direct gaze. "I'm entrusting you with my very heart, O'Malley."

"Between Finn and our cousins, the four of us will protect yer family with our lives."

The duke held out his hand. "I depend upon it."

O'Malley shook the duke's hand and vowed, "I won't let ye down."



A FEW HOURS later, the duke rode away from Wyndmere Hall, Flaherty by his side. Another layer of guilt weighed him down. He had not been able to bid his wife goodbye. She was not in the nursery when he kissed his babes goodbye, and the weather had turned foul.

But he could not waste a moment more looking for her. Nothing would stop him from his mission to add a covert arm to his personal guard.

He would see his family protected at all costs—including his own happiness.



CHAPTER THREE

“HIS KISSED THE twins goodbye without waking them.”

The duchess stared at her nanny, trying to comprehend what she’d just said. “Jared was here and he did not wait for me?”

“I told him you would return shortly, but he said he had to leave immediately.”

A feeling of dread washed over Persephone. “I cannot let him leave when I have no idea how long he will be gone!”

“Go now,” Gwendolyn urged, “before you miss him!”

Persephone argued with herself as she rushed to the servants’ staircase and descended. The thought of Jared leaving with harsh words hanging between them bothered her. She had no idea what tasks awaited him in London, or when he would return. Her appearance was suddenly not as big a worry as his leaving them. She had come to rely on his strength far more than she’d admitted to him.

Mayhap she should tell him that. Her mind raced. Should she apologize first or kiss him? Unable to decide, she yanked the door open with more force than she’d intended and rammed into a wall.

“Yer Grace? Are ye hurt?” O’Malley inquired as he steadied her. “I didn’t expect ye to be comin’ down this staircase.”

She braced a hand to her heart and shook her head. “My fault, Patrick. I know you and your guard use the servants’ staircase during your patrol.”

Instead of waiting for him to reply, she scooted around him and rushed along the hallway.

“Is there somethin’ wrong, Yer Grace?”

“I don’t want to miss saying goodbye to my husband.”

O’Malley’s loud groan halted her in her tracks. She slowly turned around, meeting his troubled gaze.

“Yer Grace...”

Hand to her throat, pain lancing through to her soul, she rasped, “He’s gone, isn’t he?”

“Aye.”

“Without saying goodbye to me?”

“Ye were indisposed.”

“He could not spare the time to say a proper goodbye to me and our babes?”

O’Malley cleared his throat. “His Grace stopped in the nursery first. When he could not find ye there—”

“He left.” Tears welled in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. “I understand. Thank you for telling me. If you’ll excuse me, I need to return to the nursery.”

“If there’s anythin’ I can do for ye while he’s gone, Yer Grace, ye’ve but to ask.”

She nodded and slipped around him, retracing her steps without a sound, without a word. What could she possibly say to her husband’s most trusted guard? Jared’s leaving without bidding her goodbye spoke volumes.

As she trudged up the steps, a devastating thought cut her to the bone. Had he gone to London for reasons other than urgent matters left too long unattended? Had he come to loathe her appearance and temperamental moods that much? Could he no longer bear to be near her?

She paused and grasped the railing. Dear God, had he fallen out of love with her?

Persephone pressed the back of her hand to her mouth to cover her gasp. Would he seek comfort in another woman’s

arms? It was obvious he no longer sought it in hers.

As soon as the thought filled her mind, she pushed it away. They had vowed to love one another. He was too honorable to break that vow...but he had been so distant as of late.

As have you, her conscience reminded her.

With a heavy heart, she forced herself to walk up the remaining steps and opened the door at the top. A quick glance about her revealed that none of the staff appeared to be about.

The first tear fell before she could stop it. Anguish cut her to the bone. Careful to quiet her footfalls, she rushed to the bedchamber they used to share. She shut and locked the door, spun around, and braced her back against it as if that were necessary to ensure no one would invade her privacy. Listening for any sound to indicate she had been followed, she waited.

Convinced she was alone, she slid to the floor and unleashed the pain of Jared's leaving.



FRANCIS AND MOLLIE stood in the hallway outside Their Graces' bedchamber, hands grasped tightly as they bore witness to their employer's pain.

"Should we knock?" Mollie whispered.

Francis shook her head. "We'll wait."

"What if we're needed elsewhere?" Mollie queried.

"We share the duties of lady's maid to Her Grace," Francis reminded her. "With the duke leaving, she'll have even more need of us—especially today."

The door to the nursery opened, startling the maids.

Gwendolyn O'Malley stepped into the hall and frowned. "I thought I heard Her Grace return."

Mollie nodded and motioned to the closed door. "We did not want to disturb her."

“Did Her Grace manage to say goodbye before His Grace left?”

Francis sighed. “No.”

Gwendolyn’s eyes flashed with worry. “What happened?”

“We don’t know,” Mollie admitted. “We have been waiting for Her Grace to stop crying before we intrude.”

The nanny absorbed the information and their worry. “We must do all that we can to see to Her Grace’s comfort.” With a glance over her shoulder, checking on her charges, Mrs. O’Malley closed the door behind her. “Francis, would you please have Constance prepare a tray for Her Grace? Strong tea and something sweet to comfort her in her distress.”

Eager to help, Francis replied, “At once,” and scurried off.

“Mollie, would you ring for one of the footmen to bring up more hot water? Her Grace will want to bathe her face before she sits down to eat.”

The maid wrung her hands. “Why would His Grace act so cold? We all know how brave she has been these last weeks.”

The nanny frowned and shook her head. “They both have. We must be vigilant in the duke’s absence to see that Her Grace is coddled and reminded to eat well and rest to keep up her strength. The twins depend on her.”

Mollie hesitated for a moment. “Mrs. O’Malley, there is something you should know.”

Gwendolyn paused and waited for the maid to continue.

“I overheard one of the squire’s maids the last time I was in the village.”

“Oh? What did you hear?”

Mollie hesitated then met Gwendolyn’s concerned gaze. “She said Her Grace’s milk will either dry up or sour because those brutes tried to steal her babes!”

Gwendolyn admonished the younger woman not to repeat such nonsense, all the while worrying that it was a distinct possibility...well, as far as the duchess's being able to continue to produce enough milk for two babes. The duke had spoken to her about sending for the two wet nurses his physician recommended. Given Her Grace's current mood, she would wait and speak to the duchess before she did.

“Hurry now, Mollie!”

The maid rushed to the servants' staircase and clattered down the steps.

Gwendolyn stood in front of the bedchamber door and lifted her hand to the knob—twice. And twice she dropped her hand. What could she possibly say to the woman who had become her friend, the woman who took her into her trust as a confidante to comfort her? Should she reassure her that His Grace left abruptly because the weather had turned foul as he was planning to leave?

She drew in a deep breath and then another, deciding that she should. What other reason could there be?

“There ye are, lass.”

She whirled around at the sound of her husband's voice. She held her hand out to him, then grabbed hold and pulled him into the nursery.

Feet braced, ready to spring into action, Patrick waited for her to speak.

“Francis and Mollie have been waiting outside of Her Grace's bedchamber.”

“For...?” he asked.

“Her to regain her composure.”

“I should have followed her immediately.”

“Why? What has happened?”

Patrick raked a hand through his hair and let his hand drop to his side. A glance over his shoulder had him lowering his

voice so as not to wake the sleeping babes. “She crashed into me as she bolted through the door at the base of the servants’ staircase.”

“Oh dear. That was my fault. I told her to hurry, or she would miss His Grace.”

Patrick frowned. “She missed him by ten minutes.”

Gwendolyn placed her hand on her husband’s forearm. “Why did he not wait? What do you know about their argument?”

He answered the first question: “’Twas best to keep ahead of the weather bearing down on them.”

She inclined her head, waiting for him to answer her other question.

He held her gaze for long moments before admitting, “Not a bloody thing. What I noticed lately was himself spendin’ more and more time with us, discussin’ extra protection and fortification of Wyndmere Hall and the grounds surroundin’ it. The kidnappin’ attempts have had a profound effect on the duke.”

“Her Grace as well. Though I did not mention it until she asked me, she and I both noted His Grace’s new habit of not returning to their chamber until it was time for the twins’ midnight feeding. It was only a short while later that the duke started insisting that Her Grace needed her rest.”

“Aye,” he agreed. “He mentioned that worry more than once.”

“Her Grace has been distraught, and her worry increased once the duke started sleeping in the room on the other side of the nursery.”

Patrick grumbled, “’Twould be funny if their hearts were not so bruised. They have been at cross-purposes before, but this time they started avoidin’ one another.”

“What can we do?”

“I’ll keep His Grace apprised of the situation here, while ye see that Her Grace continues to confide what’s troublin’ her.”

Rising on tiptoes, she kissed her husband on the cheek.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her until she sagged against him. “That’s the kind of send-off she should have given His Grace.” A rolling thump to his middle had his eyes widening. “Our son agrees.”

“Our *daughter* knows Her Grace would have given him a kiss that spoke of love and the reminder of the lives born of that love...*if* he hadn’t left without bidding her goodbye.”

Patrick rested his chin on the top of his wife’s head. “’Twill be up to us to see that they do not drift further apart.”

Gwendolyn gently pushed away until she could meet her husband’s intense gaze. “What do you have in mind?”

“With this bitter cold weather, it’s too soon for Her Grace to start makin’ the rounds visitin’ their tenant farmers. I’m thinkin’ she needs a bit of a visit with her neighbors.”

“The vicar and his wife might be feeling a bit shut in with this weather,” Gwendolyn said. “Mayhap we can suggest she invite them to tea.”

“A sound idea. Speak to Merry; I’ll speak to Humphries. They’ll know who is in residence this time of year, and what type of entertainments would be proper for Her Grace to host while His Grace is in London.”

“How long will he be gone?”

Patrick frowned. “Until he’s completed his business.”

“I see.”

“Nay, lass,” he said, brushing a lock of hair from her eyes. “I do not think ye do. He’s a man torn. ’Tis not me place to speculate, or to discuss certain aspects of His Grace’s business with ye, as ye knew when we wed.” When she opened her

mouth to protest, he silenced her with a brief but potent kiss. “Have a care and rest yerself. Our son needs ye to be strong.”

She laid her head on his chest and sighed. “I will rest when I can.”

“Ye agreed to let Her Grace know when it becomes too taxin’ for ye to care for her little ones and our unborn babe.”

“I have not reached that point yet, my darling. Trust me. I know my limits and would not do anything that would hurt our babe.”

“Ye might think ye know yer own strength, lass, but a woman carryin’ is known to be a bit unreasonable when suggestions are made to her.”

Gwendolyn’s laughter surrounded the couple. “I am most agreeable and reasonable, husband.”

Patrick grinned, devilment dancing in his green eyes. “Oh aye, wife, that ye are. I’ll be needin’ another proper kiss from ye before I return to me duties.”

Gwendolyn sighed exaggeratedly. “If you must.”

“Do not be temptin’ me now,” he grumbled, then grinned. “Tempt me later.”

She smiled. “Aye, Patrick.”

Her quick agreement had him frowning down at her. “No prevaricatin’, wife of mine.”

“I would not dream of stretching the truth, husband of mine.”

“Fine,” he grumbled, giving her a brief hug. “I’ll have messengers goin’ back and forth between here and the London town house—and a few other locations as well. We’ll both have a clearer picture of Their Graces meetin’s and entertainments and will be able to formulate our plan to hurry His Grace back to Wyndmere Hall.”

“I pray that it works.”

“It has to.”



CHAPTER FOUR

UNAWARE THAT SHE had caused an uproar with her staff, Persephone wiped her face with the backs of her hands. Her nose had started to run, and rather than resorting to using the hem of her gown to wipe it, she pushed to her feet and fetched a handkerchief from her wardrobe.

She rubbed a hand over her heart, but the burning ache remained. Massaging her forehead with the tips of her fingers did nothing to relieve the pain hammering there.

My own fault. If I hadn't been so beastly to him earlier... not just earlier, she reasoned with herself. In my bid to have a modicum of control over our terrifying situation, I butted heads with him for weeks. He never budged, insisting he and his guard were handling the situation.

Unable to recall the last time she had not been at odds with her husband, she realized something more...she had been suppressing the terror and worry that remained even though their babes were safe. She spent all of her time caring for their twins, neglecting Jared—who seemed to have his hands full running the ducal estates.

Hand to her lips, she swallowed her keening cry. *I pushed him away.*

The loud knock on the door was telling—it was not one of the staff. Only the men in her husband's guard had such a forceful knock. Rather than berate them for pounding on her door, she accepted it, as she had the men who protected them with their lives.

“Come in.”

O'Malley entered. “Yer Grace, there's a problem in the kitchen. Constance is asking for ye to mediate.”

Persephone stared at him for long moments... There was a hint of hesitation in the depths of his green eyes. Something was not as it should be. As far as she knew, there had never been anything more than a bit of territorial posturing in the kitchen—nothing that would require her interference.

“Merry urges that ye come at once.”

She acquiesced, although with the mention of the housekeeper, she knew something was afoot. The only way she would know what was going on in their household was to address it at once. It was the least she could do now that her husband was not in residence.

A spear of sorrow jabbed hard in her belly. Her sharp intake of breath and hand pressed to her stomach had O’Malley reaching for her arm to steady her. “What is it, Yer Grace? Are ye ill?”

She drew in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. The worst of the pain was receding. Patting his hand, she thanked him. “I am fine.” With her gaze locked on his, she added, “I’d best see to whatever the commotion is. It must be troubling if both Constance and Merry have asked you escort me to the kitchen.”

“If ye’re certain ye are not ill.”

There it was again—that hesitation, right before he released his hold on her. This would not be the first time her husband’s guard had kept information from her, thinking to protect her.

“His Grace would have me head if I let anythin’ happen to ye.”

His competent, direct look was back. Whatever he avoided discussing with her, she would not be able to pry from Patrick O’Malley’s lips. However, she could—and *would*—attempt to wheedle it out of his wife.

Persephone went to the kitchen. Constance was flushed and looking more than a bit harried. Persephone immediately felt remorse for thinking the head of her husband’s guard had

manufactured a disturbance simply to involve her with the staff so soon after her husband's departure.

The cook rushed toward her. "Thank goodness you are here! Mollie's collapsed! Eamon carried her into the room off the pantry. Merry is with them."

Persephone walked quickly along the hallway. "Did she seem ill before she fainted?"

Constance kept pace with the duchess as she responded, "Mollie was the picture of health a few hours ago. She and Francis are always flitting about seeing to their duties for yourself as well as assisting Mrs. O'Malley in the nursery."

"Are we asking too much of Mollie and Francis? After all, they were scullery maids when I first arrived. Learning what was expected of them as my lady's maids was a lot to take on at once...and then helping me to care for our babes until we hired Gwendolyn."

The cook shook her head. "They are both young and full of energy...normally."

Worry tangled with guilt. Had Persephone been so overly concerned with her appearance and her husband distancing himself that she had neglected her staff?

She rushed toward the pantry and entered the room just beyond it. The room had been instrumental in tending for the wounded during the attack on Wyndmere Hall. One of the walls was lined with shelves filled with an assortment of herbal remedies, salves, and tinctures. Beneath the shelves was a cupboard that held a ready supply of linens and various lengths of bandages.

What grabbed her attention was the pale form of her lady's maid lying on one of the cots. Mollie appeared so still, so small.

Eamon turned at the sound of her footsteps. His face was devoid of expression as he said, "Yer Grace. I don't know what happened. I'd just greeted her on me way through the

kitchens. Her gaze met mine, and I swear every drop of blood left her face! She started to sway.”

The duchess placed her hand on the guard’s forearm. The tension beneath her fingertips belied the lack of expression on his face. Eamon O’Malley was worried. Gently patting his arm before removing her hand, she told him, “You were there to catch her. Thank you.”

“Do ye need me to carry her to her bedchamber?”

Persephone considered asking him to do just that, but as the maid had not been ill, her faint could be due to any number of things—personal things, none of which she would be discussing with the man shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, waiting for her reply. “I think we’ll let her rest here for a bit until she feels better.”

“I’ll head on out to me post, then. Send word if ye have need of me.”

“Thank you, Eamon. I will.” It never ceased to amaze her how much compassion and caring lay beneath the surface of the men in her husband’s guard. Their size alone would lead one to believe that they were hard men whose only thought would be fighting to protect the man they served. Persephone had come to understand the tall, muscular men used their size and intimidation tactics to their advantage when the need arose, while shielding their hearts of pure gold.

Mollie moaned softly and slowly opened her eyes. “Your Grace!” She sat up quickly and put a hand to her head.

“Easy now,” the duchess warned as she stood beside the maid’s cot. “You are probably still a bit dizzy. How do you feel otherwise?”

Her maid frowned. “Fine, but how did I get in here?”

“Eamon carried you.”

Mollie dropped her head into her hands. “I’ll never hear the end of it!”

The duchess reminded her maid, “If I were you, I’d thank him. He caught you before you hit your head on the oak table in the kitchen—or the cookstove!”

The younger woman dropped her hands and lifted her head. “You are right, Your Grace. Forgive me.”

“Do not give it another thought.”

Merry bustled back into the room. “Mollie! So wonderful to see that you’re awake. How do you feel?”

“Mortified.”

“Now, now,” the older woman soothed her. “No need to take on so much. Everyone has had a moment or two in life when they needed help. How lucky that Eamon was nearby to catch you.”

“Er...yes, wasn’t it?”

The duchess smiled. “Is your head still feeling light?”

“Nay, Your Grace. I can get back to my duties.”

Persephone straightened to her full height and proclaimed, “I should say not! Merry, would you mind asking Constance for a cup of weak tea and mayhap a day-old biscuit if we have one?”

Merry softly smiled. “I’ll see to it right away.” The housekeeper bustled off, leaving the two women alone once more.

The duchess did not want to embarrass the young woman further but needed to ask some pertinent questions, especially given that Mollie shared the duty of watching over the twins in between the times when they were waiting for the nanny or the duchess to resume their care.

Deciding to lead with that statement, as she felt it would cause the least amount of embarrassment, she said, “I do not want you to worry unnecessarily, but given that you care for our babes whenever we need you, I must be certain that you

are not suffering from anything more serious than overexerting yourself.”

Mollie nodded and waited for the duchess to begin questioning her.

“Have you been suffering from any lightheadedness or megrims lately?”

Mollie hesitated before answering, “Just a bit of a light head now and again.”

“I did not detect a fever, but from past experience, I know that fevers are normally higher at night and when we wake in the morning.”

“No fever, Your Grace.”

Persephone noted that Mollie seemed uneasy with the questioning. Mayhap it had to do with her monthly courses. When she asked, Mollie’s face flamed and she immediately denied that it did.

Relieved, the duchess asked one last question: “Nausea?”

Mollie stared at her hands. “I did have a bit this morning ___”

“And how do you feel now?”

“Fine, thank you.”

The duchess strove not to show any emotion at the answer. She would keep a close watch on the younger woman—and keep her own counsel for now and wait. A week or so would either prove her suspicions right or wrong.

She wished Jared were here. Sharing their worries with one another had often eased the worst of their burdens...but they had not shared anything since the last kidnapping attempt. Her husband had closed himself off from her, only visiting the nursery when she was not there. Now that he was gone, her worries increased. What had she done to engender such a reaction from him?

Merry arrived with a small tray. “Here we are, Mollie. Constance wants you to sip the tea slowly and make certain that you nibble on the biscuit. Not too much liquid in your belly just yet.”

“I will, thank you, Merry.”

“I’ll be back to check on you shortly,” the housekeeper promised.

The duchess sat in the room’s only chair—a straight-backed wooden chair that someone had, thankfully, put a cushion on. “Is there anything troubling you, Mollie? Sometimes when our thoughts become too heavy to handle, our bodies react in the strangest of ways.”

Her maid set her teacup on the small table beside the cot. “Is that why you seem so sad?” As soon as the words left Mollie’s mouth, she gasped and put her hands over it. Tears gathered in her eyes as she dropped her hands. “Forgive me, Your Grace! I did not mean to ask such a personal question.”

The duchess handed the young woman a handkerchief and assured her, “There is nothing to forgive.”

“But I spoke out of turn.”

“If you knew how many times I have done just that over the years, it would shock you,” Persephone replied. “Now, as to your question, His Grace and I have been through an ordeal a new parent would never dream of facing. The aftermath of what occurred is it bit more difficult to deal with than I had imagined.”

Mollie wiped her eyes. “I was mortally afraid—but did not want to add to your burden by telling you.”

The duchess sighed. “I wish that you had. We could have avoided your suffering now.”

Mollie looked away, and Persephone thought perhaps her women’s intuition *was* correct. Time would tell.

“There are moments when I wake and am transported back to those attacks—the fear is absolutely debilitating.”

“You are so brave,” Mollie rasped. “How are you able to continue with your duties as you care for your babes?”

“I have a wonderful staff and am not alone. I have Jared.” *But do you, really?* Unease swept up a chill up from Persephone’s toes. She shivered.

“I am sorry for bringing up something best left alone,” Mollie said.

The duchess disagreed. “At times, I believe it is better to speak of the things that have had such effect on our lives.” Her thoughts immediately went to the duke’s sister and the nightmares she suffered after being held at knifepoint. “If we suppress our fears and emotions for too long, we cannot help but have an adverse reaction.”

“Do you believe only women suffer from fear?” Mollie inquired. “I have yet to note His Grace showing an ounce of fear—from that first attack on Wyndmere Hall to the most recent despicable attempts to steal your babes.”

Persephone met Mollie’s gaze. “I know that they do, though not one of the men in our lives would willingly admit to such—especially His Grace and the men in his guard. They are more apt to act than react.”

Mollie hesitated, then whispered, “Do you think a man would leave, rather than face a situation he has no idea how to solve?”

The duchess froze. Was Mollie speaking of Jared? One glance at her maid’s miserable expression, and she realized Mollie was speaking of the man she loved—Finn O’Malley. “I do believe that some men would. Do not lose heart—once a man comes to what he feels is the appropriate conclusion, he will return.”

Mollie nodded. “We must give them time, then. Mustn’t we?”

Persephone slowly smiled. “I do believe we should—but not too much time.”

Her maid surprised her with her next comment. “Mayhap His Grace is still scared and worried and not willing to admit it. If he’s anything like Finn, Patrick, and the rest of his guard, he may see it as a weakness.”

The duchess fought to keep her expression neutral. How had her maid been able to reason through what had been plaguing Persephone for days? “I have only just come to that conclusion myself, Mollie.” She rose to her feet. “Rest. When Merry returns, if you feel up to it, you may retire to your room for the rest of the day.”

“But I feel fine,” her maid protested.

“Then in the morning, you shall feel even more restored.”

“Aye, Your Grace.”

The duchess’s mind was in a turmoil. Her mind raced as she wondered if she had missed her final opportunity to apologize to her husband. What could she do? What *should* she do?

Her mind cleared, and she knew what to do. *I shall send a message to London.*

She quickened her steps, dashing through the kitchen in search of Humphries. Their stalwart retainer would know who best to entrust her message to. Mayhap, if her husband were not in a great hurry to reach London, her missive may be waiting for him!



CHAPTER FIVE

“HUMPHRIES!”

Their butler spun around, immediately on guard, prepared for the worst. “What is it, Your Grace? Is it the twins? Are you ill? Has someone been injured?”

Persephone skidded to a stop and held a hand to her breast while she caught her breath. “No, nothing like that. I need to send an urgent missive to His Grace.”

“Of course.”

“Please tell me there is a way for it to arrive in London before my husband.”

Humphries’ eyes lit with pleasure. “His Grace left his stallion home...er...not wanting to attract undue attention to himself as he traveled the road south to London.”

“I’m happy to learn my husband is taking proper precautions, but won’t Jared’s horse attract the wrong kind of attention being ridden by a messenger?”

“It likely would, but I am afraid there is no other option if your missive must precede His Grace’s arrival at your town house.”

“It is imperative.”

“Then I shall seek O’Malley’s suggestion for whom to deliver your missive. Will it be verbal or written?”

Persephone’s heart raced. Should she task someone with the message from her heart? Would they remember all that she needed to say—all that she wanted to say?

“I saw O’Malley just a few minutes ago,” the butler informed her. “While you decide how you would like your

message to be delivered, I shall speak to him...with your permission, of course.”

Relief swept up from her toes. Lord willing, she just may be able to save the shambles of their marriage! Much to their butler’s chagrin, she grabbed hold of his hand, gushing, “Of course! Thank you, Humphries.”

He waited a moment until the duchess was out of sight before he grinned. “Thank goodness one of them has come to their senses. O’Malley will be pleased with this information and request.”



HALF AN HOUR later, the messenger had been tasked with delivering two urgent missives from Her Grace—one sealed and the other verbal.

The messenger rehearsed the verbal part of Her Grace’s message that he was instructed to repeat *word for word* to Emmett O’Malley. The head of the duke’s London guard would deliver the verbal message first, and then the sealed missive from the duchess.

A short while later, the duke’s stallion lifted his head and whinnied in jubilation as they set off at a gallop. The changes of horse were as swift, as the duke had excellent horses stabled at strategic inns along the road south to London.



EMMETT O’MALLEY BEGAN pacing after receiving the missive from Her Grace. “He should have arrived by now, Jenkins.”

The duke’s London butler shook his head. “The messenger advised that the duke planned to draw as little attention to himself as possible by traveling on horseback.”

Emmett sighed. “And if he arrived at any one of the inns demanding immediate service and the duke’s best horse, that would defeat the purpose. Someone would recognize His Grace.” Before Jenkins had the opportunity to reply, Emmett

added, "I'll be getting back to me post; we won't be seeing the whites of His Grace's eyes for another day or so."

The butler agreed. "From the scuttlebutt we've heard through Captain Coventry's contacts, and those of the tradesmen traveling to and from the Lake District, we will have our hands full."

"Aye." Emmett frowned. "Never thought to play matchmaker to Their Graces!"

"It is our duty to see that they reach an accord," Jenkins reminded him.

"Understood. They belong together. Me ma and da had more than one rough patch to smooth out over the years. Ma likes to remind us 'tis what will make a marriage strong. The disagreements and the compromising to fix them."

"Your mother is to be commended."

"She usually follows her advice with a wallop to the back of the head."

Jenkins slowly smiled. "A rare woman indeed."

When Emmett turned to go, Jenkins asked, "You will keep me abreast of any further news from your contacts?"

"Aye, Jenkins."



CHAPTER SIX

THE DUKE WAS exhausted and exhilarated at the same time, an odd combination he had not felt in far too long. The unbidden image of his wife coming apart in his arms by turns taunted and haunted him.

He shook his head to clear it. First he had to settle the matter of whom to hire for his expanded guard. Then he could tackle the raven-haired, obstinate problem that was his wife.

“Are ye troubled with the cold?” Flaherty inquired as they entered Grosvenor Square.

“Nay. I have much to contend with now that we are here, and even more waiting for my return.”

“If I can be of any help, ye’ve but to ask, Yer Grace.”

They reined in their mounts in front of the town house and dismounted. The front door burst open, and Jenkins greeted them effusively.

“Your Grace!” he said. “Delighted to see you. Flaherty, I trust your journey was not too taxing.”

The duke smiled. “It’s wonderful to see you, Jenkins. Not at all. With Flaherty as company, the journey flew by.”

Flaherty chuckled. “I’m thinking ’twas the cold nipping at our heels that kept us flying down the road south to London.”

They thanked the stable lad who’d arrived to take their mounts to the stable where they would be pampered.

Jenkins was noticeably uneasy. Something was definitely wrong—the family’s longtime butler rarely showed emotion.

“Jenkins?” the duke said.

“An urgent missive was delivered earlier today.”

The duke paused. “I take it the missive is waiting on my desk in the study.”

His butler looked distinctly uncomfortable. “No, Your Grace. It is an unusual missive.”

“Is it not sealed?”

“The seal has not been broken. It is a two-part message, verbal and written.”

“From?”

“Her Grace.”

The duke was instantly on alert as fear slashed his gut and threatened to close his throat. He handed the butler his top hat, gloves, and greatcoat. “Where is Her Grace’s missive?”

“Emmett O’Malley has it. The messenger’s instructions were to repeat the verbal missive to Emmett so that he could convey the first part of Her Grace’s message to you.”

Though he could not imagine what in the bloody hell was so important that his wife had sent an urgent missive to Grosvenor Square to arrive before him, he asked, “Where is Emmett?”

“After the messenger left, he was pacing the hallway near the rear entrance, Your Grace.”

“Thank you.”

The duke strode to the door to the servants’ side of his town house, anxiety and guilt roiling in his gut with each step. Yanking it open, he nearly collided with Emmett O’Malley. “Emmett!”

“Yer Grace?”

The duke locked gazes with him. “You have a missive for me.”

“Aye—but I’m to deliver it in private.”

Mrs. O’Toole looked up as the men walked past her. “Welcome back, Your Grace.”

“Thank you. Mrs. O’Toole. Would you please see that we are not disturbed?”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Mrs. O’Toole brushed the flour from her hands and relayed the request to one of the footmen.

After bounding up the servants’ staircase, the duke shoved open the door to his private study and motioned for Emmett to enter. His guard looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Well?” the duke demanded.

Emmett sighed, reached for the duke’s hands, and lowered to his knees. “Begging yer pardon, Yer Grace—’tis part of me instructions.”

The duke’s mind raced. Was his wife planning to leave him? Would he return home to find it empty of the family he loved?

Emmett stared at him, and the duke growled, “What?”

“Did ye not hear what I said?”

Embarrassed, he admitted he had not.

“I’ll not be repeating the whole of it a third time, Yer Grace, so ye’d best be listening.”

The man’s discomfort was equal to that of the duke. Wondering yet again why in the bloody hell he’d instructed the men of his guard to speak to him as if they were equals in private, he agreed. He may have to rethink his dictate.

“Jared me love...” Emmett paused to clear his throat. “Word for word,” he whispered before continuing. “Forgive me. I have been consumed with terror for weeks on end. Keeping me fear from ye has taxed me strength and plagued me every waking hour. I cannot keep up with me moods...”

The duke stared at Emmett’s hands, his mind racing at that last statement. Away from the tense situation, he’d wondered about his wife’s moods—they were remarkably familiar, though it had been over a year ago when last she suffered from them. “Is that all?”

“Nay, though I fear I cannot do the rest of it!” Emmett let go and flexed his hands.

The duke growled, “Just tell me the rest, and I shall later swear you delivered the verbal message exactly as you were instructed to.”

Relief flashed in his guard’s eyes. “Ye won’t insist I kiss yer hands?”

The duke’s heart leapt in his breast. She was not leaving him! He kept his expression neutral as he replied, “Nay.”

Emmett nodded. Still on his knees, he relayed the rest of the message: “Please do not set me aside. I promise to return to me former self and former temperament.” He stood and pulled the sealed missive from his waistcoat pocket.

“Former temperament would be a boon, but what in the bloody hell does her former *self* mean?” The duke paused then groaned. “Good God! She cannot mean to order bilious-colored gowns and go about wearing spectacles, could she?”

Emmett snorted with laughter. “I wouldn’t be knowing. Mayhap ye should ask Mrs. O’Toole or Mrs. Wigglesworth.”

“Later. Ask Rory and Seamus to meet us in the library in a quarter of an hour.”

“Aye, Yer Grace.” Emmett was about to close the door behind him when the duke called his name. “Aye?”

“Thank you for doing your damndest to deliver my wife’s message the way she intended it.”

“Yer welcome.”

Alone, the duke let down his guard. Heart aching, hands trembling, he broke the wax seal and read the note.

My Love,

*I was devastated to discover you left
without bidding me goodbye but understand*

your need for haste, as a storm seemed to be brewing. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me and not ask me to leave. I could not bear it!

I was wrong to keep my fears to myself, but I kept remembering how difficult it was after our first ball when Edward and Phoebe were injured at the hands of that madman.

I wanted to be so strong for you. I have failed. Please wait until you have finished your urgent business and returned to Wyndmere Hall before making your decision.

Your Loving Wife,

Persephone

The duke was shocked—not that she had hidden her fears from him, but that she thought he would set her aside. She was his wife! His *life*! How could she even think he would do such a thing?

His earlier harsh words and decision to have Mrs. O'Malley send for the two wet nurses came back to him and shamed him. *'Tis I who should be asking for her forgiveness.*

He vowed to do just that, but first, he had to speak to his men and then meet with Coventry and King to finalize his plans of further protection.

Descending the staircase, he saw his housekeeper waiting for him. She beamed at him, and he inclined his head. “Mrs.

Wigglesworth. I trust you and Jenkins have been taking care of my staff with your usual aplomb.”

“We have.” She noted him rubbing his hands together to warm them and tutted. “I must insist that you adjourn to your library at once—the fire is quite cozy. We cannot have you catching a chill, Your Grace.” When he smiled at her, she added, “Mrs. O’Toole has been waiting to ply you with tea and an assortment of your favorite sweets. I do hope you are hungry.”

The duke chuckled. “I could eat. Please advise Mrs. O’Toole there will be four for tea. I’ll be meeting with Flaherty and the other members of my guard momentarily.”

“Of course, Your Grace. Do see that you sit close to the fire.”

He shook his head at her motherly request but did not chide her for it. She had been doing so since he was a lad. “I believe I shall.”

His aging housekeeper’s concern warmed his heart. *Wiggy*, as he used to call her when he was young, had always looked after him. It appeared that she always would.

Flaherty was waiting for him in the library and opened the door for the duke. “Have ye sent word to Coventry and King, or will ye wait until after we meet with me brother and cousin?”

“After we meet, I shall send word, asking both gentlemen to meet us tonight.”

Heavy footsteps echoed in the hall. Flaherty grinned. “I’ll fetch me kin.”

The sound of deep chuckles and inventive suggestions drifted toward the duke. The company of men he had gathered were kin—brothers and cousins. In that moment he realized how cut off he and Persephone had been from his family, and hers as well. Lady Farnsworth had not been able to make the promised trip up to Wyndmere Hall due to the ugly weather. His brother and his wife lived to the south of him in Sussex,

his sister and her husband to the north in the Borderlands. He was squarely in the middle, just as he'd been stuck in the middle of a tenuous situation that began the moment he accepted the mantle of duke.

His sigh was long and deep. The voices grew louder as the taunts that always seemed to accompany conversations between the men of his guard grew more pronounced. Had he been investing too much time in worrying about his family's safety when he should have been discussing his worries and plans to protect them with his wife?

No! As long as it was within his power to keep such worries from his wife, he would. She deserved a peaceful life.

At what cost?

The question tormented him. Their babes and his wife would be well protected while he spent his every waking hour refining his plans to continually accomplish that feat as each new threat emerged. But wasn't his absence from their lives at the root of their current discord?

His stride over to the fireplace. The fire burned steadily, giving off a warmth he did not feel. Holding out his hands to the flames, he wondered if he'd closed himself off for too long. Had his heart hardened in his bid to have a clear head where the protection of his family was concerned?

Dear Lord, let this be the end of it. His very soul cried out to return to a happier time, when he and Persephone would share their thoughts and plans for their future over that first morning pot of tea.

He slowly smiled. His darling wife required two pots before she was coherent or—dare he even think it—*pleasant*. He missed that closeness. Missed her and their babes desperately.

Drawing in a deep breath, he resolved what he must do: meet with his men, discuss the situation, then send off a missive to Captain Coventry, his London man-of-affairs and closest friend, and another to Gavin King of the Bow Street

Runners. He looked forward to laying out the plans he'd made, and would refine with the help of his staunch guard, before meeting with Coventry and King to listen to their suggestions.

Mayhap in a fortnight, he would have accomplished what he intended and hired extra men to infiltrate the different layers of society. These new members of his London guard would glean the information required to keep his family safe.

Safe. The word shot through his skull. He had put off spending time with his wife, holding her in his arms in his bid to keep her and their babes safe.

What about love? Had he traded his happiness for his family's safety?

“By God, I'll have them both!” His voice bounced off the walls of his library. Absorbing the words, and his intention to see to it that they became truth, he felt the tiniest fraction of the weight lift from his shoulders.

The burden he had been carrying since that first attack on his wife and his home had increased in weight as he braced himself, preparing for the seemingly endless attacks on his family with the aid of his fearless personal guard. With the advent of his new plan, they would put an end to the verbal and physical threats to his wife and babes.

He would accept no other outcome. He was the bloody Duke of Wyndmere! His elevated position in society should assure his success. He would do his duty to his title and be more than diligent in his bid to protect the family name and coffers he had worked so hard to resurrect from the gutter, where his brother had dragged them before meeting his ignoble end.

Being the bloody duke was a royal pain in the arse!

He was smiling when Rory called, “Yer Grace!”

“Come in, men. I'd like to go over my plan to add to my guard here in London, with your suggestions as to how many and where they would best be able to acquire the constant

stream of intelligence I require to keep abreast of threats to my family.”

Having opened the discussion, the duke relaxed as he listened to his men toss out suggestions, ignore the ones they did not approve of, and embrace the ones they did.

Three-quarters of an hour later, the duke inclined his head. “Thank you, men. I believe we are ready to meet with Coventry and King.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

“YER GRACE, ARE ye certain ye wish to entertain in this weather?”

Persephone smiled at O’Malley. “It is just a dusting of snow. I am so looking forward to returning to my duties as duchess with my first guests, the vicar and his wife.”

His stern expression softened. “If ye have need of me, ye’ve but to ask.”

“Thank you. I promise not to keep our guests longer than it takes to empty a pot of tea and devour the cream tarts and butter cake Constance has prepared.”

“I’ll have one of the men on patrol report in if the weather turns. I cannot imagine what His Grace would say if he found out ye had overnight guests in his absence.”

Her heart clutched in her breast at the mention of her husband. She ignored the ache and did her best to retain the hint of a smile she’d worked so hard to show to everyone. It had been days and she had yet to receive a reply from London. Mayhap he had no intention of replying...or returning!

An unwanted vision of the beautiful, willing widows and cyprians of London seeking to lure her duke into their clutches hardened her heart. “I cannot imagine it would perturb him in the least. His Grace has far more *lofty* things to worry about than the comings and goings here at Wyndmere Hall.”

O’Malley mumbled something beneath his breath.

“I beg your pardon, what did you say?”

“Clearing me throat, Yer Grace.” He did so again. *Loudly.*

Closing the distance between them, she tilted her head back and frowned. “I can imagine what you said, having had

more than one occasion to hear the opinions you cannot help but give to those you feel incapable of thinking for themselves.”

The man’s face paled. “If I have given offense in the past, Yer Grace, I beg yer pardon.”

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and tapped her foot. “You know that you have!”

If she thought her words would have O’Malley getting down on one knee to beg her forgiveness, she was mistaken.

“I made a vow to His Grace to protect himself and his family with me life if necessary.”

She regretted her outburst and needed to make amends. “And have bled while doing so. We are beyond grateful and beholden to you and the rest of the Duke’s Guard.”

His green eyes danced with merriment. “Then ye’ll understand why I won’t be sharing me thoughts with yerself, Yer Grace. As they might not be fit for yer tender ears.”

Persephone’s snort of laughter surprised them both.

Before she could respond, he bowed and advised her, “I’ll report back to ye, if there’s a change in the weather.”

She was thanking his broad back as he left to do his duty. His surly response reminded him so much of Jared. What was her husband doing at this very moment? He would be in London by now. Had he read her missive and accepted her apology? Would he choose to ignore it in favor of the tempting delights of a willing widow who would make no demands on his time or tax his brain? A woman who would tend to his every physical need—giving him the pleasure he had rejected from his own wife.

No! I shall not use this time of separation to sink deeper into morose thoughts. She spun on her heel and retraced her steps. It was nearly time for her twins’ next feeding. After which she would dress in her prettiest frock—one of the many that had had the seams let out so she could wear them. She’d

seen no need to purchase new clothes, anticipating she would regain her former figure. Mayhap she was wrong and should purchase a new gown or two. Vowing not to think of her inability to shed the weight the midwife, and more than one of her staff, had promised would begin to magically melt off by the time the twins were a few months old, she paused before the nursery, gathered her composure, and opened the door.



PERSEPHONE Poured a second cup of tea for the vicar and his wife.

“So lovely to be invited to take tea this afternoon, Your Grace,” Vicar Digby said. “Am I to understand that His Grace is not in residence?”

Used to the rapidity with which news traveled in and about Wyndmere Hall and the village, Persephone inclined her head. “He had urgent business in London.”

Mrs. Digby sipped delicately from her cup. Setting it on its saucer, she nodded. “His Grace’s brother, the fifth duke, was constantly being called away on urgent business.”

Persephone buried thoughts of the late duke, knowing Jared’s older brother frequented the gaming hells and more in the bowels of London. She hoped her husband’s *urgent* business would not take him on a similar path.

Choosing to ignore the comment, she smiled and queried, “Would you care for another lavender scone? Constance has such a light hand preparing them.”

Mrs. Digby beamed. “Thank you.”

“They are delicious,” the vicar remarked.

The elderly couple spoke of the various families in the village and news of births—and, unfortunately, as life would have it, deaths that occurred in the last month.

Once they caught her up on the happenings in the village, she said, “I have so enjoyed our visit today. I have missed so

much during the last few weeks..." Her voice trailed off as the reasons roiled in her stomach. Ignoring it, hoping it would settle, she continued, "I would like to invite you and another couple to dine with me—an early dinner, weather permitting."

The vicar's boney chest expanded with pride. "We would be honored to dine with you, Your Grace."

"Do you think Squire Bothwell and his wife would be amenable to accepting my invitation?"

Mrs. Digby smiled. "Lucretia would be beside herself receiving your invitation." Her enthusiastic expression faded. "Although mayhap not at the moment—you see, their nephew and a friend have come to stay with them for a fortnight."

"Then I shall be sure to include them in the invitation. What are their names?" Persephone asked.

"The nephew is Anthony Bothwell."

The vicar looked distinctly uncomfortable while his wife rattled on about how charming the squire's nephew was and how sought after he was when in London. She did not mention the other man's name.

"It sounds as if the squire's nephew will make a lively addition to our party," Persephone said. "As I am certain his friend will be. What is the other gentleman's name?"

The vicar did not answer, instead changing the subject, and they were soon speaking of those in the parish in need. "The Morgan family is in dire straits after their house fire."

"When did this happen? Was anyone injured?"

The vicar's reply had her stomach threatening to rebel once more. "A fortnight ago. Right around the time..." The vicar's face flamed. "Do forgive me for bringing up such an inappropriate topic, Your Grace. I was not thinking."

Persephone fought and won the battle to calm her stomach, though her nerves were racked with tension. "Do not worry about it, though I would like to know if anyone was harmed."

“Mr. Morgan’s hands were severely burned when he pulled his family to safety.”

“Has the doctor been to attend him?”

“Aye, and left instructions that Morgan not return to his trade until the doctor was satisfied his hands were fully on the mend, with no sign of infection.”

“I do not believe I have met the Morgan family. What is his trade?”

“He’s a cooper—crafts the finest barrels and is adept at repairing wheels and such.”

Interested in the welfare of the villagers as well as Jared’s tenant farmers, she asked, “Where are they living while their house is repaired?”

Mrs. Digby sighed. “They will have to rebuild... Their home burned to the ground. The family is spread out among those in our parish who have spare rooms. Though his sons have taken to staying at his shop. They have learned their father’s trade and are filling in for him while he is on the mend.”

“Commendable,” the duchess replied while she worried over how she would be able to assist the family, as she was certain the duke would wish her to. “We have an empty cottage! I’ll pen a note, if you would kindly deliver it to Mrs. Morgan. I’m certain she will accept on behalf of her husband.”

The vicar frowned. “Do you not think it would be better to address it to Mr. Morgan?”

Persephone was quick to respond, “Nay. He is obviously in severe pain and would not be thinking past all they have lost, the work that is waiting for him, and the future of his family.”

“You are so thoughtful...so wise, Your Grace,” Mrs. Digby said. “I will be happy to deliver your note.”

Pleased that she was beginning to attend to the duties she felt were expected of her, Persephone relaxed and enjoyed the

lively conversation as the vicar's wife spoke of their grown children who now lived in London.

After a companionable visit, the teapot was empty and not one crumb of their cook's delicacies remained. With a contented sigh, the vicar rose and bowed. "Thank you for a lovely afternoon, Your Grace. It is wonderful to see you looking well, even in the duke's absence."

He turned to assist his wife. Standing beside him, she said, "Mayhap the next time, your little darlings will be awake, and I will have the opportunity to meet them."

Persephone smiled. "They do seem to enjoy seeing new faces. Mayhap a brief visit to the nursery can be arranged when you arrive at the end of the week for dinner."

"That sounds lovely, Your Grace. I look forward to it."

Lighter in spirit after a lively discussion over tea with the vicar and his wife, and offering her aid to those in need, Persephone accompanied her guests to the entryway. Humphries retrieved their coats and helped don them while waiting for the vicar's carriage.

