

SALLY BRITTON, SARAH M. EDEN  
ASHTYN NEWBOLD, KAREN THORNELL



# *Christmas Forevermore*

A Christmas Romance Collection



“In *Christmas Forevermore: A Christmas Romance Collection*, these four stories set during the holiday season are an excellent short read to get into the Christmas spirit. They each draw you into the Regency era with descriptions of a snowy England, festive balls, and massive estates lavishly decorated in mistletoe, garlands, and Yuletide logs, and we are swept into a more innocent, traditional period. The collection by Sally Britton, Sarah M. Eden, Ashtyn Newbold, and Karen Thornell left me charmed and mindful of the true meaning of Christmas, where love always finds the lonely hearted.”

—Readers’ Favorite four-star review

“I enjoyed these festive Christmas stories. Very clean historical fiction that were heartwarming!!!”

—Elaine Herbst, five-star Netgalley review

“What a great grouping of Christmas stories. There is not a bad or slow one in the group. What a fun collection!”

—Susan Ringo, five-star Netgalley review

# *Christmas Forevermore*

*A Christmas Romance Collection*

SALLY BRITTON, SARAH M. EDEN  
ASHTYN NEWBOLD, KAREN THORNELL



Covenant Communications, Inc.

Cover image © Lee Avison / Trevillion Images

Cover design by Emily Remington

Cover design copyright © 2023 by Covenant  
Communications, Inc.

Published by Covenant Communications, Inc.

American Fork, Utah

Copyright © 2023 by Sally Britton, Sarah M. Eden, Ashtyn Newbold, Karen Thornell

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any format or in any medium without the written permission of the publisher, Covenant Communications, Inc., PO Box 416, American Fork, UT 84003. The views expressed within this work are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of Covenant Communications, Inc., or any other entity.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, names, incidents, places, and dialogue are either products of the authors' imaginations, and are not to be construed as real, or are used fictitiously.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Name: Sally Britton, Sarah M. Eden, Ashtyn Newbold, Karen Thornell

Title: Christmas forevermore / Sarah M. Eden, Sally Britton, Ashtyn Newbold, Karen Thornell

Description: American Fork, UT : Covenant Communications, Inc. [2023]

Identifiers: Library of Congress Control Number 2023931182 | ISBN 9781524424459

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023931182>

First Printing: October 2023

ISBN: 978-1-52442-446-6

# Christmas Forevermore

A FAMILY CHRISTMAS” BY SALLY BRITTON  
..... 1

“CHRISTMAS FOREVERMORE” BY SARAH M. EDEN  
..... 81

“CHRISTMAS AT CRANFIELD” BY ASHTYN NEWBOLD  
..... 187

“A THRILL OF HOPE” BY KAREN THORNELL  
..... 283

# **A Family Christmas**

SALLY BRITTON

# Chapter 1

*December 20, 1816*

THE TINKLING OF BELLS WOKE Jane a moment before her bedroom door opened on silent hinges. She opened one eye enough to see between the bed-curtains and spied two little girls hushing one another as they slipped into her room. Each step they took, creeping closer to her, was accompanied by the muffled jingles that had interrupted Jane's dreams.

She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling.

"Ready?" the taller of the two girls asked. That would be Kitty, the more daring of the two cousins who fell under Jane's charge on occasion.

"Yes. But—are you sure she won't be angry?" Nancy whispered back, uncertainty making her voice squeak.

Kitty huffed. "Jane isn't ever cross." There was an impatient jingle, and she gasped. "Not yet. One moment. Let me get to the curtains." The patter of slippers danced away from the bed. "All right. One. Two. Three!"

On three, the light-blue curtains at the window and around Jane's bed flew open, accompanied by the wild sound of a dozen bells meant to adorn horse harnesses. The girls giggled with glee as Jane sat up with an exaggerated gasp.

"Are the horses in the house?" she shouted, pulling the quilts up to her chin. "Quick, alert the stablemaster!"

More laughter, and then both girls launched from their places on the carpet into her bed. They bounced on their knees, and Nancy threw herself directly into Jane's arms. "It's only us, Jane." She held up her arm to show a leather strap with bells wrapped around it.