Satisfied her guests were tucked into their carriage and on their way, she passed through the servants' door and sought out Constance to thank her for a lovely tea.



A SHORT WHILE later, Persephone returned to the nursery to spend time with her babes and their nanny—her newest friend.

She paused at the door, listening. It was too quiet for her to knock and take the chance she'd wake up her darlings, so she turned the knob slowly and peeked around the edge of the door. Gwendolyn looked up from where she sat in one of the mahogany rocking chairs, pencil in hand, journal in her lap.

Mrs. O'Malley set aside the pencil and the book and rose to her feet. Beckoning Persephone inside, she quickly noted the duchess was alone before speaking. "Your Grace, I was

wondering if I'd have to send for you or if you would stop by on your way to rest."

"You know you do not have to worry about addressing me, as I've bid you on numerous occasions, Gwendolyn. You have been a kindred spirit since the day you stepped down from my husband's carriage."

"I do not want anyone to think that I would disrespect you by not addressing you by your title, Persephone."

"Botheration! I do not give a fig what anyone else thinks. Besides, we have been through far too much together for you to be constantly *Your Gracing* me. Don't you think?"

Gwendolyn's soft laughter wrapped around Persephone like a hug.

"How was your visit? Did the vicar and his wife have any new gossip to share?"

The duchess frowned. "Yes, actually. The Morgan family lost their home to a fire." She did not mention the fact that it coincided with the last failed attempt to kidnap her darling babes. Gwendolyn was more of a sister to her, and therefore an aunt to the twins. It would be just as upsetting to her as it was to Persephone.

"The cooper?"

"Aye. His hands were badly burned when he rescued his family from the fire."

"Poor man. How many children does he have?"

"Two sons, who are old enough to tend to their father's current orders."

"Anyone else injured?"

"Nay. I...er...offered them the vacant cottage to live in."

Gwendolyn's eyes widened before she smiled. "What a wonderful idea! Do you think he'll accept your offer? Men can be very stubborn about offers of assistance."

The duchess snorted. “Both our husbands are more than stubborn.”

“Hardheaded,” Gwendolyn added.

“I penned a note to Mrs. Morgan, as I am certain she will accept my offer. Her family will be under one roof again, and she will be able to care for her husband without the added worry of being in the way.”

“Excellent notion, Persephone. I know exactly what you mean. Over the years I have felt as if I am in the way, though for different reasons entirely.”

Persephone reached for her friend’s hand, gave it a squeeze, and released it. “You are most definitely not in the way here!”

“Thank you.” Tilting her head to one side, Gwendolyn studied the duchess before asking, “Is there anything else you discussed this afternoon?”

“I have extended an invitation to the vicar and his wife to dine with me on Friday. They will be delivering an invitation to Squire Bothwell and his wife for me.” Persephone paused, remembering the Bothwells’ nephew and friend. “We will actually be a party of seven.”

“Seven? Have you heard from His Grace? Is he to return by then?”

“I have not, and have no idea when he will return. The Bothwells’ nephew and a friend are visiting for the next fortnight, so I naturally included them in the invitation. Apparently, their nephew is known to be quite charming and an excellent addition to any hostess’s table. Although Mrs. Digby is not acquainted with the friend, or his name or family, for that matter.”

“Bothwell...” Gwendolyn said. “I knew of a Bothwell when last I was in London.” She shrugged. “I am quite certain he is not the same fellow. Mayhap a distant cousin.”

“Oh?” Persephone replied. “I sense a hesitation on your part. Out with it! What do you know?”

Gwendolyn blew out a frustrated breath. “If you must know—”

“Oh, I must.”

Gwendolyn frowned at the duchess. “The Bothwell I knew of attended a house party hosted by one of the families I was working for. The servants’ gossip indicated he was quite charming, glib of tongue, and a seducer of women.”

Persephone sighed. “Well, let us hope he is not the nephew in question, though mayhap he *is* related to the squire.”

Gwendolyn’s eyes danced with amusement. “What are the odds that you have invited a charming gentleman—or two—of questionable character to dine with you while the duke is away?”

“Botheration! How am I going to find out if they are one and the same?” The babes started to fuss at the sound of the duchess’s voice.

“Lower your voice,” Gwendolyn cautioned her. “You’ll wake the babes.”

They started to cry.

“Now *you* have woken them,” Persephone murmured as their cries gained in volume. “See if you can soothe Richard, please. Abigail is due to be fed first this time.”

She sat in the rocking chair closest to her daughter’s cradle and settled the fussing babe to her breast, knowing she would fill up as quickly as her son was wont to eat slowly.

Brushing the tip of her finger along the curve of her babe’s cheek, she sighed. “I do hope my missive arrived before Jared. I need him to understand that I have been out of sorts and am completely to blame for ignoring him.”

While Gwendolyn held Richard to her heart, she swayed, rocking back and forth to soothe him while he waited his turn

to eat. “I am quite certain His Grace has received your missive. My husband sent the messenger off on the duke’s stallion. He would most certainly cover ground faster than His Grace, who is traveling on a much slower horse.”

“I hope you are right,” Persephone replied. “The wait for his reply is torture.”

“At least you’ll have the pleasure of entertaining two handsome rakehells at your table! No doubt word will spread, reaching London before the end of the week, when he will sit at your table, all smiles and affability.”

Persephone frowned. “As I have yet to hear from my husband, I cannot think he will care.” She shifted Abigail to her shoulder and began to coax the bubbles from her belly. “There now.” She beamed at the loud burp. “That was impressive.”

Gwendolyn took Abigail and handed Richard to her. “Do you have a menu in mind for your dinner guests?”

“Not as yet. I spoke to Constance before coming up. She will have some suggestions for me in a little while.”

While the nanny changed her daughter, Persephone marveled at the contentment that filled her every time she sat down to feed her babes. There was but one thing missing—her husband, which reminded her of his last dictate to her.

“Gwendolyn, did Jared ask give you the names of the two wet nurses his physician recommended?”

“Er...yes, actually, he did. I wasn’t going to broach the subject with you unless I noticed you were having difficulty keeping up with the twins’ feedings.”

“Did you tell Jared that?”

“Not in so many words,” Gwendolyn admitted. “Richard and Abigail seem content—and for longer in between feedings. So I do not recommend any changes just yet. Would you?”

“No,” the duchess was quick to respond. “I was a bit overset by his proclamation.” Striving to maintain her calm, she changed the difficult subject completely. “Now that the twins have been fed and you’ve changed Abigail, why don’t you take a break?”

“Thank you. I believe I will.”

With Gwendolyn’s closing of the nursery door, the duchess sat lost in thought. Those that haunted her had her asking aloud, “How have we let ourselves slip away from one another?” If she added that worry to the hiring of the wet nurses, she would be distraught and unable to feed her babes.

With a shake of her head, she pushed her worries aside to concentrate on feeding her son.

She coaxed bubbles out of him, smiling when he burped louder than his sister. “Your father would have laughed listening to the two of you.”

I hope I haven’t waited too long to apologize.

She changed her son and laid him in his cradle. She tried not to think about what her husband would be doing in London. The moment word of his arrival spread through the *ton*, there would be a flood of invitations. Would he accept them?

Heartsick at the thought that he might just do that, she returned to the rocking chair and wondered how soon he would respond to her missive.



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DUKE FELT another heavy weight shift as his trusted friends agreed with him.

The intensity in the depths of Coventry's gaze was magnified by the black of his eye-patch. "King and I have been in discussion for a fortnight," he said.

"Do you have a list of names?"

Gavin King inclined his head. "Aye. We have two lists. Would you like to discuss our choices now or after you have had the opportunity to review them?"

A troubling thought kept plaguing the duke. He had left without bidding his wife goodbye. Time had been against him. While he made the effort to find her, she was indisposed, and he could not wait.

You could have left a verbal message for her with O'Malley.

The sudden silence in the room had him snapping back to attention. "Forgive me. You were saying, King?"

King reached into his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a sealed missive. "I did not expect to see you today, hence the wax seal."

"I'm glad I was able to intercept your list before you sent it off to the Lake District." The duke broke the seal and unfolded the foolscap, reading the names. "I admit to not knowing any of the men on your list."

Coventry snorted with laughter. The duke glared at him, and his longtime friend laughed harder. "Admit it, Your Grace—if you *had* known any of the names on the list, there would

be many members of the *ton* who would readily call your character into question.”

“Indeed.” Glancing at the men gathered in the library, Jared stated, “My plan is to meet with the men. Given the number of names on the list, mayhap it could be accomplished in groups of five or more.”

King was the first to reply: “I do not believe that would be wise, Your Grace. As it is, you know far more about those who would discredit you and harm your family than I am comfortable with. You could be at risk just knowing their names.”

“Are they that disreputable?”

Coventry responded, “Nay, Your Grace. Each one of these men are honorable, trustworthy, and willing to suffer any consequences if they are caught in this dangerous game we are about to begin.”

“Spying,” the duke rasped.

“Aye,” Coventry agreed. “Spying.”

“How will they communicate with my London guard?”

“We know most of them men on the list, Yer Grace,” Seamus Flaherty advised.

“I see.” The duke began to pace. “Unsavory characters?”

“Nay,” Emmett O’Malley was quick to respond. “Honest men who have not sought employment working among the quality.”

“Dockworkers?”

“Ye could say that,” Rory Flaherty remarked.

“Tradesmen?”

“A few,” Seamus replied.

Before Jared could ask how many of the men were currently employed in the gaming hells that littered London’s underbelly, King spoke up. “Your Grace. Suffice it to say, the

men have all met with myself and Coventry. Those that your London guard did not know have been introduced.”

“And approved of,” Emmett remarked.

“Ye can rest easy, Yer Grace,” Rory said. “These men will blend in with whatever level of society is required to do the job.”

Coventry walked over and placed his hand on the duke’s shoulder. “Trust us.”

The duke met Coventry’s gaze and knew without question that he would. “I do.” With a glance at those gathered around him, he felt his throat constrict. “I am grateful to you all—and to those whom I will not have the opportunity to meet. Please thank them for me.”

“We already have,” Coventry assured him.

The duke inclined his head. “Thank you, men.”

After the men filed out, the duke sat down behind his desk to read through recent correspondence. Normally all correspondence would have been sent to Coventry to weed through. Those his man-of-affairs deemed for the duke’s eyes only were sent once a week via messenger.

The knock on the library door had him grumbling, “Enter.”

Jenkins stood on the threshold with a silver salver.

The duke groaned. “Not even a few hours in Town and the bloody *ton* wants me to attend their endless round of entertainments?”

The butler’s lips twitched, but he did not smile. “It would seem so, Your Grace.”

“Could you not simply toss them into the fire?”

Jenkin’s eyes gleamed with amusement—a rare show of emotion for the staid head of the duke’s London staff. “Your Grace?”

“Where is my valet? Mayhap he could respond to them for me.”

The butler cleared his throat. “May I suggest asking Mrs. Wigglesworth to oversee the task? She has been in your employ far longer than your new valet, and it would be more seemly for her to do so.”

The duke motioned for Jenkins to take them away. “If you would. Before you even suggest it, Jenkins, I have no intention of remaining here for more than a few days and will not be interviewing candidates for a private secretary who would see to the chore whenever I am in residence with Her Grace.”

Remembering his wife’s distaste for most of those moving in the upper level of the *ton*, he rubbed a hand over his face. “Blast—mayhap I should make the time to do so. Persephone would have already tossed the lot into the fire by now...and laughed while she did so.”

Jenkins could no longer contain his mirth. He slowly smiled. “I believe you are correct, Your Grace. And may I say how very much your father would have delighted in your choice of duchess.”

The duke was touched by the show of emotion he had not seen often since he was a lad. “I believe his first reaction—were he to meet Persephone wearing one of her unfortunate-colored gowns and spectacles—would be to ask me if I had taken leave of my senses. After having the opportunity to speak with her for more than a few moments, I do believe you are right. Father would have had no choice but to fall in love with her.”

“Like father, like son, Your Grace.”

“Indeed.”

The door quietly closed behind his retainer. In the silence of the room, Jared recalled the number of years spent feeling relief that he was not in line to inherit his father’s title. He preferred working with his hands, helping the tenant farmers.

He never imagined his elder brother would die so young—or in such a manner.

Life did not give one a choice as to what one wanted. If it had, he would never have chosen to be the duke. Then again, if he had not inherited the title, would he have met Lady Persephone at the ball? Would she have fallen backward into his arms, wreaking havoc with his life, or would someone else have been there in his stead? His brother? Viscount Hollingford? Lord Chellenham?

He shuddered at the thought and then thanked God he had been the one to catch Persephone and capture her heart.

She had been through so much since that night, forced to bear witness to horrendous deeds and vicious slander. Still, she had borne it all with a grace he could not imagine any other woman possessing. When had he let the never-ending onslaught of physical and verbal attacks against himself and his family allow him to forget how very much he treasured his wife?

Picking up his quill, he put pen to paper, knowing exactly what to say to her.



CHAPTER NINE

PERSEPHONE STROVE TO hide her worry behind a smile of welcome. She had been in the kitchen off and on all afternoon, chatting with their cook and housekeeper. All was ready to receive their first dinner guests without the duke in residence.

Had she let emotion overrule her head? Her husband's guard kept rigid control over who would be allowed onto the grounds of Wyndmere Hall. Though they had grudgingly approved of her guests, Patrick O'Malley had voiced his unhappiness with the fact that the duke was still in London.

She lifted her chin, and while she felt a modicum of satisfaction having the approval of the Duke's Guard, she was irritated that she had to request it. "I am the Duchess of Wyndmere," she murmured. "I can bloody well invite whomever I chose to our home."

"Within reason, Yer Grace," came the grave reply from behind her.

The duchess whirled around, placed her hands on her hips, and challenged, "I am quite sure you have far more important matters to attend to than adding your seal of approval to my list of dinner guests."

His facial muscles told a different story. She watched in fascination as the head of her husband's guard battled to rein in his frustration. "Your Grace, nothing is more important than your safety and that of your babes. As guests could be potential threats to your safety, His Grace has given me leave to deny any requests that I feel warrant it."

She narrowed her eyes and glared at him. "Oh, did he?"

O'Malley opened his mouth to speak, then clamped it shut.

Satisfied that he understood she was vexed with him, she asked, “Do you intend to answer my question?”

O’Malley inclined his head and stalked off.

Persephone should have been angry with the guard for not answering her question, but knew he was dedicated to his duty and would do whatever he felt essential to carrying it out.

O’Malley’s long strides quickly added to the distance between them. She drew in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. *He is protecting your life and that of your babes.* It took more of an effort than she had imagined to squash thoughts of O’Malley and the way he had fueled the worry and frustration in her heart.

She had guests arriving any moment; it wouldn’t do to appear out of sorts. By this evening, talk would spread to London that the duchess had hosted a dinner party without the duke. What if it already had? Would Jared be vexed with her decision to entertain without him? Did he already know of her choice of guests?

“Botheration!”

The knock on the sitting room door had her jolting.

“You can handle a few dinner guests, Persephone,” she told herself. “Come in,” she called.

“Vicar and Mrs. Digby, Your Grace,” Humphries announced as he motioned for the rail-thin elderly couple to enter.

Persephone walked toward them with her hands outstretched. “How wonderful to see you again. I hope the roads were not too terribly difficult to navigate after the overnight snowfall.”

The vicar puffed up his chest. “Our coachman has driven through all kinds of weather over the years, has he not, my dear?”

Mrs. Digby positively glowed at the endearment. “He always delivers us to our destination intact.”

Persephone hid her smile at the image that wrought in her mind. “You are very fortunate to have such an experienced coachman.”

“Squire and Mrs. Bothwell, Your Grace,” the butler announced as he stood aside for the portly squire and his equally round wife to enter.

The duchess murmured a quiet “Excuse me” to the vicar and his wife, who quickly nodded. She moved toward the squire and his wife. “I am so pleased to see you both.”

“We were delighted to receive your invitation, Your Grace,” he said.

Persephone could not help but notice the squire sounded as if *she* were the one who should be delighted he and his wife accepted.

Mrs. Bothwell leaned close and said, “Our nephew Anthony and his very good friend Gideon Lockmead left just a few moments behind us. They should arrive very soon.”

“Won’t you make yourselves comfortable while we wait for them?”

The couples sat opposite one another on the green-and-white-striped settees. Persephone had arranged the furniture in groupings so guests would be able to easily converse as they faced one another. Two floral-patterned chairs sat on either side of the settees.

As she lowered herself onto one of the chairs, Humphries returned, announcing the arrival of Messrs. Bothwell and Lockmead.

“Your Grace.” Mr. Bothwell beamed at her. “Thank you for including myself and Lockmead in your invitation to my parents.”

“Most gracious of you,” Mr. Lockmead added with far too familiar a smile.

She hated to form opinions of someone’s character too quickly, and set her irritation aside. “Gentlemen, won’t you

join us?”

She introduced the newcomers to the vicar and his wife and offered everyone a glass of sherry while they waited for dinner to be announced.

The conversation held her interest as it began with the happenings in and around Wyndmere Village and moved on to London. Her worry that she would hear her husband's name mentioned as the conversation turned to the entertainments Bothwell and Lockmead attended kept her in a heightened state of anxiety.

Finally dinner was announced, and she led the party to the dining room. It wasn't until she was about to walk through the open double doors to the spacious room that she noted Patrick and Eamon O'Malley had positioned themselves in the room. The unrelieved black of their uniforms was a sharp contrast to the royal-blue and gold livery of the duke's footmen. Her husband had been insistent that the famed tailor Weston would create his guard's uniforms. The only adornment was the striking contrast of emerald green and gold in the Irish harp and Gaelic word *Eire* embroidered over their hearts.

Her anxiety melted away under the stern expression the O'Malley cousins wore...they were in protective mode. Understandably, they made quite an impression on her guests. Their height alone would give anyone cause to stare. In her opinion it was their broad shoulders and muscular builds, visibly apparent in the fit of their frockcoats, that would ensure her safety.

The meal was largely a success, with the only wrinkle in her evening the effusive compliments from the squire's nephew and his friend. She had never mastered the art of flirtation and was unsure how to deflect questionable comments in order to divert the conversation to safer ground.

Fortunately, Mrs. Digby came to her rescue, changing the topic. “Will we have a chance to meet Richard and Abigail?”

“I did promise that you would, didn’t I? What with the change in the weather and our plans to dine later, I had forgotten.” Persephone motioned for one of the footmen to find out if the twins were still awake.

While she waited for the reply, the conversation turned once again to London. She flinched when she heard her husband’s name mentioned as the reason Lady Stenerson’s ball had become quite a crush.

Heart in her throat, her stomach tying itself into knots, she managed to hold her head high and act as if she had not just received a direct blow to the heart.

“How long does His Grace intend to remain in London?” Lockmead inquired.

Persephone was not quite certain she could trust herself to speak. She reached for her water glass and took a sip, feeling as if she were adrift in waters she had no idea how to navigate. Why had she thought she could manage her first dinner party without her husband?

“Your Grace?”

Relief speared through her as she motioned the footman forward, enabling her to ignore Mr. Lockmead’s question.

“Mrs. O’Malley thinks a short visit would be best,” the footman said.

Knowing it would soon be time to feed her babes, she inclined her head and thanked the footman. Rising to her feet, she said, “Gentlemen, if you wish, you may adjourn to the sitting room—as His Grace is not in residence—and enjoy a glass of port there.”

The men rose, bowed to her, and were escorted to the sitting room.

“I hope you do not mind a shorter visit this evening, ladies.”

The vicar’s wife smiled. “Of course not, Your Grace. They are still so little, and their schedules can be set off-kilter so

easily and without an apparent reason.”

Mrs. Bothwell inclined her head. “I remember the squire’s sister’s tales of when Anthony was young. Our nephew suffered from colic.”

The women discussed various cures for colic on their way to the nursery while Persephone listened intently, storing the information away for future reference.



AN HOUR LATER her guests had gone, and Persephone once again rocked her son, nursing him. The gentle motion of the rocking chair soothed her. “I had no idea keeping track of conversation between six people could be so exhausting.”

Her nanny chuckled. “I am quite sure I would have no idea how to handle a conversation with *two* guests, let alone the number you chose for your first official dinner party.”

“I had intended for it to be four but felt obligated to invite the squire’s nephew and friend, as they were the squire’s houseguests.”

“Word will soon spread that you are a most gracious and obliging hostess.”

Persephone smiled as her son’s mouth went slack. “I think he’s full.” She shifted him to her shoulder and gently rubbed his back in a circular motion. His loud burp had her laughing. “I never would have guessed an infant could be so loud.”

Gwendolyn softly smiled as she handed Abigail to her mother then took a sleepy Richard from the duchess. “It has been my experience that most mothers are shocked when they first hear the rumblings and burps that follow. I will say, a good number of the infants I have had the privilege to care for were in the care of their nurses, who were not at all surprised.”

“Jared and I wanted to be the ones to care for any children we were blessed with.”

Placing him in his cradle, Gwendolyn mentioned, “Patrick has been hovering as of late.”

Persephone smiled. “It would seem expectant fathers feel it their duty.”

“He does not want me to overdo it,” Gwendolyn remarked as she lowered herself onto the rocking chair beside the duchess.

“Jared worried over every mouthful of food and cup of tea while I was expecting. Our husbands must feel so helpless to protect us. After all, we are the ones carrying their babes, and all they can see as proof of that is a belly that grows larger with each passing day. I imagine it wreaks havoc with their instinct to protect—knowing they were the ones who happily put us in that condition.”

Gwendolyn snorted with laughter. “They did, didn’t they.” Her smile disappeared as she added, “Do you think Patrick’s worry that I may not be able to carry our babe to term is a viable one?”

“No. You have a large support system here. Those who will bully you into taking care of yourself and your unborn babe.”

“Have I thanked you lately?”

Persephone’s delighted laughter echoed in the room. “Yes, you have. Now as to Patrick...let him worry,” she said. “He will no matter what you say to alleviate his worries. Besides, it will keep his mind off telling you what to eat—or God forbid, start rationing your tea intake.”

Their quiet laughter was just what Persephone needed after the hectic day leading up to the trying dinner. Rocking as she fed her daughter, she wondered at the effusive compliments the gentlemen paid her, prompting her to ask, “Do you think men flatter a woman because they believe their words to be the truth or because they have another reason entirely for doing so?”

“It would depend on the man,” her nanny replied. “His Grace and the men in his guard would absolutely be speaking the truth. I couldn’t possibly guess about anyone else, as I have never spent much time outside of a nursery until coming to Wyndmere Hall.”

“I am altogether uncertain how to counter such remarks. I admit I ignored them tonight, rather than trying to respond them. It felt unseemly to even acknowledge them.”

“Well, of course, given that it was not His Grace doing the complimenting,” Gwendolyn replied.

Relieved that her friend found no issue with the way she’d handled the rather forward remarks from Mr. Bothwell and Mr. Lockmead, Persephone shifted her daughter to her shoulder and began the soothing motion that was guaranteed to loosen any burps. The comments remained at the forefront of her mind as she began to contemplate whether there was a hint of truth in their words. Was she still attractive to someone who had never met her previously—when she was a slimmer version of herself?

“I am looking forward to changing out of this gown and donning my nightgown and dressing gown,” she said. “I know you must be just as tired, but would you mind waiting just a bit longer to retire for the night?”

“I do not mind in the slightest, and I must say, you do look as if you could sleep for days,” Gwendolyn replied. “I can sit up with the twins for the next hour until Mollie or Francis comes to relieve me. Please do not give it another thought.”

“I have looked haggard and in need of sleep since before the twins were born,” the duchess quipped. “I will be fine as soon as I change. I shall return shortly.”

The duchess quickly changed—not bothering to ring for her maid to assist her—and returned to the nursery. An hour later, Francis arrived to sit with the twins for the first of two overnight shifts.

“Oh, Your Grace! You changed already? Did Mollie assist you?”

The duchess smiled. “I managed on my own, though I may have wrinkled my gown returning it to the wardrobe.”

“I shall see to it first thing in the morning,” Francis promised.

“Thank you, Francis. I shall see you in two hours, unless Richard or Abigail wake unable to wait for me to feed them on their normal schedule.”

Francis smiled. “I promise to send for you straight away. I wouldn’t want to rouse the rest of the house by letting either of your babes cry.”

Persephone laughed. “His Grace and I have been blessed with babes who have healthy sets of lungs.” As she slowly closed the door, a feeling of sadness crept over her as her worry returned.

How many Incomparables *had* her husband waltzed with at Lady Stenerson’s ball?



CHAPTER TEN

“I BEG YOUR pardon?”

Emmett noted the tension in the duke’s jaw and the flash of irritation in his eyes and could not wait to share the duke’s reaction to the news with Jenkins. He repeated, “Her Grace entertained a party of six for dinner.”

“Did Patrick mention who was in attendance?”

“Aye.”

“Well?”

Emmett tried to hide his smile. The duke was acting as if he were jealous. “Yer Grace?”

“Who. Attended.”

“Beg pardon, Yer Grace. I thought ye were asking an ‘aye’ or ‘nay’ question.”

“Bloody hell, Emmett! Who attended the damned dinner?”

“Vicar and Mrs. Digby, Squire and Mrs. Bothwell, and the squire’s nephew and friend, who are visiting from London.”

“I know the vicar and the squire and their wives quite well.” The duke frowned. “What of the nephew and friend? Did your brother supply their names?”

Noting the growing annoyance in the duke’s tone, Emmett was quick to respond, “Anthony Bothwell and Gideon Lockmead.”

“Any further information on the two?”

“Just Patrick and Eamon’s reaction to the younger men’s conversation and flirtatious comments to Her Grace.”

“*Bloody, buggering hell!* Why did Her Grace entertain dinner guests when she did not deign to entertain the entire time I was in residence?”

Emmett shrugged. “As I was not there during the planning, or the dinner, I’m certain I cannot say.”

The duke paced in front of the fireplace in his downstairs study, all the while mumbling to himself. Finally, he stopped in front of Emmett and commanded him, “Send a missive to Coventry at once! I need to find out just who these two men are. I cannot have my duchess risking her reputation when I am not there to protect her.”



ALONE, THE DUKE drew in a deep breath and tried to regain his control. He could not lose his temper, or else he’d act without thinking—something frowned upon when one held a lofty title.

Persephone did not have enough time to spend with me, let alone to entertain. Why is it she suddenly has the time now that I am in London? A sobering thought occurred, but the duke pushed it aside. He refused to consider it. His wife loved him. Hadn’t she professed so in her missives?

The bottom dropped out of his stomach as the realization hit him. “Good God! I never sent my response!”

The duke strode to the door and yanked it open. It bounced off the wall as he shouted, “Jenkins!”

The butler was just stepping through the door to the servants’ side of the town house and rushed toward the duke. “Is there a problem, Your Grace?”

“There bloody well is! Have my horse saddled at once.”

“Have you an appointment?”

The duke took the steps two at a time. “I have an urgent missive to deliver,” he called over his shoulder.

“Shall I have one of the footmen deliver it?”

“I must deliver it personally.”



JENKINS SENT ONE of the footmen with the duke’s request to the stables as Emmett approached the butler. “Is His Grace leaving us?”

“Apparently so.”

Emmett chuckled. “Tomorrow?”

Jenkin’s lips twitched as he fought the urge to smile. “Immediately.”

“Can he not wait for a response from Coventry?”

“He said he has an urgent missive to deliver.”

Emmett sighed. “He never sent the duchess a reply, did he?”

Jenkins shook his head. “Not to my knowledge.”

“His Grace is rattled,” Emmett remarked.

“Well?” the duke demanded as he pounded down the staircase. “Is my horse ready?”

“Aye, Your Grace. Let me help you with your coat.”

“Forget the bloody coat!”

“Won’t that be a pleasant surprise for Her Grace if ye arrive home out of yer head, feverish.”

The duke spun on his bootheel and glared at Emmett. “If I were not in such a rush to reach Wyndmere Hall—”

“You had best hurry, Your Grace,” Jenkins interceded on Emmett’s behalf. “There is still plenty of daylight left to reach one of the inns you favor along the road north.”

The front door opened, and Rory Flaherty frowned. “I thought ye’d be ready by now, Yer Grace.”

The duke glared at him and strode through the doorway.

Jenkins and Emmett congratulated themselves on a successful mission—the duke was rushing back to his duchess!

“Do ye think he’ll be so angry, he’ll end up putting both feet in his mouth when he speaks to Her Grace?”

“When His Grace puts his mind to it,” Jenkins reminded him, “he can be quite charming.”

Emmett laughed in his face. “Ye don’t say!”



“LADY STENERSON WAS effusive in her remarks after waltzing with the duke,” Francis told Mollie.

“His Grace waltzed with her?” Mollie shook her head. “Are all men so fickle?”

Merry overheard that last comment as she walked into the kitchen to find both maids speaking with Constance. “Constance, do not encourage these two.” Turning to the maids, she asked, “Don’t you have duties to attend to?”

Francis looked at Mollie before responding, “Aye, Merry, but we also have a duty to Her Grace to pick apart the gossip from London to get to the truth.”

“What truth?” Merry demanded.

Constance sighed. “Apparently His Grace attended Lady Stenerson’s ball the other night and danced with two very attractive widows and the lady herself.”

“I see.”

“Our plans to urge the duke and duchess back together may backfire on us,” Francis wailed.

“I shall never forgive myself if they cannot mend this rift between them,” Mollie whispered.

“What rift?” Patrick O’Malley demanded, approaching them from the rear entrance.

“Between the duke and the duchess,” Francis rasped. “Rumors are flying about the village about how entranced His Grace was while dancing—”

“Waltzing,” Mollie corrected her. “A much more scandalous dance.”

Francis agreed. “Waltzing with two beautiful widows and the hostess!”

“Ah, Lady Stenerson,” O’Malley said. “I’ve heard she’s old enough to be the duke’s mother.”

The maids gasped, but the housekeeper and the cook smiled. “Well, that’s one problem solved. Out with it, Patrick,” Merry said. “What do you know about the widows?”

“Lady Tierney’s husband of two years died in his sleep a fortnight ago.”

“Shouldn’t she be in mourning?” Mollie inquired.

“Aye, out of respect, though rumor has it ’twas not a love match, as he was twenty years her senior.”

Francis started wringing her hands. “What of the other widow?”

“Lady Morrisey’s husband perished serving in His Majesty’s Regiment,” O’Malley replied. “Five years past.”

Mollie looked at her friend. “What are we going to tell Her Grace?”

Francis shook her head. “I have no idea. She is still distraught, waiting for His Grace’s reply to her missive.”

O’Malley cleared his throat. “Mayhap His Grace’s urgent business kept him from sendin’ a reply.”

Merry picked up on the idea and assured the maids that was most likely the case. “Now back to your duties.”

“At once, Merry,” Francis said.

“Of course, Merry,” Mollie replied.

Once the maids left, Constance rounded on O'Malley. "What are you holding back?"

His face lost all expression. "Not a thing." He stalked past them and bounded up the servants' staircase.

"He knows something," Merry remarked.

"We'll have to keep Her Grace so busy, she will not have time to miss His Grace."

"Constance! That's it!" Merry declared.

"What is?" the cook asked.

"We urge her to invite Mr. Bothwell and Mr. Lockmead to tea."

"Without Mr. Bothwell's aunt and uncle?"

"Aye. Having to contend with those two gentlemen will keep her distracted to the point where she will not have time to worry about His Grace."

"But those two were not very respectful when they came to dine," Constance reminded the housekeeper.

"Precisely why they should be invited to tea," Merry insisted.

"I do not understand. What are you thinking?"

"If the duchess has the opportunity to entertain those two without the buffer of the squire and his wife," Merry said, "there is no telling how outrageous their flirtations will be."

"What will that accomplish, aside from embarrassing Her Grace?"

Merry leaned close to whisper, "Patrick and Eamon will be on hand to relate every comment to His Grace when he returns in a few days."

Constance frowned. "What makes you think he will come back so soon?"

Merry slowly smiled. "He neglected to respond to Her Grace's verbal and written missives. He will be beside himself

once he hears that she entertained two rakehells, thinking the worst: that she has misunderstood his lack of timely reply and feels he no longer cares for her.”

Constance finally agreed. “If he thinks his lack of response has pushed her to do something so out of character, he will in all likelihood be on his way.”

“Lord, let us hope he is,” Merry remarked.

“You will keep me apprised of the situation, won’t you?” Constance asked.

“Of course. If you hear anything—no matter if you think it is insignificant—and you will do the same?”

“I will.”

The two servants parted, Merry searching out Humphries, while Constance waited for O’Malley to pass through her kitchen at the end of his shift. She planned to have a word with him.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

A FEW DAYS later, Persephone hurriedly donned the new gown she had ordered from the local seamstress. The color was a rich, deep rose that complemented her coloring, with a sheer lace overlay in ecru.

Turning her back to Mollie so her maid could button the back of her gown, she asked, “Tell me again why I let anyone talk me into inviting Mr. Bothwell and Mr. Lockmead to tea?”

The maid fumbled with the top button. “Entertaining is a way to meet those who visit and live in the village, Your Grace. His Grace would be pleased that you are taking care of this vital task while he is in London.”

“I am not quite certain inviting two gentlemen who are more apt to spout effusive compliments than engage in intelligent conversation would be his first choice of those I should invite to tea.”

Mollie stepped back. “All buttoned up, Your Grace.”

The duchess turned around. “Thank you, Mollie. You and Francis have been such a help to me since my husband has been away.”

“It is our pleasure,” Francis said as she motioned for the duchess to sit. “Let me just add a few more pins to secure the topknot I’ve fashioned.” Pins in place, she stepped back and eyed the duchess’s coiffure. “I think I should pull a few strands free, so they frame your face.” After doing so, she stepped back next to Mollie. They both beamed at the duchess. “There. You look lovely, Your Grace.”

“Thanks to your insistence that I order a new gown—and your help with my hair.”

“You do want to look your best for your company—and His Grace when he returns.”

The light went out of the duchess’s eyes. “If he returns.”

“Of course he will return,” Mollie assured her. “I am certain he misses you and your babes.”

“You will see,” Francis added. “But for now, you should repair to the sitting room, as your guests are due to arrive soon.”



THOUGH SHE WOULD rather be anywhere than the sitting room, waiting for two gentlemen of questionable reputation to arrive for tea, the duchess did as they bade and soon found herself on tenterhooks. Why hadn’t her husband responded to her missives? Had he truly fallen out of love with her? If he had, what could she possibly do or say to change his mind?

“Your Grace.” Merry swept into the room. “I thought you could use a bit of company while you wait.”

“Are you planning to chaperone me?”

“Yes. I believe it would be proper, given that His Grace is not at home.”

“Thank goodness. I am quite uncomfortable at the prospect of entertaining them...and am quite certain I would have nothing to say to Messrs. Bothwell and Lockmead. Confidentially, they cannot seem to hold a thought longer than a moment or two and have absolutely no idea what is happening outside of their gentlemen’s club, or the ballrooms of the *ton*.”

“Your Grace, I don’t want to you to worry. His Grace—”

Merry was interrupted as Humphries intoned from the open doorway, “Mr. Bothwell and Mr. Lockmead to see you, Your Grace.”

The duchess and Merry rose from their seats. “Welcome, gentlemen,” the duchess greeted them. “Won’t you sit down?”

They waited for her to return to her seat before Lockmead sat down beside her—too close for propriety’s sake, or her own. His leg was alarmingly close to hers. She noted Bothwell choosing the settee across from them as she scooted over, putting distance between herself and the brazen young man. Lockmead offered a toothy grin as if to imply he thought she was interested and being coy.

Before she could stop him by placing her hand on the cushion between them, he moved over and once more pressed his thigh snug against hers. Unease skittered up her spine. She looked up to find Merry’s gaze riveted on hers. Would her housekeeper speak up, or was it up to Persephone to do so?

Botheration! She had no idea how to handle such a debacle. What to do? Call him out for ignoring propriety and demand he move over?

At the knock on the sitting room door, Merry smiled and rose to her feet. “Ah,” she said, as if everything was as it should be. “Our tea has arrived.” She directed the footman to place the large tea tray on the table between the settees and leaned close to speak to him.

A look of alarm flashed across his features and was gone a heartbeat later. If Persephone had not been watching their footman so closely, she would have missed it. What had Merry said to the man?

A few moments later, she had her answer.

“Yer Grace, I’ve an urgent matter to discuss with ye,” O’Malley announced as he strode into the sitting room. “If ye’ll excuse us,” he all but growled at the man bold enough to sit too closely to the duchess.

When O’Malley offered his hand, alarm speared through her. *Had something happened to Jared?* Persephone grasped it tightly and replied, “Of course, Mr. O’Malley. If you gentlemen would excuse me. Merry, please serve our guests and entertain them in my absence.”

O'Malley all but dragged her into the hallway and around the corner. "What are ye thinkin', lettin' that excuse for a man sit so close to ye?"

Her eyes welled with tears, but she blinked them away. "For your information, I had already moved over...twice, but he kept moving closer. What would you have me do? Demand he sit somewhere else?"

"Aye, 'twould have been an excellent notion."

She bowed her head and confided, "I am not as adept as my sister-in-law, or Lady Calliope or Lady Aurelia, at navigating these treacherous waters."

O'Malley urged her to follow him into the smaller sitting room and bade her to sit. "Give yerself a few moments. I did not mean to sound so harsh with ye, Yer Grace."

"Didn't you?"

"Sometimes me temper gets the better of me. I could not countenance ye lettin' a man brush his leg against ye."

This time a single tear escaped. "Thank you for coming to my rescue so quickly, Patrick."

He reached into his waistcoat pocket and retrieved his handkerchief, offering it to her.

She blotted her eyes and twisted the cloth in her hands. "I did not want to invite them to tea, you know."

"I suspected as much. Whose idea was it?"

"Merry's—maybe it was Constance."

"Well, I doubt—"

"Persephone!"

She jolted to her feet and flew from the room toward the sound of her husband's bellow.



“WHERE IN THE bloody hell is my wife?” the duke demanded as he stalked toward the sitting room. Flinging the double doors open, he glared at the two men sipping tea with his housekeeper. “Who in the bloody hell are you?”

One man set his teacup and saucer on the table in front of him and rose to his feet. “Lockmead, Your Grace. Delighted —”

The duke turned away to demand of the other man, “Who are you?”

“Bothwell, Your Grace. My uncle is—”

“Where is my wife?”

“Jared?” The duchess stood in the doorway, pale and uncertain. “You came back.”

“Of course I came back. I live here.” He walked toward where she stood on the threshold looking as if she had seen a ghost. Unnerved, he inquired, “Have I interrupted your tea?”

“Not at all. I am so glad you are here, even though I thought you would send word of your imminent arrival.”

“I was pressed for time,” he remarked, brushing a lock of hair from her brow. “I have missed you.”

“You have?”

Her question had him frowning at her. “What kind of a question is that?”

She eased one step back from him, and then another. “An honest one.”

“Welcome home, Your Grace.”

He turned to accept the greeting from their housekeeper. “Thank you, Merry.”

She rose and slipped past them to speak to the footman stationed right outside the sitting room. As the footman rushed off, she advised, “A fresh pot of tea will be delivered momentarily, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Merry.”

He offered his arm to his wife. She hesitated for a moment before slipping her arm through his.

“Yer Grace,” O’Malley said from where he stood just outside the room. “A word.”

From the tone of the man’s voice, Jared knew it was important. “If you’ll excuse me.”

The duchess inclined her head and walked back to her guests, this time choosing a chair to sit in.



MR. LOCKMEAD FROWNED at her. “Is there a reason you chose not to resume your seat next to me?”

Now that her husband had returned and seemed pleased to see her, she felt her world shifting back to where it had been before the duke left for London. Her confidence having returned, she stated, “I always have a reason for everything that I do, Mr. Lockmead.”

“Your Grace!” Francis rushed into the sitting room. “You are needed in the nursery at once!”

The duchess quickly rose and followed her maid out of the door and up the staircase, leaving the two men to take tea with the duke when he returned, if they chose to do so. She did not give a bloody damn what they did. Her gumption was returning with a vengeance, and it felt wonderful!

She didn’t bother to knock. Dashing into the room, she froze at the sight before her. Glancing from one sleeping infant to the other, she spun around. “They are asleep.”

“And will continue to be as long as you do not wake them,” her nanny remarked. “Is there something you needed?”

“Francis said I was needed at once.”

Gwendolyn shook her head. “Those two.”

“Francis and Mollie?” the duchess questioned.

“Aye. I sensed they were up to something when she mentioned you invited those two gentlemen to tea today.”

“Tell me what is going on.”

“Did I hear that His Grace has returned?”

Persephone sighed. “Yes, and he was about to join our guests for tea when Patrick waylaid him, and then a few moments later, Francis rushed into the sitting room to fetch me.”

“The plot thickens. Mayhap you should give His Grace and the others a little while longer before you return.”

“To tell the truth, I’m happy to escape.” The duchess sat in one of the rocking chairs. “Mr. Lockmead has appallingly bad manners.”

“How so?”

“As soon as I sat on the one settee, he sat beside me—crowding me.”

Gwendolyn’s expression showed her surprise. “What did you do?”

“I moved over and was about to place my hand on the cushion next to me so he would not sit there, but he moved too quickly and had the appalling manners to press his leg against mine...again.”

“Then what happened?”

“Your husband announced he needed to speak to me—privately.”

Gwendolyn’s lips twitched. “What did Patrick have to say?”

“After he all but dragged me around the corner to the smaller sitting room, he had the audacity to ask why I let that man sit so close to me.”

“How did he know about that?”

Persephone stared at her nanny for long moments before she sighed. “Merry must have noted my discomfort and asked the footman who delivered our tea to find Patrick and inform him.”

“Then what happened?”

“Jared returned.”

“Did you have a chance to speak with him?”

“Barely,” the duchess remarked. “Then Patrick appeared in the doorway a second time, asking to speak to Jared.”

Gwendolyn smiled. “Of course he did. He will want to report what he was told by the footman before the duke confronts your guests about their improper behavior to his duchess.”

“My husband would never do such a—”

Her words were cut off by her husband’s bellow echoing through to the upper hallway. “The head of my personal guard will escort you off the premises!”

“I...er...it appears you are right, Gwendolyn.” Persephone stood quickly and smoothed her skirts. “I had best present myself.”

“Why don’t you wait...” The nanny’s voice trailed off at the sound of heavy footfalls approaching the nursery.

Persephone walked to the door to intercept the duke before he could wake their babes. “Richard and Abigail are still asleep,” she whispered.

The duke nodded and stepped into the room behind her then slowly walked over to the twins’ cradles to see for himself. Satisfied they were asleep, he turned around and held out his hand to the duchess.

Unsure what he wanted other than for her to follow him, Persephone put her hand in his. After a quick word to her nanny, she let her husband lead her from the room.

He closed the door quietly behind them and tugged on her hand until she once more began to follow him. He paused in front of their bedchamber and drew her closer. "I need to speak with you...alone."

Uneasy with his urgent tone, unsure if he were about to hand her heart back to her, she inclined her head in silent agreement. He opened the door and stepped aside so that she could enter first.

He closed the door behind him.

Her eyes rounded at the snick of the lock. "What is so urgent that you need to ensure our privacy by locking the door?"

Jared closed the distance between them and went down on one knee. "Forgive me for not responding to your missives. I was so caught up in meetings with my men and Coventry and King—"

She snorted and crossed her arms beneath her breasts. "Do you not mean you were too busy waltzing with widows?"

The expression on his face changed to one of confusion. "If I did, it was because my father had often told my older brother it was part of the duties of a duke to attend balls and such when they were asked by certain members of society."

"Lady Stenerson is one such person?"

"Aye," he replied. "She was a good friend to my mother. When no one else would travel to the Lake District to visit her when she fell ill, Lady Stenerson did."

Immediately contrite, Persephone reached out to her husband, relieved when he grasped her hand and the heat of his skin warmed hers. "Forgive me for jumping to conclusions. I did not know."

"How could you unless I spoke of it?"

Persephone tugged on his hand, and he rose to tower over her once more. Not knowing how to bridge the gap that had grown between them, she took one step and then another until

there was not a breath between them. Looking into his brilliant blue eyes, she rasped, “Forgive me for not sharing my fears with you and for not making the time to spend with you to see to your needs and your comfort.”



HE ENVELOPED HER in the warmth of his embrace and dropped his chin to the top of her head, drawing in the heady scent of lilacs she always wore. “Forgive me for not doing the same, my love. I was ashamed that I could not protect you or our babes—”

Persephone put her fingertip to his lips. “You and your men surrounded us with your loving protection.”

“I could not stop the onslaught of attacks,” he said. “I have failed.”

She cupped his cheek in her hand. “My love, you cannot control the minds and deeds of those out to destroy us. You hired sixteen of the bravest, strongest, most capable men to surround your family with a web of protection. You have *not* failed!”

“Then why have you been avoiding me?”

“Why have you been spending your nights elsewhere?” she countered.

The duke waited for his wife to answer his question, while his duchess waited for him to respond to hers. When he realized neither one would be the first to give in, he chuckled. “We are a pair, aren’t we?”

“I cannot seem to lose the weight I gained, and I know my shape is off-putting, but once the twins are weaned—”

“I cannot wait that long to return to your bed, Persephone...if you still want me there.”

A lone tear streaked across her cheek, and she dashed it away. “It is you who cannot stand to be in the same room with

me. My overblown shape and jutting breasts have you turning from me.”

“You could not be more wrong, my love.”

“I’ve watched you clench your jaw and turn around and leave a room if I am in it!”

“If I did not, I would have tossed you over my shoulder and found the nearest empty room and locked the door!”

Her eyes rounded with surprise before she slowly smiled. “Then what would you have done?”

He turned her around, unbuttoned the top of her gown, and slowly lifted it over her head. “Placed you on the nearest surface—settee, chair, desk...and made mad, passionate love to you.”

She helped him remove his frockcoat, waistcoat, and cambric shirt. “What if the nearest room was the storeroom? What would you do?”

The duke divested her of her chemise, swept her into his arms, and gently placed her on their bed. His gaze never left hers as he took off his boots and quickly rid himself of his trousers. Kneeling on the bed, he rasped, “I would kiss you senseless until you were all but melting into my arms.”

“And then?”

He positioned himself between her legs and pressed his lips to the hollow of her throat, the valley of her breasts, as he slowly slid into her welcoming warmth.

No other words were necessary between the lovers as they began the dance as old as time, urging one another to the heights of passion until they both cried out as they found their release.

They lay linked together, heart to heart, as they slowly regained their breath. “Have I convinced you how much I love you?” he asked.

Persephone purred. “Mayhap I need a bit more convincing.”

The duke laughed as he rolled onto his back with his wife straddling him. When her gaze met his and she tightened around him, he ceased laughing while she drove him beyond reason until he could no longer hold out. He lifted his hips off the bed, plunged deep, and pumped into her warmth until his release shattered him. Her cries of ecstasy told him she quickly followed.

Rolling her beneath him once more, he pressed his lips to hers and chuckled.

She pinched his side. “Are you laughing at me?”

“Nay, wife. I’m laughing at the thought that you were too tired to make love to me.”

She tucked her legs around his waist and wiggled until he told her to be still. “Why?”

“I have yet to have my fill of you, wife.”

“Thank God. Will you make love with me again?”

“Indeed.”



THEY WERE JUST drifting off to sleep when she heard her twins begin to fuss. Her breasts began to tingle, and she pressed her hands against them to stop her milk from dripping all over her husband.

“I did not mind, you know,” he said.

“Mind?”

“Aye, the night you were snuggled atop of me, and Richard cried—”

“And I leaked milk all over your chest.”

He nodded. “It was warm—I never gave a thought to the fact that it would be warm.” He gently tucked a silken strand behind her ear. “I am quite certain it is a comfort to our son

and daughter as they suckle at your delightfully bounteous breasts.”

Her mouth dropped open as she struggled to respond.

Abigail began to wail, and the duke touched the tip of his finger to her chin. “You, my love, are even more beautiful today than the day you landed in my arms.”

“But my weight...my figure—”

“I would not change one thing about you, Persephone.”

“You are certain?”

“Aye.” He pressed his lips to hers as he helped her to don her chemise and dressing gown, then quickly dressed in his trousers and shirt.



WHEN HE FOLLOWED her to the door, she stopped and asked, “Where are you going?”

“With you, my love. I believe our nanny and the head of my guard could use a few hours alone, don’t you?”

Reaching for his hand, she smiled. “Aye—once their babe is born, they will have less time to spend together.”

The duke opened the door to the nursery and followed his wife over to the cradles. Richard was crying louder, so he picked up Abigail.

Watching the love of his life—his wife—feed their son, he felt a wave of happiness well up inside of him, until he felt as if all of the doubts, insecurities, and shadows had been forced from his soul. “Have I told you lately that I love you, Persephone?”

She lifted her head. “I was afraid I’d never hear you say those three words again.”

“I never meant to neglect you, love.”

“I know. You were bound and possessed to single-handedly fight off any and all miscreants, and dregs of society,

who thought they could destroy the life we have.”

“I should have delegated more duties to Patrick and his men.”

Persephone eased their son against her shoulder and rubbed his back until he burped.

“In a few years, our son will win contests with that belch,” Jared said.

Persephone’s laughter twined around his. The harmony of their laughter was a happy, joyful sound.

When their daughter began to fuss in his arms, he gently placed her in his wife’s arm, while scooping his son up in his. This time he lowered himself into the rocking chair beside her. The soothing motion felt wonderful after he’d exhausted himself in their bed.

“You do realize that I would never give you up.”

Her gasp of surprise was echoed by the uncertainty in her warm brown eyes.

“You doubt it?”

“I...er...well, that is to say—”

“How could I have not noticed that in my insistence to control every aspect of your protection, I would be slowly cutting into the bonds between us? Will you ever forgive me?”

“I already have, Jared. I should have told you how I felt from the first, instead of letting those worries eat away at me until I was unsure of every word out of my mouth—and worse...every word out of yours!”

He reached across the space between the rockers and twined his fingers with hers. “All is forgiven. We have learned just how tenuous love is, if left untended. How hard words seem, when no one takes the time to temper the tone with which they are delivered. Let us start anew, right this moment, and vow to diligently tend to our love. Every day. Will you

work with me, tending our love and our family, watching it grow, my love?”

Tears welled up and spilled over as Persephone promised, “I will tend our love and our family...and now that you mention watching it grow, I believe I know the reason why I have been unable to lose weight.”

“It is of no matter, Persephone—”

“Well, it should, unless you are not ready for an addition to our family.”

The duke’s mouth fell open and only a garbled sound emerged.

Persephone’s delighted laughter filled the nursery. “An appropriate response from the man who will become father to three in about seven months.”

Jared was finally able to clear his throat to speak. “Are you certain?”

“Aye, when the first wave of nausea struck the last few mornings in a row.”

“What are you doing entertaining guests when you should be resting!” he growled. “I’ll not have random villagers and their relatives tiring you when you need your rest and to rebuild your strength.”

“I am fine now that I know why my emotions have been all over the place.”

He slowly smiled. “Ah, that would explain your reaction to the lack of tea of a morning.”

“’Tis beastly of you to tease a pregnant woman.”

“Forgive me, my darling.” He chuckled when their daughter’s burp eclipsed their son’s in volume. “Let’s put these two to bed. You must be exhausted.”

Persephone brushed the tip of her finger along the curve of their daughter’s cheek and then their son’s. “Sleep sweet, our darlings.”

The duke swept her into his arms and held her to his heart as they left the room. “Promise me you will not overdo it. You need all of the rest you can get right now with another babe growing inside of you.”

She tilted her head to one side and stared at him before smiling. “What if it’s two?”

The duke’s steps faltered, but he did not ease his grip on her. “You have a wicked sense of humor, wife.”

“Just thinking of all the possibilities, husband.”

“You still have not given your word, Persephone.”

“Botheration! Fine. I promise to rest a bit more each day, if you promise to relent and let Constance brew my customary two pots of tea in the morning.”

“Fine, then. Two pots of tea it is. But under the physician’s advice, it must be weaker tea than you would care for.”

“Is that the only condition you have?”

“It is.”

“I agree. Two pots of weak tea, until the physician advises that I may have a bit stronger brew in the morning.”

The duke paused in front of their door, turned the knob, and pushed the door open with his shoulder. Stepping over the threshold, he said, “You are my life, Persephone. Never doubt my love for you again.”

His lips captured hers in a kiss of love and devotion.

“I promise not to doubt your love again, even if you grouse and growl at me.”

The duke was laughing when their lips met again. This time he plundered. When she went limp in his arms, he broke the kiss. “I never growl.”

The couple’s delighted laughter echoed through the still, quiet halls of their home. The sound of it wrapped its occupants in the warmth of their love and the promise of a

future where problems would be shared, doubts would be dispelled, and love would conquer all.

The End

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About C.H. Admirand

Historical & Contemporary Romance “Warm...Charming... Fun...”

C.H. was born in Aiken, South Carolina, but her parents moved back to northern New Jersey where she grew up.

She believes in fate, destiny, and love at first sight. C.H. fell in love at first sight when she was seventeen. She was married for 41 wonderful years until her husband lost his battle with cancer. Soul mates, their hearts will be joined forever. They have three grown children—one son-in-law, two grandsons, two rescue dogs, and two rescue grand-cats.

Her characters rarely follow the synopsis she outlines for them...but C.H. has learned to listen to her characters! Her heroes always have a few of her husband’s best qualities: his honesty, his integrity, his compassion for those in need, and his killer broad shoulders. C.H. writes about the things she loves most: Family, her Irish and English Ancestry, Baking and Gardening.

Take a trip back in time to Regency England for her new series: *The Lords of Vice*, coming in 2021 from Dragonblade Publishing! Venture back to the Old West with her bestselling Irish Western Series. Fast-forward to the present, stopping at the Circle G Ranch in Pleasure, Texas, before finally landing in Apple Grove, Ohio—Small Town USA—for a slice of Peggy McCormack’s Buttermilk Pie!

This award-winning multi-published author’s books are available in paperback, hardcover, trade paperback, magazine, e-book, large print, and audio book.

C.H. Admirand loves to hear from readers!

LOVING LYSANDER

Charlotte Wren

*'And then the moon, like to a silver bow new bent in Heaven,
shall behold the night of our solemnities.'*

From

A Midsummer Night's Dream

by

William Shakespeare.



CHAPTER ONE

Present Day

Sallingford House, Cheshire

Thursday, January 1st,

1846

THE ARRIVAL OF His Grace the Duke of Gillingham at Lady Pennington's New Year's Day gathering caused quite a stir. Understandably, given that the fellow hadn't attended any kind of social event since his scandalous marriage eighteen years before.

It certainly never occurred to Catherine that His Grace would put in an appearance that day. Not only because of his elusive lifestyle, but also because, barely six months earlier, he'd been widowed, his wife dying of consumption.

It appeared, then, that his period of mourning was over. Catherine thought it a bit premature, but men, unlike women, were not expected to adhere to such established practices.

Had Catherine known the duke would be present at Lady Pennington's gathering, she would have avoided the event. As it was, she now stood in frozen shock, staring at him across the wide expanse of a marble-tiled floor. He was unaccompanied, yet appeared to be searching for someone, his gaze wandering over the sea of faces, most of which, in turn, were fixed upon him.

Catherine's shock then gave way to a bizarre sort of panic, one that demanded she hide before his focus settled on her. Though it made little sense, she surrendered to it, and moved to stand behind one of the massive marble columns that graced the four corners of Lady Pennington's *grand salon*. There, she

pressed a gloved hand to her throat, heart and mind racing. *Eighteen years.* That's how long it had been since she'd last seen and spoken to him. Eighteen years and seven days, in fact. Despite the passing of time, she couldn't bear the thought of facing him. Not after what he'd done.

When Catherine had last spoken to him, he'd been a mere Marquess – the Marquess of Hawes, specifically. Even then, his title wasn't part of her rhetoric. *Their* rhetoric. He had called her Cat, she had called him Lysander, and she had loved him with all her heart. And, at the time, she'd been assured he felt the same.

An old familiar ache stirred beneath her ribs.

Furtively, she peered out from behind her hiding place, and reabsorbed the reality of his presence, taking the time to observe him in detail. It seemed the years had not been too unkind.

He looked to be hale, standing tall, head held high, spine and shoulders straight. No sign of a paunch beneath his finely tailored coat and snug trousers. Arms by his side, he stood with feet planted slightly apart, securing him to his spot as he continued to survey his surroundings. A visible frosting of silver, at his temples and sideburns, gave testament to his forty-eight years upon the earth, while the rest of his hair remained as black and abundant as ever. As always, a few errant strands tumbled carelessly over his forehead, the rest swept back from his dark brows to curl softly where it brushed his collar. His face, or more accurately, his expression, exuded a certain calm maturity, as if the passing years had tempered the devil-may-care attitude that Catherine had known him to possess. The square jaw implied his inherent stubbornness, which surely remained. His mouth, wide and full-lipped, was not set in his familiar smile, but neither was it firmed in disapproval. Catherine touched her lips as she remembered his kiss.

Soft. Teasing. Demanding.

She inhaled through her nose, imagining she could detect the subtle hints of sandalwood and citrus that always used to accompany him. Did they still, she wondered?

And as for his eyes...

Of course, from where she stood, she couldn't gaze into their gray depths. But there had been a time when she had done so and found herself captivated by the promises they appeared to convey.

False promises, as it turned out.

As Catherine continued to watch, a woman approached him; young and beautiful, with an ivory complexion and hair like spun gold. She seemed vaguely familiar, though her name remained elusive. Her touch on Lysander's arm drew his attention and brought the missing smile to his lips. He bent his ear to her mouth and, judging by the resulting expression on his face, whatever the woman said pleased him. As if to substantiate that, he took her hand and kissed it. Catherine ducked back behind the column, out of sight. Leaning against the cold, hard marble, she closed her eyes. It seemed he'd wasted no time in finding another to warm his bed. Who was she? Catherine frowned, searching her brain for the woman's identity.

"Goodness, Aunt Cat. Are you quite well?"

Startled, Catherine opened her eyes to see her young niece, Evie, regarding her with concern. Was it Evie? It might have been Clara. The twins looked so alike. Catherine straightened and silently cursed the warm flush wandering over her face. "Oh, yes, dear, I'm perfectly fine. I just find it a little stuffy in here, that's all. In fact, I might step outside for a moment and take some air."

"Oh, but it's bitter cold out, Aunt," the girl replied, glancing at the nearby window. "Maybe a walk along the hallway might be better? I'm sure it will be less stuffy there and nowhere near as crowded. I'll go with you if you like."

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary, dear, I’m all right, really. Just a little tired. It was a late night, after all.” Catherine managed a smile. “But I appreciate your suggestion and shall act upon it.” She changed the girl’s focus. “Where is your Mama?”

“Playing cards in the games room. And they’re looking for more players if you’re interested.”

Catherine nodded. “I’ll consider it, certainly, but I’ll take that stroll along the hallway first.”

Evie, if that’s who it was, smiled, nodded, and wandered off. Catherine lingered for a moment before daring to take another peek from behind the column.

Lysander had gone. So had the woman.

Catherine cast a quick glance around the room but saw no sign of him. She then silently castigated her behavior, which was unquestionably foolish, and quite unlike her. But then, the wretched man had always managed to bring out an unrecognizable side of herself.

What was she so afraid of? Her connection to Lysander had long since been severed. She’d been young and naive, believing his interest in her to be serious. Something unbreakable and everlasting, forged from love. Certainly, the engagement ring he’d given her should have meant something, but in the end, it had only intrinsic value. As a promise of a sacred and lifelong union, it turned out to be worthless.

She’d given him her heart, and he had cast it aside without a care.

Silently praying she wouldn’t bump into him, Catherine hurried out into the hallway and paused to catch her breath beside the life-size statue of some half-naked Roman god. Lysander’s appearance had shaken her to core, more that she could have imagined. She eyed the grand staircase, wondering if she should simply feign a headache and sneak off to her room.

“I knew you’d be rattled,” a familiar male voice said. “The fellow is here for the night, apparently, which means you’ll

have to face him sooner or later. At least, I suspect the reason you scurried out here was to try and avoid him.”

Catherine regarded her eldest sibling, Henry, who had always been able to read her every mood. “I just...” She winced. “It was such a *shock*, Henry, seeing him after all this time. I wasn’t prepared.”

Henry scoffed. “It’s been a shock to everyone. The elusive Duke of Gillingham, in the flesh and unattached. I’m not sure how Lady Pennington managed it, but it’s quite the coup, and she’s basking in her triumph. All the unmarried women present, young and not so young, are practically throwing themselves at the man’s feet.”

“Not *all* the unmarried women,” Catherine replied, with emphasis.

“No, Cat.” Henry gave her a sympathetic smile. “Not all of them.”

“And besides, it looks like he’s already spoken for. There was a woman with him in the grand salon. Young. Very pretty. She seems familiar, but I can’t place her.”

Henry appeared to ponder. “Young? With yellow hair?”

“Gold hair, yes.”

“Gold, yellow.” Henry shrugged. “Yes, that would be his cousin, Miss Halliwell, Lord Stanley’s daughter. She’s engaged to Lord Fullerton.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Catherine nodded, annoyed by an unexpected flare of relief. Why should she care whether Lysander had acquainted himself with another since Helena’s death?

“As far as I can tell, the man is making it very clear that he’s *not* looking for a wife.” Henry regarded her intently. “Much to the disappointment of many.”

“Well, it does not signify with me, Henry.” The declaration sounded forced, not quite genuine. Flustered, Catherine fiddled with the lace edging of her cuff. “Though I will

confess to wondering why he's here, if seeking a wife is not his motive."

"I'm sure he has his reasons." Henry offered his elbow. "Come, my dear. Enough of this foolishness. Let's rejoin the party."

Catherine shook her head. "No, I'm afraid I can't. The thought of having to face Lysander terrifies me. Please understand. You, of all people, should understand."

"*Terrifies* you?" Henry's eyes widened. "Why, for Heaven's sake? It all happened years ago, and you did nothing wrong. He's the one who should be—"

"*Please*, Henry." Catherine placed a hand on her stomach as if to calm the churning within. "I know I'm being foolish, but I just need a little while to gather myself. That's all."

"Oh, very well. I'll give you fifteen minutes, and then—"

"Thirty."

"*Twenty*. Anymore, and your absence is certain to be noted and probably investigated. I guarantee I'm not the only one who thought of you when Gillingham appeared. In any case, I'll not allow him to ruin your day. *You* should not allow him to do so. Take a few minutes, by all means, then I'll come and fetch you. That way, if you *should* run into him, you won't be alone." Henry scratched his jaw. "If he's still here, of course. He might grow weary of all the female attention and leave. You never know."

Catherine heaved a sigh. "Oh, I do hope so."

"Hmm." Henry gave her an odd look. "So, where will I find you?"

She glanced about. "I don't know. Somewhere quiet. I'd really prefer to feign a headache and retire to my room."

Henry shook his head. "No, Cat, you can't do that. I won't allow it. Why don't you spend some time in the orangery? It's a restful place, separate from the house, and heated too. I doubt anyone will be there at the moment."

“The orangery.” Catherine blinked. “Yes, that’s a good idea.”

“Twenty minutes, then, and not a minute more. In my opinion, you need to face him.”

“I really don’t see why. It won’t solve anything.”

“There is nothing to solve. You just need to get it over with, and the sooner the better. If the fellow is out and about in society again, bumping into him is inevitable, don’t you think?”

She heaved a sigh. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Right. Off you go, then, and find some steel to put in your backbone.” Henry pulled a fob-watch from his waistcoat pocket. “Twenty minutes. No longer. I’ll wait here to make sure there are no unwanted interruptions.”



CATHERINE STEPPED OUT into the bright, bitter cold day, and hurried along the snow-covered pathway to the orangery. Though only a short walk, her toes, encased in silk slippers, were already turning numb by the time she reached the door. Shivering, she opened it, and stepped into a delicious atmosphere of warm, humid air. Winter sunlight poured through the walls of glass, which served to trap the sun’s heat even on the coldest days. That, and a couple of stoves built for the purpose, kept the atmosphere comfortably warm. All around, plants and trees of an exotic nature created a lush, green jungle-scape. Catherine paid them little mind, however. Her thoughts were still ruminating over the appearance of Lysander, question after question flitting through her brain.

Why was he there? What would she say, if and when she met him? What might he say to her? Would he even acknowledge her, or would she be a victim of his scorn once more?

Feeling a little less vulnerable, she wandered into the safe depths of the man-made jungle and sat down on a wrought-

iron bench. Beside her, seated atop a carved lily-leaf pedestal, a stone frog spouted a jet of crystal water from its mouth, arcing gracefully into a small lily pond nearby. The sight and sound had a mild calming effect, and Catherine settled back, allowing her mind to venture eighteen years into the past. To a few days in the depth of winter. Bitter cold days, much the same as this one. That was when everything changed, and Catherine's bright and brilliant future slid from her grasp.



CHAPTER TWO

Eighteen years earlier

Myddleton House, Derbyshire

Saturday, December 22nd,

1827

THE GRAND HALL clock struck the fifth hour of the afternoon, but on this, the shortest day of the year, darkness had already crept across the land. Catherine slipped into the space behind her curtains and scraped a spyhole in the frost forming on her bedroom window, suppressing a shiver as she peered out. The gardens, a series of indefinable shapes, draped in winter's frigid cloak, had a ghostly appearance. Beyond them in the distance, the fledgling crescent of the waxing moon hung just above the horizon. Exquisitely brilliant but newly born, it posed no threat to the blackness. If anything, it served only to enhance it.

The sound of voices in the corridor drew Catherine's attention. Myddleton House was currently packed to the rafters with guests of her parents, the Earl, and Countess of Hutton, all there to celebrate the Christmas season. With the previous night being a late one, Catherine, like most of the guests, had retired for a rejuvenating afternoon nap. Now, given the hour, a tea would have been laid out in the Tapestry Room; a refreshing and light repast to bridge the gap between luncheon and dinner. Catherine turned from the window, wandered over to her mirror, and gave her candlelit reflection one final, critical inspection before heading downstairs.

A soft buzz of conversation drifted out of the Tapestry Room, aptly named for the collection of rare and ancient textiles covering most of the walls. Catherine entered to find

several of the guests already present, helping themselves to the variety of edibles that had been laid out on several tables. Greetings were made and exchanged before Catherine cast a swift glance over the room, seeking one face in particular, and not finding it.

Catherine's eldest brother, Henry, Viscount Fulston, wandered past with his plate. "Don't fret, Cat," he said, not bothering to lower his voice at all. "He'll be down shortly."

There followed a couple of knowing titters from the guests. Catherine scowled at Henry's lack of discretion. She was still scowling minutes later as she spooned a dollop of raspberry jam onto her scone.

"Greetings, my lady," a husky male voice said. "Has that poor scone offended you, somehow?"

Her scowl melted into a smile. "No, my lord," she replied, gazing up at the face she'd been looking for. "Not at all."

"Hmm." Lysander Theodore Barton, Marquess of Hawes, helped himself to one of the scones. "It's just that you seemed to be regarding it with some vehemence just now."

She laughed and glanced down at her plate. "Thanks to my brother's teasing. You know what he's like. Did you rest well, my lord?"

"Very well, thank you, my lady." He leaned in as if to tell a secret. "And what of my future wife? Did she rest well this afternoon?"

A sweet little tingle ran across the nape of Catherine's neck. "She did, Lysander," she replied, softly.

Not exactly true. Excitement over her recent engagement to the man she loved had kept her awake for a while. In the end, she'd dozed off in his imagined embrace.

"Glad to hear it." Lysander arched a brow. "Um, have you finished with that dainty little jam spoon, by chance?"

Catherine regarded the utensil in question, still clutched in her hand. "Oh!" Feeling the warmth of a blush, she handed it

to him. "Yes, I have."

"Thank you," he said, and winked at her. "Save me a seat, my love."

A short time later, Catherine found herself installed beside Lysander and Henry on one of the settees. The two men had long been friends, having both attended Harrow together. Lysander had been a frequent guest at Myddleton. Consequently, Catherine had known him most of her life. She'd always liked him, but, during much of her childhood, the ten-year difference in their ages had felt like an unbridgeable gap.

As she approached womanhood, however, the intellectual gap narrowed, bringing her closer to him. Close enough to notice the storm-cloud gray of his eyes, and the way the little lines appeared at the edges whenever he laughed or smiled. Close enough to inhale his scent of sandalwood and citrus, which filled her with a hidden longing to move closer still, to touch him. Of course, she did so only in her imagination.

Whenever he was near, it took an effort to keep her senses about her. Being in his presence was akin to a sort of intoxication, rendering her light-headed, unable to think clearly or articulate properly. At such times, she barely recognized herself, and feared others saw what she tried so desperately to hide; that she'd fallen deeply in love with Lysander. It took command of her heart and occupied her dreams, but it remained unrequited. Or did it? Whenever he visited Myddleton, he always found time to seek her out, and appeared to enjoy her company, but she hardly dared to hope he might feel as she did. For a while, her biggest fear was that he'd marry someone else.

She need not have worried.

Lysander made his feelings known before she'd even had her first season. Then, with her blessing, he'd gone to Catherine's father and asked for her hand in marriage. The brilliant yellow diamond on her finger now proclaimed her as Lysander's intended; a dream come true. 'Happy' barely

described how she felt. It was as if she'd gained a pair of invisible wings.

"Philip!" Henry's exclamation, and the fact he'd suddenly shot to his feet, startled Catherine from her indulgent reverie. She looked over to see her second eldest brother heading toward them. And, to her surprise and intrigue, he was not alone. She also rose to her feet, as did Lysander.

"Well, it's about time." Henry set his plate on the nearby table and took his brother into a brief embrace. "I was beginning to think you'd got lost *en route*. Mama and Papa have been a little worried as well."

"There was ice on the roads, or we'd have been here by lunchtime, but at least we're in time for tea," Philip replied. "Greetings Cat, Lysander. And speaking of Mama and Papa, where are they?"

"They'll be down shortly, I should think." Catherine also set her plate down while trying not to stare at Philip's mysterious female companion. Though young, she appeared to be in mourning. Her dress of dark gray wool, edged in black, stood out against the flagrant colors worn by the other guests. Slender of form, she stood about the same height as Catherine, her near-black hair styled into perfect ringlets that framed an alluring heart-shaped face, set with wide, dark eyes. She was, in a word, exquisite. And she had yet to be introduced.

"I'm wondering, Philip, if you left your manners in London," Henry said, echoing Catherine's thoughts.

"No, not at all. Forgive me. I was just hoping Mama and Papa would have been here." Philip stepped a little to the side and addressed his female companion. "My dear, please allow me to make the introductions. This is my elder brother, the Viscount Fulston, and this is my baby sister, Lady Catherine Northcott. The gentleman at her side is the Marquess of Hawes, a good friend of the family."

With each introduction, the woman had inclined her head in acknowledgement.

Philip then addressed the others. "My lords, my lady, it gives me the greatest pleasure to introduce you to Miss Helena Elliot." He smiled broadly. "My fiancée."

Catherine barely managed to control a gasp.

The woman inclined her head again. "I am truly delighted to make your acquaintance, my lords, my lady," she said, her voice sweetly melodic. "Philip has told me so much about his family and this wonderful house."

Henry, obviously astonished, appeared to be searching for an appropriate rejoinder. "Well," he said at last, "this is quite the surprise. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Elliot, and please accept my felicitations. Two engagements in one week! There must be something in the air."

"I echo my brother's comment, Miss Elliot," Catherine said. "Welcome to Myddleton House."

Lysander inclined his head but remained silent.

"*Two* engagements?" Philip remarked. "Who else?"

"Your sister," Henry replied, and glanced at Lysander, "to this questionable gentleman right here."

"Well, it's about time!" Philip said. "Congratulations, both. And look, here's Mama and Papa at last. Come, my dear. I cannot wait for you to meet them."

"I didn't see that coming," Henry said, as Philip and Miss Elliot wandered off. "She looks to be in mourning. Elliot, eh? The name is not familiar to me. I wonder where he found her."

"I'm sure we'll soon find out," Catherine replied, and regarded Lysander, whose silence continued. His gaze, it seemed, was fixed intently on the new arrivals, and specifically Miss Elliot. A little twinge of jealousy stirred beneath Catherine's ribs.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" she said.

Lysander turned his gray eyes to Catherine. "She's pretty," he said, taking Catherine's hand and raising it to his lips.

“*Exquisite* would better describe the woman who has captured my heart.”

Henry snorted. “Nicely done, Hawes. You were heading into deep water there, for a moment.”

Lysander laughed and continued to regard Catherine with eyes that surely held a promise of forever. “I know what I have, Henry,” he said. “I would never do anything to jeopardize it.”



“MISS ELLIOT’S FAMILY is landed gentry, but have been in India for years,” Henry said, later that evening after dinner. Catherine listened with interest and cast a surreptitious glance at Lysander. He stood beside her, nursing a glass of brandy in his hand, his focus on Henry. But a moment later, his gaze switched to Miss Elliot, who stood with Philip by the pianoforte. They, and the guests, had gathered in the music room, where the lady in question was about to show off her prowess on the instrument.

Catherine told herself she was being foolish. Lysander’s interest in the lovely Helena was probably nothing more than simple curiosity. He’d never had a wandering eye, nor was he given to frivolity. Yet, it seemed something about the lovely Miss Elliot had garnered his attention.

“Charles Elliot was a highly respected official by all accounts,” Henry went on. “He and his wife both succumbed to a cholera outbreak several months ago, leaving Miss Elliot, who is an only child, on her own. She is no longer officially in mourning but is not yet comfortable discarding all semblance of it, apparently.”

“Understandable,” Catherine said. “It must have been terribly difficult for her.”

“Yes, it was all rather tragic,” Henry replied. “Of course, she had little choice but to return to England. She arrived back at the end of September, along with her Indian nurse, and they’ve been lodging with friends near Bath since then. Philip

first met her at some private event in Bath not quite six weeks ago.” He frowned. “This engagement all seems a little bit hurried, if you ask me, though the marriage date has not yet been settled.”

“Her Indian nurse?” Catherine repeated.

Henry nodded. “Practically raised the girl, it seems. Haven’t seen the woman yet, but she’s here somewhere. Bit of a strange one, according to Mama. Refused to sleep in the staff wing and insists on taking her meals alone.”

Catherine raised her brows in question. “Then, where is she staying?”

“In Miss Elliot’s room. They’ve put a chaise in there for her.”

“Has Miss Elliot been left without means?” Lysander asked.

“Not according to Philip, though he didn’t elaborate beyond that.” Henry grimaced. “I’m not sure what Mama and Papa think of it all. I just hope Philip isn’t making a mistake.”

Lysander shook his head. “He’s no fool, Henry.”

“He’s besotted,” Henry replied, “which means he lacks prudence.”

Catherine frowned. “That’s rather cynical of you, dear brother.”

“No, actually, he’s quite correct.” Lysander gave Catherine a fond look. “A case of besottedness addles the brain, and I speak from experience.”

“Besottedness?” Catherine chuckled. “Is that even a word?”

“It is now.” He blessed her with a smile and brushed her fingers with his. The subtle caress had an intimacy to it that quickened Catherine’s heart and acted as a balm for her unsettled thoughts. Maybe she’d was reading too much into his perceived fascination with Miss Elliot. Maybe, like Henry,

he merely wanted to know more about the mysterious young woman who was set to marry into the family.

“According to Philip, she plays like an angel,” Henry murmured, his attention on the activity taking place around the pianoforte.

“Well, we’re about to find out if that is true. Let’s sit, shall we?” Catherine settled onto a nearby settee. Lysander took his place beside her. Henry remained standing.

A hush fell over the room as Miss Elliot sat at the piano and arranged her skirts. Philip hovered over her, ready to turn the music as required.

She began.

Philip’s claim that the girl played like an angel had not been exaggerated. She was a virtuoso, each and every note perfectly rendered. Catherine recognized the piece immediately as Chopin’s *Nocturne Op. 9*, one of Lysander’s favorites. She glanced at him. He appeared to be transfixed by the performance.

As the final notes faded away, there followed several moments of silence, and then, in unison, everyone rose to their feet and began to applaud.

“Brava,” Henry shouted, his call echoed by others. “Brava!”

Catherine regarded Lysander once more, who, like everyone else, was looking fixedly at Miss Elliot. And then he spoke a single word, inaudible against the din of continued applause. But Catherine read his lips with ease.

“Remarkable.”

Not an inaccurate observation, yet an unwelcome touch of jealousy soured Catherine’s stomach.

Miss Elliot played two more pieces with equal flair before begging an abeyance. She and Philip wandered the room for a while before finally coming to sit with Catherine, Lysander, and Henry.

“You play beautifully, Miss Elliot,” Catherine said. “Truly.”

“Thank you.” The woman smiled and glanced around. “But please call me Helena. I am to be part of your family, after all.”

Absolved of formalities, the conversation flowed a little easier. Catherine played her part as required, intent on hiding the silly suspicions and fears that fluttered in her stomach. Lysander appeared to watch and listen, but spoke little, and his gaze frequently fell upon Helena’s face. Yet no one else seemed to notice anything untoward, which made Catherine question her own perception.

“Philip tells me your family seat is in Nottinghamshire, Lord Hawes,” Helena said, drawing Catherine’s attention. It was the first time the woman had addressed Lysander directly.

“That is correct, Miss Elliot,” Lysander replied. “Malvern Hall is located about twelve miles south of Nottingham.”

“It’s a spectacular house,” Catherine said. “The entire estate is magnificent.”

“I’m sure.” Helena’s gaze flicked to Catherine and then back to Lysander. “And not too far from Rosemount, I imagine, which is located perhaps twenty or so miles further south, in Leicestershire.”

“Rosemount.” Lysander raised a brow. “Your father’s estate?”

“Yes.” Her smile faltered. “That is, it’s mine now. Until I marry, of course. The land is still being worked, but the house and some of the farm buildings are in need of reparation, apparently. I will be going there in the New Year to see exactly what is required.”

“The house was left empty while you were in India?” Catherine asked.

“It was tenanted for a while, and much of the land still is.” Helena gave a slight shrug. “But the actual house has been

unoccupied for the past two years, though my father employed a caretaker to oversee its basic maintenance. It just needs modernizing, I think.”

Henry addressed Philip. “Do you plan to live there after the wedding?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Philip replied, frowning. “My practice is in Bristol.”

“Nothing to stop you opening an office elsewhere, Philip.” Lysander took a sip of his brandy. “Solicitors are always in demand.”

Philip grimaced. “Something to consider, I suppose,” he said, and glanced at Helena. “We’ll see.”

Helena said nothing.

Later, when most of the guests had gone to bed, Catherine had an opportunity to speak to Lysander in a secluded corner of the music room. She’d told herself that she was imagining his strange mood and his fascination with Helena. But she couldn’t resist digging, just a little.

“Is everything all right, Lysander?”

He blinked. “Everything is fine, my love. Why do you ask?”

“You’ve been a little quiet tonight, that’s all.”

“Have I?” He stroked an errant strand of hair from her forehead. “I wasn’t aware.”

Catherine simply couldn’t help herself. “What do you think of Helena?”

A frown appeared as he pondered. “I can’t really fault her,” he said, at last. “What is your opinion? Do you think they’re suited, her and Philip? Is that what you’re worried about? I agree with Henry, that it all seems to be a bit hurried.”

“No, I’m not worried at all. It’s just—”

“You two look like you’re hatching a plot,” Henry said, approaching with a glass of something in his hand.

“We are, actually,” Lysander replied, straight-faced. “We’re planning to elope tonight. You know, Scotland and all that. But don’t tell anyone.”

“Lysander!” Catherine pressed a hand to her mouth, catching her stifled laugh.

Henry’s jaw dropped. “You had better be joking, Hawes, or by God, I swear I’ll—”

“Henry, of course he’s joking,” Catherine said, still trying not to laugh.

Henry scowled. “Well, it was *not* funny, Hawes. Not in the least.”

Lysander grinned and squeezed Henry’s shoulder. “Your lack of faith in me is troubling, my friend,” he said. “Catherine was just asking me what I thought of Philip’s intended, that’s all. Want to share your opinion?”

An odd expression flitted across Henry’s face, too brief to interpret. “I’m not sure I have an opinion yet. I suppose I have to trust Philip’s judgement, despite what I said. Time will tell, I suppose, if he’s made the right choice.”



SLEEP WOULD NOT come that night. Catherine tossed and turned, mulling over all that had happened that day. She couldn’t quite figure out why she still felt unsettled. Lysander had all but put her fears to rest. She actually felt a measure of guilt for doubting him. So why did she still feel disconcerted?

At last, weary of tossing and turning, Catherine slid from her bed, donned robe, and slippers, and wandered downstairs, candle in hand. The clock in the hall showed twenty minutes after one, and a mumble of male voices could be heard coming from somewhere. The games room, she thought, her suspicion confirmed moments later, when she heard the distinctive clatter of billiard balls colliding.

Treading quietly, she made her way to the back of the main staircase and took the servants' stairs down to the kitchens. She was no stranger to the servants' domain. As a child, she'd often sneaked down in search of a sweet treat, a freshly baked scone, perhaps, or a sugary biscuit.

She was greeted with a mewl from Sadie, the kitchen tabby cat, who sauntered over and proceeded to wrap herself around Catherine's legs.

"Shouldn't you be catching mice?" Catherine set the candle down and stooped to pet the animal. "Or maybe you'd prefer some milk. Just wait a minute, and I'll fetch it." Standing on tiptoes, she grabbed a glass and a saucer from the large dresser and placed them on the table. Then she wandered into the cold-room and brought out the milk jug, to be greeted by several chirps of excitement from Sadie. Catherine splashed some milk into the saucer. "Here you are," she said, and crouched to place it on the floor, dropping it with a clatter when the cat suddenly hissed and arched her back.

"Sadie, what on earth...?" As she straightened, a shape loomed out of the darkness in the hallway beyond. Catherine let out a cry and pressed a hand to her chest, her heart doing somersaults when a shadowy figure appeared in the doorway. A black silhouette. Indefinable.

"Please forgive me, ma'am," a voice said, heavily accented. "I did not mean to frighten you."

The figure moved into the candlelight; a woman, small in stature and perhaps of middling years, clad in a muslin *sari* of rich indigo blue, edged with a pale blue trim. The cat hissed again, drawing the woman's gaze. Scowling, she spoke to the animal, her tone sharp, the words foreign to Catherine. The cat backed away, flicked its tail, and vanished into the shadows.

Catherine, still shaken, drew her dressing gown tightly about her. "You startled me," she said, her heart rattling against her ribs. "You should not sneak up on people like that. Who are you?" This latter was a superfluous question, since Catherine had already guessed the woman's identity.

“I beg your forgiveness, ma’am. I did not mean to frighten you.” The woman moved closer, her features becoming clearer in the candlelight. She had a face that was neither young nor old, with a smooth complexion, quick, dark eyes, and a prominent nose and chin. Her hair was a rich black, drawn up into a neat chignon, and pinned in place. “My name is Anjali and I am Miss Elliot’s *Ayah*. And you are the sister to Mr. Northcott, are you not?”

Catherine ignored the question. “What are you doing here?”

“Miss Elliot is in need of a soothing drink, ma’am,” she replied, and nodded toward the milk jug. “As are you, it seems.”

Again, Catherine ignored the comment. “Why do you not carry a candle?”

“I have no need of one, ma’am. My eyes are well accustomed to the dark.”

“Is that so?” Catherine, now feeling more irritated than shocked, and perhaps a little foolish as well, filled her glass with milk.

“If you are finished, ma’am, may I also avail myself?” the woman asked. “I do not like to keep Miss Elliot waiting.”

Catherine drew a calming breath. “Yes,” she replied, and managed a smile. “Of course.”

The woman inclined her head, took a glass from the dresser, and set it on the table. Then she reached into a fold of fabric across her breast and drew out a small linen pouch.

“What is that?” Catherine asked.

“Just a few herbs, ma’am,” she replied, opening the pouch. “I add a pinch to Miss Elliot’s milk to help her sleep. Perhaps you would like to try some.”

“No, thank you.” Clutching her drink, Catherine moved toward the door. “I have what I came for. Please return the milk jug to the cold room when you’re finished.”

Anjali inclined her head. "I'll see to it, ma'am."

"Thank you. I hope Miss Elliot has a restful night."

"I bid you the same, ma'am."

Catherine gave a nod and began to turn away, but then paused and regarded the woman once more. "I'm curious," she said. "What did you say to the cat?"

The woman smiled. "I told her to mind her manners, ma'am."



CHAPTER THREE

Myddleton House,

Derbyshire

Christmas Eve,

1827

SNOW CRUNCHED BENEATH booted feet, cheeks bore winter's rosy glow, and the woods echoed with lively conversation and bouts of laughter. There were undoubtedly occasions when such a cacophony would have been considered quite improper. But not this occasion. The hunt was on for Christmas decorations, specifically holly, conifer, and mistletoe. In seeking their prey, the hunters—each and every one a resident or guest of Myddleton House—had spread out through the bare trees, putting space between them. Clear communication, then, had to take distance into account. The cold air helped, conveying sound with startling clarity.

“There's some holly over here,” came a female cry.

“With berries?” a masculine voice responded.

“No.”

“Then look about you, my lady,” the same gentleman suggested. “There'll probably be another tree with berries nearby.”

“I'll come and help you,” another lady called.

Conventional behavior, too, had less dominion out here in the wilds of Derbyshire. Catherine's gloved right hand had been enveloped in Lysander's leather-clad left hand since they'd entered the woods a half-hour since.

“There may be hidden obstacles beneath the snow, which could cause my fiancée to stumble,” Lysander had pointed out,

in response to Henry's disapproving frown. "I am obliged, therefore, to provide her with my support and protection."

"Very chivalrous of you," Henry replied, rolling his eyes heavenward.

Catherine's smile accompanied a squeeze of Lysander's hand. He glanced down at her, wearing a smile of his own.

"If you start to feel chilled, tell me," he said. "I mean it."

"I will," she replied, but doubted very much that it would be necessary. Not only was she well-wrapped, but the sheer warmth of her spirit was bound to keep winter at bay. On this, the day before Christmas, she was more at ease with herself. The previous day, also sunny and cold, had passed gently, with walks in the gardens, parlor games, and more music. Lysander had paid Helena little mind, much to Catherine's relief. Only her meeting with Anjali remained as something out of the ordinary, mainly due to the way the cat had reacted. But then, Anjali was a stranger. Perhaps that was why the cat behaved the way it did. In any case, Catherine hadn't mentioned the meeting with Helena's nurse to anyone. Helena had made no reference to it either.

As for today, the lady in question was off in the distance with Philip and Henry, leaving Catherine and Lysander to wander more or less alone. Unbeknownst to Lysander, Catherine had a destination, a place she'd known of since childhood. Gradually, they drifted further away from the others, till they came at last to a large clearing, where a single linden tree reached bare branches to the sky.

Lysander gazed up at the tree, his eyes widening. "I say! Is that...?"

"Mistletoe, yes," Catherine replied, shading her eyes with a gloved hand as she regarded the telltale clumps clinging to the branches. "It always grows here."

"Does it now?" Lysander regarded her with a stern expression. "Am I correct in thinking that you led me here knowingly, my lady?"

Catherine tutted. “As if I would, my lord. It was purely by accident.”

“Hmm.” He squinted up at the mistletoe. “Haven’t climbed a tree since I was a lad, but I think I can manage it.”

“*What?*” Catherine felt a stab of alarm. “You will do no such thing. You might fall.”

“No, I won’t.” Still looking up, he wandered over to the tree, and reached for one of the lower branches. “Trust me.”

“Lysander!” Catherine stumbled after him and grabbed his coat. “Stop, please. I’d never forgive myself if something went wrong. We can gather some sticks and try to knock some of the mistletoe down.”

He regarded her for a moment, his expression thoughtful. “Well, that won’t be quite as much fun, but it might work. There’s something I have to do first, however.”

“And what might that be?”

Smiling, he looked up to where a clump of mistletoe hung from a branch. “Come here,” he said, and held out a hand. She took it, allowing him to draw her close. Then he cupped her face, his leather gloves warm against her cold cheeks. Catherine, knowing what was to come, held her breath and gazed into his eyes, which seemed to speak of feelings that words could never express.

“Do you have any idea how much I love you?” he said. “And how long I have loved you? That I get to spend the rest of my life with you is...” He shook his head. “Is a blessing I cannot begin to accurately describe. But there is nothing I want more than a future with you, Catherine.”

Then he lowered his head and touched his lips to hers, softly, almost tentatively, as if awaiting permission, perhaps, to take it further. Catherine responded by lifting up on her toes and wrapping her arms about his neck, anchoring herself to him. Lysander made a sound deep in his throat as his arms folded around her, drawing her closer still. His tongue teased the seam of her lips, and she opened instinctively, tasting

peppermint and brandy as he deepened his kiss. The sensation of his mouth against hers, his powerful body against hers, was utterly intoxicating. She parted with a soft whimper of delight.

As if starved of air, Lysander immediately broke away, his chest rising and falling as he regarded her. “God knows, I do not want to stop,” he said, breathlessly, “which is precisely why I must.”