Kitty grinned and shook her bells too. "We found them on a chair in the corridor. Don't they make the loveliest sound?" She dropped onto her elbows and put her chin in her hands. "Why are you still asleep? It's nine o'clock."



“I was at dinner last evening.” Jane put her arm around Nancy and gave the girl an affectionate squeeze. “The conversation was quite stimulating, and I quite enjoyed the company.”

Nancy lifted her head. “Oh, I know what that means.” She giggled. “You were up very late.”

“Not *very*, but late enough that your grandmama told me not to be seen until noon.” She twitched Nancy’s nose, then wiggled out of the top of her blankets since the girls had her pinned down on either side. They giggled as she pulled her legs beneath her and then stood, taking a stumbling step forward and then jumping off her bed. She landed with a flourish, then turned and curtsied to her employer’s granddaughters while they applauded her.

Perhaps a paid companion ought to have acted with more decorum or reserve, but Jane Allen had ever and always been herself. That, Lady Mardale had assured her, was why she had chosen Jane to fill the position. “You make me feel young again,” she had said. “I couldn’t abide a somber companion. I want your good cheer in my household.”

Jane went toward the window, arms stretched out on either side. The vision that met her eyes took her breath away, and she practically skipped the last two steps to get to the glass. “It snowed,” she whispered. Indeed, it was *still* snowing. Large flakes fell lazily from the sky, blanketing the rolling hills in white.

“I knew you’d be excited,” Kitty said, still on the bed, as Jane turned back to Lady Mardale’s grandchildren. “That’s why we wanted to wake you.”

“Kitty said you’d take us out to play. Nurse Derwent won’t. She says we’ll catch our death.” Nancy’s eyebrows drew sharply together. “How does one catch death?”

“It’s an expression,” Kitty answered, rolling free of the bed. “She thinks we will catch cold.”

“Oh.” Nancy climbed off the mattress. “So will you, Jane?”

Jane looked over her shoulder at the glorious sight of the



snow. “Absolutely. Anyone in the nursery who wants to come with us may, so long as they bundle up to keep warm.”

The girls squealed and ran from the room, taking their sleigh bells with them, jingling all the way down the corridor to the stairs. The nursery occupied half the upmost floor, while the other half comprised rooms for the staff. As companion to the countess, Jane had a modest bedroom on the second floor adjacent to Her Ladyship’s suite of private rooms. This meant she was in the family wing, which was full to bursting at this time of year.

The Christmas season had brought all the earl’s children to his country estate, and with them had come their families and personal servants. *Almost all of them*, Jane reminded herself. Their second son and his wife had passed away years before, and their son and daughter—the Grants—had yet to arrive at Mardale House.

The house, part of a large estate in Wiltshire, boasted over a thousand acres sculpted to perfection by Capability Brown himself. Parts of the home were Elizabethan, but the house had been added to and refined, polished until it shone like a jewel, by centuries of Mardale earls and their countesses.

Even Jane’s humble room, decorated in blue-and-silver French wallpaper, held a distinct charm that never failed to make her happy to wake and behold it.

She dressed quickly in the warmest of her gowns and her fur-lined pelisse, along with woolen stockings and boots—all gifts from her employer to keep her in style as the seasons changed. She pulled on a pair of fleece-lined gloves and hurried out of her room, bonnet and scarf still in hand. She turned from closing her door and stumbled when her boot caught the end of her scarf trailing along the floor.

A yelp escaped her at the same moment a strong hand gripped her arm, deftly swinging her from her forward fall to the side, her other hand flailing until it landed upon a shoulder. Her head came up, her mouth popped open to apologize, and then Jane’s ability to speak vanished.

Deep brown eyes met hers, narrowed with concern from

beneath a furrowed brow and wavy black hair. The man stood half a head taller than she did, with shoulders twice as broad as her own. And he looked as though he'd arrived from a land of summer, tanned and smelling of bergamot and fresh cotton.

He frowned at her, the expression so severe on his handsome face that it startled her back to her senses. "Are you all right?" he asked, his fingers relaxing their hold.