“But I do not want you to stop, Lysander,” Catherine replied, her arms still wrapped around his neck.

“Which is also, my love, precisely why I must.” He pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead, and gently untangled himself from her embrace. “Now, if you’re not going to allow me to climb the tree, how about we find some sticks and start throwing them at this...” He scratched his jaw and looked up. “...at this pagan paradox.”

Catherine laughed. “Why do you call it that?”

“Because it is a plant that has long been associated with romance, yet all parts of it are poisonous.”

“Mmm, I suppose that is something of a contradiction.” Catherine, still delirious from her first kiss, heaved the happiest of sighs, and glanced about. “All right let’s find some —” She inhaled sharply at the sight of Helena Elliot standing on the edge of the clearing, watching them, her dark garb creating an oddly ominous silhouette against the winter backdrop.

“What the hell?” Lysander muttered. “I wonder how long she’s been there.”

Even as he spoke, Helena turned away, showing no sign she’d seen either of them. Catherine suppressed a sudden shiver. “How strange,” she said. “And rude, frankly. She must know we saw her.”

Lysander shook his head. “I cannot get the measure of that woman. She’s an enigma.”

Catherine felt a mild twinge of unease. “Does it matter?”

“No, of course it doesn’t.” Smiling, he gazed up at the tree again. “Right, my love, let’s find those sticks.”



BY DINNERTIME THAT evening, the sweet scent of evergreens and other Christmas foliage, permeated the air at Myddleton, blending with the delicious aromas of roasted pheasant and beef. The house glowed and glittered with candlelight. Fireplace mantels were laden with sprigs of red-berried holly and polished ivy, while hearths crackled with burning logs or coal. The genteel hum of conversation flowed unhindered beside a harpist’s serenade. And, here and there, sprigs of mistletoe, felled from their branches by some well-aimed sticks, hung from chandeliers.

Gifts were exchanged after dinner, and then Lord and Lady Hutton excused themselves, and went below stairs to distribute gifts to the household staff. The rest of the family and guests spread themselves through the house accordingly. Lysander and Catherine found a cozy spot on a settee in the west parlor, where a fire burned brightly in the massive hearth.

Lysander took the gold fob watch from his pocket and flicked the case open. “It is precisely twenty-seven minutes past ten,” he said, and snapped the case closed again.

Catherine laughed. “Are you going to be doing that for the rest of the evening?”

“Undoubtedly,” he replied, waggling a brow at her. “It gives me pleasure to do so.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I love it.” He tucked the watch back into his pocket. “It’s the perfect gift. I shall treasure it always.”

Catherine regarded the emerald bracelet encircling her wrist. “And I shall do likewise,” she replied. “It’s magnificent.”

Lysander didn’t answer. His attention had shifted to an approaching footman, carrying a salver. “A letter has arrived

for you, Lord Hawes,” the man said, presenting the tray.

Frowning, Lysander took the missive. “At this hour?”

“Yes, my lord. The man is still here, awaiting your response.”

A prickle ran across Lysander’s scalp as he broke the seal. He opened the letter and began to read. By the time he reached the end of the brief epistle, his life had changed completely. Stomach churning, he read the words again, absorbing them.

Understanding them.

Feeling slightly sick, he got to his feet. “Tell the man I’ll be with him shortly,” he said. The footman gave a nod and departed.

“Lysander?” Catherine rose and stood at his side. “What is it? What’s wrong? My goodness, you’ve gone quite pale.”

“It’s my father,” he said, clenching his jaw as he folded the paper and put it in his pocket. “He’s had a stroke, they believe. He’s gravely ill, and not expected to recover. It’s recommended I return to Malvern immediately.”

“Oh, dear God.” Catherine clasped her hands, prayer-like, beneath her chin. “I’m so sorry, my love.”

“The letter was written yesterday. I can only pray he’ll still be alive when I get to Malvern. I have to go, Cat. There’s a coach waiting for me.”

“I understand, of course.”

“I love you.” He bent and kissed her cheek. “I’m sorry to leave you like this. I’ll write.”

Not twenty minutes later, after a hail of farewells and good wishes, Lysander, along with Finney, his valet, clambered into the waiting carriage, and went off into the winter’s night.



CHAPTER FOUR

Malvern House

Nottinghamshire

January 3rd, 1828

LYSANDER OPENED THE office door, paused on the threshold, and cast his gaze around the familiar room. Inhaling deeply, he savored the familiar scent of beeswax, old books, tobacco smoke and, surely, he did not imagine the lingering scent of his father's cologne. The curtains were still open to the view of the gardens beyond, though the perfectly trimmed lawns and hedges were not visible through the ferocious blizzard that had swept in from the northwest almost an hour ago.

He turned his attention back to the office, where shadows, cast by candlelight and the flickering flames of the coal fire, danced across the wood-paneled walls and portraits of those who had gone before. His father's portrait hung over the fireplace, the shimmer of light giving the impression of movement, as if the painted eyes had come to life, and were watching him.

Nostalgia, overwhelming in the extreme, washed over him when his gaze finally came to rest on the huge, carved oak desk that dominated the room. More than any other item, anywhere in any of the Gillingham properties, Lysander associated this particular piece of furniture with his father. This was not just a place of business, it was also a retreat, a place where his father would sit by the fire, enjoying a nightcap or reading a book.

Not anymore. Though the duke had still been alive when Lysander had finally arrived at Malvern, he had not been conscious. Lysander had held his father's unresponsive hand

and whispered his goodbyes to ears that no longer heard. Death had come mere hours later.

A lavish funeral had been tempered by the bitter weather, and Theodore Cornelius Barton, the sixth Duke of Gillingham, had been laid to rest in the family mausoleum with a little less ceremony than might otherwise have been possible.

A sudden and fresh sense of loss brought the sting of tears to Lysander's eyes. In his mind, he saw himself as a child, stealing into the office to clamber into his father's leather office chair. At the time, he could barely see over the top of the mighty desk, but he'd play at being duke, giving orders to imaginary visitors, pretending to write important letters, and signing official documents.

There was no pretending now. The desk, and everything it represented, past and present, belonged to him. Not that he feared the responsibility of it. Since infancy, he'd been groomed and educated, prepared for what was to come. Today, though, he'd decided any official business could wait. His first responsibility would be of a personal nature. Once seated in that revered leather chair, he would take up his gold pen, and write a long-overdue letter to his future duchess.

Heaving a sigh, he closed the door behind him and wandered over to the desk. Before he'd even sat down, a knock came to the door and Pinksen entered, salver in hand.

Lysander groaned inwardly. *What now?*

"You have a caller, Your Grace," the man said, and presented the small tray, upon which sat a calling card. "Apparently, the lady is in need of shelter and is hoping she might be allowed to stay here the night. I have placed the lady in the front parlor but have not said you are available."

The lady?

Lysander took the card, eyes widening as he read the embossed name. "Good Lord. Miss Elliot is here?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Pinksen replied. "The lady is not unescorted. There is another woman with her. Her maid, I

believe. And a coachman.”

Lysander glanced at the window and specifically the snow, blowing horizontally across the garden. “Damnation,” he muttered.

Pinksen’s brows lifted. “Your Grace?”

Lysander gave his head a slight shake. He was in no mood to receive Helena Elliot and her ever-present nurse. He was in no mood to receive anyone. Given the conditions, however, he could hardly turn them away. It struck him as rather odd that they’d sought shelter at Malvern rather than taking rooms at a coaching inn. They’d obviously made a detour from their intended route, and for some reason, that situation bothered him.

As he continued to ponder, the clock struck four, and Lysander resigned himself to the inevitable. Whether he liked it or not, he knew there could only be one course of action.

“I’ll see the lady, Pinksen,” he said, heaving a sigh. “Arrange for some tea, will you? And ask Mrs. Gates to prepare a guest room in the east wing. One room only, and as far away from my apartments as possible. The coachman can take a bed in the coach house.”

The hint of a smile came to the man’s face. “Right away, Your Grace.”

Lysander made his way to the parlor. The door stood slightly ajar and he paused, able to hear a quiet conversation taking place between Helena Elliot and Anjali. He understood none of it, of course. As he pushed the door open, the conversation ceased, and Helena rose from her place on the settee. Anjali remained seated with her hands clasped in her lap.

“Your Grace.” Smiling, Helena Elliot held out a gloved hand. “I trust this is not an inconvenience. We were on the road from Clifton when the snowstorm began, and by the time we reached the coaching inn, it was already full. I was in a bit of a fix when it occurred to me that Malvern wasn’t that far, so

I decided to make a small detour and throw myself on your mercy. I really didn't know what else to do. And may I offer my sincere condolences on the death of your father." A softness came to her dark eyes. "I know what it is to lose a parent."

He shook her outstretched hand. "That is very kind of you, Miss Elliot. And it's not inconvenient at all. Sit, please. I have sent for some tea."

She retook her seat, and Lysander settled himself into a nearby armchair.

The tea was served, and the time passed not unpleasantly. Miss Elliot chatted animatedly about her childhood in India and inquired politely about Lysander's life and duties. Perhaps an hour or so later, she and Anjali, who had not uttered a single word, were shown to their room, and notified that dinner would be served at eight o'clock.

When the time came, Lysander readied himself. Being in mourning, he donned the applicable black attire and made his way downstairs to the dining room, trying to summon up some enthusiasm. He'd be glad when morning came, he told himself, and silently prayed that the weather would not hinder his unexpected guests any longer.

Miss Elliot and Anjali were already in the dining room, and before long, the meal was served. Conversation throughout the meal carried along pleasantly enough.

"I have something to confess, Your Grace," Miss Elliot said, as the dessert plates were being cleared. "While we were waiting for dinner, I took the liberty of exploring some of the rooms in this magnificent house, and I notice you have a music room."

Lysander smiled, already aware of where the conversation was leading. "Indeed, I do, Miss Elliot."

"And in that music room," she continued, "is a Bösendorfer piano."

Lysander inclined his head. "It belonged to my mother."

“Ah,” Miss Elliot responded. “Well, I was wondering if you would allow me to play it. I was so tempted to do so when I first saw it but thought it best to seek your permission.”

“You have my permission, certainly,” he said. “Whenever you’re ready, we can remove there.”

Miss Elliot nodded. “I wonder, also, if I might trouble you for some tea? I enjoy a cup in the evening. It is a habit I acquired in India.”

“Of course,” Lysander said, and dispatched the order.

Soon after, he stood beside the pianoforte, ready to turn the music for Miss Elliot. Though not normally an evening habit for him, he also accepted a cup of the tea that had been ordered. Anjali, serving as the ever-present chaperone, took a seat by the door.

Truth be told, Lysander found himself relaxing, even enjoying himself. Miss Elliot had naturally taken some of his mother’s music, so the pieces she played aroused many fond memories of his childhood.

“You really have a gift, Miss Elliot,” he said. “Listening to you play is extremely pleasurable.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” She took a sip of her tea and signaled for Anjali to bring her some more. “I wish we could dispense with the formality, however. I’d much prefer it if you called me Helena.”

A small voice in Lysander’s head told him to refuse, albeit politely. Instead, he surprised himself by agreeing. “If that is what you prefer, Helena,” he replied. “But in that case, I must reciprocate. Please call me Lysander.”

“Thank you.” She briefly touched his hand with hers. “That’s much less stuffy, don’t you think?”

Lysander nodded and looked down at his hand, questioning what he’d just felt. Had she actually touched him?

“Which is your favorite?” Helena asked. “Choose it, and I will play it for you.”

“Actually, you played it at Myddleton,” he said. “Chopin.”

“Ah. Well, that happens to be my favorite as well, Lysander. I can play it by heart, so why don’t you sit down and relax?”

“As you wish,” Lysander said, amiably. He felt movement at his side and watched as Anjali filled his teacup and handed it to him. For a moment, she met his gaze and held it, her expression intense. Then she smiled and stepped away.

“I confess, Helena, I wasn’t exactly happy when you arrived at the door,” he said, ignoring an odd little voice in his head that told him something was very wrong. “But now, I’m glad you’re here. This evening has been very enjoyable.”

“And it is not yet over,” Helena replied, her voice sultry. “Sit down, Lysander. Let me serenade you.”

She began to play, the notes rising into the air with exquisite clarity. Lysander closed his eyes, feeling rather like he was floating on air.

His dreams, that night, were unlike any he’d ever had. A sweet entanglement of limbs, the feel of soft, warm flesh in his hands, and the heated scent of arousal. He was erect and eager, desperate to find completion. It all felt so real. So incredible. Unable to stop, he drove himself hard, wondering who had given herself to him, whose cry he heard when he entered her.

And then he saw her face in his dream. She was the one. The one he wanted. The one he loved. As he tumbled into a sparkling pool of ecstasy, he called out her name.

“Catherine.”



CHAPTER FIVE

Myddleton House,

Derbyshire

January 20th, 1828

CATHERINE SAT BY the hearth and stared into the flames, her right hand clasping a letter. It was her letter to Lysander; signed, sealed, apparently delivered... and then returned, unopened.

Since he'd left Myddleton on Christmas Eve, she had not heard a word from him. She knew the old duke had passed away. It had been reported in *The Times*. The weather had prevented them from attending the funeral, but letters and cards of condolence had been sent, none of them returned.

So why this one?

At that moment, the door opened, and her father, Lord Hutton, entered, carrying a copy of *The Times*.

"I don't understand, Papa," Catherine said, regarding the envelope. "Why would it have been returned? Even if he wasn't home, they'd have kept the letter." All at once, she sat up straight. "Or maybe he's on his way back here. That still doesn't explain why the letter was returned, though."

Her father cleared his throat and sat across from her. "Catherine, my dear, I have some news."

The tone of his voice and the look on his face sent a chill of apprehension down Catherine's spine. "What news? Is it about Lysander?"

"Yes," he replied. "It's about Lysander."

"What about him? Has he been hurt?"

“No, not hurt.” Her father heaved a sigh. “I’m so sorry, my dear, and I hate to have to tell you this, but it seems Lysander is married.”

Catherine stared at her father and had a sudden and bizarre urge to laugh. “Married,” she repeated. “Lysander is married.”

“Yes, my dear. Just over a week ago.” He showed her the newspaper. “The announcement is right here.”

She looked at the paper, the words upon it blurring into an indecipherable mass. “That’s not possible, Papa. They’ve made a mistake. They’ve got the name wrong.”

“There’s no mistake, Catherine. I’m so sorry.”

At that moment, the door burst open and Philip stormed in, his face twisted and angry. “I’m going to kill the bloody bastard,” he said, through gritted teeth. “I swear it. I’ll take him apart, limb by limb.”

Lord Hutton rose to his feet. “I’m of a mind to do that myself,” he said. “I simply cannot fathom it. Whatever possessed him to do such a thing?”

A chill took hold of Catherine, as if someone had opened a window to the winter air. She began to tremble. “Who did he marry, Papa?”

Philip made an odd sound and looked at his father. “You didn’t tell her?”

“Not yet, no,” he replied. “You didn’t give me enough time.”

“Who?” Catherine cried. “Who did he marry?”

“Helena.” Philip’s mouth quivered. “He married Helena.”

“No.” Catherine shook her head. “It’s not possible. He would never do that to me. He would *not*.”

Hurried footsteps could be heard coming along the hallway. A moment later, Henry appeared, clad in his coat. He looked around the faces and shook his head. “Well, it would appear I’m too late,” he said, regarding the newspaper in his

father's hand. "You've already read the announcement. I left Shrewsbury yesterday and hoped to get back in time to warn you."

"You almost did," Lord Hutton said. "We only got the paper a half hour ago."

"How did you hear about it?" Philip clenched and unclenched his fists.

"From Lord Simmons. He was in London last week and said Gillingham's wedding is the talk of the town. Every major town in England, I should think."

Gillingham.

Catherine felt a stab of pain at the mention of Lysander's duchy. Tears blurring her eyes again, she looked down at the diamond on her finger. All at once, she desperately wanted her mother.

"Where is Mama?" she asked.

"In her sitting room," her father replied. "She's very upset by all this as well. Go to her, Cat."

"Actually, Papa," Henry said. "I'd like a moment to speak to Catherine alone, if I may."

"Certainly." Lord Hutton gestured to Philip. "Come on, let's go."

"Sit down, Cat," Henry said, once they'd gone. She took her seat again.

"I can't believe he's done this, Henry," she said, her voice quivering. "I just can't believe it. It's as if someone has reached into my chest and torn my heart out."

"Having trouble believing it myself," he said. "Thing is, there are rumors already circulating, which is why I wanted to speak to you. I'm not sure they're appropriate for your ears, but I just want you to be aware, in case you overhear some of what is being said."


"What is being said?"

Henry took a breath. “That Lysander was drunk and seduced Helena. That being so, he had little choice but to marry her.”

“Oh, dear God.”

“I’m so sorry, Cat. The man’s a fool.”

Catherine regarded the envelope for a moment and then threw it into the fire. “Well, there’s nothing I can do. Whatever Lysander and I had, whatever we shared, it’s over.” Sobbing, she dropped her head into her hands. “It’s over, Henry. It’s over.”



CHAPTER SIX

Present Day

Sallingford House, Cheshire

Thursday, January 1st,

1846

CATHERINE WAS HERE, somewhere. At least, that's what he'd been told. But so far, Lysander's search for her had been unsuccessful, and hindered by constant interruptions. He'd half-expected it, however, and had taken the time to acknowledge each and every offer of condolence. As for the demure glances and fluttering eyelashes, those he politely ignored. Only one woman interested him, and she was proving damnably difficult to find. He paused in the hallway, hands on hips, and heaved a sigh. "Where are you, Catherine?" he muttered.

"She's in the orangery," a male voice said, startling him. "Hiding from you, actually."

Despite the passage of time, Lysander recognized Henry's voice immediately, and turned to see him seated in a chair nearby. The man rose and approached. Lysander struggled to maintain a neutral expression. He'd long regretted the loss of the friendship they'd once shared. "Fulston," he said, "it's been a while."

"It has, indeed," Henry replied. "My condolences on the death of your wife, Gillingham."

"Thank you." Frowning, Lysander looked along the hallway. "*Hiding* from me?"

Henry gave a nod. "Said she wants nothing to do with you."

“Can’t say I blame her,” Lysander replied. “And yet here you are, telling me where to find her, which begs the question why.”

Henry smiled. “A fair question.” He paused. “There was a time when I wanted to beat you to a pulp. And it’s probably a blessing Philip is away. I seem to remember him wishing you an extremely violent death.”

“I did Philip a favor,” Lysander said. “Believe me, Fulston, he’s better off with the wife he has.”

“Perhaps. He seems happy, right enough.” Henry regarded him for a moment. “Maybe you did Catherine a favor too. But you hurt her in the process, damn you. Nearly destroyed her, in fact.”

“I know, and if it means anything at all, it almost destroyed me too.” Lysander grimaced and rubbed at his temple. “And if Catherine feels that strongly about *not* seeing me, it might be best if I leave.”

“It might,” Henry replied, “but I think she also needs the answers that only you can provide. The thing is, I’m not sure what led up to your dalliance with Helena. Certainly, there were some strange rumors flying around at the time. Knowing you as I did, your actions seemed to be out of character. That being so, I’ve always tended to give you the benefit of the doubt, though I kept it to myself. As for what you’re hoping to achieve by coming here, I trust it’s because you want to try and right a wrong.”

“That is the *only* reason I’m here,” Lysander replied. “There was some truth in those rumors, Henry.”

“Hmm.” He looked dubious. “I doubt you’ll ever persuade my sister of that. She’s always been convinced that you were guilty on all counts.”

“Like I said before, I can’t really blame her.”

Henry’s eyes narrowed. “She was devastated.”

“Yes.” Lysander released a sigh. “I know.”

“Just be careful how you approach her,” Henry said. “Don’t make me regret what I’m doing.”

“If she asks me to leave her alone, I will.” Lysander went to turn away, but hesitated. “I’m curious. Why has Catherine never married? I can’t believe she hasn’t had offers over the years.”

“She’s had several and refused them all,” Henry replied. “And do I really need to explain why?”

Lysander swallowed over a sudden tightness in his throat but said nothing. He merely nodded, turned on his heel, and made his way down the hall. Breath clouding, he stepped out into the chill night air, pausing when he saw the trail of footprints in the snow, leading toward the orangery.

Catherine’s footprints.

“Please God,” he said, following where she’d trod. “Give me a chance.” Preoccupied with what lay ahead, he barely noticed the cold. Apprehension knotted his stomach as he approached the door, and his stride slowed as doubt weighed on him. Was it wise to resurrect the past after so long? Perhaps this was a bad idea after all. Perhaps he should simply let things lie. He halted.

Said she wants nothing to do with you.

Why has she never married?

Do I really need to explain why?

Was it wrong to assume it was because she still loved him? He didn’t need to ask *himself* if love could endure over the years. The answer to that lay in his own heart, untouched and unchanged by time. But what of Catherine? What might he hear in her voice, or see in her eyes?

The imminent reality of facing her left him breathless. He had dreamed of this day. Longed for it yet feared it at the same time. Still, it had to be done. “Get on with it, then,” he muttered. Drawing a deep, slow breath, he entered the orangery and closed the door quietly behind him.

For a moment, he stood still in the humid air and squinted into the sunlit, jungle-like depths of the foliage. From somewhere within came the sound of running water. A fountain, undoubtedly. Lysander moved forward, following the direction of the sound, halting when at last he saw Catherine, seated on a bench. She appeared to be deep in thought, head down, hands folded in her lap.

She had not heard his approach, which had likely been masked by the eternal trickle of water. Lysander took a moment to observe her, absorbing all that she was. Eighteen years could not pass without leaving an impression, but they had not been unkind. She was still slender, the alluring silhouette of her body perhaps a little thinner than he remembered. Dappled sunlight played on the gold in her hair, which had been adorned with small, white flowers. As he watched, she parted with a sigh and closed her eyes. Without thinking, he spoke her name.

“Catherine.”

With a gasp, she lifted her head, eyes widening as she recognized him. “But how did you...?” Shock showing plainly on her face, she rose to her feet and glanced about as if seeking an escape. “What are you doing here?”

Lysander held up a hand. “Please, Catherine. I mean no harm. I just desire...” His voice sounded strange to his ears; strained. Desperate, even. “May I approach?”

There followed a few moments of silence, then her shocked expression disappeared, replaced by one that showed disappointment. “Did Henry tell you where I was?”

“Yes, but he meant well. I just...” Lysander took a breath, determined to keep his wits about him. “I just need to speak with you.”

“I doubt we have anything to say to each other,” she said, lifting her chin a notch. “And my brother had no right to interfere.”

Lysander took a tentative step forward. Seeing her, being this close to her, was doing things to his insides that he hadn't felt in years. "Please, give me a chance. That's all I ask."

Her gaze swept over him from head to toe, and then she spoke with icy deference. "As you wish, Your Grace."

Lysander gave a soft, humorless laugh. "That is *not* necessary, Cat."

She assumed a bewildered expression, quite obviously feigned. "Then how, pray, shall I address you, Your Grace?"

"The way you always used to," he replied, moving to within an arm's reach. "By my *name*."

Her eyes, with their intriguing golden flecks, were as beautiful as he remembered. They narrowed a little as she regarded him. "That would not be appropriate, Your Grace."

"But it is what I wish." He curled his fingers to stop himself from reaching out and touching her. "Lysander. My name is Lysander." *And I still love you, damn it.*

She glanced away momentarily, as if pondering. "My condolences on the loss of your wife, Your Grace," she said, facing him once more.

He bit back a sigh. "Thank you," he managed, her refusal to speak his name souring his stomach. This was not going well at all. Worse than anticipated, in fact. Then again, he had hardly expected her to fall at his feet.

She gave him a grim smile. "You must miss her."

The remark took him aback. To affirm it would be false. To deny it sounded heartless. He regretted Helena's demise, but it had not plunged him into melancholia. "I am coping," he said. "In the end, death was a blessing. Her Grace had suffered enough."

An expression he couldn't quite read flitted across Catherine's face. "No doubt," she replied. "So, what is it you wish to say to me?"

“I wish to explain everything.”

“About what, Your Grace?”

“About what happened when I returned to Malvern eighteen years ago.”

Catherine threw him a look that, had it been a punch, would have knocked him on his arse. “Oh, but I already *know* what happened, Your Grace,” she said, a telltale sheen coming to her eyes. “You seduced Helena and was obliged to pay the honorable price, while Philip and I suffered the ultimate betrayal. I am so thankful he is not here tonight, having to face you, after what you did.”

“I did *not* seduce Helena.” Lysander clenched his fists. “She seduced *me*. Drugged me. Or rather, that nurse of hers did. I swear, the woman is a witch, with her potions and herbs. She put something in my drink that night, which made me lose all sense of—”

“Good Lord.” Catherine’s laugh held no trace of humor. “I confess, I was not sure what I expected you to say in your defense, but it wasn’t something as implausible – as utterly *ridiculous* as that! An apology for making a complete fool out of me might have served a little better. Not that I would have accepted that either. But instead, you’re actually attempting to lay the blame at your dead wife’s feet, which is cowardly and contemptible in the extreme. Especially since the poor woman is no longer here to defend herself. The truth is, you were attracted to Helena from the start, and do not dare to deny it. I can still remember the way you looked at her. You were *always* looking at her.”

Lysander gasped and raked a hand through his hair. “If I showed interest in Helena, it was because my gut told me something was amiss, not because of any attraction to her. I had a feeling she was not as she seemed, that behind that beautiful façade was a tainted soul.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s the truth, I swear. And it turned out I was right. Helena was not what she appeared to be.”

A tear escaped and she hastily brushed it away. “And yet you married her!”

The sight of that tear, and the anguish in Catherine’s voice, tore through Lysander’s heart like a blade. “Yes, Cat, I married her.” He threw up his hands in despair. “Given what had *supposedly* occurred, what else could I do? But I made it very clear that she would be my wife in name only. Not that she cared. She got what she wanted, after all, which was the title.”

Catherine huffed. “So, you seduced her and then made her suffer a loveless marriage.”

Lysander groaned. “Christ help me, I did *not* seduce her, and if she suffered at all, it was only because of what she herself created. I will admit, without remorse, that I did not love her, but I was never willfully cruel. She wanted for nothing, had the freedom to do as she pleased, and indulged herself accordingly.”

“None of which matters to me, Your Grace,” she said. “What happened between us is no longer of any consequence. I put it all behind me long ago.”

He shook his head. “I don’t believe that.”

“I don’t care what you believe,” she countered. “I don’t even know why you’re here, telling me this.”

Because I still love you, Catherine. Only you. And if, as you say, what happened between us is of no consequence, then why...?

“Why have you never married, Cat?”

She flinched, and he instantly regretted the question.

“Please forgive me,” he added, quickly. “I should not have asked.”

“No, I’ll tell you why. When you...” She closed her eyes for a moment and drew breath. “When the man I loved

betrayed me, I swore I would never again put my heart at risk. And I never have. To this day, I answer only to myself and am quite happy. So, if it is absolution you seek, you may have it.”

He winced. “That is not why I’m here.”

“Then why *are* you here, Your Grace?” she demanded, her voice still edged with emotion. “What do you want from me?”

“I want to turn back time.” Lysander scrubbed a hand over his face. “God help me, Cat, I want things to be as they were between us.”

She gasped. “Have you completely lost your mind? You must have, if you think for one moment that I would even *consider* entertaining such an idea. You abandoned me, Lysander, without a word. You tossed me aside for another and made me look like a fool. I could *never* trust you again. Not *ever*, do you understand? I’ve heard enough. I must go. Please step aside.”

At last, she used his name, though not in the way he needed to hear it. He could almost taste the bitterness of her words. But he wasn’t quite ready to let her go, and held out an arm, blocking her way. “No, Catherine, wait. I just...” He shook his head, inwardly cursing the desperation in his voice. “I have never stopped loving you. If you’ll just think about what I—”

“Let me *pass*, damn you!”

Jaw clenched, Lysander dropped his arm and stood back. With a swish of skirts, Catherine all but ran from him, leaving her familiar floral scent in her wake. He inhaled it greedily and closed his eyes against the deluge of memories it invoked. Moments later, he heard the unmistakable sound of a sob, followed by the solid slam of the door.

In truth, he could hardly blame Catherine for not believing him. His explanation did sound ludicrous. Desperate, even. *If only*. Ah, those two cursed little words. If only his father had not fallen ill, and Lysander had stayed at Myddleton. If only it

hadn't snowed. If only he'd refused to see Helena and her wretched nurse when they'd turned up at Malvern.

His presence here today had all been for naught. If anything, he now regretted that as well. Any hope he had for a reconciliation with Catherine had just been snuffed out like a candle.

He headed for the door and opened it. Ahead lay a trail of footprints in the snow, his and Catherine's, overlapping. Her latest footprints led away from the orangery. Away from him. He wouldn't follow them this time. There was no point. Tears stung his eyes as a familiar sense of desolation washed over him.

He headed around the back of Sallingford, toward the stables, intent on summoning his valet and his driver. If he left now, he'd be at the coaching inn at Uttoxeter by nightfall. Tomorrow, he'd return to Malvern and resume his reclusive lifestyle.

He'd become used to it, after all.



CATHERINE RAN ALL the way back to the main house. Once inside, she halted and put a hand against the wall while she caught her breath. She felt as though she was trapped in an outlandish dream. The passing of the years no longer meant anything. They had all been swept aside in minutes. Wounds that had taken so long to heal now lay open and bleeding. But beneath all the pain and heartache lay something more torturous. And that was the love that still flowed through her veins, as fierce and as pure as ever, desperate to be requited. She had a terrible need to run back to Lysander, to tell him she believed him and that all was forgiven. And that she had never stopped loving him, either. But she couldn't. She didn't dare.

“Catherine, what happened?”

Choking back a sob, Catherine glared at her brother. “You betrayed me, Henry, that's what happened. Why would you do such a thing? You knew I didn't want to see him, to face him.”

“I thought he deserved a chance.” Henry shrugged. “And I thought you did, too. I happen to believe the rumors, Cat. I’ve always suspected something untoward happened to him.”

“That he was given some kind of... of strange potion and then woke up beside Helena?” Catherine scoffed. “If that were truly the case, he would never have married her.”

“He had to marry her. He had no choice.”

“How can you—?”

“No, just let me finish.” Henry took her hand and pressed it between his. “Had he refused to marry Helena after what occurred, would you have married him, under the circumstances?”

Catherine frowned. “Of course not.”

“No, of course not. And even if you *had* agreed to it, Mama and Papa would never have allowed it. Lysander did the honorable thing, but I’ve never believed he did it willingly. I believe there was treachery involved. There had to be. In all the years I’ve known him, I have never seen him in his cups. Not once. He was always a man who could hold his drink. He was also a man who knew when he’d had enough. The idea of him being drunk and seducing Helena, without being aware of it, is bloody ridiculous, frankly.”

Catherine pressed her fingers to her temple. “But we’ll never know for sure, will we? And even if we did—if *I* did—I have no future with Lysander. It’s so different for men, Henry. He’s ten years older than I, yet he is still able to marry and have children, whereas I...” Tears stung her eyes. “Whereas I am bound to be a childless spinster. The choice was mine, of course, but there it is.”

Henry sighed. “You couldn’t at least give him the benefit of the doubt and become friends again?”

Catherine gasped. “I cannot believe you would even suggest such a thing. The answer is no, I could not, Henry. It would be too painful, a constant reminder of a wonderful dream that never came true.”



Two weeks later

Myddleton House,

Derbyshire

CATHERINE AWOKE TO darkness, wondering if she'd imagined the sound of her name being called. It had been a woman's voice, oddly familiar. She lay still, straining her ears, hearing nothing but the sound of her own breath and the lively tick of the carriage clock on her mantel. It must have been a dream, one that did not include Lysander for a change.

Of late, it was a rare night when he did not come to her in dreams and rouse her from sleep. Seeing him, being so close to him on New Year's day, had awoken so many memories, so many feelings.

By all accounts, the man had retreated back to Malvern, reportedly refusing any and all attempts to entice him to subsequent social events. Catherine, in contrast, had only declined one invitation in the past fortnight, and that had simply been due to a matter of preference. Despite her current sorrow, she had no intention of spending the rest of her life hiding away. In another month, Henry and Frances were heading to London for the season, and she had accepted their invitation to go with them.

This time, Catherine thought, she might even consider pursuing a courtship. She was well past what would be considered marriageable age, of course, and she was under no illusion about finding love. But perhaps an unattached older gentleman might take interest in her, someone who wanted nothing more than companionship from a marriage.

The mere concept of such an arrangement made her feel slightly desolate, though she wasn't quite sure why. Perhaps because she had experienced love, felt the power of it, the immortality of it. And now she was considering a life where the absence of love would be acceptable. Was that wrong? It had to be wrong.

From downstairs, she heard the hall clock strike three. Such a lonely and depressing hour. Maybe, after all, she was simply tired and overwrought, in need of a distraction. Something sweet, perhaps. She threw off the bedcovers, shivering as she donned slippers and dressing-gown. Then, lighting her lantern, she padded downstairs and headed for the kitchens, intent on raiding the larder.

To her surprise, it seemed that someone was still up. The small stove had been lit, and the tea kettle upon it was already blowing steam from its curved spout. On a nearby table, a lantern flickered, and a tea-tray had been set for two.

Puzzled, Catherine glanced around, seeing no one. Yet a prickle ran up her spine as she squinted into the darker corners of the vast kitchen. "Is someone here?" she called, softly.

In response, a dark figure stepped silently out of the shadows, and Catherine parted with a soft cry of alarm.

"Do not be afraid," a voice said. "There is nothing to fear."

A woman's voice that sounded oddly familiar. It was accented and carried the timeworn timbre of old age. A memory stirred in Catherine's brain, unclear and unsettling.

"Who are you?" She raised her lantern. "Show yourself."

The woman moved into the candlelight, her ancient face wizened with time, her once-black hair now stark-white beneath the burgundy silk *pallu* draped over her head. Catherine gasped. "Anjali?"

"Lady Catherine." Anjali placed her hands together, prayerlike, at her chest, and bowed slightly. "It has been many years."

"But, how...?" Catherine, her heart thudding solidly against her ribs, pulled her dressing gown tightly around her. "What are you doing here? How did you...? I mean, who let you in?"

The hint of a smile appeared. "How I came to be here is not important, ma'am, but my reason for being here is if you

will permit me to explain. I shall not take much of your time. Will you take some tea?"

Catherine, still not quite able to grasp the reality of the situation, gave the back of her hand a hard pinch, which hurt. And nothing changed.

"You are not dreaming, ma'am." The woman poured hot water into a tea pot. "I am quite real."

"But I don't understand." Catherine set her lantern down. "It seems you were expecting me."

"I was, ma'am."

"But how can that be? I was asleep till ten minutes ago." Lysander's declaration rang out in Catherine's head. *I swear, the woman is a witch.* Catherine doubted the existence of such creatures, but there was definitely something unsettling about this woman. "And I insist you tell me how you got in here."

Anjali heaved an audible sigh. "The questions you ask are of no consequence, ma'am. I do not have much time. I wish only to say what has to be said, then I must take my leave of you."

"None of this makes sense," Catherine said. "Why are you here, then? What is this about?"

Anjali set a steaming cup of tea down in front of Catherine. "It is about telling the truth."

Catherine frowned. "The truth about what?"

"About a marriage that took place eighteen years ago. A marriage brought about by lies and deception. A marriage that should never have been."

Catherine's heart missed a beat. "What are you talking about? I don't understand."

Anjali gestured to the cup. "Drink, ma'am," she said. Catherine looked down. *She put something in my drink that night, which made me lose all sense of...*

"Of what?" Catherine muttered, to herself.

“It is Darjeeling, ma’am,” the woman said, in a mistaken response. “The finest.”

Catherine raised a questioning brow. “Then why do you not drink it?”

Anjali frowned, filled her cup, and took a sip. “The duke told you the truth, ma’am,” she said. “About that night.”

Catherine gasped. “How do you know what the duke told me? How do you know he even spoke to me?”

She shrugged and took another sip of tea. “Again, you ask questions that are not important. You may do what you wish with what I am telling you. I am not doing this for your benefit, or for his. I am doing it for *mine*. I made a mistake, and my conscience must be cleared.”

“You made a *mistake*.” Catherine’s heart pounded in her ears. “You’re admitting that you tricked the duke into seducing Helena, forcing him to marry her, and you call that a *mistake*?”

“She wanted him,” Anjali’s hand trembled visibly as she set her cup down. “I knew it was wrong, and not just for the duke, or for you, or for Mr. Northcott. I knew it was wrong for Helena. But she wouldn’t listen. She wanted the house, the wealth, and the title, and I helped her get them.” Anjali’s face crumpled. “In the end, though, the thing she missed most of all was the one thing she’d never considered.”

Catherine puzzled over the words. “You mean children.”

Anjali gave her a sharp look. “No, not children! I am speaking of his *love*, ma’am. Oh, I knew the man had love in his heart; a powerful, indestructible love. Helena knew it, too. But it was not meant for her, and there is no alchemy in the world that can create love where it is not meant to be. Lysander’s love was meant for another, and he safeguards it to this day, waiting for her to claim it.”

Catherine closed her eyes and put a steadying hand on the table. “He was telling me the truth,” she said.

“Yes,” Anjali replied. “And you must decide what you will do with that truth. As for me, I have said all I needed to say. Now I must go.”

“Where are you going?”

“Back to India.” She smiled. “I cannot abide this climate.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

Malvern House

Nottinghamshire

THE SOUND OF wheels on gravel drew Lysander's attention. Seated at his desk, he lifted his head from the ledger and looked out at Malvern's great portico to see a carriage pulling into the columned entry. From where he sat, he couldn't quite make out the crest on the carriage door, but the fact there was a crest implied a visit from a peer.

He heaved a sigh.

Since his appearance at Lady Pennington's gathering, he'd been inundated with invitations of all sorts. And he'd refused every single one. Since he hadn't invited anyone to Malvern, he could only assume the caller was hoping for some kind of personal audience. The sheer audacity of it forced a curse from his lips and lifted him to his feet.

As he watched, a lady descended from the carriage, her form partially obscured by one of the columns. Odd, that a lady would descend first. Where was her escort? Lysander waited, only to see the footman set a valise on the ground.

"What the devil?" he muttered.

In his mind, he went back eighteen years, to a cold winter afternoon, when another coach had arrived at Malvern. That coach, too, had transported only women. Through trickery and treachery, one of them had become his wife, and his future had been forever changed. Such a thing would never happen again.

"Whoever you are, you can get back in the bloody coach and leave," he muttered, and returned to his seat.

It wasn't long till he heard footsteps along the hallway. The door opened and Pinksen appeared, balancing a silver salver on his right hand.

"Your Grace, you have—"

"Tell her to bugger off, Pinksen."

The man's eyes widened. "Your Grace?"

"You heard me. Whoever she is, I'm not interested. Get rid of her."

"Are you sure, Your Grace?"

"Positive."

The servant stood there for moment, as if uncertain of what to do. "Your Grace, I really think—"

"Are you deaf, man?"

"No, Your Grace."

"Then do as I say. Get rid of her."

"Very well, Your Grace. Um, I wonder, though, if I might at least offer the lady some refreshment before sending her on her way."

Lysander heaved a sigh. "If you must. But I will *not* see her. Is that clear?"

"Very clear, Your Grace."

"Good." He reached for his pen and bent over the ledger once more. It was only a matter of minutes before the butler returned. It was all Lysander could do not to hurl the inkwell at him. "What?" he snarled.

"Your Grace, I made it clear to the lady that you do not wish to see her, and she said she understands completely. She declined my offer of refreshment and is, as we speak, getting ready to depart. But she asked me to give you this, and I saw no reason to refuse."

The man set something on the desk and stepped back. Frowning, Lysander leaned forward and picked up the item

between finger and thumb.

A sprig of mistletoe.

He stared at it, hardly daring to believe what it implied. It couldn't be. Not after what had occurred in the orangery.

But then Pinksen spoke. "The lady said to tell you it is a paradox, Your Grace. A contradiction. Not unlike what happened to her and to you. She said you would underst—"

"Out of the bloody way!" Lysander all but vaulted over the desk and ran out into the hallway. "She mustn't leave. Cat, wait, please. I didn't know it was you!"

He ran like the Devil was after him, slowing only when he approached the open door and saw the silhouette of the woman he loved, standing on the threshold. Breathless, he halted a stride away, but never said a word. To have done so would have meant giving freedom to the tears that welled in his eyes.

Instead, he lifted the sprig of mistletoe above his head. Catherine regarded it for a moment, her mouth curving into a smile. Then she stepped forward and into his arms.

Where she belonged.



EPILOGUE

LYSANDER AND CATHERINE were married on the 11th of April 1846, at Myddleton. As society weddings went, it was a small affair, with only family and close friends in attendance. There were those who questioned the union. Lysander, after all, had no direct heirs, and Catherine was considered perhaps a little old to be having children. But they loved each other deeply and had waited a lifetime to be together. Neither could imagine spending the rest of their lives with anyone else.

The End

This short story is connected to characters who will feature in my new six-book Victorian Romance series entitled ‘The Highfield Chronicles’. My inspiration for this tale came primarily from Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, where the lovers are paired with the wrong partners. Thank you for reading!

May all your dreams for the New Year be bright!

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Charlotte Wren

The Highfield Chronicles

[Of Christmas Past \(Novella\)](#)

[If the Fates Allow \(Novella\)](#)

The Lyon's Den Series

[The Devilish Lyon](#)

About Charlotte Wren

Charlotte Wren writes heartfelt historical romances set in the Regency and Victorian eras. Her new Regency/Victorian series, 'The Highfield Chronicles', is currently in the works, with the first full-length novel set for release in 2022 through Dragonblade Publishing!

You can find Charlotte at the following social media sites:

Facebook – [facebook.com/Wrenbooks](https://www.facebook.com/Wrenbooks)

Amazon – [amazon.com/Charlotte-Wren/e/B08FFBR14W](https://www.amazon.com/Charlotte-Wren/e/B08FFBR14W)

**MUCH ADO ABOUT A
STORME**

Sandra Sookoo

Author's Note

This story is very loosely based on Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. It seemed only fitting that the misunderstanding in that storyline would be put to use with a Storme, since both the Bard's plays and my Stormes are quite chaotic and full of squabbles.

Dedication

This story wouldn't have come about if Gloria Pastorino wouldn't have kept insisting that the dowager needed her own happily ever after.



CHAPTER ONE

December 21, 1819

Hadleigh Hall

Derbyshire, England

LAVINIA STORME, THE Dowager Countess of Hadleigh, walked through the corridors of Hadleigh Hall with a faint smile curving her lips. This Christmastide season would certainly be one of the best in recent memory.

For the first time in many years, the nursery had been renovated. It was now full and thriving with young ones, for so much had changed within the Storme family in the past two years. All of her children had married and started families of their own. Cooing and fussing from one of those young ones drifted to her ears as she passed the doorway, blending with babble from the older cousins. Chatter between the nursery maids interspersed the other sounds.

Andrew's daughter was a year and a half. Phineas and Jane's son had just passed his six-month-old birthday. Brand's daughter was a month younger than Andrew's Lady Penelope.

Beyond that, the Storme cousins had also settled and were beginning their families, for William's son would turn one year old next month. Isobel's child was expected in March of the new year. And as for Caroline? Well, she had been a married woman for just over a year. It was anyone's guess if she and her husband John would have children, but Lavinia didn't doubt that if it was fated, it would happen.

Oh, her husband would have been so pleased to see how the Stormes had grown over the years. To say nothing of the fact that Andrew had been the instrumental one in reuniting the rift between the two factions of the family.

It was a lovely life, and she was so grateful to witness the love and acceptance the family had found.

The low buzz of conversation reached her ears from behind closed doors she passed. Everyone with the exception of Brand and Caroline were beneath this roof, but they were expected to arrive later today since they both were coming from Ipswich, and travel could be tricky during this time of year. Not since last Christmastide had the hall run with laughter and good-natured tricks between the cousins, but this season would be exponentially better than that memorable Christmastide house party of 1817 when the cousins had come back together for the first time in years.

Yes, life was incredibly wonderful. Her smile continued as she glided down the stairs to the second floor. At the age of two and sixty, she couldn't be happier. Even through missing her husband over the past few years, she couldn't complain. For the first time in a long while, there was nothing pressing she needed to attend, no familial distress she had to defuse, no worrying over her sons' fate, or anything else.

It was decidedly odd, a little empty, but a bit exhilarating as well.

Perhaps I shall try my hand at a hobby.