"Yes, quite. Thank you. You saved me from a nasty spill." She stepped backward and looped her long scarf over her arm, catching her breath.

"You ought to be more careful." He lowered his hands to his side, and as he spoke she caught the hint of an accent she couldn't immediately place. "What is it that has you rushing about?"

She tilted her chin up, not bothering to hide her surprise at being addressed with so much disapproval. "Why, the snow, of course."

"The snow?" Yes, that was certainly distaste in his tone.

The familiar sound of bells echoed down the corridor, and Jane turned at the same time as the strange man to see Kitty and Nancy had returned, dressed in coats and boots, leading a line of five other children, all bundled against the elements. They were all laughing and chattering, their voices raised in excitement.

The man beside her grunted. "They're going to wake Lord and Lady Mardale."

She laughed. "Oh, they always wake early. Lady Mardale says it is the curse of old age, having all the time to rest and being unable to help rising with the sun." When she turned her smile in his direction, he met it with a frown.

"Who are you, to speak so freely of their business?" he demanded, looking over her shoulder at her door. "And in the family wing? How many cousins are there?" He muttered the last.

"Cousins?" she repeated, and then the pieces came together. "Oh, you must be—"

“Cousin Cyril!” Kitty shouted. “Look, everyone. It’s Cyril!” She skipped forward, but the other children stayed back, their stares curious and their voices hushed. As the oldest of the nursery-aged children at ten, Kitty was most likely to know her older cousins.

Cyril Grant, the eldest grandson at eight and twenty, had arrived sometime between the hours of midnight and nine o’clock that morning, it would seem. He and his younger sister were the only two members of the countess’s large family that Jane hadn’t met in her two years of employment. They had a residence in St. Kitt’s, an island under British governorship in the Caribbean. Mr. Grant ran his late stepfather’s shipping business from the port, which would certainly explain the tan of his face and hands.

The frown he wore eased away to a tight, controlled expression that appeared equal parts smile and grimace as he lowered himself to receive Kitty’s enthusiastic, jangling embrace. He hugged her back. “Cousin Katherine. Good to see you again.”

She giggled. “No one calls me that, you know.”

“Why not? It’s a perfect name for a little lady.”

“I’m not a lady yet. I’m too busy having a jolly time to be a lady.” She stuck her hand on her hip and grinned at him. “Are you going to play in the snow with us?”

Uncertainty replaced the grimace. “Are all of you going out? But where are your nurses and governesses?”

“Oh, they aren’t any use when it comes to the snow.” Kitty grabbed Jane’s free hand. “That’s why Jane is taking us out. We’re going to build snowmen.”

“An entire village of them,” Jane promised with a squeeze of the child’s mittened hand.

Mr. Grant looked up at her and slowly straightened to his full height. “Jane? But who is Jane?”

“Silly.” Kitty shook her head. “She’s the only fun grown-up, besides Grandmama and Grandpapa.” Then she tugged Jane’s hand, leading her away.

Jane didn't feel the slightest bit of guilt at leaving herself un-introduced to the solemn-faced Cyril. He seemed too high-handed and prone to glower. So she cast one smile over her shoulder at him, quite pleased with Kitty's description of her, then swept up the other children to begin their march down the stairs and out of doors to the gardens.

\*\*\*

Cyril watched the line of children follow the cheerful woman—Jane, apparently—down the stairs, their happy chatter floating along behind them until one of the outer doors shut heavily as they took their merriment outdoors.

He couldn't recall ever meeting the woman in his life. He'd remember seeing blue eyes like that—the exact color of the Caribbean Sea on a hot summer's day. Her hair was an odd shade, somewhere between gold and auburn. And she'd carried herself with grace, which hinted that she came from gentility.

“Who the dickens is Jane?” he muttered to himself. He'd worked hard to memorize the wives of his younger cousins by name, so she hadn't married into the family. Was she some far-flung poor relation come to spend Christmas at Mardale House?

He shrugged away the question and took himself down to breakfast. The entire household, excepting the children and the mysterious Jane, were still abed. They had been up late the previous evening, celebrating the coming holiday, while he and his sister, Elizabeth, had spent the night at an inn an hour's ride away. The roads hadn't been in a fit state for travel during part of their journey from London, and they'd hired a private carriage early that morning to see them to the end of their journey.

A good thing they had too. If the snow continued to fall, it wouldn't be long before the roads were impassible.

He entered the breakfast room as the servants laid out covered trays and toast racks on the long buffet. Pots of chocolate and coffee waited with warming candles beneath them, and soon other men came to join him at the table.

Uncles by blood and marriage both, unmarried female cousins, and a few of the married men near him in age. The earl's eldest son, the viscount and heir, arrived at the table with his own three sons. A dozen men and four misses out in Society lined both sides of the table. Only the earl himself and the married women in the family hadn't arrived to break their nightly fast.

Had Cyril's father lived, as the second of the earl's line of offspring, would he have joined them at the table with the same merriment? Would Cyril have felt less unsure of his own place among them?

Cyril hadn't been near his father's family in three long years. His stepfather had never been keen on them visiting, though Cyril's mother had tried to keep a connection with her first husband's family.

After his mother passed, Cyril had poured himself into working with his stepfather, who'd never had children of his own. Then they had lost him too.

Cyril had put off the sale of his stepfather's Caribbean offices, keeping his sister on that tiny island, trying to stay near what he knew. But he couldn't stay there forever. Not when the family had asked them to return. Not when Elizabeth wanted to find a suitable husband and have children of her own.

Here at last, surrounded by strangers who all claimed a blood relation to him, he wondered why he had come at all. The house, full of people and noise, couldn't have been any less comfortable for him.

"Cyril." His eldest uncle, the viscount, slapped him on the shoulder. "Look at you, lad. Why, you look like a pirate. Doesn't he look like a pirate, Eloise?"

Eloise, his uncle's youngest daughter, buttered a slice of bread and didn't bother looking up. "I am sure Cousin Cyril is quite respectable, Papa. He looks no more a pirate than you do."

"The girl has no imagination," her father said. "Tell us about

the ocean crossing, Cyril. I must hear how it was. I have yet to cross more than our Channel, you know.”

Cyril obliged them for a quarter of an hour, amid interruptions as cousins asked questions and uncles chortled to themselves when they said something amusing. At some point in his storytelling, Elizabeth arrived at the table. The young ladies asked about island fashions and teatime aboard a merchant vessel, hardly giving her a moment to eat her breakfast.

Taking pity on his sister, Cyril went to the sideboard to make her a cup of chocolate with rich butter and cream, as she most liked it, but he paused when he saw movement out the windows. The dining-room windows stretched from floor to ceiling, with long green-velvet curtains held back by gold braided rope. Beneath the windows, the gardens stretched out in every direction, with hills and trees beyond all covered in white, and a gaggle of children dashed between the hedges. They bent to gather things, then ran back to a fountain—the water had frozen over, and several pillars of snow filled the once open courtyard between the fountain and shrubbery. Jane stood among the pillars, none of which were taller than her shoulders.

She accepted whatever the children brought her—stones, perhaps—and put them in the pillars, creating eyes and noses for her village of snowmen. The window muffled the sounds, but the high-pitched voices of the children were full of excitement. And then Jane laughed, and Cyril leaned closer to the glass.

“What has you so transfixed? It hasn’t been that long since you’ve seen snow, surely,” his cousin William, the heir of the heir, said. “The children are all out early.” William shook his head. “My boy isn’t out there, is he?”

After a quick mental check of the family tree he’d painstakingly memorized, Cyril answered, “Your boy is only three. I doubt his nursemaid would let him near the snow without your leave.”

William chuckled. “Too right. His mother would have a fit if

she wasn't there when he trundled out in his pantaloons and mittens. She enjoys cooing over him, as though he were the first baby in the world to lisp a nursery rhyme. Wait until your turn, Cyril. You'll see what I mean."

Cyril had no present intentions of taking a turn at parenting, so he changed the subject and nodded out the window. "Who is that woman? Jane is the only name I have heard. Kitty seems to know her, but I can't recall ever meeting her."