When she arrived in the drawing room, she smiled again, for Andrew sat in his favorite wingback chair near the cheerful fire. A copy of *The Times* was in his hands, but his attention wasn't on the paper. Instead, he watched the flames behind an ornate metal grate. The scents of spices and citrus filled the air, for the mantel had been decorated with fir boughs as well as clove-studded oranges, bright red ribbons, and tin bells.

"Am I interrupting great thoughts?" she asked in a soft voice so she wouldn't startle him.

"Of course not, Mother." Andrew immediately folded the newspaper and then laid it on the table at his elbow. "I'm glad to see you. In fact, I was pondering the possibilities of your future."

“Well, that is an odd thing to spend your time on.” Lavinia sat on a low sofa near his position. On Christmas Eve, the boys would fetch an evergreen tree and set it up in this room, as folks did in the Bavarian region. The Stormes had adopted the custom a couple of years ago, and now she couldn’t contemplate a Christmastide without such a festive accompaniment. “Why are you thinking of my future at all when your own existence is so full?”

A mysterious grin took possession of his mouth. “Life is indeed changing quickly.”

“Yes, and in the best ways.” She couldn’t help her chuckle. “Two years ago, I couldn’t guess that you boys would all be married, or that your cousins would find love as well.”

“It has been a busy time for our family.” He rested an ankle on a knee, and though gray strands glimmered heavily through his dark brown hair, he was still much the arrogant young man he’d been twenty years ago. Yet he had changed, and grown so much as a person over the past two years since marrying that he was almost unrecognizable. “There is something I must tell you.”

“Oh? Is all well with Penelope?” Her chest tightened briefly with worry. The child had had a head cold a month ago shortly after arriving at Hadleigh Hall, but she had since recovered. Was it something more serious?

“My daughter is quite well.” Andrew’s grin widened. “Sarah encouraged me to go ahead and announce the news, and it explains why she has been under the weather for these past few months.”

“Oh?” She clasped her hands together in her lap. “And?” Could she dare to hope?

“Sarah is once more increasing. Three months or so, the midwife confirmed yesterday.” His eyes twinkled. “Never did I think I would be gifted with one child, let alone two.”

Indeed, his wife wasn’t a young woman—none of the Storme ladies were—but they were all healthy and quite

determined to take everything they wanted from life.

“I am so glad for you.” Lavinia left the sofa, crossed to her son’s chair, and then leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Another grandchild! How splendid.” She flashed him a smile. “I can hardly wait until June.”

“Neither can I, and if fate is kind, this one will be a boy and heir.” He appeared so pleased she rather thought he might pop. Then he sobered slightly and found her gaze with his. “However, I don’t wish to talk about me. Are *you* happy, Mother?”

Whatever she thought he might say, that wasn’t it. “Of course I am. How could I not be?”

He uttered a quick huff. “I don’t mean because we’ve all settled and are giving you grandchildren.” An intensity rolled from him in waves. Andrew never did things by half. “Are you living a life fulfilled? I mean, surely your existence isn’t to be of service to the rest of us.”

“What are you trying to get at, Andrew?” Lavinia narrowed her eyes. If her eldest son had a singularly annoying fault, it was his penchant for meddling in the lives of his family members. At one time or another, he’d sought to orchestrate different events for them all. Perhaps it was her turn.

He waved a hand in dismissal of her creeping suspicion. “I mean romantically. Now that we don’t require supervision—much—perhaps it’s time for you to marry again, so you’ll have a companion with whom to live out the remainder of your years.”

As if I’m a doddering old woman about to lose my faculties?

“Oh, pish posh. I am doing perfectly well without such things.”

She hadn’t given thought to marrying again, for she’d remained loyal to her husband’s memory, but he’d died early in 1815, over four years ago. She missed him, of course—he’d

been the love of her life—but his heart had attacked him, and that had been that. No warning and then he was gone. They'd been married for almost forty-two years. He had been her best friend, the person she'd relied on the most, but also stubborn to a fault, and his absence had left a huge hole in her heart. Since then, she'd lived for the Storme family, wanting to repair the huge rift that had occurred between her children and her nieces and nephew.

Yet, it had been Andrew who'd done that, once his wife had slowly influenced him and taught him how to heal himself first. He had reconciled the Storme connection where his father and uncle had wrecked it, and it hadn't been easy over the years.

In the event he didn't understand her answer, she went on for clarification. "I rather think romance is best left to the younger generations."

"Nonsense." Andrew strummed the fingers of one hand on his thigh. "You are still quite vital and beautiful."

Was she, though? Lavinia shook her head. "I am older, Andrew. Why can I not live out the rest of my days in peace and by dandling grandchildren on my knee?"

"You can, of course, but don't you miss the closeness a romance can bring?" Mischief sparkled in his eyes, and that couldn't bode well. "You and Father were thick as thieves most of the time. I find it odd you don't want that again."

"I am content. There is nothing wrong with that."

"No, but what about kissing? Women always like that. Surely, you'd wish to experience that again? Have a man court you?"

Oddly enough, heat infused her cheeks. "I *did* adore kissing your father..." But that was all over now. In fact, they hadn't come together carnally more than a handful of times each year toward the end of their union, for her husband had been busy with Parliament and other duties, while she had been at her wit's end worrying about her boys, for two of them

had been in the war. To say nothing of their cousins or various social schedules.

The Storme family required a delicate but strong touch at times.

Could women feel that rush of heated excitement again at her age?

Andrew nodded. “Once we return to London after Twelfth Night, concentrate your efforts on pursuing a man.”

Oh, good heavens. “Honestly, I am not like the ladies of your generation. I don’t want to take the initiative.” She sighed and returned to her seat on the sofa. “I *like* being pursued, being courted, knowing a man will do whatever it takes to possess *me*.”

Though she might not have approved of the way the Storme wives—and her nieces—had gone after the men in their lives, that didn’t mean their tactics had been wrong. The Storme men were difficult creatures, but the thought of prowling through ballrooms after an eligible man? It sent chills down her spine.

I don’t have that sort of courage.

“You won’t know unless you try.” Andrew’s smile held an edge of amusement. “Sarah has been after me to matchmake if you’ll allow.”

“I will not.” Of that she was quite adamant. “If such a thing doesn’t happen naturally, then we’ll know a second romance is not meant to be. Why can you not see I’m happy and leave me to it?”

“Because I believe you still have much love to give.”

“And you like to muck about in the lives of your family,” she said with a touch of sarcasm.

“Perhaps, but is it my fault that I *do* know what’s best?”

“Only because Sarah has been such a good influence.” Lavinia shook her head. “Leave off, Andrew. When, or *if*, I’m

ever ready, I shall make that decision.” She pressed her lips together, for this next bit wouldn’t go over well with him. “Now that you are to have another child, I think it’s perhaps time for me to move into the dower house and leave both the hall and the London townhouse to your growing family.”

It wouldn’t be a hardship, for she did adore the grounds here, and the dower house was only a mile away from Hadleigh Hall. There was a decent-sized garden there and a lovely little pond on the property that she could see from the bedroom she’d take as hers.

Shock etched across Andrew’s face. “You intend to leave us?”

“Not leave, just put distance between.” She gave him a smile aimed at comfort. “You don’t need me knocking about and being in the way as you raise your family, and I need the space to discover who else I can be now that my life is shifting too.”

For long moments, he remained silent as he stared as if seeing her in a different light for the first time. Finally, he nodded. “I can appreciate that. After all, you *are* a Storme, and the usual things aren’t for you.”

“Thank you.”

“Promise me you will keep an open mind if an opportunity presents itself.” He reached out a hand and she took it over the arm of the sofa. “I don’t want you to miss out on a new romance merely because you might be afraid. Trust me, that emotion can destroy more than it can help.”

Really, her firstborn son was a dear now that he’d mellowed. “I promise. If fate deems it right to throw a man into my path, I shall be receptive. But if it doesn’t, you must let the matter drop. I have more than enough to keep me busy in life.”

“Agreed.” He squeezed her fingers before releasing her. “Brand and Caroline should arrive if not tomorrow then the next day. If the weather holds.”

She nodded, and partially tuned him out as he went on to discuss the snow and events he hoped they could indulge in once the family was once more together.

Did she want a new romance? Who could say, though now that he'd put the idea into her head, it wouldn't leave. *Dear heavens, do I even have the mental fortitude to withstand a courtship at my age?* Were there decent men left who didn't look like a dog's breakfast and come with too many problems to count?

Only time would tell.



CHAPTER TWO

December 22, 1819

Derbyshire, England

Will this trip never end?

THOUGH THEY HAD been underway for only an hour, Allan Montrosse, 4th Duke of Tattersham, was dreadfully bored.

It had been a risk to try and travel from Tattersham Grange in Sheffield to London at this time of the year, but he hadn't thought the anemic snowflakes that had been in evidence when they started out would have changed into the blowing squall that it was now.

"Is all well, Papa? You seem excessively nervous this afternoon."

This was from his son Philip who held his courtesy title—Earl of Sanderson. At forty years of age, the boy had yet to settle down and start his nursery. It was troubling, for Allan wished to see the line of succession secured; neither of them was growing any younger, after all. Philip was his only son, and they were on their way to London to be with his daughter, Rebecca. Time was rather of the essence.

"Of course it is, though the weather is concerning." Heavy, large snowflakes fell outside the traveling coach's window. They swirled about, buffeted around the vehicle on gusty winds. It was troubling how quickly the roads and surrounding countryside had been covered by a blanket of white. "I'm wondering if we shouldn't turn back and try to set out later."

Philip groaned. "Postpone the trip?" He rubbed a gloved hand along the side of his face, and with that gesture, he looked a near spitting image of Allan when he'd been that age, all golden hair, square jaw, and piercing blue eyes. "There is

nothing scintillating to occupy one's attention in Sheffield. I'm rather excited to return to Town for the Christmastide season. At least there will be social events."

"There are worse things than rustivating quietly in the country." Allan chuckled at his son's aversion to the out-of-the-way property. "In time, you will come to appreciate the slower pace as well as the silence."

"I doubt that." Philip sighed and turned his attention to the window. "I'd rather pass the time with my fellows and fine brandy, then spend the nights in a willing woman's bed."

"And I would like you to marry." Why was the boy so against it?

Allan had lost his wife ten years ago after a brief illness, but they'd been married for thirty years, and though the union had been rocky at times, it had been the best time of his life.

"There is time enough for that."

He kept his own counsel, but before he could introduce a new topic, a loud crack resounded through the air. The traveling coach lurched violently to the right. Both he and Philip were thrown into the wall as the vehicle tipped onto its side. Shouts from the drivers echoed. Snow lay pressed against the windows and door.

"What the devil?" It was quite the chore to right himself in the disabled coach, but he managed it. Standing upon one of the benches, he had the opposite door opened. "Sam? What happened?" he called to his driver as he pulled himself up through the doorway and then perched on the side of the coach.

"Must have hit a hole in the road hidden by snow," one of the drivers responded. The snow fell furiously around them, hindering clear vision. "The axel broke, and we pitched into a drift."

"Yes. I'm well acquainted with that part," Allan said with a fair amount of sarcasm. "What now? Can it be fixed?" Damn, it was cold. He turned up the collar of his greatcoat and wished

his muffler was a bit thicker. Philip climbed out of the vehicle and then slid down the exterior, landing with a thud on the ground below.

“Not any time soon, Your Grace.” Sam shook his head and hunched into his coat. “I’ll need parts and tools.”

Bloody hell.

Never in all his five and sixty years had this sort of complication happened to him. Perhaps he’d been uncommonly fortunate, or perhaps it had been folly after all to travel during this time of year. No matter. They couldn’t very well spend the day freezing to death in the snow. “We must be in Derbyshire, correct?”

“Yes.” Sam looked about the area. “Nearest manor is Hadleigh Hall, I believe. About two miles south of here. John and I can walk there if you and Lord Sanderson want to return to the relative warmth of the coach. We’ll ask for assistance —”

“Nonsense.” Allan shook his head. “No need. The four of us will walk. Once you warm yourself, perhaps we can convince Hadleigh to render assistance.” He remembered the earl from his earlier days as an active member of London society. The man had had a pretty wife. But there had been talk the earl had died four years before. “Let us hope the son is as congenial as the man I knew.” No time like the present to begin. “Best not waste more time, else we’ll be buried.” And that wind cut through his clothing. It wouldn’t take long before he was chilled to the bone.

This Christmastide season wasn’t starting out as he’d hoped.



“THE DUKE OF Tattersham and his son, the Lord of Sanderson.”

Allan nodded his thanks at the butler as they were shown into an elegantly appointed drawing room done in various

shades of blue. At least there was a fire burning, and he couldn't wait to stand before it for a few minutes.

A man rose from a chair with an expression of confusion. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit, Tattersham?" But he extended a hand in welcome.

"Our traveling coach is disabled and in the road about two miles off. You were the nearest shelter from the wicked storm." He shook the offered hand, and indeed, this man must be Hadleigh's son. Definitely had the same features. "Could I trouble you for tea and shelter until the vehicle is repaired?"

"Of course. I'll ring for it and in the meanwhile, please make yourself comfortable." The younger earl swiftly crossed the room and then yanked on a bellpull. "That is my mother, the Dowager Countess of Hadleigh." He gestured with a hand. "My brother, Major Storme. His wife, Jane. My brother-in-law, Doctor Marsden—or rather, the Earl of Worchester. His wife, Isobel. The other house guests will no doubt show up sooner or later."

Allan nodded. "My son, Philip." As introductions were performed, the only person in the room he noticed was the dowager, who rose as soon as his gaze landed on her.

"I'm afraid we have a rather full house for the Christmastide season," she said by way of introduction.

Those dulcet tones were immediately soothing. While his son wandered over to talk with the man in the Bath chair, Allan studied the dowager. She was elegant and stunning with graying brown hair and lovely hazel eyes. Perhaps the forced detour here wouldn't be as bad as he thought, for she was as fetching as he remembered from years ago.

"That is what the holidays are for, though." He took possession of her hand and slowly brought it to his lips. "Hullo, Lady Hadleigh. I believe we've been acquainted through mutual contacts over the years."

"Of course, Your Grace. How have you fared?" Her eyes twinkled, and when he placed a kiss on her middle knuckle, a

faint blush stained her cheeks, marred only slightly by wrinkles and tiny laugh lines about her mouth.

How curious.

“I was on my way to London for my daughter’s confinement. She will deliver her third child soon and I wished to be close in the event of complication.”

“That’s understandable.” The dowager drew him to a sofa within a grouping of furniture. “I hope this interlude will be a happy one before you return to your travels.”

The Earl of Worchester chose that moment to interject. His red hair gleamed in the candlelight. “I rather doubt anyone will go anywhere soon. It’s become a right proper storm out there. The roads will be impassable in another hour.”

Hadleigh drifted over to one of the windows. “It does look ominous. Perhaps you should join the house party, Tattersham.”

Though Allan fretted internally about his daughter, there was nothing he could do about the condition of the roads or his broken coach. He shot a glance at his son, who shrugged but scowled. “This is a sight better than freezing on the road.” Then he once more looked at the dowager. Awareness he thought long dead stirred deep within him. “I appreciate the invitation.”

She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “The more the merrier. We have plenty of guest rooms. Besides, I am throwing a masquerade ball on Christmas Eve. It shall be an entertaining event.”

His son perked up at that. “Oh, how jolly!”

Allan fought the urge to roll his eyes. “That would be lovely, though procuring a costume might prove impossible.”

The major shook his head. “The attics are stuffed full of clothing. No doubt you can have at it and find something appropriate.” To Philip, he said, “I’ve invited a few

acquaintances of mine from my London publishing house, and they'll add to the mix of attendees."

Worcester nodded. "I have also brought a few friends with me, including two who are visiting from the University of Glasgow. Who needs London when it's practically come here?"

Everyone laughed at that. Shortly afterward, the tea service arrived, and for the next few minutes, cups were handed out as well as plates of edibles.

As everyone talked among themselves, Allan garnered the dowager's attention once more. "Your sons favor your husband."

"I think so too." She glanced at Hadleigh, who talked to Allan's son, and then back at him. "Brand is the only one who looks more like me."

"Oh? Is he in residence?"

"He should arrive with his wife sometime tomorrow. God willing." Worry lined her face. "I hadn't realized how treacherous it had grown out there."

"It certainly made the two-mile hike difficult." His toes were still mostly frozen.

"That must have been a terrible experience." She watched him from over the rim of her teacup, and he was immediately captivated by the sense of whimsy and intelligence in those eyes that were now more green than brown.

Why? He would give anything to know the direction of her thoughts right now.

"It is not one I wish to repeat, but the end result more than makes up for the difficulties." *Well, bother.* Was he truly attempting to flirt with her? There was certainly a curious sense of belonging in her company he hadn't felt in far too many years, yet he knew next to nothing about her other than she was a widow.

“How kind of you to say,” she murmured. When she peered at her eldest son and he lifted an eyebrow, another blush went through her cheeks. “You will find there’s never a dull moment here at Hadleigh Hall, especially during Christmastide.”

“So I can discern.” As they talked, a few more people drifted into the drawing room. “It has been a while since I last entertained. My wife was the one who adored all things in that vein, but after her passing, I’m afraid I buried myself in my work and causes.” When his son followed a red-haired woman about the space with his gaze, Allan tamped down the urge to chuckle.

Was he truly interested or only out for a tryst?

“That’s understandable. Losing a spouse is a traumatic experience.” Her hand shook slightly, but she returned her teacup to its saucer on the low table in front of her. “You and your son must be fatigued after your ordeal. Shall I ring and have your rooms readied immediately?”

And lose her company so soon after he’d met her? “Do not trouble yourself, Lady Hadleigh. Everything in its time.” Allan peered more closely into her face. “I have the feeling that you have spent more of the past years caring for everyone except yourself. Perhaps it’s time you leave everyone to their own devices and put your feet up.”

The earl chuckled. “I was just telling Mother the same before your arrival, Tattersham.”

“Perhaps between us, we can see she has a delightful Christmastide season.”

“Do stop, you two. Someone will assume from your talk I’m an invalid.” The dowager busied herself by refreshing her cup of tea.

“You are certainly not that,” Allan said in a low voice. In fact, the longer he spent in her company, the more enamored he grew. To say nothing of the fact that certain parts of his anatomy were coming to life after being dormant for too long.

An hour or so passed in cheerful, clever conversation. But then the butler returned and told him their rooms were ready and that the Hadleigh Hall's stable hands had successfully retrieved their luggage.

"Ah, excellent. Thank you."

The butler lingered. "If you would follow me, Your Grace? I shall see you and Lord Sanderson settled."

"Of course." With regret filling his chest, Allan stood. "I welcome the opportunity to rest my cold feet before a private hearth and perhaps write a letter to my daughter. Will I see you at dinner then, Lady Hadleigh? I would adore the chance to continue our conversation."

"Where else would I be?" She blushed. "I haven't enjoyed myself like that in ever so long." As she rose to her feet, she caught her bottom lip briefly between her teeth. What would it feel like to kiss her? Would she welcome that sort of attention? "Should you find yourself bored, please make use of the library. Or I could give you a tour of the house. Simply come find me." The emotions in her eyes were unreadable except for a tiny gleam of interest.

"I will bear that in mind." Yes, perhaps this holiday season would prove good indeed, especially since he wouldn't need to pass it alone, and if he chose to pursue the dowager, all the better.



CHAPTER THREE

December 23, 1819

LAVINIA CONTINUED TO fret, for the snow hadn't let up since the Duke of Tattersham had joined them yesterday at teatime. Brand and Caroline hadn't yet arrived, and she hoped more than anything they weren't stranded somewhere between Ipswich and Derbyshire.

She set aside the gown on her lap she'd been adding beadwork to the hem. It would be her costume for the masquerade ball in an effort to transform herself into a fairy queen, but her concentration was scattered. Beside the worry about her missing family members, she felt a bit emotional for the upcoming move to the dower house after Twelfth Night. Andrew and Sarah would have the honor and the joys found in the Hadleigh Hall property, for her reign here had come to an end.

A sigh escaped her. Life moved on—and well it should—but where did she fit into that march? Suddenly there was nothing to do, which was why she'd thrown herself into planning the masquerade ball, but once that event occurred, what then?

Restless and in need of exercise to help order her thoughts, Lavinia left the morning room and headed for the portrait gallery. The arrival of the Duke of Tattersham had left her at sixes and sevens for one simple reason: there had been an immediate connection between them the moment he'd taken her hand and kissed the back of it.

And that hadn't happened in too many years to count.

What to do about it? If anything?

Oh, he was handsome, there was no denying that, with hair the color of silver and still very thick, done in the latest style. His shoulders were broad and his chest wide as if he kept himself in good physical condition instead of going frail and feeble. And sometime during taking tea together, she'd almost felt... giddy. Perhaps that wasn't the best way to describe it, but that emotion was very much like when she'd met her husband those first few initial times.

Once in the portrait gallery—which was merely a long, wide hall lined with portraits of memorable members of the Storme family—Lavinia sighed. There were times when she would come here and talk to the painting of her husband when she was conflicted.

And she was certainly that now.

Pausing in front of her husband's portrait, which had been painted ten years into their marriage with him sitting in his favorite chair in the drawing room and a snifter of brandy in his hand, she allowed herself a tiny smile. "Hello, Henry." Those intense eyes had been captured so perfectly in the portrait that she could almost tumble into them. "The time we'd talked about so long ago has come. I shall be moving into the dower house soon."

A pity he couldn't truly answer her or give her comfort.

Lavinia traced the side of his face with a fingertip. "To say nothing of a startling new development that is slightly odd yet interesting." Ever since dinner the night before, she couldn't stop thinking about the duke. Was it a betrayal to her husband? She didn't believe so, but she hadn't contemplated anything regarding another man, so this put her on a sea of confusion. "But you always said you wanted me to be happy and to live my life to its fullest. Perhaps I have that chance." She sighed again. "We shall have to see."

For long moments, she stared at the portrait. Andrew had been a child of eight at the time; Phineas had been six, and Brand almost four. The boys were a handful, yet they had grown into such strong, noble men that any mother would

have pride for. Additionally, the ladies they'd chosen to marry were amazing in their own rights.

And now they were raising the next generation of Stormes.

"Am I interrupting a private moment?"

The deep rumble of that low-pitched voice sent delicious shivers down her spine. "No." The word was decidedly breathless as she spun around to look at the duke. "I was merely taking a few moments for myself in the quiet." Though she was pleased to see him, his presence left her flustered and confused.

Oh, surely, she was much too old to find herself at sixes and sevens by a man.

"Should I leave?"

"No, of course not." She waved a hand to include the length of the gallery. "You are welcome, of course." When he drew abreast of her, she tamped down the urge to run in sudden panic. "This gallery reminds me of all I have to be thankful for."

"I know exactly what you mean. It's difficult and bittersweet to remember those who have gone on before us, but on the other hand, our children and grandchildren bring with them a new hope and excitement for the future."

"Yes." Lavinia glanced up at him, and when he grinned, silly flutters went through her lower belly. "I have three grandchildren right now with one on the way, plus a great-niece and nephew."

"Ah, you are fortunate indeed." He clasped his hands behind his back as he slowly walked the portrait gallery. "I have a grandson and a granddaughter, with another ready to be born very soon."

"I am sorry you weren't able to return to London to be with your daughter." Lavinia kept easy pace with him. "Honestly, I don't think we ever stop worrying about our children or any member of our family." She glanced out the

picture window at the end of the corridor. Drat. It was still snowing.

“Obviously, my presence isn’t needed just now at her side.” He flashed her an easy grin. “She has a month to go, but since the second babe arrived early, we both thought to be prepared. Besides, her husband will be with her.”

Childbirth was such a grueling, anxiety-inducing endeavor for all involved, and there was no guarantee either mother or baby would survive. “I cannot imagine this storm will last days. Unless we have a deep freeze after, the roads have an excellent chance of clearing.” She shrugged. “No doubt you’ll be on your way in no time.”

“My daughter is safe, and I don’t mind the inconvenience.” He moved closer to her. The clean scent of him, like the air before the snow with evergreens nearby, wafted to her nose. “Though, with the reception I’ve been given here at Hadleigh Hall, I don’t consider this an inconvenience. I am actually looking forward to your masquerade ball.”

“Good. I thought it might be entertaining and something different.” Quickly, she moved to the opposite wall to contemplate the portraits there merely to put space between them. His presence was so large and commanding she might drown in it. “Do you feel this stage of life is so different from when we raised our children?”

“Absolutely.” The duke followed. He paused just behind her left shoulder. “That stage was always frantic, full of things to do, business to attend, family needs to meet, and through it all find a balance so my wife wouldn’t feel lost to everything.”

Oh, how sweet!

“I’m glad you didn’t forget her. My husband tried to do much the same, but there were times when he failed. As we all do.” She studied one of the portraits of a long-dead Storme whose name she couldn’t remember, especially while the duke was so near. “He died suddenly, that none of us were ready to tell him goodbye, but we had no choice.”

“Even when our loved ones have an illness that we know will end tragically, their death still hits hard,” he said in that same low voice. “No one wants to let go because love is so dear.” When she remained silent, he continued. “What do you miss most about him?”

Now that was a difficult question. “Honestly? His protection. The way I felt safe and cherished in his arms.” Lavinia turned about and met the duke’s eyes. “The way he would make me laugh and tell me jokes at night if I was feeling distraught or overwrought regarding the boys.”

“I didn’t know Hadleigh all that well, but I did admire him when we met in passing at various social events. He sounds like he was a good man indeed, especially because he had the good sense to choose you for a wife.” He grinned and she couldn’t help but stare at his lips.

Why? She’d seen lips on a man before. Of course, she had, yet here she was acting like a ninny and wondering what a kiss from him would feel like. Right here near the portrait of her dead husband!

Get hold of yourself, Lavinia!

“He was.” Had it always been so hot in the portrait gallery? She resisted the urge to fan her face with her hand.

“Utterly enchanting.” Lord Tattersham chuckled, and it was a glorious sound that swept away lingering concern or worries, a sound that she could let wrap around herself and burrow into. Tingles moved down her spine to lodge between her thighs, awakening a need she thought long dormant. Coupled with that knowing gleam in his eyes, need poured into her being, a sort of longing she hadn’t known for years. “I agree on your point about missing companionship. It’s easily one of the most intimate things about marriage.”

“It truly is, but it will take a bit before the younger set realizes that,” Lavinia said softly and finally let her gaze drift back to his. “Some of the richest moments are merely in spending time with one’s spouse in the quiet moments, doing

nothing of consequence. The heat fades somewhat but the companionship is the true treasure.”

“*Perhaps* the heat fades.” He brushed his fingertips along the side of her cheek, tucked an escaped lock of hair behind her ear while his eyes twinkled with mischief. “That largely depends upon the couple.”

She trembled, for it had been years since a man who wasn’t related to her had touched her. “There is too much that pulls two people apart at times.”

“True.” The duke flicked his attention to the portraits behind her. “When the marriage is young, the man needs to make something of himself, to fill his coffers, to make a name for himself that will leave a legacy. The woman is busy with raising a family and running a household.”

“To say nothing of making her husband look his best in society.”

“There is that.” His chuckle blended with hers, for they were both long past the time when heartbreak stung the most.

Then she frowned. What was the purpose of this conversation? “And after those things of life are finished?” That was where she was at now, so just what was he hinting at? For too long she’d been out of practice in this sort of thing.

The duke grinned once more. “When the children are grown and self-sufficient, and the title is well looked after, and the estates running like clockwork, there is plenty of time again for romance and revisiting that heat, whether in the initial relationship or in a new one.”

“Oh.” Confusion clouded her mind. Did that mean he was interested? In her? Warmth slapped at her cheeks. It had been quite a long time indeed since she’d found herself in such a moment, and it was rather... lovely. “Are you hinting that you would like to cultivate a new relationship in this time of your life?” Good lord, was she flirting? “A romance?” A courtship? Was that ultimately what *she* was after?

How embarrassing this is! And with a duke, no less.

His shrug was an elegant affair and only served to call her attention to the breadth of his shoulders. What would it feel like to be held by those arms? “Perhaps I am. Are *you* interested, Lady Hadleigh?”

Was she? Lavinia forced a hard swallow into her suddenly dry throat. Her heartbeat accelerated. Could he see it flutter? Had he noticed her shaking hands she’d hidden in her skirting? Finally, she nodded. “That largely depends on how you are defining romance, Your Grace.

He chuckled again, and she thought she might melt into a puddle at his feet. “Refer to me as Allan, or Tattersham if you must, but I would vastly prefer Allan.” He took possession of her hand, drew the pad of his thumb along her knuckles and left shivering anticipation behind. “I have lived long enough as Tattersham and have missed hearing my Christian name on a woman’s lips.”

Drat if her gaze didn’t drop to his mouth of its own accord. “I see, but you didn’t clarify my statement,” she managed to whisper.

“No, I suppose I didn’t.” He didn’t move, and neither did she. “Which allows me more time to linger in your company, and there is no scandal in that. Unless you wish to indulge in such a thing.”

Oh, good heavens! What is happening?



CHAPTER FOUR

ALLAN COULD HARDLY believe himself, standing here flirting and verbally bantering with the dowager countess. For ten years he'd kept himself busy with his business, politics, and charities, or immersing himself in the lives of his grandchildren. But now? Perhaps it was time to consider bringing a bit of tenderness and romance back into his life.

As well as the heat he'd spoken about.

Could he see himself with this woman, though? It was worth a try. And what did he have to lose?

"Is that what you wish for then, Allan? Naught but a scandal?" A tiny bit of surprise threaded through the question.

When she said his name, he pressed a hand to his heart in a theatrical bid to make her smile. She had a lovely smile. Lips a man could obsess about, really. "I haven't indulged in a scandal for many years, but it has merits." When she quirked an eyebrow, he rushed to continue. "As does romance."

For long moments, she regarded him with questions in those hazel eyes. Finally, she nodded. "Please, then, call me Lavinia."

The concession was like music from heaven's angels. "A beautiful name indeed." Perhaps it was the season, or the snow on the ground, or the change in his plans, or the woman herself, but he threw caution to the wind, for he was never one to do things by half. Allan rubbed his thumb along the pulse point on the inside of her wrist. Lavinia's tiny inhalation of breath betrayed her interest in his touch, his possible suit. Damn, but he'd missed those little clues a woman gave. "Please say that you will reserve a dance for me tomorrow night."

“Of course I will. But don’t tell me what you will come dressed as. That ruins some of the fun.” When she smiled, the afternoon appeared that much brighter. Bloody hell. Those pink-hued lips were the devil’s own temptation. In the ten years since his wife died, he’d never wanted to kiss a woman as much as he did Lavinia. She uttered a tiny gasp but had yet to pull her hand away from his. “You’ll need a costume. I’d forgotten you only just arrived.”

“That is easily rectified.” Over and over, he slid the pad of his thumb over that pulse point, and he grinned all the more each time her heartbeat jumped. “No doubt there are old clothes here, yes? Will you grant permission to root about in the attics?”

She nodded. “There are all sorts of things one can find of interest here.” Those lovely eyes of hers were now more green than brown. Was she under high emotion? Had she been aware of the unspoken hint? “You can arouse a storm up there if you’d like.”

“Oh?” Allan quirked an eyebrow. Did she mean to make *that* double entendre? How intriguing, and something he would very much like to explore. “I would imagine the attics are one of those lonely, isolated places where one can go if one wishes to be alone or for quiet conversation one doesn’t want overheard.” Would she pick up on the clue?

“It truly is. I sometimes lose myself for hours in the attics, and then completely forget the reason for my errand.” Almost fleetingly, her fingers tightened on his.

Being alone and tucked away with this woman suddenly became his overriding goal, but he didn’t want to be such a cad as to coerce her. “One of the things I miss most about my wife were the evenings we sat together in our drawing room, reading together or perhaps doing nothing at all except being in her presence.” He held her gaze with his. Was the dowager of the same sort? “At times, there was no need to fill the silence.” When she smiled, he did too. “At other times, I would take her to the opera. She adored the opera.”

At what point was a man babbling?

“There is something special about seeing plays in person when your escort appreciates them too. I remember the days when my husband took me to Covent Gardens. That was a lovely way to pass the time.”

Yet she still hadn't answered his earlier question. And suddenly, he desperately wanted to know where she fell on the subject. “Ah, Lavinia, you could put the younger ladies to shame in a ballroom or out at a society event.” Compliments and flattery still worked in conjunction with charm, didn't they? “What are your thoughts regarding romance between two people in their twilight years?”

Her eyes rounded and darkened slightly—a sure sign of interest. “I wouldn't know, for I've not had cause to experience such a thing.”

Ah, she would continue to play coy and flirt as well. He rather enjoyed the give and take. “Would you like to?” Again, he rubbed his thumb along the inside of her wrist, then daring much, he brought her hand up, turned it over, and pressed his lips to that patch of skin he'd just caressed. “No doubt we can discover many things of interest together if you're willing.”

What the devil was he about? That was an open-ended promise.

“I...” She smelled like roses and slightly of vanilla. His wife had preferred that scent as well. It was oddly comforting. Lavinia looked up at him with a mix of confusion and anticipation on her face. Her lips slightly parted, and his shaft stirred with interest. “I will admit I have a fair amount of curiosity in that regard.”

“As do I.”

“So the question that remains is this, Allan.” Her hand trembled in his. “What exactly are you asking of me?”

What indeed?

“This.” Perhaps he was an old fool, perhaps some of his son’s attitude had transferred to him, perhaps he’d just never been attracted to a woman since his wife, but he released Lavinia’s hand in order to cup the side of her neck. He brushed the pad of his thumb along her bottom lip, and as it trembled, he chuckled. “Forgive the trespass.” When her eyes darkened, he grinned and then pressed his lips to hers in a gentle kiss that served as a better introduction than any host of words could.

After all, why waste time?

A soft squeak issued from her throat, but one of her hands came up to touch his elbow. Lavinia stared at him with a trace of wonder in her eyes, and when he lifted an eyebrow again, she gave a shallow nod.

With a soft sound of victory, Allan curled his free hand about her hip, drew her into a loose embrace, and then kissed her with more finesse and greater hunger. Those two pieces of flesh were as soft as he had hoped, and the glory of kissing a woman with experience was that there was no need to worry about teaching her the finer points.

She slipped a hand up his chest to his nape, and as her fingers furrowed into the hair there, the dowager lifted onto her toes to better return his kisses. It was easily the sweetest moment he’d experienced in the past ten years. Why hadn’t he sought out the companionship of a lady before?

Because it hadn’t occurred to him. Because he hadn’t been ready. Because no one had fascinated him like Lavinia did now.

Allan forgot everything else except exploring her lips. He gloried in how they cradled his own, how with the veriest pressure on his nape, she guided him into how she enjoyed being kissed. Needing more of a connection, he tugged her closer to his body, teased the seam of her mouth, and when she opened for him, chased her tongue with his. The dear woman refused to let him boss her, and she gave as good as she got. All too soon, fires started in his blood and his stiffened length pressed against the front of his trousers.

Interesting indeed, and somewhat surprising.

“Father? Where the devil are you?”

Bloody hell.

The call from his son penetrated Allan’s passion-fogged brain, so much that he pulled away from her with a fair amount of reluctance. Disappointment mixed with desire in her eyes, and damn if that wasn’t the most erotic sight. He heaved a sigh. “It seems, even at this age, the children cannot muddle on without us.”

“I know that feeling well.” Lavinia chuckled as she wiped at her lips. She put several feet of space between them and had turned to peer out the picture window by the time Philip joined them in the gallery.

Clever lady.

“What the devil is so amiss you thought to holler through the corridors as if you haven’t breeding or manners?” Allan said with more stern annoyance in his tone than he’d wished.

“I was concerned when you went missing.” Philip glanced from him to the dowager, then back to him with speculation in his eyes. “Am I interrupting?”

“Only conversation.” That was all his son needed to know. He raised an eyebrow. “Well, you have found me. Out with it.”

Philip narrowed his eyes, but wisely didn’t utter his thoughts regarding why they were both in the portrait gallery. “I am in need of a costume for tomorrow evening, and something that will suitably impress Miss Warren, even though she is a bit of a harpy.”

At the window, Lavinia snorted with laughter.

He shot her a quick grin before settling his attention onto Philip. “Then you are in luck. I’ve just asked Lady Hadleigh for permission to poke about the attics on the hunt of a costume for myself.” As the dowager turned about, her eyes still sparkling and a faint blush in her cheeks, he nodded. “I don’t suppose you’d mind if Philip accompanied me?”

“Of course not.” When she smiled, his pulse accelerated. “No doubt all my houseguests will take a tour of the trunks in the attics sometime today.”

That was something he hadn’t thought about. “Then perhaps we should hunt up our costumes now before the clothes are picked over.”

“Perhaps.” Drat if Philip didn’t look even more suspicious. “What were the two of you discussing before I came along? I’m quite certain I’ve interrupted *something*.”

“You haven’t,” Lavinia was quick to answer. “Your father and I were merely talking about how life was in our heydays and how different this phase of life is from that.” At least it was partially the truth. She glanced at Allan, her gaze lingering on him for a few seconds, before she transferred her attention to Philip. “Enjoy your ramble in the attics. I have duties elsewhere, in any event.”

How disappointing. “You won’t accompany us? Direct us to the best costumes?”

“You are both grown men. I’m quite certain you can look after yourselves.” Her chuckle continued to stoke the fires smoldering in his blood.

His chest tightened, for he wasn’t ready to quit her company so soon. “Then I suppose we’d best locate the attics.”

“I will, however, lead you there.” She moved past them both and paused at the head of the portrait gallery, clearly expecting them to follow. “If you both haven’t come down for dinner later, I shall send up a search party.”

Philip scoffed. “Surely we won’t be gone long.”

“The attics are sometimes magical.” Again, her smile was the loveliest thing and would light up a stormy night. “Some of my husband’s clothes are there, and they’ll be in the most recent style if you find you don’t wish to go back decades or even centuries. They will probably fit you, Lord Sanderson, but your father is a larger man.”

Allan quelled the urge to cough. Did she mean in general, or was she using those words to let him know that the evidence of his desire hadn't escaped her notice?

His son saved him the mental confusion. "I shall take that into account. Thank you, Lady Hadleigh."

"You are, of course, welcome. There are domino masks in a box as well as other, more elaborate masks from events past." As she hurried along the corridor, he and Philip were hard pressed to match her pace.

Yet he couldn't hold back a grin. This holiday season would prove interesting indeed, for already he was smitten with the dowager. A few more conversations and kisses, or perhaps a tryst if she were willing, and he might just be staring down a very different future than he'd imagined when he'd set out for London two days ago.

I cannot wait to see what else fate has planned.



CHAPTER FIVE

December 24, 1819

Morning of the masquerade ball

ALLAN WENT THROUGH the morning with a certain level of anticipation buzzing at the base of his spine. That surprised him, for he hadn't given much thought to a society event in years. Even his valet had remarked upon it, told him how good it was to see the old verve back in his eyes.

Had he been dead before that?

It wasn't, perhaps, far off the mark, for the last ten years without his wife had caused him to retreat into himself when he wasn't involved in matters of business or responsibilities.

That meant the excitement bedeviling him now must be for wishing to be in Lavinia's company once more, but when he came down to the dining room and didn't spy the dowager in attendance, cold fingers of disappointment played his spine.

Well, damn. What now?

He nodded his thanks as the butler brought over a plate loaded with typical breakfast foods as well as put a cup of coffee by his plate. Other members of the house party had gathered around the table. Philip and the red-haired Scottish woman—Miss Warren—were once again bickering and it was barely ten past the ten o'clock hour, while other guests talked quietly among themselves. "Must you two squabble so loudly and over breakfast? It disturbs the digestion."

Really, the boy needed to take her to bed and have it done with.

Philip grinned at him. "Think of it rather as indulging in a 'merry kind of war,' as the great Bard himself said of

Benedick and Beatrice in the play *Much Ado About Nothing*.”

Did his son think himself clever? Allan rolled his eyes as he took up his fork. “At least you won’t die at the end as so many characters do in Shakespeare’s work.” Though it was surprising he’d showed such an interest in the woman. Perhaps that boded well for Philip’s future. Trying valiantly to banish the grump, Allan grinned at her. “Who are your people, Miss Warren? What is your lineage?”

“Father, for shame.” Philip glowered at him while a blush had infused Miss Warren’s cheeks. “We are merely enjoying the banter. There is no harm in that.”

Allan stabbed at a golden mound of scrambled eggs with the tines of his fork. “No, there is not, but the danger lies when the banter jumps the line into desire.”

They protested quite vigorously, which had him biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. There was clearly an attraction between them. A Christmastide romance would be good for both of them, and if it brought Philip up to scratch and aware of his future responsibilities finally, all the better.

He quickly ate the bulk of his breakfast in silence, and once he’d finished his cup of coffee, a certain restlessness had taken over him. Wishing to track the dowager to earth, he stood and made his excuses. Indulging in another conversation sounded like just the thing to pass the time until tea. “Enjoy the remainder of your breakfast. I am needed elsewhere.” God, he hoped Lavinia needed him, else he’d made a proper fool of himself yesterday. Was that why she wasn’t at breakfast? Nodding at a few of the other people around the table, he took his leave.

No sooner had he gained the corridor than one of Lavinia’s sons drew near. He handled the Bath chair quite effectively. A notebook lay on his lap and there was a handsome gray cat perched upon his shoulder.

“Ah, good morning, Your Grace.”

“Hullo, Major Storme. I trust you are well?”

“Never been better. Thank you.”

“Good, good. Where can I find your mother during this time of day? I would like to speak with her.”

There was no suspicion in the man’s face, only a constant joy and perhaps a trace of exhaustion, no doubt from having a baby in his midst. “If I remember right, she takes refuge in her morning room after an early breakfast. Mama likes to answer correspondence and perhaps if there is time read from a Gothic novel she doesn’t think we know about.” The major grinned. “Shall I escort you?”

“No, I can find my own way.” Each time he learned something new about her, she managed to intrigue him more.

From inside the dining room, squabbles erupted between his son and Miss Warren and another young man whom name escaped him. Perhaps he should help a potential relationship along if he could before Philip said something stupid and lost his chance to his friend.

Major Storme chuckled while the cat licked at his hair, grooming him. “Tell my mother I’m in need of a cape for my costume.”

“I will. Enjoy your breakfast.” Eventually, Allan located the morning room, and it suited the dowager well in shades of rose with gold trim. “Am I interrupting?”

“Oh!” Lavinia startled from where she sat in a wingback chair of rose brocade but sent him a smile as she removed a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles from the bridge of her nose. “Of course not. To what do I owe this pleasure?” She closed her book with a snap, laid both it and her spectacles on a small table at her elbow.

Knowing she required spectacles to read made him feel less self-conscious about his own. “I wished to seek you out, possibly enter into another discussion, since ours from yesterday afternoon was interrupted.”

“It was.” Her gaze dropped briefly to his mouth as she stood, and he reveled in that fact. “Please, make yourself

comfortable.”

“Thank you.” Daring much, Allan softly closed the door behind him and turned the key in the lock. When he faced her again, she’d risen, and surprise lined her face. “Perhaps you might be of a mind to continue our kiss?”

But would he be content to end this meeting with just that?



LAVINIA DIDN’T KNOW whether to be amused by his assumption or offended. In the end, she didn’t mind, for being in his company was much like sneaking about when she’d been a young woman just married and anxious to be alone with her husband.

“That can be arranged.” As the duke moved over the floor in slow, measured steps, she eyed him with a mixture of wariness and excitement. There was something about this man that set her pulse leaping and fired her blood, and those kisses from yesterday still held her captive. “Did you eat breakfast? I’m told our cook outdid herself for that meal, especially since there is a duke in our midst.”

“I did.” When he grinned, the silly little butterflies danced through her lower belly. “It didn’t truly satisfy my appetite.”

“Oh? Is there something you want that I give you?” Belatedly, she realized the slip of her tongue. Heat jumped into her cheeks.

“There is.” His eyes twinkled with wicked promise. “If you agree to put yourself into my hands.”

Oh dear.

Lavinia retreated until her back connected with one of the windows. The cool glass did nothing to calm her overheated skin. “I’m not certain I understand your meaning.” But that was a lie. How could she not?

Allan’s chuckle caused another butterfly ballet in her belly. “Don’t you? I didn’t think you were one to play coy.” Easily,

he trapped her between that window and the hard wall of his chest.

“I...” A shiver of pure need went down her spine. What sort of woman had she become merely by having a duke under her roof? *And under my skin.* Then she found her courage. “The house is full of people, Allan. I have much to for in preparation for the ball tonight, and—”

“Hush.” He slipped a hand about her nape, dragged her to him, and kissed her. Immediately she lost her train of thought. There was more urgency in this kiss though than there’d been yesterday. He tasted faintly of coffee, but his touch awakened things she thought long out of her reach. When he was finished, he held her gaze. “Take a moment for yourself, Lavinia. Your family won’t miss you for the handful of minutes it will take to bring you to pleasure.”