"Oh, that's only Jane Allen." William stepped away from the window to pile food on his plate. "Have you had any of the cherried ham? It's as good today as it was last night."

Not to be distracted from his inquiry, Cyril presented his question again. "What has Jane Allen to do with us? Is she a cousin? Someone's betrothed?" He glanced at the two unmarried men at the table, neither of them above three and twenty. Too young to wed, in his opinion. They were barely more than boys still.

"She's no relation of ours," William said, but then Elizabeth arrived to take the cup from Cyril and see about her own hot chocolate.

"Who is no relation?" she asked, holding the cup in both hands. "I confess I have not my brother's ability with names. Is there an interloper in the house?" Elizabeth had the misfortune of being nearly as tall as Cyril, which he feared would cause gentlemen to lose interest in her. But her dark hair and eyes would easily draw the right man to her side. He hoped.

"Jane Allen," William said, as if repeating the name he'd already given was any sort of answer.

"Oh, I adore Jane," Cousin Louisa said, turning in her seat at the table. "Why is she not joining us for breakfast? Grandmama cannot have need of her this early."

"Why does Grandmama need Jane Allen?" Cyril asked, impatience simmering beneath the words. He'd studied all the letters from his father's family on the sea crossing, along with his mother's diary, in which she had copied down marriage



and birth dates as she learned them, and he'd never once seen a Jane Allen mentioned anywhere.

That his information was lacking sent a jolt of anxiety through him he didn't care for.

William chuckled and nudged Cyril with his elbow. "Come now, Serious Cyril. No need to turn brusque."

The childhood nickname made Cyril's neck itch. He kept his lips pressed shut and returned to the table. He hadn't been around his father's family much, but he remembered that unfortunate moniker all too well. If inquiring into the identity of Jane Allen meant being mocked by his relatives, he would leave off the subject entirely.

Elizabeth came to his rescue as she retook her chair. "It seems your adored Miss Allen—she is a miss, I take it?—is outside in the snow, playing with the children. Is she a nursemaid?"

"Not at all. Jane—she isn't married, of course—she's Grandmama's companion." His cousin Miss Georgiana Grant answered with a wave of her hand.

Another question formed in Cyril's mind, but he gave a pointed look to Elizabeth, who understood well enough to ask it for him. "I didn't know Grandmama needed a companion. Miss Allen seems so young. Why wouldn't Grandmama find someone nearer her age?"

"You know how our grandparents are," William said, plunking his full plate on the table a second time and ostensibly forgetting that Cyril and his sister did *not* know their grandparents well. "I think they find her amusing. They've collected her more so than employed her."

"Fascinating. I cannot wait to make her acquaintance." Elizabeth put her cup to her lips and sipped delicately, raising her eyebrows at her brother. But Cyril had no further questions, so he gave her a nod of thanks and eased himself into a conversation between two of his uncles.

A paid companion. Knowing that, he needn't waste another moment thinking about Jane Allen. Or the way she'd laughed

as she led the children, as though pleased to be one of them for an adventure out in the snow. Not something many women of his acquaintance would endure, much less enjoy. Yes, he could put her completely from his mind and satisfy himself that he'd done well in his study of the family after all.

Except his gaze wandered to the window again, noting the soft fall of snow. And he wondered, how had someone so young and cheerful beguiled his grandmother into hiring her?

## Chapter 2

JANE HAD TO MAKE MORE promises surrounding snow and sweets to get the children back inside the house than she could possibly fulfill before Christmas. But she safely returned all the children to the nursery with their fingers still intact, even if their noses were pink from the cold. To avoid the censure of the nurses, she even stayed to help undress the children from their layers of wool and hang all the mittens she could find on little hooks before the nursery hearth. She even sent an order for warm milk and biscuits down to the kitchen before making her escape.

All her winter things slung over her arm, wet and dripping with melted snow, made walking with grace a somewhat difficult endeavor. No sooner had she deposited her things on a drying rack before the hearth in her bedchamber than a knock sounded at her door. One of the maids entered when invited.

“Miss Allen, Her Ladyship wishes to see you at your convenience. She’s in her sitting room.”

“Thank you, Anne. I’ll be right along.” Jane went to the mirror to smooth her hair while the maid took her leave, then hurried to find her mistress. Lady Mardale, nearing seventy years of age, had a kind and patient disposition. And while she might still speak of her wish for the powdered wigs and petticoats of her youth, she had an eye for the future.

Yet another reason, she claimed, to have taken Jane into her home. “Young minds breed young thoughts, my dear. Even in old people like me.”

Jane entered the countess’s sitting room to find Lady Mardale dressed in a deep-green gown with long sleeves and a bright-red shawl, her gray curls uncovered. She spotted Jane and waved her in. “There you are, Jane. Come, come. Tell me about your adventures this morning.”

“Has news of my exploits already reached you?” Jane asked, coming fully into the room. She bent to say hello to the

massive French spaniel her mistress kept. She'd never seen such an animal before, but paintings in the country house assured her they had been loved by the family for generations. An intelligent breed, the dog was white with tightly curled fur and a long, elegant face. "Was it you who betrayed me, Cupid?"

"Tush. Cupid would take all your secrets, and mine, to the grave." The countess chuckled. "I looked out and saw you with a parade behind you. My grandchildren certainly know how to choose their playmates. It seemed you enjoyed yourself too."

"Tremendously." Jane sat on the footstool near the countess. "I am not certain what I liked most: the beauty of the snow or the knowledge that there was a warm fire waiting for me inside."

The countess's smile softened. They rarely spoke of what Jane's life had been like before Lady Mardale had rescued her from loneliness. Sometimes Jane could pretend she had always been a part of the lively and bright household. This was one of those times the countess knew there was much Jane could say about the "Before." But after a moment's pause, giving Jane the opportunity to speak or remain silent, the countess turned the conversation to their usual business.

Every day, they went over the countess's schedule. They discussed social visits made and returned, meals and menus, shops and seamstresses, and correspondence. Jane wrote most of the countess's letters for her and updated the small diary Lady Mardale always kept at hand. Then they read or began the day according to the dictates of Lady Mardale's whims.

Today they spoke exclusively of the preparations for Christmas Eve and the twelve days of celebrations following. Having spent two Christmases with the family already, Jane had as much enthusiasm in the planned activities as any of the grandchildren did. There were parties for the family, parties with guests, greenery hunting, a ball, gifts, carols, ghost stories, and delicious foods. There were visits and sleigh rides and beautiful church services. So despite the cold and the long, dark nights, Jane looked forward to the celebrations with her

whole heart.

“There is one thing I am concerned about,” the countess said, tapping her elegant fingers on the arm of her chair. “Indeed, I am quite distracted by something, and I am not certain what to do about it.” She sighed deeply and fully captured Jane’s attention. The countess almost *never* worried. And she went forward in life with more focus than Jane had the capacity to uphold herself. For the countess to admit to distraction *and* concern?

“What is it, my lady? How may I help you?” Jane leaned closer. “If there is anything at all I can do, you must tell me. I am your companion, and that means it is my duty to take burdensome things out of your hands and into my own.”

Lady Mardale placed her hand over her heart. “Oh, I could not possibly bother you with this, my dear. Not when it’s something so personal.” She turned her head away, and Jane’s alarm mounted. It was *Christmas*. The countess’s family filled the house to bursting, all of them the people she loved most in the world. Nothing ought to weigh on her mind. Not when she was good and kind and did so much to help others.

“Please, my lady. You can entrust any of your worries to me. I promise I will say nothing of them to another soul, and I will do everything within my ability to set right anything that has gone awry. Please?” She tipped her chin upward, not disguising her determination. “After everything you have done for me, you ought not to deny my help.”

Her Ladyship’s shoulders fell, and she reached forward, taking Jane’s hands in hers. “You are too good, my dear, and kind.” The sparkle had returned to the woman’s eyes. “Very well. You are right. I can think of no one better suited to this situation than you. Mainly because there is no one who knows, quite as you do, what it is to feel lost.”

At this, Jane’s heart twisted. “You are worried for someone else who feels that way.” She knew Her Ladyship well enough to realize that immediately. Of course Lady Mardale wasn’t concerned for herself but for another.