“What?” She gasped. “You mean to... You want to bed me right here?” How scandalous but intriguing. Her traitorous body certainly clamored to be pressed against his.

“Oh, we don’t have time for that, but there are other ways I might send you flying.” One his eyebrows quirked upward. “You and I both know such things are relaxing afterward.” Then he dragged his lips down the column of her throat, followed the edge of her bodice, and all the while, she clung to his shoulders as familiar sensations flowed over her. “Yes?”

“But I...” Lavinia trembled. How was he so potent? It was much like being an inexperienced bride, only this time, she had full working knowledge of men and what occurred between two lovers. “Isn’t it rather early in our relationship to take such liberties?” Yet her body tightened with anticipation.

It has been such a long time, and I’ve missed how it feels!

“So enchanting.” With a chuckle that had the power to turn her knees into cooked porridge, the duke gently turned her so she faced the window. “At our age, isn’t the better approach to go after what we want while there is still time, and we have all our faculties?”

Oh, why did he have to make so much sense? Time was so precious these days. Hadn't she seen that with her own family and how their romances had played out? She laid a palm on the glass. Where was the harm if she indulged herself?

"Do I have your permission to proceed?" The whispered words lulled her beneath a creeping blanket of warmth. The moment Allan raised her skirting, handful by handful, and bunched it at her waist, she was nearly lost. When he trailed his fingers over a bared arsecheek to her hip, Lavinia bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out. His touch ignited a response she hadn't wished to show this soon.

"Yes." The word was little more than a breath, an exhalation. For far too long she'd been alone, had put her own needs in the background, but now? He was here and so was she, and she'd be a widgeon to deny the attraction simmering between them.

"I do adore when a woman is responsive." He stepped forward, pressing her closer to the window. When she placed both palms on the cool glass, the sound he emitted sounded much like the purr of a jungle cat might. "Spread your legs, Lavinia. Let me in."

Though heat went into her cheeks, she couldn't wait to be sent flying. "I haven't done anything like this since well before my husband died."

"It's akin to a sin that a beautiful woman has been so neglected." He caressed her hip while his other hand came around to her bosom. As he dipped a finger into her bodice, finding her already hardening nipple, she gasped.

Pleasurable sensations pinwheeled through her insides. Was she a wanton because she enjoyed this? "Rogue," she finally managed to eke out from a tight throat.

"Perhaps, or merely a man who enjoys seeing a woman fly." He gave her nipple a light pinch and at the same time eased his other hand between her splayed thighs. "Ah,

Countess, you have no idea how glad I am to be here right now.”

Lavinia couldn't answer even if she'd wished to, for as he explored her flesh with his fingers, her hold on reality began to slip. She held her bottom lip between her teeth and glanced outside. At least the snow had stopped, and with the sunlight shining down, the entire property sparkled like diamonds.

The second Allan slipped a finger inside her passage, she gasped, and her attention came spinning back to him. “Oh, I don't think...” But he added a second digit and slowly pumped them in and out of her body.

It was different, so very different with him, but much the same as she remembered. Her knees trembled; gooseflesh popped on her skin, and still the duke sought to draw out the moisture of her arousal. Over and over, he teased her, saying nothing, and his fingers at her breast would drive her mad all too quickly. Soon enough, his ministrations caused a break in her control. She writhed in his arms. Her breathing came in pants. “Allan, I cannot continue. It's so... overwhelming.” And had been a long time since she'd indulged. Surely it hadn't been this intense the last time.

“Shh.” He kissed her nape. “If you are this bothered already, then you are nearly there.” Those talented fingers then found the nubbin at the center of her being, and the second he rubbed a fingertip over it, she nearly launched off the floor.

“Oh!” As her eyes drifted closed, her mind gave off an aberrant thought. Anyone passing below could look up and see her in the window, note him behind her, and that threat of discovery added a delicious edge to their play.

How interesting.

Another pinch to her nipple refocused her attention onto the sensation zipping through her body. The duke chuckled as he teased her nubbin, uttered soft words of encouragement while he trailed his fingers over her damp flesh and again penetrated her to mimic intercourse. Once more he returned to

that swollen, throbbing button and she thought she might not survive the onslaught of feeling he brought to her.

Quickly, the friction proved too much. The tension inside broke and she was hurled over the edge into bliss that she'd not visited in far too long. Intense contractions rocked through her core and a scream of surprise left her throat. Pleasurable sensations crashed over her again and again; it was all she could to do remain upright.

Seconds later, as she came back to herself, Lavinia laid a cheek against the cool glass and sagged, but the duke was there, holding her steady lest she slide to the floor. Once sanity returned and she straightened, he lowered her skirts and then kissed her cheek.

“Unless I miss my guess, some of your worries have fled. Yes?”

“Yes.” The rogue. She offered a weak, shaky laugh and stumbled over to a chair, barely dropping into it before she collapsed. “That was... surprising. I assumed I was much too old to feel such things again.”

“Of course you're not. People older than us indulge in carnal activities.”

“Perhaps.” The residual tremors deep in her core sent heat into her cheeks. “It was lovely.” Then she glanced at the front of his trousers where an insistent bulge pressed against the fabric. “Shall I return the favor?” The thought of wrapping her hand around his length—would it be impressive?—and making him hit release increased the feelings of restlessness circling through her belly. Being sent flying with his fingers was one thing, but it didn't compare to being fully claimed by a man.

“Not just yet.” A faint flush rose over his cravat as he leaned over her and brushed his lips over hers. Then he took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his fingers. “After all, one of the best parts of a romance is the other intimacies a couple can enjoy before the actual bedding comes along.”

With a wink, he crossed the floor, unlocked the door, and then quietly opened it. “Until tonight, Lavinia. I cannot wait to see you in costume.”

Oh, dear heavens! That man is potent indeed. Yet she rather enjoyed spending time in his company, pleasure notwithstanding.

A few minutes later, running footsteps in the hall brought her wandering attention back, and she gasped again, for Brand rushed into the room.

“Mama, is all well? I heard you scream.”

She ignored the heat in her cheeks. “I thought I saw a mouse and it startled me.” As she rose to her feet, she ignored, too, the fact she was now dissembling to her children. All due to meeting a handsome duke with silver hair who was still very much a stranger. “Did you just arrive?”

“Yes, not a half hour past. It was a bugger coming in due to the state of the roads.” Her youngest son engulfed her in a hug. “I’m glad to see you again, though. If you’d like, once we’re all settled, I can poke around the room and check for mice.”

“I would appreciate that. Thank you. I despise the creeping little rodents.” If her grin was rather more gay than usual, she hoped he would attribute it to the upcoming ball.

One thing was certain. Never would she forget this Christmastide, and a tiny part of her didn’t want it to end, for she was enjoying herself all too much.



CHAPTER SIX

December 24, 1819

Night of the Masquerade Ball

IT HAD BEEN some time since Allan had attended a society event, and even longer still since he'd had such anticipation buzzing at the base of his spine. All because of the enchanting dowager countess and the surprising immediate connection that had sprung between them.

As he adjusted his domino mask, he entered the ballroom and scanned the crush of people, but he didn't immediately see Lavinia. Perhaps that was just as well, for his mind hadn't left the thought of her since he'd dared much and sent her into bliss with his fingers.

A satisfied chuckle escaped him. That had been a surprise, for they barely knew each other, yet she must have trusted him, must have felt that connection as well, else she wouldn't have let him touch her.

But she had.

And he had shared that particular intimacy with her.

So, what would happen now? After Twelfth Night and once the roads were cleared, would he continue on to London and forget about Lavinia? The tightness in his chest suggested that wasn't true. There was something there between them he'd like to nurture into bloom if she would let him.

Needing a distraction, he let his gaze rove over the room. Fir boughs had been fitted above every doorway and window. Tin bells and glass balls were set amidst the greenery. Bright red ribbons and full wreaths festooned the walls and golden bells hung from some of the gas lamps. The holiday scents of spices and oranges wafted through the air. Truly, the dowager

had thrown her heart and soul into the decorating for this event. Everywhere he looked, the room held small touches of her elegance.

Then Lavinia was there, entering the room on the arm of her eldest son, Andrew. A moss green gown clung to her slender frame. It sparkled with seemingly millions of clear glass beads with every step. Tulle trailed over the low bodice to reveal a décolletage any woman of that age would admire and feel jealous of. Allan was forced to swallow in order to encourage moisture into his suddenly dry throat, for she was simply a dream. Pinned to her back were fairy wings made of some sort of gossamer fabric and wires; her gray-brown hair had been set in an elaborate updo that glittered with combs. A moss green mask obscured the upper portion of her face, but he would recognize her anywhere.

“Dear God,” he whispered as she greeted various guests, as elegant as a queen. “She is magnificent.”

“Unless I miss my guess, you are thoroughly beguiled by the dowager countess,” Philip said as he came abreast of Allan. “Why, you are practically salivating, Father.”

“Do shut up.” Was his regard that obvious?

“You should definitely court Lady Hadleigh. She’s still quite stunning.”

“Do *not* talk about her like that.”

“Oh, ho! Aren’t you overly protective of a woman you have no right to?” Teasing threaded through Philip’s voice.

“Perhaps, but I might like to.” When he glanced at his son, he frowned. What the devil was this, then? Philip had donned the very same highwayman costume that he had—loose-fitting lawn shirt, red cravat twisted about his waist, black trousers, and black boots. He’d even managed to find a cavalier hat, complete with a fluffy feather stuck in the brim. “Why are you dressed like me?” They looked identical in every way.

“Why not?” His son shrugged with a clearly unrepentant grin. “You had a good idea, so I went with it. Perhaps it will

catch Miss Warren's fancy." He touched the brim of his hat. "May the best man win the lady, eh, Father?"

"Where are you going?" And to whom did he refer?

"To ask the dowager to dance, of course." He winked. "Since you appear glued to the spot." Then he was off before Allan could utter word.

Well, damn.

A few minutes later, when a country reel formed on the parquet floor, Philip had indeed partnered Lavinia. As they waited for it to begin, whatever his son said to her made her laugh and a blush fill her cheeks. Why was Philip flirting with her? Allan craned his neck once the set began in order to see her better. Was this some mad attempt to force his hand?

What sort of gammon was that?

He wished to win Lavinia in his own way. Yet... if Philip could talk him up, lay a good foundation, let her see him through the eyes of his son, perhaps it would help sway her decision.

But why should Philip have all the fun? Perhaps he should repay the favor by dancing with Miss Warren and perhaps picking her brain as to how she felt about Philip.

The next set was a waltz, and since he didn't wish to waste it, he swooped in on Lavinia and whisked her away from the young pup who sought to lead her out.

Surprise flickered in her eyes behind the mask. "Two sets in a row, Tattersham? People will start to talk."

Ah, so Philip hadn't bothered to tell her of his true identity. Allan ignored the oversight, for it wasn't important. "What can I say, Lady Hadleigh? You've enchanted me."

"How sweet, Your Grace." She squeezed her fingers on his shoulder, and when the dance began, she smiled. "I was surprised at what you said during our last set."

“Oh?” Since it hadn’t been him, he desperately wished to hear what Philip had told her.

“You confessed that I had utterly captivated you, ever since you arrived here at Hadleigh Hall.” One of her eyebrows arched. “Have you changed your mind?”

“I...” Damned Philip. *Rushing my fences*. “I have indeed felt a certain connection, a sort of homecoming one could say.” He hadn’t meant to admit such a thing until much later in the holiday season.

Her smile widened. “So have I, but I didn’t want to say anything first for fear you would make jest of me or think me silly, especially after what we shared...”

“I understand.” Euphoria danced through his veins. Perhaps there was hope for a future between them after all. “Surely you know I would never make jest.” Daring much, he drew her closer on the next turn. Thank the powers that be this was a Continental waltz instead of the Vienna version. It was much more scandalous but offered more in the way of conversation. “Our times together thus far have been too precious.”

A blush stained her cheeks. “I think so too. And...”

“And?” His chest tightened in anticipation.

“I haven’t felt as giddy as I do now for a very long time indeed.” She squeezed his fingers. “It’s rather lovely to know I still can.”

“That makes me glad.” Instead of sustaining the conversation for the remainder of the waltz, Allan simply enjoyed having her in his arms. Her skirting swished about his legs as they moved across the floor, and each time he twirled her, a giggle escaped her that went straight to his heart. Her light scent of roses teased his nose while the heat of her fairly begged him to touch her skin. That might be for later tonight. The fact she was carefree and lighthearted buoyed his own spirit. Perhaps she wouldn’t mind trading in her dowager title for that of duchess.

Eventually, the waltz ended, and he escorted her back to the side of the room.

“Will I see you later this evening, Your Grace? I wouldn’t mind a second waltz.” Her tone, the way she rested a gloved hand on his arm was utterly beguiling.

“Nothing could tear me away. But you do know that if I dance with you again—a third time—it’s tantamount to an engagement.”

The dowager winked. “Did you hear me offer an objection?”

Well, damn. “No, I did not.” He took her hand, lifted it to his lips, and then kissed the middle knuckle while holding her gaze. “A private conversation might be in order.”

“I cannot wait to hear what you might say.” With twinkling eyes, Lavinia pulled away. She waved to an acquaintance and then was soon lost to the shifting crowds.

Allan grinned. Oh yes, the dowager had completely taken him by surprise, and he couldn’t be happier. It was time to welcome love and companionship back into his life. Whatever Philip had said to her must have left quite an impression, and for that, he was grateful.

When he nearly ran bodily into Miss Warren, he stayed her flight with a hand on her arm. “A word, if you please, Miss Warren.”

Her eyes rounded. “Miss Warren?” A snort escaped. “Why so formal, Philip?”

Ah, so then others had been fooled about his costume and his son’s being the same. Perhaps that was for the best. “I beg your pardon.” Damn if he didn’t know her Christian name. He moved her farther away from the edge of the dance floor and out of the way of foot traffic. “Won’t you grant me latitude tonight and stop the quibbling?”

“Why should I?” She let her gaze rake up and down his person. “You are naught but a layabout and a rogue. In short,

you not worth my time even if you will be a duke someday.”

Well, that was shocking. Allan stared at her. Though her words said one thing, the passion deep in her green eyes spoke an entirely different story. Philip could use that to build a foundation. Daring much, he grinned. “I suggest you might wish to judge me on the basis of kissing before making a decision.” He winked. “Men are willing to change their ways for the right woman.”

Would Philip, though?

Miss Warren’s eyes rounded behind her mask. She had gone as some sort of medieval maiden. “Is that true, Philip? Will you pledge your fidelity in exchange for a relationship?”

He was already in the charade this far... Allan nodded. “I will.” Then he took a step backward. “Meet me in the corridor later so we can discuss this in a more private setting.”

“I promise.”

Before he sank too deep into the lie, Allan set off to survey the room and watch the dancers. How soon before he could ask Lavinia for another dance without drawing the attention of members of the *ton* who were present? It wouldn’t do to force his hand too prematurely. To take his mind off the urge to whisk her into an unused room, he headed for the refreshments room. After that, he’d stop by some of the card tables before returning to the ballroom.

His luck, it seemed, didn’t accompany him when, an hour later, he approached Lavinia and asked her to partner him in the next set that was forming.

“Have you gone mad?” she asked in a hissed whisper. Fury snapped in her eyes behind her mask. “After what you did, you have the gall to talk to me *now*?”

What the devil was she on about? Allan frowned in confusion. “I beg your pardon, but what has occurred to put you into this frosty state?” The moment the words sailed out of his mouth, he realized they were the wrong ones, and that she wasn’t in the mood for humor.

Lavinia's eyes narrowed. Her hands rested on her hips as she glared. "What has occurred?" The hiss was more pronounced. "What has occurred?" Her voice rose an octave. "You pig! As I made my way back here from the refreshments table, I spied you and a red-haired woman indulging in frantic kissing at the back of a darkened corridor." Tears sparkled in her eyes. "You didn't even bother to hide that display!"

Bloody, bloody hell.

Apparently, Philip had managed to talk Miss Warren around. But why the devil couldn't he have been more discreet? He raised a hand, palm outward. "Let me explain. It is not what you have assumed."

"How could it not be when I saw you, Allan?" The tiny waver in her voice cut him to the quick, but it was the betrayal in her expression that pierced his heart. "You are merely a rake, going from woman to woman until they give you what you want." Then she lifted a hand and slapped his cheek.

The sound of flesh striking flesh echoed, and more than a few of the nearest people turned about to watch the bit of Drury Lane drama.

"Damn." He pressed a gloved hand to his stinging flesh. "I suppose I deserved that, but if you will let me explain—"

"No." Lavinia shook her head while her chin trembled. "I want nothing to do with you." She retreated a few steps. "After what I let you do..." A sob stole the rest of her words. "Never again!" She turned abruptly on her heel and then strode through the ballroom, apparently not caring that she scattered dancing couples in her wake.

He stared after her with admiration and a healthy dose of respect. Now *that* was a storm personified, and damn if he wasn't stupid enough to throw himself back into her path in an effort to make this right.

"What the devil did you do to incite my mother's anger?" the Earl of Hadleigh said as he came into Allan's personal

space. “Rarely does she fall into a temper, and when she does, it’s usually quite personal.”

Captain Storme arrived next, and he didn’t waste any time drilling a forefinger into Allan’s chest. “What the devil did you do to Mama? I passed her on the stairs and she’s sobbing. Refused to talk to me about it.”

Buggar.

He bounced his gaze between the two livid Storme brothers. “I didn’t—”

It was Major Storme who came to his unlikely rescue. “I rather think His Grace didn’t do anything untoward on purpose,” he said as he rolled over to their group. “I have been observing the interactions between the duke and Mama, and there is more between them than meets the eye.” He looked at Allan. “Isn’t that true?”

“Well, I...” He tugged at his suddenly too-tight cravat. Damned masquerade. A pox on his son who wore the same costume! Would midnight *never* come so they could get on with the unmasking? Then he could find Lavinia and beg her forgiveness. A huff of frustration left his throat. “This is all a misunderstanding, and one on the level the great Bard himself could have penned.”

Irony, that, since his son had mentioned a play just that morning.

The earl frowned. “Let us remove to a more private location. Lord Tattersham can make his appeal to us, but know this.” His gaze roiled with anger as he pinned it on Allan. “If we find that you have trifled with our mother, there *will* be hell to pay, duke or no duke.”

“That is fair.” And he hoped to God he could weave a tale that would satisfy her sons, else he find himself thrown bodily into the nearest snowdrift.

Perhaps after he explained himself, he would apply to the earl for permission to court the dowager if not ask for her

hand. It all depended on if her sons would land him a facer...
or three.

Lord help us all.



CHAPTER SEVEN

*O*H, DEAR HEAVENS, *how could I have been so stupid?*

Lavinia dashed up the stairs as fast as she could with her skirting fisted in her hands. Tears misted her vision; her palm stung from when she'd slapped the duke. Like a naïve girl still in school, she'd allowed her emotions to be engaged by a rogue.

The man she'd been dancing with, flirting with, saying such risqué things to this evening was nothing but a bounder who had only wanted... what? To get under her skirts and send her flying? That made no sense. If that were true, he could have done that with any woman at the ball tonight, and it hadn't benefited him.

Did that mean their relationship had begun on true emotions? Then why was he kissing another woman so vigorously? Seeing him locked in such a scandalous embrace and moments away from embarrassing himself in that corridor had made her nearly want to retch.

Tears fell to her cheeks, and as she hurried into her room, slamming the door behind her, Lavinia wrenched off her mask and tossed it to the floor. Obviously, men were more trouble than they were worth, and she had been just fine without one in her life.

Not knowing what else to do, she moved to the window and peered out at the sweeping back lawn of the manor house. Snow blanketed the acreage. It glittered in the moonlight as if a million diamonds had been poured from the heavens. On an ordinary night, it would have been breathtaking and romantic, but the duke had destroyed that outlook.

Why had he toyed with her?

A faint scratching on the door had her whirling around. “Who’s there?” She would refuse to see Tattersham on principle.

“Lavinia, it’s Jane. May I come in?”

Out of all her daughters-in-law, Jane was the most compassionate. “Yes.” Phineas’s wife worked alongside her to become the silent glue that kept the Storme connection together and humming along with contentment, even while she worked at her brother’s clinic and being a new mother.

Once the red-haired lady came into the room and softly closed the door behind her, Jane sighed as she glanced at Lavinia. Dressed as a tragic heroine from a gothic novel, an observer could truly believe that she had just escaped the moors and from a slightly crazed hero.

“What has occurred to see you in tears?” She swiftly crossed the room and took Lavinia’s hands in hers. “You were so gay at the start of the ball. Finn and I had discussed the possibility that you might have found a suitor or at the very least, the beginnings of a romance.”

Had she been so obvious all along? Lavinia went to speak, but a half-strangled sob escaped instead. With the shake of her head, she pulled a delicate lace-edged handkerchief from a clever pocket sewn into her skirting and then dabbed at her eyes.

“Oh, everything is such a mess.” Had she hoped for a romance with Allan? It was perhaps too soon to tell, but after what he’d done, she was inclined to give him the cut direct.

“From my experience, that means a man is in the middle of it.”

“In this instance, it’s true. I alternately wish to slap him again and shake some sense into him.” Good heavens, when had she become thirsty for violence?

Jane’s eyebrows went up in surprise. “You *slapped* a duke?” Shock rang in her tones.

Heat went through Lavinia's cheeks. The realization of what she'd done finally sank into her confusion-clouded brain. "I suppose I did. In front of a ballroom full of people."

"Well, you *are* a Storme. We don't do things subtly, especially when matters of the heart are involved." The younger lady chuckled as she drew her over to the bed and gently tugged her down on the side when she sat. Holding her hand, she asked, "Can I assume this certain handsome, silver-haired duke has sent you into a quagmire of doubt?"

It was somewhat annoying the whole of her family knew the inner workings of her life. Lavinia only hoped Brand hadn't suspected what she and the duke had been doing in the morning room earlier. With a sigh, she glanced at Jane. "My reaction to Allan was unexpected."

"But isn't that what made it exciting?" Her green eyes twinkled. "The beginnings of a romance are always so lovely."

"I'm afraid I don't know anymore." Lavinia pleaded the handkerchief in her fingers. "He was such a gentleman: considerate, humorous, caring. It's almost laughable how he's managed to form a connection with me in such a short time. Or else I'm simply a ninny." A tiny laugh left her throat, but it wasn't mirthful. "Imagine me, a widow of two and sixty years, in tears and anguish over a man."

Jane squeezed her fingers. "If they weren't impossible and vexing most of the time, there would be no challenge in trying to land them." Her daughter-in-law smiled. "Christmastide is the most wonderful time to find oneself perhaps in love," she added in a soft voice.

"Ha!" Lavinia shook her head and the fairy wings on her back quivered. "I don't know that I'm in love with Tattersham."

"Yet your heart wouldn't be breaking if that were true," Jane suggested gently. "Surely you've gleaned that as true over the years, not only from your own marriage but from watching all of us run the gamut of the same emotions."

“I suppose.” With firm resolve, Lavinia wiped away the lingering moisture on her cheeks. She lifted her chin. “But he acted the arse tonight and toyed with my feelings. Outright betrayed me, and I don’t take kindly to that.”

Jane nodded. “Perhaps you should tell me what he did to cause you such torment.”

“He danced with me earlier, said such scandalous things to me, which I assumed was his way of flirting.” Heat infused her cheeks at the remembrance. “I would be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy his attention.”

“Of course you did. Any woman would, and it doesn’t matter her age.” Jane offered a smile. “You are still attractive, Lavinia. There is no reason that you shouldn’t have a new romance in this stage of your life.”

“I thought so too.” She forced a hard swallow past the ball of unshed tears in her throat. “Then I danced the waltz with him later, promised him another toward the end of the night.” When tears stung her eyes again, she rapidly blinked them away. “Even if it would fairly give society fuel for tittle-tattle.”

“Then, what happened to send you into the depths of despair?”

She released a ragged sigh. “Coming back from the refreshments table, I spied Allan in a torrid embrace with one of the other guests. Miss Warren, I think her name is. And he didn’t even bother to hide the indiscretion!”

Oh, how her heart had ached at the sight! In that moment, she’d realized perhaps how much she’d begun to care for the duke in such a short time, and she’d had no idea how aggravating it would be to swing from such extremes this late in life.

“I see.” With another squeeze to her fingers, Jane grinned. Mischief twinkled in her eyes. “What would you say if I told you that what you saw wasn’t the truth and that your eyes had played tricks on you?”

“How can you even know that?” What was the girl on about? “I know what I saw.” And the scene kept circling through her mind like ponies on a loop.

“Sometimes when the heart is engaged, it blinds us to everything else. I also think you need to give some of Shakespeare’s works another read.” She winked, and when she stood, she brought Lavinia to her feet as well.

What the devil did that mean?

“I don’t understand.”

“You will, and unless I miss my guess, quite soon.” Jane kissed her cheek. “Don’t abandon hope just yet. I rather believe this romance of yours hasn’t reached the end.”

Must she talk in riddles? Lavinia shook her head. “I appreciate your support and optimism, but the simple fact is I cannot trust Allan any longer.”

Jane snorted. “You used his Christian name. Twice while talking to me.”

“Why is that important?”

“It means you care more for him than you think.”

She refused to confirm or deny that claim.

“No matter. By the end of the night, there will be much to celebrate beyond the dawning of Christmas Day.” Jane’s smile was wide and confident. “Now, I should return to the ball and make certain Finn hasn’t gotten himself into trouble. Or, knowing him, he’s been observing your guests and has, even now, begun to scribble madly in his story notebook. He’s had an idea for a third book percolating but is waiting to write it pending on inventing just the right characters.”

“He is so talented in that regard.” Her son had two books out with a fussy London publisher, and they’d given him an advance for a third. Not only did those stories resonate with the public, but they also helped Phineas work through some of the experiences and depression he struggled with. Glad for the change in topic, Lavinia nodded. “I’m surprised you are away

from his side. Each time I've come into a room, the two of you are seemingly attached at the hip and three seconds away from causing scandal."

A faint blush stained Jane's cheeks. "I had come abovestairs to check on little Lucian—Finn's taken to calling him Luke recently; oh, he's such a cute baby."

"I agree." Her grandson was beyond adorable and looked like her son, except he had Jane's red hair.

"What can I say, Lavinia? Even with a six-month-old baby, I remain enamored with Finn. I drown in his regard regularly." She shrugged. "He's proved a wonderful husband and a companion, and at the risk of sounding love-sick, I cannot have enough of him."

"I am glad you two have each other." That had been one of her largest worries when Phineas had come home from the war injured and paralyzed. She'd despaired he would ever marry, but then Jane had come along and surprised them all with her dedication to and support of her son. "I well remember those early years of marriage and how much time a couple spends in interesting... endeavors."

"They can be yours again if you consent to talk with the duke. If he feels the same way, no doubt he will seek you out shortly."

Good heavens, she'd hadn't thought about that, only assumed Allan didn't care. Flutters danced through her lower belly. "Surely not." Yet there was a bloom of hope deep inside her soul. Could there still be a chance?

"It is the season of miracles. But whatever happens, please don't shut yourself away in here. You have planned the most wonderful masquerade and I would hate for you to miss the unmasking at midnight."

Lavinia nodded. "I shall do my level best to sort myself and then return to the ballroom." She waved off her daughter-in-law. "Go. Enjoy the festivities."

“Best wishes. I shall seek you out later if you don’t come down for dinner.” Then Jane departed the room and left her once more to her thoughts.

Did Allan care for her? Had it been a mistake as Jane had alluded to? Only time would tell, but she simply wasn’t ready to return to the ballroom just yet. There was much to ponder, and she needed to decide where she wished for the rest of her life to go.

Perhaps retreating to the dower house before Twelfth Night was the more imminent need, for then she could shut herself away with her mess of emotions in peace.

Whoever said that romance at advanced ages was easier than the young had been vastly misinformed.



CHAPTER EIGHT

“SO YOU SEE, Hadleigh, I did not set out to hurt your mother or break her heart,” Allan explained to the earl and his brothers. They occupied a back parlor, and from the stony stares he received from the Stormes, his words weren’t having the desired effect. “It was simply a misunderstanding, and what Lavinia witnessed wasn’t the truth.”

“How do we know what you say is true?” The major crossed his arms at his chest. From his costume and black cape lined with red satin, it appeared he was attempting to act as a mesmerist, but the effect was quite destroyed by the writing notebook and pencil nub resting on his lap. “What I’ve seen and guessed notwithstanding.”

“Indeed.” The captain looked even more menacing with his eyepatch. He hadn’t thrown himself much into the idea of a masquerade, for he’d come as a pirate of the high seas. Not far off the mark for him. “Mama was quite upset when she ran past me. I have never seen her in such high emotion. Not even when Drew was being an arse,” he shot off with a teasing glance at his oldest brother.

“Do shut up, Brand.” The earl glared. He flicked his attention to Allan. “What have you to say for yourself that won’t land you headfirst into the nearest pond?”

The rumors regarding the protectiveness and tight knit family of Stormes were all too correct. He tugged again at his cravat. What would it hurt to reveal all? “I have nothing but the best intentions toward your mother. Please trust me on this.” When the boys didn’t give quarter, he sighed. “Not since I courted my wife have I felt such hope or this unrelenting need to be with another woman that I have for Lavinia.”

Surprise registered on the earl's face as well as the captain's. Only the major appeared calm as a slow grin curved his lips.

"I knew it!" He rested a speculative gaze on Allan. "You care for Mama?"

"I do."

The earl unbent slightly as he exchanged a glance with the major. "You wish to have a romance with her?"

"Yes, but beyond that, I would like to marry her." He quickly cleared his throat. "If the three of you will grant your permission for me to ask for her hand." It wouldn't do to further antagonize this group, but if he could win over their support, convincing Lavinia of his devotion would go better.

For long moments, the Storme men remained quiet. It was the major who broke it.

"Do you promise you will keep her in good health and spirits for the rest of her life? Will you make her happy and give her the moon if she should so desire?"

"I will." It was perhaps the most serious he'd ever been outside of speaking marriage vows to his first wife. "Lavinia is a woman of strong determination, and if she will have me, I promise to spend every day being worthy of her."

A wide grin spread across the earl's face. "Then, I think I can speak for my brothers as well, you have my blessing."

The other two men quickly nodded, but the captain cleared his throat and narrowed his eyes.

"From the gist of this conversation and the mistaken identity that sent Mama fleeing in high emotion, can I assume she did not, indeed, see a mouse in her morning room this morning and caused her to scream?"

Bloody hell. Heat crept up the back of Allan's neck. "In an effort for full transparency, no, she did not. I was with her, and we had—"

“Stop.” The earl held up a gloved hand. He hadn’t deigned to dress in a costume but had chosen to appear in requisite black evening attire. “None of us wish to hear about Mother’s private moments.”

“Thank Jove for that,” Allan said in a whisper. Then another thought occurred. “Dear God, now I’ll have to try and convince your mother I am not the rogue she believes.” He flicked a glance between the Storme brothers. “How do I do that? I’m far removed from having to fight for a woman’s good graces.”

The major snorted. “Though none of us are strangers to fighting our way out of disfavor with a woman, perhaps the best course of action is to be truthful and charming. Speak from the heart.”

“What if she rejects me?” That was a valid fear.

The earl shrugged. “Then that is her right. However, you won’t know until you try.”

“And meanwhile, we shall go talk some sense into Lord Sanderson,” the captain added with a firm nod. “Perhaps he will have discovered that his pursuit of Miss Warren needs to end with an engagement promise.”

“Thank you.” Gratitude welled in Allan’s chest, for he hadn’t the time to worry about his son’s prospects when his own were in such shadow. “I suppose I’d best get on with it.”

“Indeed.” The earl nodded. “And Tattersham, see if you can’t give it some stick? I would like to see Mother wed by Twelfth Night. She deserves every good thing.”

“Yes, yes, she does.” With a groan, he stood up from the low sofa. “Would that I have good fortune, then.”

The major snickered. “If the two of you have already got into scandal, I rather doubt you will encounter problems convincing Mama to marry you.”

The heat at the back of his neck intensified. “I would like to hope so, but women are tricky at times.”

With the Stormes' good-natured laughter ringing in his ears, he set out to locate the missing dowager.

After a few words of encouragement, as well as well-placed direction from the major's wife whom he'd met in a corridor, Allan arrived at Lady Hadleigh's bedchamber door. "Lavinia? Won't you please let me in so that we may talk?" He rapped a few times with his gloved knuckles. "Please?"

How long had it been since he'd begged a woman to do anything? But even a duke must grovel in the gutter a time or two to gain the outcome he desired.

For the space of a few heartbeats there was no response from the other side of the door, but then the sound of footsteps on the hardwood echoed. Seconds later, the door swung open, and Lavinia stood back and gestured him in.

Her countenance was pale, her eyes red-rimmed from crying, a trace of that moisture lingered on her cheeks. "What do you want, Allan?" The flat tone of her voice left him reeling.

Gently, he closed the door behind him. "You and I are both of an age that long-winded, pretty speeches are no longer needed."

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts, which pushed those charms tempting close to the low neckline. "Then you have decided not to try and do the pretty with me?" One of her eyebrows quirked upward.

"Of course I will, but probably not in the ardent spirit your sons employed to win their wives." He offered a grin, but she remained unimpressed. Damn, but he would need to work harder to gain her forgiveness. With a sigh, he rubbed a hand along the side of his face, then remembering that he still wore his mask, he yanked it and the cavalier's hat off his head. He tossed them both onto a nearby chair as delicate and gilt enhanced as the rest of the furnishings in the room. "I never thought I was one of those men who believed in love at first

sight, for, you see, I'd enjoyed a long engagement with my first wife. Love came softly to me during that time."

"And now?" Did that slight inflection in her voice betray interest?

More emboldened as hope bloomed in his chest, Allan rushed to go on. "However, after meeting you over tea a mere few days ago, all of that changed."

"Oh?"

He nodded. "In the years since I lost my wife, I never let myself think too much on the future, for I lived very much in the moment. It was folly to hope lest it turn into disappointment." Why the deuce was this so difficult? One would think at his age, he would have mastered the use of his words by now. "After meeting you, I began to think of that future, though, and how lovely it might be to have someone to live out the remainder of my life with."

"But, you acted the rogue, Allan. I saw you—"

"No, my dear. You did not." He held up a hand. "My son and I had apparently donned the same outfit for the masquerade tonight. I didn't know until I entered the ballroom and you had already danced with him."

A blush infused her cheeks. "So that conversation I had, those scandalous words... They didn't come from you?"

What the devil had Philip said to her? "They did not. In Philip's infinite, meddling wisdom, he wished to make certain a romance between you and I occurred. And I, at the same time, and apparently in the same nodcock vein, decided to put in a good word for him with Miss Warren while pretending to be him."

God, what a coil.

"Then that wasn't you who engaged in such passionate kissing with Miss Warren?" Her chin trembled. Confusion shadowed her eyes.

“Of course not. That was Philip taking advantage of the groundwork I’d laid with the Scottish lass.” He shook his head. Such was the folly of romance at any age. “I had no notion he had planned the twin costuming or that it would upset you.”

Lavinia snorted. She tugged the opera length gloves from the fingers of one hand and then finally pulled it off. “Then you don’t know women very well despite your talent for...” a gesture between them presumably meant that of a carnal nature, “... other things.”

Some of the tension of the moment broke. When he grinned, she returned the overture, and cool relief poured down his spine. “I apologize, Lavinia. Truly.” As she shed the second glove and laid them both on a nearby occasional table, he sighed. “I fear I am woefully out of practice regarding courtship.”

Her tiny giggle went straight to his stones while his heart squeezed. “As am I.”

“Furthermore, I didn’t want to cock my chance up with you, for since the snow has stopped, no doubt the roads will soon be passable.” *Bother.* Why couldn’t he just say what he’d come here to say?

Panic leapt into her eyes. “You intend to leave? How... disappointing.”

The fact that he caused her more undo anguish wasn’t lost on him. “That largely depends on the next few minutes.” He looked at her and hoped he didn’t appear as sheepish as he felt. “Now I’ve explained the confusion, am I forgiven? In the spirit of the holiday?”

The slow smile that curved her kissable lips promised more than any words could ever give. “I would say yes, but not because of the holiday.” She took a step toward him. “But due instead to the fact I find you refreshingly interesting and wonderful.”

“Oh?” His heartbeat accelerated. “And a touch charming?” It might be rushing his fences, but he didn’t care.

“Yes, that, as well as swoon-worthy.” Lavinia came toward him and gently poked a finger into his chest until he retreated before her, stopping when the door prevented further movement. So many emotions roiled in her eyes, he didn’t dare to identify them. “Is that all you would say to me this night, Tattersham? I refuse to carry on in this same vein merely for the convenience of it. As you’ve mentioned before, we are both well past that age.”

“Of course not.” Desire graveled his voice. He lifted an eyebrow. “Do you wish for me to go down on one knee? For I must tell you, I rather doubt I’ll be able to get up.”

“Stop.” Her grin was dazzling, and he knew he’d been forgiven. “It’s not necessary.”

“Good.” *Don’t cock this up, Tattersham. You’ll never find another as wonderful as her.* Not that he wanted anyone else. “Lavinia Storme, I know we aren’t well acquainted with each other—”

“—one of us more than the other—”

“—true.” Damn but he adored her sense of humor. He chuckled with relief. “However, from the moment I met you and our fingers brushed that first time during tea, I was enchanted by you.” He took possession of one of her hands. Why the hell did he still wear gloves? He needed to feel her skin against his. “I’ve only been more enamored with each passing day.”

“Oh, you mean both of them?” Teasing threaded through the whispered inquiry as amusement danced in her eyes.

“Yes.” Had it only been that? For it felt as if he’d spend a lifetime in her company already. “If you will it, I would like to marry you, spend the rest of my life learning your secrets and making you happy, seeing you cared for and wrapped in laughter and contentment, because isn’t that what life is about?”

“Perhaps there *is* romance possible at this stage of life.”

Did that mean she would? He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles, much like he’d done that first time. “And? Put an old duke out of his misery.”

“Yes, I will marry you, and will adore doing so, but you will undoubtedly have to run the gauntlet with my sons before it’s allowed. Especially Andrew.”

He wanted to shout her acceptance from the rooftop, Christmas be damned. “I will go through every trial because you are worth it, but all three of your sons have already given their permission... after threatening me for my alleged horrid treatment of you.”

“Oh, Allan.” She pressed her body to his and sighed when he wrapped his arms around her. “This is all so unexpected.”

“Is it?” Needing the intimacy of touching her, he nuzzled the place where her shoulder met her neck. That fragrant skin, the tiny hitch in her breath, the way she slipped a hand to his nape all worked at his undoing. “You have witnessed many miracles in your own life and family, sweeting. Why shouldn’t you expect one for yourself?”

“Well, when you put it that way, Your Grace...” She leaned around him, and seconds later, the click of the door locking mechanism echoed in the silence of the room. “Kiss me, Allan. Show me in no uncertain terms how much you will love me.”

“Gladly.” He cupped the back of her head and then claimed her lips with his. What he’d wished to convey in a tender kiss suddenly changed into something else entirely as the heat of desire swept through his blood. Everything about this woman captivated him, and he couldn’t wait until she was completely and utterly his.

Several passion-clouded moments passed as he explored every secret of her mouth. Then he wrenched off his gloves, and after throwing them to the floor, he cupped her breasts,

found her hardening nipples with his thumbs and set out to tease her into breathlessness.

A moan told him he wasn't far off the mark, but when she pulled slightly away, doubts crept in. He needn't have worried, for she tugged at his cravat, had the knot undone within seconds, and then she pressed her lips to the skin of his neck she'd just uncovered.

"Come with me." Lavinia took his hand and led him across the floor toward the bed.

Surprise twisted down his spine along with quick need. "Are you certain you wish to—"

"Oh, yes." Her eyes were dark with the same desire coursing through his veins. "It is quite your fault, since you aroused me beyond measure this morning, and I've gone through the day with a vague feeling of restlessness to be finished."

"Then, allow me to rectify the situation." When Allan turned her about so that her back was to his front, she uttered a protest. "None of that, sweeting. I simply wish to remove your wings lest they become crushed from our endeavors."

She glanced over her shoulder, and the look she gave him in the soft candlelight sent a rush of blood into his shaft. "I hope you are ready for all that you've promised to take on."

"I welcome every challenge you should bring." Then he set to work on relieving her of the wings.



CHAPTER NINE

LAVINIA WAS IN a heightened state of awareness as various pieces of their clothing fell to the floor in discarded heaps. This man who had set her at sixes and sevens practically since the first moment he'd stepped into her drawing room two days ago had managed to upend her world again with his charming and heartfelt proposal.

By the time she'd tumbled onto the bed with the pleasant weight of him pressing on top of her, she was already halfway to losing her grasp on control. Then something he'd said wriggled through the cloud of desire in her brain. "My boys gave their permission?"

"Yes." Allan worried a tight nipple through the thin lawn of her shift, for she'd only stripped to that garment. It would take more than two days to summon the courage to show him what the whole of her body looked like. "They wouldn't let me out of the parlor without me giving them a good enough reason."

She placed a palm on the side of his face and nudged his head up until their gazes connected. "You were coerced?"

"No, dearest." His blue eyes had darkened to near sapphire. Though he still wore his loose-fitting fine lawn shirt—perhaps he was as self-conscious as she—the warmth and strength of him was all too real against the palm of her other hand that rested on his chest beneath the garment. "I'd been thinking about doing just that ever since I sent you flying this morning."

"Oh."

"I don't have a ring or any other gift for you to mark such a special occasion, but then I didn't know I'd find such a wonderful woman during my travels this week."

“It doesn’t matter. I have enough gems; I rather think you are enough.”

“Ah, but my life is full once more thanks to you.” He kissed her chin. “However, once things are settled, you shall have a ring.”

“You spoil me.”

“That is the plan.”

Lavinia sighed when he returned to worrying her nipples with his fingers and lips. Pleasure streaked through her from her breasts to lodge between her thighs, yet his use of endearments warmed her more than his touch every could. “This is so scandalous,” she managed to whisper in between gasps. “Letting a man bed me after two days of meeting him.”

“Yet doesn’t it feel like a lifetime? Like that homecoming I’d mentioned before?”

“Indeed, it does.” That was a lovely way of explaining it. When she slipped a hand downward and encountered his semi-hard erection, she grinned. “Let’s see what we can do about this, hmm?”

He snorted. “Don’t be disappointed if it doesn’t end with a desired result,” the duke whispered against her breast. “I cannot be aroused as easily or for as long as younger men.”

“But there are other forms of love and intimacy we can give each other.” Already, she craved having time enough to explore his body more than she was able to do in this moment. How long would it take to bring him to release with just her fingers? To that end, what would he taste like? *Oh, good heavens, what is wrong with me?* Had she suddenly grown depraved, or was this simply nature taking its course? She stroked her curved fingers up and down his length. The sheer delight of touching a man like this stole her breath and fired her need. With every pass of her hand, his shaft hardened and grew thicker, and though she wanted nothing more than to feel him moving inside her, there were words she wanted to say. “I

was upset before because I've come to unexpectedly care for you."

He brushed his lips over hers. "I am man enough to admit that hearing such a thing again makes me uncommonly happy."

"And I am grateful I'll have you to spend the remainder of my life with someone who makes me laugh." The longer she stroked his length, the more shudders went through him.

"That makes everything more endurable, I think." Gently, he rolled her onto her back. "Let us not lose the momentum. Are you ready for me?"

"Yes." She slipped an arm about his shoulders, glided a hand to his back, felt the strength of him, and when he widened her legs, her heartbeat pounded. It had been years; would it still feel pleasurable? Then he thrust inside, and though there were some of the familiar, wonderful sensations there, a fair amount of pain and discomfort accompanied them. Immediately, she pushed at his shoulder. "I don't remember it being like this."

What if they weren't compatible after all?

"Experience makes a difference." He withdrew and then encouraged her onto her side with her back toward him. "Let us change position and see if that won't help." Again, he parted her legs, rested one of them over his as he spooned her. The stiffness of his arousal bumped against her backside.

Flutters filled her belly. How was it possible she'd never made love like this? It had never occurred to her that it could be done like this. "Allan, I'm not certain... Oh!" When he entered her from that new angle, not only did it send her into another level of amazing, but the pain of intercourse the last position brought had dissipated. She curled a hand into the bedding while acclimating to this new experience. "It seems there is more to learn," she finally whispered.

Allan chuckled. "Indeed." His hips moved in a slow, teasing rhythm, and one she could easily match. As he thrust,

she pushed back as best she could, and each time he stroked deeper, her breath shuddered from her, and her eyelids fluttered. “I shall endeavor to amaze you for as long as I can.”

The ability to speak was temporarily beyond Lavinia. She closed her eyes and concentrated on how they fit together, what he did to her, how shivers of pleasure swamped her with each new movement. And when he slipped a hand around her hips to bedevil the button at her center out of hiding, she squealed and could have sworn her soul left her body for a few seconds.

Shivery sensations crashed over her, and between the friction of his fingers on that nubbin and the penetration from his shaft going deeper, she was thrown over the edge all too soon into a lovely sort of release that left her shaking and crying out softly as waves of contractions rocked through her core.

“I have missed those sounds, these feelings,” he whispered against the shell of her ear. Once, twice more, he thrust, spearing deep into her passage before he too fell into his own bliss. “Ah, Lavinia.” As he nuzzled his lips into the crook of her shoulder, she sighed. “I think we shall complement each other quite well.”

“That is my hope too.” Fully relaxed, she stretched but mourned the break in their physical connection. When she rolled onto her back, it put her back into his vicinity, and he wasted no time in wrapping an arm about her hip. “I am sorry I was such a ninny over what ended up being a silly case of mistaken identity.”

“I’m not.”

The rumble of his voice sent tingles of awareness over her skin. “Why?”

“It made me realize what I wanted most from my life, and it showed you the same.” The corners of his eyes crinkled with a grin, and his shaggy gray eyebrows were so comical that she

giggled. “Perhaps the farce was fate’s way of helping us to not waste any more time.”

“Perhaps.” A pleasant lethargy weighted her limbs, so she laid her head on his chest and reveled in the silence. The duke had shown her how different life could be, but how also fulfilling it was to take a chance and do something completely out of character.

Long moments passed while she listened to his even breathing. It was rather lovely having a man in her bed again. A man who would be her husband. Eventually, the longcase clocked at the end of the corridor chimed the midnight hour. They had tarried here for nearly an hour. It had seemed like mere minutes.

“Happy Christmas, Allan. Thank you for what I suspect will be one of the best gifts I’ve ever been given.”

He pressed his lips to her forehead. “Happy Christmas, Lavinia. You have no idea how much brighter the future is because you are in it.”

Truly, this was unlike any other she’d ever had, and she couldn’t stop smiling.



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, they both returned to the ballroom where the ball was slowly winding down, but guests were still in a celebratory mood.

With a sigh, Lavinia glanced about the room. Her family was thriving. All her children as well as her nieces and nephews were there, for Caroline and her husband had made an appearance. Some of the ladies had their babies in their arms, possibly in a wish to usher in that most holy of days with their families together. She sighed and leaned into Allan’s embrace as he held her from behind. They watched the celebrations from one of the doors.

In that moment, life was very nearly perfect.

“Look at them, Allan. Everyone is so happy.” Finally. It had taken many, many years. Tears gathered in her eyes. “I’ve hoped for so long it would be like this.”

“I must say, it is quite amazing.” Then he chuckled. “It seems that even Philip will usher in a change to his future soon.”

Lavinia followed his gaze. Indeed, Lord Sanderson seemed quite smitten by Miss Warren. “I’m glad for it. Everyone should know what love is at least once in their lives.”

“And if they are fortunate, twice.” He pressed his lips to her temple regardless that they were in public, and she adored him for it. “I think your husband would have been proud of you, just as I am.”

“Hush, you.” Though her knees threatened to melt. He was simply adorable, and she couldn’t wait to come to know him better during their marriage. A soft gasp escaped her. “Oh, goodness. I will soon be a duchess.”

“Are you up for the challenge?” Wariness threaded through his voice.

“I have presided over the mess of the Storme family for many years, so I should think the responsibilities of your duchess will pale compared to that.”

“Perhaps you are right.” His laugh sent tremors of awareness down her spine. “You are quite the force to be reckoned with in your own right. I’ll wager my cheek is still stinging from that slap.”

Heat went through her. “I apologize for my outburst.”

“All part and parcel of the woman I adore.”

How was it possible she’d been so fortunate as to meet him? “Please, let us be quietly wed. Just us. Perhaps my family and yours in attendance. I don’t want a fuss.”

“You shall have anything you wish.” She didn’t doubt it was so. He was a generous man. “Do you wish to travel for our wedding trip?”

Oh, it had been so long since she'd gone anywhere! "I think I might." Her family could get along without her for a few months.

Now, it was time to do things for herself.

"Wonderful." Allan took one of her hands and then kissed the inside of her wrist. "We shall have such fun." When she turned in his arms, the soft look he bestowed upon her stole her breath. "It will be rather nice to have a wife again, to know someone is there in the quiet. To share smiles with as well as secrets."

"I agree." Despite being in a crowded ballroom, she laid a palm to his cheek, lifted onto her toes, and then pressed her lips to his. Never would she tire of doing that.

"What was that for?" But his eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Because I'm happy, and I know it won't take long for me to love you." She had missed that as well.

"I would enjoy all of it." He patted her hand. "Now that there has been much ado about a Storme tonight, perhaps we should announce our news to your family."

Lavinia laughed and for the first time in years, she felt relaxed. "Perhaps it's best to grab a glass of champagne to fortify ourselves. Knowing my family, it will cause boisterous celebrations, to say nothing of exclamations."

"From everything I've heard about the Storme family, I would be disappointed if it didn't." With his hand firmly in hers, he led the way into the corridor toward the refreshment table. "No doubt my son will be pleased, since he had a hand in bringing the engagement about."

"Let us remember to thank him later." Lavinia grinned. Life was certainly unexpected, and truly full of surprises, even at her age. She couldn't wait to see what new directions hers would lead.

The End

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About Sandra Sookoo

Sandra Sookoo is a *USA Today* bestselling author who firmly believes every person deserves acceptance and a happy ending. Most days you can find her creating scandal and mischief in the Regency-era, serendipity and happenstance in Victorian America or snarky, sweet humor in the contemporary world. Most recently she's moved into infusing her books with mystery and intrigue. Reading is a lot like eating fine chocolates—you can't just have one. Good thing books don't have calories!

When she's not wearing out computer keyboards, Sandra spends time with her real-life Prince Charming in central Indiana where she's been known to goof off and make moments count because the key to life is laughter. A Disney fan since the age of ten, when her soul gets bogged down and her imagination flags, a trip to Walt Disney World is in order. Nothing fuels her dreams more than the land of eternal happy endings, hope and love stories.

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**A MIDWINTER NIGHT'S
DREAM**

**(With apologies to
William Shakespeare)**

Anna Markland

“Though she be but little, she is fierce.”

From *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare.

Dedicated to all who dream of a world without war.



THE PLAY'S THE THING

England, 1819

“MAGIC FAIRIES DON'T exist,” Theo Paignton, Duke of Broughton, exclaimed, mildly irritated by his niece's interruption of a sacrosanct morning ritual. A titled gentleman was expected to read *The Times* while enjoying his breakfast, even if it was two days out of date by the time it completed its journey to Lancashire from London.

“They're just characters in my play, Uncle Theseus,” Edwina whined.

“I don't see...” he began.

“You must agree it's important we do something to celebrate the Winter Solstice here at Broadmead,” Edwina interjected.

He always found it difficult to deny his late brother's daughter anything she desired, especially when she used his full name. He much preferred Theo to the classical Greek moniker he'd been saddled with. What else could a man expect from parents named Hercules and Ariadne?

The precocious twelve-year-old knew how to get her way, even when she came up with unusual requests.

However, had her parents not been killed in a carriage accident ten years before, Theo would never have inherited the title. Edwina would have been a duke's daughter, entitled to all the privileges the high rank entailed.

As it was, the Shakespeare-obsessed Edwina preferred the theater to the ballroom, academic pursuits to garden parties and the like. Now, she'd written a play based loosely on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and cast her uncle in the leading role.

Only a few years older than Edwina was now when he'd been thrust unexpectedly into the role of duke, he often felt inadequate as his niece's guardian. With no children of his own, he'd had to learn on the job, so to speak, much as he had with the dukedom itself.

With a grieving little girl and onerous new responsibilities on his plate, there'd been no time for the pleasurable pursuits he'd enjoyed as a youth—and certainly no opportunity to search for a suitable wife. He still rode, of course, but exhilarating gallops over hill and dale were a thing of the past. He couldn't risk putting his family's two hundred years as the Dukes of Broughton in jeopardy. His widowed mother had recently kept harping on about his duty to provide heirs for the dukedom. Fortunately, Ariadne Paignton's infirmity kept her confined to the dower house and her visits to Broadmead Lodge were few and far between. He could hardly admit to his mother that he was woefully inexperienced at wooing. The prospect was ridiculously daunting for a twenty-five year old man of his rank. And how to find a woman willing to take on a twelve-year-old genius?

Perhaps he needed some of Edwina's fairy magic after all.



DOLLY JENKINSON HAD been extremely fortunate to secure a position as governess to the precocious Edwina Paignton. Broadmead Lodge was an old but comfortable manor house in Lancashire, situated on a sprawling estate far away from her former home in the southern counties. Sympathetic to her plight, her late mother's sister, dear Aunt Sophie, had recommended her to the agency in London. That highborn lady's glowing letter was apparently sufficient to convince Edwina's guardian of her suitability without the necessity of an interview. After a brief meeting the day she arrived, Dolly saw the duke infrequently—just as well since he'd had an unsettling effect on her. Her heart had never fluttered before. Nor had she ever wanted to preen for any male of the species. She'd experienced a peculiar tingling in her nipples and a

strange wetness in a very private place. Much younger and a good deal more attractive than she'd expected, the duke had readily admitted knowing nothing about the education of little girls, and given Dolly free rein to teach his niece whatever she thought appropriate. The task wasn't onerous; the child soaked up knowledge like a sponge. It was a challenge to keep up with her agile brain. Despite being clever, she was respectful and well-mannered. For a child who'd suddenly lost her parents to a violent death, she was extremely well-adjusted and easy to like. Dolly became very fond of her in a few short weeks.

Edwina clearly had the duke wrapped around her little finger, but Dolly couldn't say the girl was spoiled. She adored her uncle, though she often lamented the amount of time he spent on estate matters—time Edwina believed should be devoted to finding a wife. It genuinely saddened her that he didn't enjoy the love of a good woman. Dolly assumed there were probably many eligible society maidens whose mamas had set their sights on the good-natured, handsome man in control of a wealthy dukedom. A girl couldn't fail to be impressed by his broad shoulders, intriguing green eyes and perfectly proportioned physique. She'd wager he sat a horse well, given his long, powerful legs.

To all intents and purposes, Broadmead Lodge was the perfect refuge, yet Dolly lived in constant fear. Harboring increasingly wanton thoughts about her employer was dangerous and the surest way for her secret to one day be discovered.



PRINCESS EUROPA

“SO,” EDWINA EXPLAINED when she and her governess were discussing the details of the midwinter play in the library. “My uncle has agreed to take on the role of the Duke of Hessian.”

“Hessian?” Dolly inquired, resisting the urge to smile.

“Yes. Like the boot. I can’t name my hero the Duke of Wellington, because the play is meant to be an allegory. However, Wellington boots were originally a type of Hessian popularized by the victor of Waterloo.”

“Fair enough,” Dolly replied. “Quite clever actually.”

“I’ve assigned the part of Princess Europa to you,” Edwina said, preening under the praise.

“Oh,” Dolly replied, preferring at all costs to avoid any unwanted attention. “I shouldn’t be in the play. Why don’t you be the princess?”

“Because I am going to be the Fairy Queen, of course. Servants can easily play the other parts, but who should I cast as Boneshanks?”

“I suppose Boneshanks is meant to be Bonaparte?” Dolly remarked.

“Yes. He kidnaps Princess Europa. The Duke of Hessian saves her from his clutches.”

“Like Wellington saved Europe at Waterloo.”

“Exactly. I think most of our guests will understand the allegorical references, except perhaps the Batesons. The squire and his wife tend to be obtuse.”

As usual, Edwina was being kind. Having met the Batesons at Sunday services in the nearby village, Dolly thought the term *dimwitted* better described the elderly couple.

“It’s important though to choose the right person to play the villain,” Edwina mused. “What do you think of asking Hunter?”

The punctilious, reed-thin butler was an odd choice—he stood over six feet tall and never raised his voice.

Dolly knew someone who would fit the role perfectly. If Edwina ever met Dolly’s second cousin—and pray to God she never did—she would immediately recognize Devlin Leslie as the embodiment of the Corsican—cruel, ruthless, short of stature and probably hunting high and low for the cousin who’d fled a future as his wife.

There’d been no son to inherit her late father’s title upon his untimely death. The Dukedom of Cushing had devolved to Devlin, a man her father loathed. Shortly after inheriting the dukedom, he had produced a document purporting to be an agreement signed by her father that promised his daughter’s hand in marriage to Devlin.

“I’ll ask Hunter,” Edwina declared, jolting Dolly from thoughts of the dire future that awaited her if Devlin Leslie ever tracked her down. She’d have no recourse against a powerful man with a title. The Duke of Hessian might rescue Princess Europa but he’d be powerless against the new Duke of Cushing.



THEO STRODE ONTO the makeshift stage set up in the ballroom. “Unhand her,” he declared, brandishing the wooden sword James the groom had fashioned.

“No, Uncle, we’re not at Act Two yet,” Edwina scolded, emerging from the wings behind a pile of boxes.

Since his initial interview with Miss Jenkinson, Theo had carefully avoided the governess. Her unexpected beauty and graceful bearing had thrown him off balance and stirred too much interest at his groin—a feat no woman had managed to accomplish for some time. However, if and when he married, a governess would never do.

Distracted by her cries of distress when Boneshanks stumbled down to attack her from atop a pile of rugs intended to represent Paris, Theo had completely lost the plot and made a fool of himself. But her distress had seemed so real. She had thrown herself into her role, unlike the red-faced Hunter who looked and probably felt ridiculous with a cardboard bicornie tied under his chin so it didn't slip off his bald head.

“Can we start again, please?” Edwina said, an unusual edge of impatience in her voice. “Act One, Uncle,” she reminded him.

Holding on to his black hat, Hunter climbed back atop his capital. Miss Jenkinson assumed her position center-stage, arms spread wide in magnanimous blessing over the cushions strewn about that represented the countries of Europe—just until Edwina could think of something more appropriate.

Theo thought the governess really was a fine-looking woman, very regal with her lovely breasts thrust out and her long neck. He could hardly wait to see her costumed in the sheer curtains Edwina had found in the attic.



DOLLY WASN'T SURE what had caused the duke's confusion about where they were in the script. He did everything with such precision, it wasn't like him to get so mixed up. However, it was the first run-through, and Edwina's script had a lot of lines crossed out and corrections scribbled in. The spectacle of Hunter tripping over the pile of carpets was perhaps enough to distract anybody. The gangly butler simply wasn't cut out to play a greedy emperor. She doubted very much if he would have put his hands on her as the stage directions called for.

And the hat! Edwina had done a creditable job with its construction, but the black paint was starting to run. Her pupil had been so delighted with the way it had turned out, Dolly didn't have the heart to mention the paint might not be completely dry. But then Hunter had perspired quite a lot.

He'd be mortified when he discovered the black streaks on his bald head. The other servants pressed in as extras were already tittering behind his back.

“That’s your cue, Uncle,” Edwina shouted from the wings. “You should have exited, Miss Jenkinson.”

Dolly fled to the wings as the duke entered stage right.

“The dastardly Boneshanks has kidnapped Princess Europa,” the Duke of Hessian declared to the servants playing the part of his army. “We will do all we can to rescue her. Europa must be free.”

Dolly’s throat constricted. If only she had a handsome hero like the duke willing to defend her against Devlin Leslie.





TANTRUMS

THEO WAS RELIEVED to see Hunter had managed to wash the paint stains off his rather large ears, but the butler looked uncharacteristically nonplussed as he entered the study later that afternoon.

“What is it?” Theo asked. In all the years Hunter had served his family, he’d never known the man to dither.

“I don’t rightly know how to say this, melord,” the butler said.

Hunter normally took great pains not to use working class phrasing, so something was definitely amiss. The reason finally penetrated Theo’s brain. “You’re not happy with your role in Lady Edwina’s play.”

“It’s not dignified, my lord. I’m supposed to grab hold of Miss Jenkinson when I kidnap her, and, well...”

Theo resisted the urge to laugh. It wasn’t the dripping hat, nor the pile of carpets Hunter minded. It was touching Miss Jenkinson, something a certain duke would be only too glad to have an excuse to do. “I sympathize,” he said. “I’ll speak to my niece about casting someone else in the role of Boneshanks.”

“Thank you, my lord. It’s not that I want to disappoint Lady Edwina. She’s such a treasure. I’d happily portray a minor character, but not a dastardly villain like Boney.”

Theo couldn’t think of a single part in Edwina’s play that called for a six foot tall beanpole. Except perhaps...



DOLLY WAS TAKEN aback when the duke entered the library while she and Edwina were discussing props for the play. He

normally spent most of the day closeted in his study with the estate manager. “May I interrupt?” he asked, hesitating at the door.

“Of course, Uncle Theo,” his niece replied. “Miss Jenkinson and I are trying to think how we can show the countries of Europe on stage. Instead of the cushions.”

“Perhaps by means of a large map,” the duke suggested. “What do you think, Miss Jenkinson?”

Dolly’s mind was busy thinking on how much nicer Theo sounded than Theseus. It suited a handsome young man with raven hair better than the rather pompous Greek name. “Er...a map...yes. We’d need a good deal of kraft paper.”

“But how will we distinguish the countries from each other?” Edwina asked.

“Maybe a symbol for each one,” her uncle replied. “Or a flag.”

“That’s rather a lot of work,” Dolly said, immediately regretting she’d spoken like the daughter of a noble family. Governesses were expected to keep their opinions of a duke’s suggestions to themselves.

“You’re right,” his lordship replied, apparently not offended. “Perhaps you could simply give Princess Europa an extra line or two naming the countries she watches over.”

Edwina chewed her bottom lip while she considered the suggestion. “I suppose.”

“On another topic,” her uncle said. “I think it would be preferable for me to take the part of Boneshanks. Hunter is...”

“No,” Edwina shrieked, startling them both. “Then the spell won’t work at all.”

She rushed out of the library, slamming the door behind her.



THEO STARED AT the door, then at Miss Jenkinson, who looked as gobsmacked as he felt. “I’m not sure what I said,” he admitted.

“Nor I, my lord,” she replied.

“Hunter simply isn’t the right person, and he’s very uncomfortable playing Boneshanks. I thought...”

His thoughts flew away like startled birds as he gazed into wide, brown eyes. “Er...”

“I don’t know what came over Lady Edwina,” Miss Jenkinson said, her face reddening under his gaze. “Although...perhaps...no, I shouldn’t speak of such things, especially with a gentleman. But Edwina is without a mother’s guidance.”

“Please, feel free if you have some insights into how I offended her. I admit to often being at a loss to understand the female mind.”

Miss Jenkinson narrowed her eyes. “Lady Edwina is twelve years old, my lord, almost an adolescent. Girls that age...er...well.”

Heat flooded Theo’s face as gooseflesh marched up his spine. How on earth had he embroiled himself in a discussion of female rites of passage? “I see,” he said, trying desperately to think of a way to extricate himself from the library without coming across as a male clod. His turmoil eased when he realized Miss Jenkinson was smiling.

“Don’t worry, my lord,” she assured him. “I will do my best to guide Lady Edwina through the challenges that face young girls.”

“My niece is lucky to have you,” he exclaimed, relieved the burdens wouldn’t fall on him. He didn’t even know if Edwina had begun to sprout—up top, as it were. “I’d be sure to muck it up.”

“I doubt that’s true,” she replied. “A young girl on the cusp of womanhood who has lost her parents needs a loving male

influence in her life. She knows you love her.”

It occurred to him that they were sharing opinions as friends who trusted one another, rather than employer and governess. “You sound as if you speak from experience,” he said, alarmed when the color drained from her face and the confident young woman turned into a pale wraith.





DELICATE MATTERS

DOLLY COULD HAVE bitten her tongue. To have embarked on a discussion of taboo female matters with a man she barely knew—her noble employer for goodness sakes! And then to have opened the door to questions about her own background. Folly!

It was dangerous to feel at ease with this man, no matter how kind and gentle he seemed. One thing she knew about aristocrats, particularly males—they never broke rank. If Devlin Leslie came to claim her, the Duke of Broughton would have no choice but to back him up. The law would be on their side. A woman's objections would count for naught.

"Perhaps you should sit down, Miss Jenkinson," her employer suggested, his voice full of concern. "You look like you're about to faint."

His words jolted Dolly back to her senses. She'd never fainted in her life and wasn't going to do so now. A swooning governess would soon be asked to pack her bags. "I can assure you I am fine, my lord," she retorted with more annoyance than she intended. "I was merely remembering my own dear father."

"I apologize," he replied. "It wasn't my intention to resurrect bad memories. I take it your father is deceased?"

Surely there was no harm in admitting to it, "Yes," she said.

"And recently, I might assume?" he asked.

The grief tightened her throat. As a governess, she wore conservative clothing in muted colors. She hadn't even been able to honor her father by wearing full mourning clothes for the required period of time. "Just over a year ago," she lied.

“My sincere condolences, Miss Jenkinson,” he offered, fidgeting with his cuffs. “Now, if you will excuse me. I’ll see if I can track down Edwina.”

The sincerity in his voice was touching, but she doubted he’d be comfortable confronting his niece. “Perhaps I should do that, my lord.”

“Yes. Woman to woman, I suppose. By the by, what did she mean by the spell not working?”

Dolly had wondered the same thing. “I don’t know. She’s been rather secretive about her own role in the play. She insists the Fairy Queen would never divulge her secrets to mere mortals.”



THEO RETURNED TO his study, ostensibly to work on the estate’s accounts, but the notion of secrets played on his mind. What was Edwina up to?

His niece wasn’t a secretive person, yet the play was almost too important to her. He’d clearly touched a nerve when he’d suggested he play Boneshanks. Or was it the idea of Hunter playing Hessian that had upset her? Yes, that was it. She likely didn’t see the butler as hero material.

More perplexing was the uneasy feeling that Miss Jenkinson also harbored secrets. She wasn’t what he’d expected of a governess. The letter of reference had described her abilities and her character in glowing terms, but there was something else about her bearing—something almost noble. He’d wager she’d been brought up in a well-to-do household.

Her father had died recently. It wasn’t uncommon for a daughter to leave home when a son inherited a house—or another male relative. Perhaps that’s what had happened to Miss Jenkinson. But why hide the fact? It was a common enough occurrence—unfortunate and unfair, but that was often the way of things.

But Miss Jenkinson had clearly loved her father. Why would he not have provided for his daughter?

He scribbled a quick note to speak to his solicitor about adequate provisions for Edwina in his will. He might also ask Benjamin West to make discrete inquiries into Lady Sophie Price-Jones, the lady who'd written the letter of recommendation for Miss Jenkinson. She must be aware of the governess' past. Had he been remiss in not investigating her further? It was, after all, important he be apprised of anything untoward in her history. It had nothing to do with an inexplicable thirst to learn everything there was to know about Miss Dolly Jenkinson. He'd tried to ignore his growing attraction to her but those warm brown eyes and flaxen hair undid his resolve every time.



BEFORE DOLLY HAD a chance to seek out her charge, Edwina reappeared in the library, her arms full of what appeared to be curtains.

Ferretting out the reason for the child's previous outburst suddenly wasn't as pressing in view of the broad smile on her face. It seemed she was over her upset.

"What do you have there?" Dolly asked.

"Your costume," Edwina replied, spreading her burden out on the leather settee.

Dolly guessed the curtains had been in storage for quite a while. They may have been white at one time, but age had endowed them with a gray cast. Twenty years ago, they were probably fashionable, providing privacy for a large window once the heavy draperies were drawn back. Perhaps the sun had drained the color. However, an outright refusal to wear curtains might send Edwina off in another snit. "There is quite a bit of material here," Dolly said, playing for time as she lifted one corner of the material. "And it smells rather musty."

"I agree," Edwina replied, wrinkling her nose. "Mrs. Malone has brought in a seamstress. She'll be here

momentarily so we can decide on a style and make alterations. The housekeeper will see to the laundering too.”

Dolly tried another tack. “The material looks rather, er, flimsy. Perhaps inappropriate for a classical play.”

“Uncle Theo thought you’d look splendid in it,” Edwina retorted.

Dolly feared her knees might buckle. “You...er...his lordship...er...”

“I had Marcus Footman put the stuff in my uncle’s study when he brought it down from the attic—just to make sure I had his permission to use it.”

Dolly doubted Edwina would ever seek her uncle’s permission beforehand. Wheedling his forgiveness after the fact was her usual *modus operandi*. However, the notion of the duke expressing an opinion on how his niece’s governess would look dressed in diaphanous drapery muddled her thinking.

She had no chance to ponder the matter further when Mrs. Malone entered with another woman. Within minutes, they’d swathed her in fabric, decided on how to cut and sew it, then left with the material.

“It will be perfect,” Edwina exclaimed, clapping her hands.



UNIFORM

“GRANDPAPA’S UNIFORM MUST be up here somewhere,” Edwina insisted.

She was probably right, but Theo could scarcely believe she’d sweet talked him into rummaging about in Broadmead’s network of attics. However, it was more fun than poring over ledgers.

He’d stumbled upon a few forgotten treasures from his childhood. They evoked happy memories for the most part, although the hobby horse handed down from Jason was a painful reminder of the tragic accident that had changed so many lives.

He toyed with the idea of taking the toy back downstairs and getting it refurbished. If he ever sired a child...

“Look at these,” Edwina said softly. “Have you seen them before?”

Puzzled by the uncertainty in her voice, Theo wandered over to the trunk she’d opened, his heart nigh on breaking.

“Was it my father’s?” his niece asked, running a hand over the domino cape sitting atop other treasures. Clearly, she sensed his reluctance to speak.

“Yes,” he finally managed, remembering how Jason and Anna loved the fun of masquerades. “Your parents often attended masked balls when they were in London.”

Edwina carefully lifted the domino. Two elaborate masks lay beneath. “Did Mama wear this one?” she asked, lifting the gold half-mask with great reverence.

Theo swallowed the lump in his throat as the memory of Jason’s lovely wife surfaced. “Yes. The black one was my

brother's."

"I'd love to use this as part of my costume," his niece said wistfully, holding it to her face. "But it's too big."

"Maybe when you go to London for your debut," Theo suggested, fearing that day would come all too soon. He was woefully ill-equipped to lead a young woman through her first season. He'd never felt comfortable mingling in London society.

"Good idea," Edwina said, rummaging to the bottom of the trunk. Apparently satisfied the object she was looking for wasn't in the trunk, she moved on to kneel in front of another.

"Here it is," she shrieked as soon as the lid was thrust open.

Theo navigated to where she was kneeling. More of the past flooded back when he saw the uniform his father had been so very proud of, despite the fact he was an Honorary Colonel of the regiment and had never seen action. He'd also gone to great pains to make sure neither of his sons ever went to war, forbidding both to buy a commission. The fatal accident that had killed his heir seemed all the more ironic.

"Look at the gold braid," Edwina remarked, holding the jacket in front of her body.

Theo scarcely paid heed, his attention riveted on the hilt of the ceremonial sword peeking out from beneath the uniform's trousers. Edwina forgot all about the gold braid when he carefully lifted the sword from its resting place. "Unhand her," he yelled, drawing the weapon from its sheath.

"Perfect," Edwina exclaimed. "The spell can't fail to work now."



EDWINA WAS UNUSUALLY tight-lipped when she returned to the library after her excursion to the attic. Confined, dusty places weren't something Dolly was comfortable with, so she readily agreed when Edwina insisted she not accompany her and her

uncle. It wouldn't be proper in any case. A little girl was hardly a suitable chaperone.

"Did you find anything useful?" Dolly asked.

"Yes. Are we doing more mathematics today?"

Avoiding the question. "You don't want to work on the play?"

"I think everything is falling into place nicely. We can concentrate on something else for now."

Clearly, Dolly wasn't to be made privy to what had fallen into place. "Before we leave the matter of the play," she tried. "There are two things I still don't quite understand."

Edwina narrowed her eyes and fiddled with the end of her braid, sure signs she was on guard. "Oh?"

"The title. *A Midwinter Night's Dream*. Where does the *dream* come in? And the spell for that matter."

"You'll have to wait and see, Miss Jenkinson," Edwina replied with a naughty grin.



TWO DAYS AFTER the extraordinary find in the attic, Theo's valet helped him don the refurbished uniform jacket under Edwina's watchful eye.

"They've done a marvelous job with the braid and the epaulettes, my lord," Beacon remarked.

Theo barely recognized himself when he peered into the cheval mirror. "I do look quite dashing, if I say so myself," he admitted. "And you were right that my buff breeches complete the illusion instead of my father's rather baggy trousers."

"Thank you, my lord," the valet replied. "The uniform trousers were too long and I've always thought those breeches fit particularly well."

Theo privately thought they were too snug—the reason he rarely wore them—but they did complement the jacket.

“Now try the hat,” Edwina urged.

The stovepipe shako with its moth-eaten plume had occasioned a disagreement. Edwina insisted her uncle couldn't wear a bicorne like Boneshanks' because then the audience would be confused, so she'd politely refused to make one for him.

“Surely we don't need to have a full dress rehearsal at this stage?” he asked, settling the shako on his head, thankful someone had deemed the plume beyond redemption.

“I think we should,” Edwina countered. “So you get accustomed to moving in your costume.”

Perhaps Miss Jenkinson was correct that his niece's female *developments* were the cause of her flawed logic, so Theo decided not to pursue the matter.

He hadn't worn the Hessians since giving up his hobby of riding long distances, so it took Beacon a while to get his feet into them. The valet had just finished buckling the belt of the scabbard when Hunter arrived and announced a visitor.

“Whoever it is will have to wait,” Theo replied.

“Squire Bateson seems agitated, my lord,” Hunter replied.

Theo prayed for patience. “The fellow's always agitated about one trivial thing or another. Very well. Show him in.”

“I say,” Bateson exclaimed when he entered. “You look splendid, my lord. Off to war, are you?”

Edwina snickered, but quickly composed her features when Bateson glanced her way.

Both servants withdrew with their noses in the air.

“No,” Theo replied, tempted to remind the squire that the Napoleonic Wars had been over for nigh on five years. “My niece has written a play for the Winter Solstice.”

“My uncle is playing the part of the Duke of Hessian,” Edwina supplied.

“Never heard of him,” Bateson replied.

“He represents the Duke of Wellington,” she explained.

“The chap from Waterloo?”

“The very same,” Theo replied. “What can I do for you, Squire?”

Bateson scratched the unruly thatch of graying hair atop his head. “Blow me if I ain’t forgot what I came for. Seeing you decked out like a proper soldier...well...knocked me for six it did. A play, eh? Don’t recall being invited.”

“About that,” Edwina said. “It’s fortunate you came today.”

Theo shot a warning frown her way, but she ignored him.

“Fortunate, you say?”

“We were wondering if you’d like to be cast in a major role?”

“Major role, eh?” Bateson asked, puffing out his chest as far as his paunch would allow.

“The Emperor.”

“Bonaparte?”

“You’d be perfect,” the minx replied.



TEMERITY

DOLLY TRIED TO get her pupil's mind back on the biblical text they were studying, but Edwina couldn't seem to stop talking about her uncle's costume, and how splendid he looked in his father's old uniform.

It wouldn't do to appear too enthusiastic about it, but Dolly found herself looking forward to seeing the duke dressed up as Wellington. He was a handsome man to begin with, so...

"By the by," Edwina said, jolting Dolly from her daydream. "I've replaced Hunter."

This should have been good news, but Dolly was wary. "And who has agreed to star as Boneshanks now?"

"Oh, Squire Bateson, but he won't be the star."

Dolly didn't know what to think of this development. The portly squire was certainly more physically suited to the part, but...

"I've cut down on his lines," Edwina explained. "So he won't have a lot to memorize. He was thrilled with the bicorne."

As was often the case when Dolly conversed with her charge, she found her mind reeling. Edwina had anticipated Bateson's intellectual shortcomings, and she could well imagine the squire being pleased with the hat. Hopefully, the paint was well dry by now.

But what had she meant about not being the star?

"You and my uncle are the stars of this show," Edwina said, yet again reading Dolly's mind.

Further discussion was rendered impossible when Mrs. Malone and the seamstress arrived with Dolly's newly sewn

and laundered costume.



EXASPERATED THAT HE seemed to be getting nowhere with the ledgers, Theo almost welcomed Hunter's interruption. However, he'd never seen the butler's face redden to such an alarming degree. If there was a letter on the salver he held above his head, there'd be little chance of Theo reaching it.

"A missive, my lord," Hunter intoned.

"Leave it on the desk," Theo replied. "I'll see to it later."

"You might want to read it now, my lord," Hunter replied as he lowered the salver. "It's from Buckingham Palace."

Gooseflesh marched across Theo's nape. It was rumored the old king was very ill. Perhaps this was news that the Regent now ruled in his own right. He retrieved the letter and slit the envelope with the opener Hunter provided.

Jaw clenched, he scanned the contents, his disbelief growing. "What on earth?"

But he knew the answer. Edwina had apparently taken it upon herself to invite the Prince Regent to her play—and the confounded man had accepted. "Charmed and delighted," he'd written.

"Does he not have enough to occupy his time?" he asked.

"Sir?" the befuddled butler replied.

"Tell Mrs. Malone to prepare for important visitors. Prinny is coming to visit in a fortnight and he'll no doubt bring a horde of sycophants with him."

"The future king, my lord?" Hunter stammered.

Theo was tempted to unleash a diatribe about the Regent's profligate ways, but criticizing the prince to a member of the working class went beyond the pale. "The selfsame. Now, I must speak with my niece."

"She's in the library, my lord, with Miss Jenkinson."

As he strode to the library, Theo's mind filled with a hundred possibilities of how to appropriately scold his niece for her temerity. His brain turned to mush when he thrust open the door and beheld Miss Jenkinson draped in...curtain material?

The costume covered every inch of her body, puddling at her feet so that not even her ankles were visible. But nipples poked at the fabric clinging to shapely breasts. To all intents and purposes, she might as well be naked. It was therefore impossible for his cock to do anything but wholeheartedly salute her beauty.



DOLLY CAME CLOSE to falling off the weighty tome Mrs. Malone had suggested she stand on while the seamstress fiddled with shortening the hem of the indecent costume. She'd been about to tell Edwina in no uncertain terms it simply wasn't possible for her to wear such a thing in public.

Then the man who plagued her dreams walked in unexpectedly and gaped. Apparently led astray by her treacherous nipples, her breasts seemed to swell. A pleasant ache blossomed in a very private place. She should really stop arching her back lest the duke actually drool. She recognized lust when she saw it. Devlin Leslie had lusted after her, but the longing in Duke Theo's gaze was a far cry from the greed in her cousin's eyes. If only... "My lord," she managed from her dry throat. "I..."

"Isn't it wonderful?" Edwina gushed, dragging her gaping uncle further into the library.

"Er..." the duke replied, the crimson tide flooding his face indicating he might be having an attack of some sort. "The Regent," he babbled, confirming her fears.

Mrs. Malone moved to shield Dolly from the duke's view. Her voice penetrated the uncomfortable silence. "We're just finishing up here, my lord," she declared. "We didn't expect..."

“No, of course,” he replied, his gaze fixed on his feet. “Excuse my interference. May I speak with you in my study, Edwina?”

Dolly didn’t know what to make of Edwina’s cheeky grin as she followed her uncle out the door.



THEO PRIDED HIMSELF on his ability to control his emotions. If he’d succumbed to the overwhelming grief caused by his brother’s sudden death—well, where would that have left Edwina, and the dukedom? The sight of Miss Jenkinson garbed in diaphanous curtains had thrown him completely off balance, though he’d managed to stifle the urge to fall on her like a depraved lunatic and kiss her silly.

“I can come back later when you’re not so upset,” Edwina said sweetly. Too sweetly.

“What are you up to?” Theo asked. “Inviting the Prince Regent without my permission, casting Bateson as Boneshanks, dressing Miss Jenkinson up in...er...”

“And spells,” she replied. “Don’t forget the Fairy Queen’s magic.”

Reminding himself he was dealing with a precocious twelve-year-old girl, Theo filled his lungs. “Fairies do not exist, and neither does magic.”

That wasn’t precisely what he’d intended to say, since it missed the point of the unwelcome royal visit entirely. Nor was it true magic didn’t exist—he couldn’t deny he’d fallen under Miss Jenkinson’s spell. The sooner he had her investigated, the better.

By the time he got his scattered thoughts in order, his sprite had kissed his cheek and flown from the study.





FINAL REHEARSAL

THE IMPENDING ROYAL visit added a sense of urgency to preparations for the play. Squire Bateson somehow got the idea the Prince Regent was coming specifically to see him perform. This belief robbed him of what little command he had over his thought processes and led him to constantly forget the few short lines he had been assigned. Even *Princess Europa is mine* was apparently too much for him to remember. However, he had no compunction about grabbing Dolly's arm with excessive vigor, though he eased his grip and apologized profusely after the scowling duke threatened him with the sword.

Edwina was surprisingly unfazed by this chaos and eventually recommended Bateson simply act and not utter a word. His actions would speak for him and the audience would understand who he was meant to be and the nature of his dastardly plan.

Dolly was so preoccupied with how handsome and dashing the duke looked in his uniform, she barely paid attention to the squire, or to anything else for that matter. A gently bred young woman shouldn't notice such things, but the buff breeches emphasized the musculature of his thighs, and molded rather naughtily to...er...other unmentionable parts of his male anatomy. She privately thought his shako would benefit from a jaunty plume, but had no idea where she might find such a thing.

She didn't know what to make of his behavior. On the one hand, he was obviously keen on her costume, or so she assumed since he couldn't seem to take his eyes off her breasts. On the other, she sensed a wariness about him, as though he was avoiding her when they weren't rehearsing.

Edwina finally revealed her part in the play. Draped in what Dolly assumed was the leftover curtain material, and sporting a rather tatty plume in her hair, as well as the cardboard wings they'd made, the Fairy Queen appeared to Duke Hessian in a dream as he lay asleep the night before a battle. She waved a wand over his head and declared, "When you awaken, you will see clearly that Princess Europa is your destiny."



WITH ONLY A week to go before the Prince Regent's arrival, Theo finally received word from his solicitor about inquiries into Lady Sophie Price-Jones. He hurried to his study in the hopes of opening the letter in private, only to find a handful of maids dusting everything in sight. No matter where he went in the enormous house, things were being cleaned and scrubbed.

He sought refuge behind his desk and slit the envelope, puzzled to learn that the lady who'd written a glowing report for Dolly Jenkinson was the unmarried sister-in-law of the late Duke of Cushing. He found it curious that a noblewoman with no children of her own would even be acquainted with a governess.

He dug the reference letter out of the desk drawer and re-read it for what was probably the twentieth time. It was clear the writer knew Miss Jenkinson well, but it occurred to him on closer inspection that most of the glowing comments concerned personal character traits rather than teaching experience.

Miss Jenkinson was well known to Lady Sophie, but not as a governess. Indeed, in light of the information he'd received, he'd say there was almost a hint of love in Lady Sophie's reference. She cared for Dolly Jenkinson. Why would the sister-in-law of a duke care so deeply about a servant?

Then there was the indisputable fact that he couldn't stop thinking about his niece's governess—and his thoughts tended to be far from chaste. Lady Sophie's letter only served to

convince him the woman he desired wasn't a commoner. He'd done his best to avoid her outside of rehearsals, but it hadn't diminished his fixation.

And what on earth was Edwina about with her outrageous spell on the Duke of Hessian?



“BRAVO, EVERYONE,” EDWINA declared as the imaginary curtain came down on the final dress rehearsal and the players took their bow. At least, Dolly was better able to bow once the duke loosened his grip on her waist and simply took her hand. “My apologies, Miss Jenkinson,” he whispered as Edwina jumped off the stage to consult with Mrs. Malone who'd served as audience and critic. “I fear my niece's spell on Hessian worked a little too well,” he said with a wry smile.

She missed the warmth of his embrace but was glad he held on to her hand, and she liked the longing she saw in his eyes—all of which was foolish. Once the play was over and the Prince Regent had departed, she too should leave Broadmead before she became enamored with a man she couldn't have. Except she'd already lost her heart to the handsome duke and she loved Edwina like a daughter.

“I've been meaning to ask you about Lady Sophie Price-Jones. How exactly do you know her?”

His question took her completely unawares. “Er...she's a friend.”

His smile fled as he let go of her hand. He knew she'd lied.



THEO'S EMOTIONS WERE all at sea. Princess Europa had felt wonderful in his arms. She was soft in all the right places and her subtle perfume was intoxicating. He hoped he'd withdrawn in time before she became aware of the hard arousal pressed against her.

Even holding her hand was exciting. It was useless to go on denying that he'd fallen in love with the governess who was no governess. But why the lies? She'd lied to his face about Lady Sophie. Of that, he was sure.

She was on the run from something or someone. He doubted she had committed a crime. The sister-in-law of a duke would not risk writing a character reference for a felon.

Did her subterfuge have something to do with her father's recent death?

He retired to his chamber where Beacon helped him remove the uniform and dress in his own clothes.

He took up the sword once more before he left the chamber. "When I find out who she is running from, I'll run the villain through," he promised.

His intention was to retreat to his study and contact his solicitor, but Mrs. Malone waylaid him with a question about provisions for the Prince Regent's visit. He'd thought the matter was settled days ago but apparently Prinny's favorite brandy simply wasn't available locally.



THE LIST

“WE’RE NOT GETTING much studying done,” Dolly lamented to Edwina after receiving yet another summons to the duke’s study. She’d been nervous about meeting with him there since she’d lied about Aunt Sophie. From the various questions he’d posed, she suspected he was making further inquiries about her. Perhaps it was to be expected, given the status of their royal visitor and her obvious reluctance to speak about her background.

“Well,” Edwina replied. “It’s not every day a future king comes to call. I truly didn’t think he would come to see our play. I expected a letter of regret to add to my keepsakes.”

Dolly wondered if she now regretted her impulse to invite the prince.

Upon entering the duke’s study, she was surprised to see Mrs. Malone, Hunter and Myrtle Cook in attendance.

“Good, here’s Miss Jenkinson,” the duke declared with uncharacteristic nervousness, handing each of them a piece of paper. “A royal equerry has forwarded a list of the guests who will arrive with the Regent on the morrow. As you see, it’s not a long list, but the staff will need to be aware of who they are. Mrs. Malone, you’ll see to suitable chambers for each distinguished guest. As we expected, the Regent will not climb stairs. There’s a notation beside each name as to the guests’ preferences for wines, spirits, etc. I’m confident we can meet their needs now that we’ve solved the problem of the prince’s brandy.”

Focused on his full lips and the sound of his deep voice, Dolly didn’t pay attention to the list, except to notice the quality of the heavy paper and the Buckingham Palace letterhead. When she finally glanced at it, the name Devlin

Leslie, Duke of Cushing, leaped off the page, causing her legs to tremble.

“Are you all right, Miss Jenkinson?” the duke asked. “You look pale.”

“Excuse me, sir,” she replied. “I feel unwell. I have to leave.”

She fled the study, resigned to leaving Broadmead forthwith, though the prospect of abandoning the duke and his niece broke her heart. She’d come to think of them both as family.

She lifted her skirts and dashed upstairs. She was in the process of dragging her trunk out of the wardrobe when Edwina appeared in the doorway. “Are you leaving?” she asked.

The unusual hint of uncertain disbelief in the child’s voice and the crestfallen look on her face challenged Dolly’s resolve. “Er...no...I’m in search of something.”

Edwina brightened. “I knew you wouldn’t simply leave, though I wondered why you didn’t return to the schoolroom. Can I help you look for whatever it is you’re searching for?”

The empty trunk would only compound the lie. “On second thought, I doubt it’s in here, and it doesn’t seem so important now. Let’s go back to our lesson.”

She wasn’t surprised when Edwina eyed her curiously. The child was too clever to fall for such a nonsensical fib.

“I’ll be there momentarily,” Edwina replied. “My uncle wishes to impart some information about the Regent’s visit.”

Dolly nodded. Obviously, she didn’t have the authority to prevent Edwina from speaking to her uncle. It was perfectly feasible that the duke wished to pass the list of names on to his niece. Or did the girl have an ulterior motive? Whatever the case, she took the opportunity of a few minutes alone to haphazardly toss some of her belongings into the trunk.



THEO'S THROAT CONSTRICTED when he examined the equerry's list more closely. He immediately understood Miss Jenkinson's reaction. At least, he supposed it was the imminent arrival of the Duke of Cushing that had caused her upset. Lady Sophie's connection to that name was too much of a coincidence, and Miss Jenkinson was clearly alarmed.

He'd harbored a suspicion she was hiding something about her past and had known for some time she wasn't a commoner. Was it possible...?

"Miss Jenkinson is leaving," Edwina exclaimed as she rushed into the study.

Theo recognized with growing horror that Miss Jenkinson wasn't just alarmed. She was terrified of Cushing. What had the blackguard done to cause such fear? Was she a servant he'd molested? But he'd already realized she was no servant.

Whatever the case, he was bound and determined Miss Jenkinson wouldn't be frightened away from Broadmead. There was Edwina's play to consider, and where would he ever find a more suitable governess?

He fisted his hands and stared up at the ceiling. "Admit it, man," he growled. "Those aren't the reasons you need her to stay."

"Quickly, Uncle," Edwina exhorted, close to tears. "She can't leave."

Jolted from his self-incrimination, he rushed out of the study and took the stairs two at a time.



CHOKING BACK TEARS, Dolly slammed the trunk lid closed when she heard a tap at the door. Edwina wouldn't knock. She struggled to compose herself, knowing who had come to find her—the man she longed to confide in, but the last person she wanted to see in her current state.

“May we come in, Miss Jenkinson?” the duke asked softly. “We are concerned about you.”

“Please go away, my lord,” she begged. “I’ll be downstairs momentarily.”

She startled when the handle turned and the door opened.

“I’m afraid I cannot go away until we have resolved whatever has upset you.”

His presence only aggravated Dolly’s distress. Now, she would be sacked for sure. Not that it mattered anyway. “It’s a trivial thing,” she lied, reluctant to face him lest he see her tears.

Edwina entered the chamber and took her hand. “Please don’t leave,” she whispered. The genuine tears in the child’s eyes constricted Dolly’s throat.

“Edwina,” the duke said softly. “Can I ask you to wait in the hallway?”

It was highly improper, but his niece left without another word.

Dolly walked to the window and gripped the sill. “I sincerely apologize, my lord. I don’t know what came over me.”

“I do,” he replied. “The Duke of Cushing.”

Gooseflesh marched across Dolly’s nape. His unique scent teased her nostrils. He’d come too close. And he knew the whole sordid story. All hope was lost.



DRAGGED INTO THE MELODRAMA

“I REALIZE IT would be highly improper to suggest you need a hug,” Theo said softly, though he thirsted to take Miss Jenkinson into his embrace—propriety be damned.

She was trying unsuccessfully to stifle her sobs, so Theo threw caution to the winds and put a hand on her shoulder. To his surprise, she turned and buried her head against him. “I have to leave,” she murmured.

It seemed natural to put his arms around her and stroke her hair, but he was careful to keep his cock’s growing interest away from her. “No. I won’t hear of it. Explain the problem and I will solve it, even if I have to let the Regent know Cushing is not welcome.”

She stiffened in his embrace and tried to pull away. “No, then Devlin will become suspicious.”

“I assume Devlin is the new duke? And you call him by his first name?”

She pulled away and turned her back to him. “He’s my cousin.”

“And Lady Sophie is your aunt. This Devlin inherited your father’s title,” he said as the fog cleared.

She looked up at him. “You already know part of the story, don’t you?”

“I care about you, Miss Jenkinson,” he replied, though that didn’t come close to describing his feelings. “I made inquiries.”

“My father must be turning over in his grave. He loathed Devlin, and he certainly would not have betrothed me to him.”

Theo's heart was in knots. The woman he loved was the daughter of a duke and thus approachable. But not if she was betrothed to another. "And this is what he is asserting?"

"He claims to have the document with my father's signature, witnessed by some London lawyer I have never heard of."

"Forged, no doubt."

She turned back to him. Her tear-streaked face broke his heart. "But it doesn't matter. How can I challenge him? I'm a woman. I won't be believed."

"Perhaps not," he said. "But my voice will carry weight."

A polite cough drew their attention to the door. Theo expected to see his niece's censure, but a hint of a smile tugged at her lips. "May I make a suggestion," Edwina said.

Blushing fiercely, Miss Jenkinson swallowed hard and addressed her charge. "I regret you had to hear my sorry tale, and that you and your uncle have been dragged into my melodrama. You must understand why I have to leave."

"No, Uncle and I want to help resolve your dilemma. If you wear a mask during your performance, this horrible cousin won't recognize you."

Theo could have kissed his brilliant niece. She'd bought a reprieve. "There's a perfect mask in the attic."

"It belonged to my mother," Edwina explained. "I'd be honored if you would wear it."

"And you can remain out of sight during the remainder of the royal visit," Theo said. "This wretched duke will never know of your presence here. Meanwhile, I'll have my solicitor look into these documents and the London lawyer who supposedly witnessed them."



DOLLY STRUGGLED WITH the realization the duke was willing to listen to her side of the story. His honorable behavior was nigh

on overwhelming, though she might have known she could trust him. She'd been attracted to him from their first meeting—more than attracted if she were honest.

However, his willingness to help her did not mean he harbored romantic feelings for her, even if she was the daughter of a duke and not a simple governess.

Her instinct was still to flee, but she'd been offered a chance to right the wrong done to her. The alternative was to spend her life running from one place to another, always afraid, always looking over her shoulder. She'd thought she was safe at Broadmead and suspected Devlin Leslie had somehow discovered she was in Lancashire. She couldn't think of another reason for him to be in the Regent's retinue.

Perhaps the mask was the solution to keeping her presence hidden from her cousin.

However, the duke's awareness of her true identity brought a further complication. She doubted he would be comfortable with a noblewoman continuing in the role of his niece's governess.



THEO WOULD HAVE a difficult time describing the inner turmoil he'd experienced upon being told of his brother's death. He'd been overwhelmed by the shock, the intolerable grief and the daunting burden of unwelcome new responsibilities.

The emotions swirling through his heart as he knelt before the open trunk in the attic were as powerful, though grief wasn't among them. In fact, the opposite was true. He was almost giddy with excitement. He could woo Miss Jenkinson openly and hope she might develop feelings for him.

First of all, though, was the matter of the falsified betrothal document. The new duke's actions angered him, but he had to remain calm and plan carefully. Unfortunately, the woman he loved was right. If he couldn't prove the documents were a lie, her protestations would be for naught.

The next few days would be fraught with danger. As he lifted his late sister-in-law's mask from the trunk, he resolved to do everything in his power to protect Miss Jenkinson from her cousin's machinations.



ROYAL ARRIVAL

FLANKED BY EVERY member of the household staff except Miss Jenkinson, Theo and Edwina stood on the front steps of Broadmead, ready to greet their royal guest. A flurry of nervousness swirled in his gut. He hoped to control the urge to throttle Cushing when they met.

He hadn't seen the Regent for many years. Prince George had sent condolences on the death of Theo's father, and even dispatched a minor diplomat to the funeral for Theo's brother and his wife. It was generally known that the Regent was obese, but it was difficult to keep a straight face when the prince was prised out of the narrow door of his carriage—by no less than three burly footmen. Theo had thought the caricatures in *The Times* must be exaggerations of royal corpulence. They were spot on!

“How will he make it up the steps?” Edwina asked softly, laughter dancing in her eyes.

Theo hurried down the steps to receive the Regent. “Welcome to Broadmead Lodge, Your Highness,” he gushed, bowing low. “It's good of you to come all this way to see my niece's play.”

“En route for Lancaster in any case,” the prince wheezed, leaning heavily on a burly footman as he brandished an ornate cane in the general direction of the house. “As good a place as any to stay the night. Lead on, Broughton.”

Theo had intended to introduce Edwina, whose bright smile had disappeared in the face of the royal set-down. However, the Regent hadn't even noticed her and clearly wanted to get inside quickly, so he hurried ahead into the foyer, leaving the footmen to wrestle their royal charge up the steps.



DOLLY STOOD WELL back from her upstairs window overlooking the drive. Distraught though she was, the comical sight of the Regent being extracted from his carriage brought a smile. Her amusement quickly faded when three more carriages pulled up behind the royal conveyance. Her heart lurched when she recognized her father's crest on the door of one. Bile rose in her throat when Devlin Leslie swaggered out, ambled up the front steps of the mansion and took out his snuff box. "Old habits are hard to break," she murmured when he sniffed the snuff from the back of his hand.

She stepped back abruptly when he looked up at the house after tucking the snuff box into his pocket. Tears trickled down her cheeks. Not only was his wretched presence a threat to her, it was an insult to the peace and tranquility that characterized Broadmead.

A uniformed naval officer stepped out of the second carriage and a quartet of servants poured out of the third. Impeccably dressed, one man supervised the hauling down of several heavy trunks from the roof by the others—the prince's valet perhaps.

A troop of mounted soldiers trotted into the courtyard. The officer leading them began barking orders to his men who quickly dismounted and set about pitching tents on the manicured lawn. "Myrtle Cook won't be pleased if she's expected to feed you as well," she whispered.

The idea of flight still constricted her throat, but she had to trust the duke's word that he would make every effort to help her. The play could not be performed without a heroine. She'd be letting Edwina and her uncle down badly. She'd tried on the beautiful golden mask and hardly recognized herself. It might just be the solution to buying time and putting Devlin off the scent.



DURING THE LAVISH evening meal, Theo was extremely proud of the service his staff provided to the Regent and the two noblemen who had accompanied him. All the guests seemingly couldn't say enough good things about the venison served as the main course. They praised the selection of wines, the perfectly seasoned leek soup, the wide variety of vegetables, and the divine baked custard and Shrewsbury biscuits.

Cushing pompously declared the port excellent and the cigars adequate. His Royal Highness was boyishly thrilled to be offered a nightcap of his favorite brandy.

Everything went like clockwork and yet Theo hated every moment of it.

Edwina asked to be excused immediately after the sweet was served, and who could blame her? The guests had ignored her and never once asked about the play they had purportedly come to see. Their lack of manners was appalling, but it was hardly surprising given that the Regent himself ate and drank like a pig. He talked with his mouth full, slurped the soup and the wine noisily and spilled as much on his silk waistcoat as he consumed. The reason for the half-dozen large trunks trundled in by his footmen became clear. The food and wine stains would be impossible for his valet to remove from the elegant outfit he wore.

Cushing fawned over the Regent, slavishly commending every inanity the future king uttered. He even expressed admiration for the obese royal's obnoxious belches and farts that made Theo's eyes water. It took a supreme effort not to snatch the snuff box from his hands and stomp on it and its obnoxious contents.

The other man traveling with the royal party was a tall, athletic-looking naval officer, Captain Henry Hervey, who had apparently seen service in the West Indies. Theo thought he might be in his late thirties. It was hard to know what to make of him. He spoke little and never smiled, only grimacing every time Cushing snorted his snuff. The most remarkable thing

about him was a marked similarity between his mannerisms and the prince's. Were it possible to discern facial features among the rolls of regal fat, he wondered if there might be a physical resemblance between the two men.

Steeling himself to sound polite, Theo turned to Cushing. "I apologize that I am not familiar with the location of your estate," he said, hoping to gain some insights into the reason for the man's presence.

"Further south, in the Home Counties," Cushing replied, leaving Theo no wiser.

"I met the former duke once, years ago," he lied. "An elderly man as I recall. I suppose he passed on?"

"His cousin," the Regent replied. "Damn fine chap. Devlin here is actually betrothed to his daughter, but the silly chit's run off. Surprising really. She seemed a sensible girl, though it's some years since I met her."

"Run off?" Theo rasped, offended by the Regent's demeaning description of the intelligent woman he loved. It might also complicate things if the prince had previously met Dolly.

"Dorothy Delaunay's her name. She's thought to be in the north somewhere," Cushing said.

"Really?" Theo replied, cursing the heat flooding his face and hoping he sounded sufficiently disinterested.



SAY YOU FEEL THE SAME

DOLLY HADN'T SLEPT a wink all night, so she decided she may as well get out of bed though the sun had not yet risen. Her diaphanous costume hung in the wardrobe, but she still wasn't certain she had the courage to go ahead with the play. Even being in the same house as Devlin was terrifying.

She paced, occasionally eyeing the leftovers on the tray brought by the housekeeper the previous evening. She'd picked at the venison and nibbled one of the Shrewsbury biscuits, but was too nervous to eat the rest.

Shortly after sunrise, someone tapped on the door. A maidservant with a breakfast tray no doubt. The support of her fellow staff members was humbling, to say the least. She picked up the tray with the leftovers, intending to make her excuses. It nigh on clattered to the floor when she opened the door and realized the duke had brought her breakfast. Not only that, he was clad in a bed robe. The patently ridiculous notion flitted through her head that at least he wore pajamas underneath as evidenced by the blue peeking ovetop the collar of the bed robe. Still, the two of them together in such circumstances was highly improper. What was he thinking?

Balancing his tray on one arm, he pressed a finger to his lips, entered her chamber and closed the door behind him.

Stunned, she stood like a statue when he put down his own tray, did the same with hers and gathered her into his arms. "My lord," she protested halfheartedly, drawing strength from his warm embrace.

"Hush," he said softly, his hand on her nape sending tendrils of wanton feelings cascading through her body. "I'm tired of pretending, Dolly. I'm in love with you, and I am not going to allow Cushing to take you away from me."

“You love me?” she asked, scarcely able to believe his declaration.

“Please say you feel the same about me,” he said.



THEO HELD HIS breath. He was taking all kinds of dangerous risks. Challenging the integrity of a fellow duke was fraught with potential repercussions, especially with the Regent in residence. Entering the bedchamber of a female employee clad only in his pajamas and a bed robe was foolhardy, if not downright insane, especially if she didn't harbor feelings for him.

However, Dolly Jenkinson wasn't a commoner. She was a duke's daughter. Wooing her was possible, though the circumstances had forced a highly improper approach.

Even if she didn't love him, for Edwina's sake, he couldn't allow...

“I've been smitten with you since our first meeting,” she whispered close to his ear.

He let out the breath he hadn't realized he was still holding. “Oh, Dolly, my darling girl.”

“Dolly is short for Dorothy. Jenkinson was my grandmother's maiden name.”

“And you're Dorothy Delaunay, daughter of the late Duke of Cushing.”

“Yes,” she admitted.

“May I kiss you, Dolly?”



SHE CRAVED HIS kiss, had dreamed of it often enough. “I don't really know how to kiss, my lord,” she said shyly, certain the duke must have been pursued by hordes of attractive women.

“We'll learn together,” he replied. “And my name is Theo.”

She was sure then that he was what she'd always thought—an honorable nobleman who'd dedicated his time to the betterment of his dukedom and not to the hedonistic pursuits that drew many aristocrats. Not to mention he'd had the responsibility of raising his brother's child.

His warm lips barely touched hers, yet a frisson of wanton feelings spiraled to her nipples and thence to her womb. Her sigh of delight unleashed a less gentle kiss to which she responded readily.

She'd never felt more loved and wanted as he coaxed open her lips, drew her body to his and explored her mouth with his tongue.

She risked doing the same to him, relishing the taste of coffee and the clean scent of a healthy male as their tongues mated.

She willingly surrendered to the strength of his embrace, trusting he would never do anything to hurt her.

But would his love be enough to save her from Devlin's clutches?



THE URGE TO gently remove Dolly's wrapper and run his hands over her body was powerful, but Theo had already risked her reputation simply by being in her bedchamber. The day would come when they could enjoy each other freely, but that wasn't what she needed from him at this juncture.

"We're going to do this the right way," he assured her. "I passed by the Regent's chamber. He's still snoring loudly. The play is scheduled for just before luncheon so I have some time before the house wakes."

"About that," she began.

Sensing her reluctance to act in the play even wearing a mask, he carried on. The play had to go ahead now that the Regent had arrived. "I went to my study earlier," he explained. "I've penned an urgent letter to my solicitor in Manchester.

Benjamin is a bloodhound. He will get to the bottom of this so-called betrothal document. I need to add the name of the man who supposedly witnessed your father's signature."

"Loire," she replied.

"Like the river?" he asked.

"That's how I remember it."

He kissed her forehead, then decided this was as good a time as any to assure her of his commitment. He went down on bended knee and asked, "Lady Dorothy Delaunay, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"





THE SHOW MUST GO ON

DOLLY HELD HER breath, worried she was perhaps dreaming all this. Was the man who constantly filled her thoughts asking her to marry him? “It would be my honor to be your wife... er... Theo, but how can I commit to you before Devlin’s claim is proven false?”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he exclaimed, smiling broadly. “You’ve made me a very happy man. Let me worry about Devlin Leslie.”

The chamber seemed colder after he left, but he’d brought a ray of hope to her dark despair. Feeling more positive and strengthened by the knowledge Theo loved her, she managed to eat the pastries he had brought for breakfast. The strong coffee bolstered her resolve to hope for the best.

Her courage lasted until she stood in front of the mirror clad in the diaphanous costume. She would have felt uncomfortable even without Devlin Leslie’s presence in the audience.

“I’m doing this for your little girl,” she whispered to the mask in her hands. “You would be proud of her.”

She startled when the door burst open and Edwina rushed in. “Uncle just told me,” she exclaimed, throwing her arms around Dolly’s waist. “You’re going to be his bride.”

“It’s complicated,” Dolly replied, thrilled the child was happy for her and Theo but aware of the enormous obstacles they still faced.

“Don’t worry about your cousin,” Edwina replied. “The first spell worked, so the one I’m planning for the Duke of Cushing will work too.”



THEO USED THE excuse of seeing to last minute preparations for the play to avoid eating a late breakfast with his ill-mannered guests.

Beacon declared himself satisfied with his master's appearance after helping him don his uniform.

Theo made a quick visit to the ballroom to check on progress. Hunter scurried about with no apparent purpose, his usual aplomb nowhere in evidence. Squire Bateson stood in the wings, staring into space, his hand tucked into the wide sash tied across his copious girth. His wife sat in one of the chairs set up for the audience, right beside Theo's mother who'd been brought over from the dower house. Some days, the dowager duchess exhibited confusion about her own son's identity and he doubted she recognized the woman prattling on about her husband's natural acting abilities.

Surprisingly, the only person who seemed unruffled was Edwina. He wasn't sure what to make of the curious smile on her face, but that look usually indicated his niece was contemplating something mischievous.

However, he didn't have time to worry about that. The woman he loved likely needed his reassurance. He hurried to Dolly's room and tapped lightly. The temptation to take her in his arms when she opened the door was powerful. "You're a vision," he rasped, instantly aroused by the diaphanous material of her costume clinging to her perfect body.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, taking hold of her cold hands.

"Terrified," she replied. "But the show must go on, for Edwina's sake."

He might have known his niece's feelings would be uppermost in her mind. "She seems to be the only person in the ballroom not showing signs of nervousness. Don't concern yourself with Cushing," he said as he adjusted her mask. "I'll

challenge him if he so much as casts one lustful glance your way.”

“I’m hoping he won’t even notice me,” she said.

Theo thought it better not to express his opinion that the revealing costume would render that impossible. Any male with functioning genitals would be aroused by her curves. “Ready, Princess Europa?” he asked, raising her hand to his lips.

“Lead on, Hessian,” she replied after taking a deep breath.

He led the way downstairs, using a side entrance to the ballroom to get Dolly into the wings. “It sounds like His Highness has arrived in the ballroom. I’d better go out front and massage his ego,” he whispered. “The whole charade will be over soon and we can pursue the legal questions through my solicitor.”

Reluctant to leave her with the now mumbling Bateson, he made his way into the ballroom, alarmed to see his mother haranguing the puzzled Prince. “A thousand pardons, Your Highness,” he said, hurrying to take his mother’s arm.

She glared at him, then smiled broadly. “Hercules,” she exclaimed, throwing her arms around his neck. “I didn’t know you were coming to see Edwina’s play.”

“It’s the uniform,” he explained to the Regent. “It belonged to my late father. My mother sometimes gets confused.”

“Like my dear papa, the king,” he replied. “I understand completely. Madness can strike the best of men and women. For example, never seen Cushing in such a ridiculous lather before. All because of his blessed snuff box. Misplaced it somewhere.”

Relieved the Regent had taken his mother’s outburst in stride, Theo became aware of a contretemps going on near the stage where Cushing ranted at the red-faced Hunter. Theo became concerned when Edwina, in full Fairy Queen costume, approached the two men.



WORRIED BATESON SEEMED to have fallen into a trance—stage fright perhaps—Dolly peeked out from behind the screen of boxes. Her throat tightened when she saw Devlin arguing with Hunter close to the stage. Her alarm increased when Edwina approached the pair, curtsyed politely and handed something to Cushing. “Here you are, Your Grace,” she said sweetly. “You left your snuff box in the dining room.”

The ungrateful wretch snatched the box out of her hand without so much as a thank you and marched off to converse with Theo and the Regent. Seemingly unbothered by the bad manners, Edwina smiled at Hunter who looked relieved to be rid of Cushing’s harangue. There was something vaguely disturbing about the smile and the unusual curtsy, but Dolly didn’t have time to wonder what Edwina was up to. Within minutes, the cast had assembled in the wings and the lights in the main part of the ballroom dimmed.

She closed her eyes and prayed.



OFF SCRIPT

THEO NODDED HIS support to Dolly as she took up her position at the back of the stage. Edwina winked at him as she exited the wings and tiptoed to the front of the stage.

After waiting for Cushing to stop talking, she announced, “Good morning, Your Highness and honored guests.”

“You’d be so proud of your little girl, Jason,” Theo whispered, detecting no hint of nervousness in his niece’s voice.

“You see a princess before you,” Edwina explained, gesturing to Miss Jenkinson. “The noble spirit who watches over Europe.”

Dolly spread her arms wide to encompass the large map they’d drawn.

“I say, what?” the Regent exclaimed, clearly impressed by Dolly’s figure.

From the wings, Theo watched Cushing, but the arrogant chap seemed more interested in bending the Regent’s ear than in Dolly’s impressive breasts. So far, so good.

“But Princess Europa is troubled,” Edwina went on. “A man of evil intent covets the peaceful countries she guards.”

Predictably, Bateson missed his cue, so Theo shoved him none too gently onto the stage. Dithering like a cornered fox, the squire hesitated for a moment or two, then suddenly jerked to life and chortled a villainous laugh, all the while tweaking his fake mustache.

The mask hid Dolly’s face but Bateson’s unrehearsed outburst caused her to glance to the wings. Theo could only

shrug in reply, but he too worried what else the unpredictable fool might do.

Edwina glared at the squire and announced through gritted teeth, “Introducing Boneshanks the Ruthless.”

Bateson strode boldly to the front of the stage, doffed his bicorne and repeated his spine-chilling laugh.

The Regent guffawed his amusement.

Edwina’s shoulders relaxed.

Hoping the rest of the play might go off without a hitch, Theo cleared his throat and prepared to make his entrance.



STILL POSITIONED AT the back of the stage, Dolly felt a little safer, despite Bateson’s improvisation. The squire had actually taken the audience’s attention off her.

Then Theo walked proudly on stage and her heart thudded in her ears. He was everything a woman could want in a husband—handsome, even-tempered, kind, considerate and loving. He aroused desires she’d never felt before but they faced an uphill battle to be free of Cushing.

“I present the Duke of Hessian,” Edwina announced, waving her wand. “This courageous nobleman is determined to save Princess Europa from Boneshanks.”

Bateson finally took the hint and exited the stage.

“Bravo, Hessian,” the Regent shouted, apparently sensing the gist of the plot.

“Hercules, oh, my dear Hercules,” Theo’s mother exclaimed, struggling to her feet.

“Calm yourself, dear lady,” the prince soothed.

The fretting dowager duchess eventually regained her seat, thanks to the joint efforts of her companion cum lady’s maid and the Regent.

The feather in Edwina's hair drooped alarmingly as she folded her arms across her body and tapped her foot. Her wings tilted.

Dolly exited the stage as soldiers appeared and held up a linen sheet to represent a tent. After an awkward moment with his sword, Theo lay down beneath the canvas. Edwina waved her wand over him and announced, "When you awaken, noble duke, you will realize Princess Europa is your destiny."

The pregnant silence was broken by a loud sneeze from Cushing.

"Bless you," the dowager duchess shouted.

"The man's too fond of his snuff," the squire whispered to Dolly.

For once, Bateson had said something sensible.



FOLLOWING EDWINA'S DEPARTURE from the stage, Theo woke from his slumber, cursed the clumsy sword when he almost tripped over it yet again, stretched and exited.

Feeling calmer now that the play was coming to a close, he watched Dolly move to the front of the stage, followed closely by Bateson. All that remained was for the squire to take hold of her arm which would be Theo's cue to...

He stopped breathing when Bateson suddenly bowed to the Regent, grabbed Dolly's mask and yanked it off her face. "Aha! Europa is mine," he declared.

A wild-eyed Dolly struggled frantically to retrieve the mask which Bateson, laughing maniacally, held above his head, seemingly oblivious to the loss of his hat which now lay at his feet.

Cushing climbed onto the stage and took hold of Dolly's other arm. "This woman is my betrothed," he shouted to the Regent.

Theo drew his sword, rushed forward and shouted, "Unhand her."

Cushing initially backed away from the weapon, then thrust out his chest and opened his mouth to respond. A loud sneeze emerged, then another, and another. Eyes watering and face red as a winter beetroot, he fell to his knees, gasping for breath.

Theo wasn't sure what was happening but he seized the opportunity to put his arm around Dolly's waist and quickly escort his sobbing beloved from the ballroom. They passed Edwina but he didn't have time to tell her there was nothing to smile about.



NO TIME FOR LEVITY

WHEN THEY REACHED the relative safety of Dolly's room, even Theo's strong arms and his reassurances all would be well couldn't stop her trembling.

"I'm ruining your father's uniform," she lamented as she sobbed against his chest.

"It's of no importance," he replied. "What we must do now is seek the Regent's help in this matter."

"He'll side with Devlin," she whined, hating how pathetic she sounded.

"Not necessarily," he countered. "Let me speak to him."

"Don't leave me," she pleaded.

They startled when Edwina burst into the room. "I told you my spell would work," she exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear.

"This is no time for levity," her uncle chided. He hesitated before he asked, "What spell?"

"The one that magically put pepper in the duke's snuff box."

Unable to help herself, Dolly suppressed a giggle. "That was very wrong of you," she scolded, clenching her jaw lest she laugh out loud.

"But effective," Theo said.

Edwina's smile fled. "The good news is, His Majesty complimented me on my creativity. The bad news is he wants to speak to you forthwith."

"Where's Cushing?" her uncle asked.

“The footmen carried him to his room and Mrs. Malone has sent for the physician.”

“Stay with Miss Jenkinson,” Theo instructed. “And engage the lock after I leave.”

He took Dolly into his embrace and kissed her forehead before heading for the door. She instantly missed the strength of his warm body, not reassured when he drew his sword and handed it to her. “Just in case,” he said.



THEO FOUND THE ballroom deserted, except for two footmen busy putting away chairs.

“Mrs. Malone invited His Majesty to the dining room for lunch, Your Grace,” one of them explained.

Theo blessed his housekeeper’s quick thinking. A hearty meal would perhaps mollify the Regent’s outrage.

The only member of the Prince’s retinue in the dining room was the naval officer, which came as a relief. Unfortunately, his mother was also present, chattering away about Jason and Anna as if her eldest son and his wife were still alive.

“Here’s Hercules now,” she exclaimed, clapping her hands softly when Theo entered. “Bravo, my dear. Wonderful performance.” Her smile fled. “Who was the young woman dressed in my curtains? You seemed too taken with her. Have you forgotten your promise about no more dallying?”

This revelation about his dead father was news to Theo, though every word uttered by his mother had to be taken with a grain of salt.

However, a smile tugged at the corners of the Regent’s mouth.

Theo took the bull by the horns. “Permit me to explain, Your Highness,” he began.

“This had better be good,” the prince replied. “Clearly, you knew the true identity of the Duke of Cushing’s betrothed.”

Before Theo could formulate a response, the naval officer spoke. “I suggest Broughton be allowed to take his seat and tell the whole story, George.”

Shocked by the man’s easy familiarity with His Highness, Theo nevertheless obeyed the Regent’s nod, inhaled deeply and began his explanation. Hopefully, laying out the facts of the matter would at least buy time for the legality of the betrothal documents to be investigated.



DOLLY PACED THE confines of her room while Edwina perched on the edge of the mattress tracing a finger over the hilt of her grandfather’s sword. She appreciated the little girl’s attempts to reassure her all would turn out well in the end. However, the curtain material was a constant reminder of the catastrophic events. “I need to get out of this costume,” she whined.

“I’ll help you dress,” Edwina offered, hurrying to the wardrobe.

No sooner had she reached inside when splintering wood startled them. Cushing burst into the room, sending the broken door slamming into the wardrobe. Edwina leaped into the cupboard just in time to avoid being hit.

Heart racing, Dolly grabbed the sword from the bed. “Get out, Devlin,” she shouted, brandishing the weapon.

“Or what, Dorothy?” he retorted sarcastically. “You’ll kill me with a rusty sword? They hang murderesses, you know.”

“It’s not rusty,” she replied as he advanced toward her, immediately regretting the inane retort that betrayed her fear.

“Come now,” he menaced, holding out his hand for the weapon. “You cannot escape me. I have your father’s signature on a legal document and I’m interested to finally get my hands on what’s beneath that flimsy costume.”

“My father hated you,” she replied, gripping the sword’s hilt with both hands. “He would never have betrothed me to you. Theo’s solicitor is looking into the legality of the documents.”

“Theo is it?” Cushing sneered. “If the Duke of Broughton thinks to steal you away, he is sadly mistaken. I didn’t get rid of your fool of a father so you could marry another.”

The breath whooshed from Dolly’s lungs. “You killed my father?”

“It was easy,” he confirmed. “And no great loss.”

Outrage soared, obliterating her common sense as she lunged at him with the sword, screeching like a banshee.

It was a desperate move and Devlin quickly disarmed her. A last hope flickered to life when Edwina crept out of the wardrobe and fled into the hallway, wings askew.



SERIOUS ACCUSATIONS

A STRIDENT WAIL from the direction of the upstairs chambers sent gooseflesh scurrying up Theo's spine. "Edwina," he shouted, sending the chair flying as he leaped to his feet.

His niece flung herself into his arms when he reached the bottom of the stairs. "He's attacking Miss Jenkinson," she sobbed. "And he killed her father."

"Go," a voice commanded. "I'll watch over the child."

He swiveled his head, surprised to see Captain Hervey standing behind him and the Regent huffing his way out of the dining room.

"Help her," Edwina urged tearfully.

Theo took the stairs two at a time, his heart racing even faster when he heard Dolly scream.

His blood boiled when he rushed into his beloved's room. Dolly lay on the bed, struggling to be free of Cushing's weight.

In a red haze, he seized the wretch by the shoulders, hauled him to his feet and pummeled him in the gut until he collapsed at Theo's feet. He might have beaten the blackguard to a pulp had Dolly not pleaded with him to stop. "He's not worth it," she said softly.

Theo gulped air, relieved when Hunter and two footmen appeared in the doorway. "Find some rope and secure this man until the magistrate can be summoned."

"Our pleasure, Your Grace," Hunter replied.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked as he took Dolly into his arms while the servants dragged Cushing from the room.

“No,” she assured him. “I was simply afraid, but my fear turned to fury when he boasted of killing my father.”

“We must rejoin the Regent and apprise him of all we have learned,” he said.

“I’d feel better about meeting His Highness dressed in something less revealing,” she replied.

He slipped off his uniform jacket, draped it over her shoulders and held the lapels together under her chin. “Will this do for a little while? We need to let Edwina know you are safe.”

He put his arm around her waist and they set off to convince the prince of Cushing’s guilt.



DOLLY HAD ONLY a vague recollection of being presented to the Regent when she was a small child. However, she didn’t remember him being so obese. In the circumstances, it wasn’t wise to let her disgust of his corpulence show. She kept her eyes downcast, holding fast to Theo’s jacket. His lingering scent gave her courage as she curtsied deeply before His Highness.

The prince patted the empty seat next to him on the drawing room settee. “Come, child, sit and explain all this to me. Miss Paignton here seems to think Cushing murdered your father. However, children tend to exaggerate.”

Standing beside the settee, Edwina bristled, but kept silent when her uncle shook his head.

Dolly straightened but preferred to remain standing. She refused to be treated like an errant child. “Devlin confessed the crime,” she replied. “Edwina was hiding in the wardrobe and heard everything. She isn’t the kind of person who makes things up.”

“Apart from a play about magic spells,” the Regent replied with a trace of a smile.

A rare blush crept into Edwina's face. "It's an allegory," she said softly.

"And a good one," His Highness replied.

"If I may, Your Majesty," Theo began. "I believe Lady Dorothy's assertion that Devlin Leslie also falsified the betrothal documents."

"These are very serious accusations against a peer of the realm," Prince George declared. "A fellow duke."

"I am aware of the repercussions this might cause," Theo responded. "However, crimes have been committed and the perpetrator must be punished, no matter his rank."

"You wouldn't allow your obvious feelings for Lady Dorothy to cloud your judgment, would you, Broughton?"

To Dolly's relief, Theo didn't flinch. "You have guessed correctly that I am in love with Lady Dorothy and I fully intend to make her my wife. However, my responsibility to make sure justice reigns supreme in this kingdom remains paramount."

"Yes, yes, you're right, of course," the Regent agreed, apparently not taking offense at this subtle reminder of his duty. "Where is Cushing now?"

"My staff has him secured."

"We'll take him on to Lancaster. Henry will be responsible for overseeing the next steps."

Dolly wasn't sure who Henry was until the tall naval officer stepped forward and nodded. He had the air of a man who took his responsibilities seriously and the Regent clearly trusted him, so she made no objection. Faint optimism faltered when the future king commanded she too travel with him to Lancaster.

"Absolutely not, Your Highness," Theo stated flatly. "I take full responsibility for her while the legality of the betrothal agreement is looked into. I leave it to you to fully investigate the circumstances of her father's death. I cannot be

persuaded you would condone a duke's daughter being forced to marry a murderer.”

Prince George arched his eyebrows, causing several more ripples in his already wrinkled forehead. “Quite right,” he replied.



A WEDDING

THEO STOOD BEFORE the altar of his local parish church. To say he wasn't nervous wouldn't be true, but his worries weren't typical of most men about to marry. Squire Bateson stood beside him. He probably couldn't have chosen a less suitable best man, but the fool had begged and pleaded for a chance to make up for his missteps during Edwina's ill-fated play.

The squire's unpredictability aside, Theo was supremely content to at long last make Dolly his wife.

They'd shared a great many highs and lows in the months since the Regent's visit. He'd come to admire her resilient courage in the face of disappointment and delay. When the investigations into Cushing produced results, her bright smile and infectious laughter gladdened his heart.

The dubious solicitor was finally tracked down. Apparently overawed by news of royal interest in the case, Loire immediately ratted on Cushing, confirming Edwina and Dolly's accusations. She wept upon learning her father had been poisoned. Theo held her tightly, elated she found comfort in his embrace.

Cushing's execution was carried out quietly and away from the public eye. It brought little solace, though they were finally free of his manipulation. Theo's solicitor began the search for a legitimate male heir to the Cushing dukedom. Since Dolly knew of no living relative, the Regent gave permission for Theo to appoint an overseer. Prince George also confirmed Theo's opinion that should he and Dolly sire more than one son, the second son would likely be declared heir to the Cushing dukedom if no other eligible male relative was located.

Dolly continued to tutor Edwina, though she admitted it was becoming more and more difficult to keep up with his niece's agile brain. The love and respect between the two important females in his life brought Theo immeasurable happiness.

He foresaw a future filled with joy. Dolly was an excellent companion who shared many of his beliefs and opinions. They'd also had lively, heated discussions about topics on which they disagreed.

As Theo anticipated, he and Dolly were also sexually compatible. He was in a constant state of arousal whenever he was near her. She made no secret of her craving to go beyond the intensely pleasurable foreplay they'd indulged in.

As the organist struck up the music announcing the arrival of his bride, Theo turned to watch her walk toward him on Hunter's arm. Smiling broadly, Edwina held up the modest train of her gown. Tonight, one lucky duke would finally bury himself to the hilt in the welcoming sheath of the woman he loved.



DOLLY WISHED WITH all her heart that her dear father was the man walking her down the aisle. She was confident her father would have approved of Theo.

However, she couldn't have had a more dignified escort. Hunter's chest had swelled with pride when she'd asked him to give her away.

Theo's hand was warm, his eyes full of love as they came together to face the altar.

"Dearly beloved," the minister began. "We are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony."

Theo squeezed her hand. She turned to look at him as the minister continued his introduction. It was sometimes difficult

to believe how much her life had changed since she'd arrived in the home of the honorable man she was marrying.

“Therefore it is not to be taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men’s carnal lusts and appetites,” the minister declared.

Desire blossomed in a very private place when Theo smiled. She was as anxious as he to give full rein to their healthy carnal appetites.

“First, marriage was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his Holy Name.”

She'd thought a lot about siring sons who'd resemble their father and perhaps little girls with Edwina's fair face and bright mind.

She was jolted from her reverie when the minister cautioned, “Therefore, if any man can show any just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace.

“If either of you know any impediment, why you may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, you do now confess it.”

She shivered at the memory of Devlin's cruelty that had threatened the happiness she felt today.

The minister turned to Theo. “Theseus Paignton, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?

Theo kept his gaze locked with hers while the minister spoke, then responded, “I will.”

Never more sure of anything in her life, she made her heartfelt response when asked for the same commitment.

Following the minister's prompts, Theo took hold of her hand and spoke his vows. "I, Theseus Paignton take thee, Dorothy Delaunay, to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

She then took hold of Theo's hand and repeated her vows. "I, Dorothy Delaunay, take thee, Theseus Paignton, to my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth."

The minister then blessed the ring the squire placed on the prayer book. Dolly was simply grateful Bateson hadn't misplaced it.

Theo slipped his ring on her finger and promised, "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

She later didn't recall much else of the ceremony until the minister joined their hands and declared, "I pronounce that Theseus and Dorothy be man and wife together. Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

"You're mine now," Theo whispered as they shared a chaste kiss.

"All yours," she replied.

"Hurrah," Edwina shouted.

Loud applause and cheering rose to the rafters of the small church.



A HAPPY DUKE

FOR ONCE, THEO'S mother seemed aware of what was happening at the luncheon reception held in the ballroom. "Your father would be very proud of you, Theseus," she told him. "It can't have been easy to take over the dukedom, and responsibility for our darling Edwina."

He'd been nervous about having her sit at the head table but, now, he was glad of her presence beside him. Sensing her days were probably numbered, he raised her hand to his lips. "Thank you, Mama," he replied, tucking away the rare praise as he put his free arm around Dolly's shoulders. "And now I have a beautiful wife to assist me."

"Wonderful girl," the dowager duchess said. "Daughter of a duke, I understand. Well done. Hercules would have liked her."

Just when he thought she was lucid, she glared at Squire Bateson as he rose from his seat at the far end of the head table. "Who's this chap and why's he coughing so loudly?"

"He's the best man," Theo replied.

"Best for what?" his mother fired back.

Gooseflesh marched across his nape. His mother might well interrupt Bateson, especially if the fellow said something inane, which was more than likely.

His anxiety fled as soon as Dolly put her hand on his thigh and squeezed gently, though the proximity of her hand to his pleasant arousal caused a different kind of physical disturbance. Confident no one could see what was happening beneath the tablecloth, he moved her hand to his groin. "Soon," he whispered, delighted to see her nostrils flare as her face reddened.

“Dear friends,” Bateson declared, though most of the guests had ignored his request for quiet.

“He should have worn the bicorné,” Dolly quipped. “That would have drawn their attention.”

Theo chuckled, realizing it didn’t really matter if Bateson made a fool of himself. It was what people who knew him expected and would take nothing away from the joy in Theo’s heart. He just hoped the man didn’t ramble on, thus delaying the moment when he could finally escape with his bride.

“Please raise your glasses,” Bateson said with surprising authority. “Today we wish health, happiness and long life to two of the best people we all know. To the Duke and Duchess of Broughton.”

“The Duke and Duchess of Broughton,” came the hearty echo.

Apparently satisfied he’d fulfilled his duty, the squire abruptly sat.

Theo seized the opportunity of the uncertain silence to get to his feet. “I thank you all for your good wishes,” he said. “I would like to propose a toast of my own. I am content to be enthralled by the woman who is now my wife. However, it was my niece’s magic that brought us together. Please raise your glasses to Edwina Paignton.”

Blushing furiously, Edwina grinned as the toast was repeated.

“Now,” Theo continued when quiet was restored. “If you’ll excuse us, my wife and I have some important business to attend to.”

He escorted Dolly from the ballroom amid loud cheers and laughter.



THE MORNING AFTER the ceremony binding her in wedlock to Theo Paignton, Dolly wasn’t sure what time it was when she

awoke. A ray of light showed around the edges of the heavy curtains, so the sun must have risen. Having never shared a bed with anyone, she'd not expected to sleep well, yet she had. It wasn't really surprising since she and her new husband had tired themselves out making love all afternoon and most of the evening. She'd had no idea there were so many ways a couple could arrange their bodies in order to achieve maximum pleasure. They'd both come virgin to their marriage bed, but Theo explained he'd finally discovered a benefit of being obliged to listen to the boasts of fellow students at Eton and Cambridge.

She stretched, aroused anew by the feel of the linens on her bare skin and the memory of Theo's selfless attention to her pleasure. Having become familiar with the most intimate part of his body before they married, she had to admit to a measure of apprehension about his size. True to his promise, he'd readied her to receive him. She'd long known sexual intercourse involved male penetration of the female, and Theo had brought her to rapture with his loving touches. However, joining her body with her husband's had lifted her into a previously unknown realm of blissful euphoria. She'd become a woman.

"What are you thinking, Princess Europa?" he asked as he turned to cup her breast.

"That I want Hessian again," she confessed, tracing a toe along his leg. "He's transformed me into a wanton."

"Now, that's exactly what a happy duke wants to hear from his duchess," he replied, bending his head to suckle a nipple when she turned onto her back.

Grateful to be safe in the arms of the honorable man who'd rescued her from a terrible fate, she surrendered to desire as they began the long, slow climb to soar among the clouds.

The End

More Anna Markland

Anna has authored more than sixty bestselling, award-winning and much-loved Medieval, Viking, Regency and Highlander historical romance novels and novellas. Most recently, she has ventured into the world of Elizabeth Tudor.

No matter the historical or geographic setting, many of her series recount the adventures of successive generations of one family, with emphasis on the importance of ancestry and honor. A detailed list with links can be found at www.annamarkland.com, where you'll also find a link to sign up for her newsletter.

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About Anna Markland

As an amateur genealogist (aka an addict of family tree research) I became obsessed with tracing my English roots back to the Norman Conquest in the 11th century.

This turned out to be a pipe dream since I am not descended from the nobility and records were not kept for “common folks” until much later. Even then, early parish records are often indecipherable.

As a result, I began to write stories about a noble medieval family I conjured from my imagination. The Montbryces were born.

Like many people, I had an inner compulsion to write one good book. What was originally intended as that one book about my fictional family eventually became the 12-book series, *The Montbryce Legacy*.

In other words, writing superseded genealogy as my principal addiction, and I have since published more than 60 novels and novellas. Almost all are historical romances that feature Vikings, Highlanders, medieval knights, Elizabethan goldsmiths, or Regency earls. You can find more details on my website annamarkland.com.

I’ve lived most of my life in Canada, though I was born in the UK. An English grammar school education instilled in me a love of European history which continues to this day. While I may boast of being a proud Canadian, I’m still a Lancashire lass at heart.

Before becoming a full-time writer, I was an elementary school teacher, a job I loved. I then worked as administrator for a world-wide disaster relief organization.

I love cats, although I haven’t been able to bring myself to adopt another one since unexpectedly losing Topaz a few years ago.

I have few domestic skills. You'll notice most of my heroines hate sewing!

I try to follow three simple writing guidelines. I give my characters free rein to tell their story, which often turns out to be different from the original version in my head. I'm a firm believer in love at first sight. My protagonists may initially deny the attraction but, eventually, my heroes and heroines find their soul mates. It seems only natural then to include scenes of intimacy enjoyed by people who love each other deeply. I believe such intimacy is wholesome. Historical accuracy is important to me, although I have been known to tweak history when necessary. I write romance because I find happy endings very satisfying.

You can find me on all the usual social media platforms. On Facebook as Anna Markland and [Anna Markland Novels](#), on Instagram as [annamarkland](#), on Twitter as [@annamarkland](#), and [Pinterest](#) and [BookBub](#) as Anna Markland. I also have a reader group on Facebook called Markland's Merrymakers and new members are always welcome.