A nod of affirmation confirmed Jane’s words. “I am

concerned for my grandson Cyril.”

The gentleman with the dark hair and eyes and the disapproval of Jane that had appeared after mere seconds of their meeting. Her Ladyship was worried about *him*?

“Poor Cyril and his sister were never permitted much time with our family,” Her Ladyship went on, oblivious to Jane’s sudden stillness. “I have already had my spies tell me that Elizabeth is doing quite well among the family. From the few times I saw her in childhood, she had such a lively spirit. It is good to know that hasn’t changed. But Cyril . . . well, he’s always been somber and quiet. I cannot think why. His father, my darling son, had so much life to him.”

Her eyes took on a different quality, as though she were staring into the past. “When my son passed away, I begged Cyril’s mother to stay with us. She did for a time, but she was young and beautiful. When the opportunity to marry came again, she took it, and I was happy for her because she always seemed content with her choice. But I think her new husband was a jealous man, of sorts. He wasn’t nobility, and I think it mattered to him that her first husband was the son of an earl.” She shrugged her elegant shoulders. “I do not know for certain. All I know is that I saw less and less of Cyril and Elizabeth, and Cyril never seemed as comfortable among our family as I wished.”

The dog rose, as though sensing his mistress’s distress. He came to sit by her side and laid his long snout on her knee. Then he turned his sorrowful stare to Jane, perhaps meaning for the only other human in the room to *do something*.

“I can see why you would worry after him, my lady. But . . .” Jane hesitated. How could she alleviate Lady Mardale’s concern? “He is a grown man now. It is up to him to decide how he feels about the family and whether he will attempt to know all of you. It isn’t something you can control. Though, I imagine if you had a talk with him—”

“Oh, I cannot possibly do that.” Lady Mardale stroked Cupid’s head. “He has always had a stubborn streak, that boy. If I address the problem head-on, I think it would hurt him.

No. It is best to come at something of this nature . . . sideways. What is the military term? Heading him off, so to speak.”

Though that didn't strike Jane as sensible, she didn't say so. She was too devoted to Lady Mardale to argue with her. “What can we do?” she asked. “We cannot force him to feel comfortable or to enjoy himself.”

“No, neither of us is capable of such a thing.” Lady Mardale settled back in her chair, and then she smiled. A smile Jane had seen the very day Lady Mardale had arrived at Mrs. Harper's School for Girls to take Jane away. Lady Mardale had a loving heart, and she brought as many into the fold of her family as she could. “But someone with your nature and bright spirit might *coax* him into enjoying the merriment of the season and perhaps help him come to know his family, without the added pressure of being part of that family.”

The last statement didn't sting. Jane knew perfectly well she'd been treated like a family member since the moment she'd accepted the position of lady's companion. But someone like Mr. Cyril Grant wouldn't see her as part of the large gaggle of the earl and countess's descendants. That might make things less awkward for him.

There was some logic to Her Ladyship's suggestion. A sliver of reason. And that made Jane give in. Besides, she had made quite the case for taking on the project before she had known what it would entail. “What would you like me to do, Your Ladyship?”

The wrinkles around Her Ladyship's eyes deepened, and she answered with her customary gentleness. “You are good to ask, Jane. I do have an idea, you see.”

\*\*\*

People everywhere. Absolutely everywhere. In every room Cyril ventured into, he found others already occupying chairs, tables, and hearths, laughing with one another. In a house the size of the earl's, it seemed impossible that not a single nook would be left to hide within.

Not that Cyril needed to hide. But finding a moment to



himself had been easier aboard the ship that had brought him to England, and that had been a small vessel full of sailors and crates of goods. He had uncles in the library, aunts in the sitting rooms, and children clattering up and down the corridors with their toy horses and dolls. And everywhere he went, someone wanted to ask him a thousand questions about his life in the Caribbean.

His head ached, and he seriously considered withdrawing to his bedchamber until dinner. Except such a thing would be exceptionally rude, and a person did not show such a lack of manners as guest to an earl and countess. Even if that person was their grandson.

At least Elizabeth seemed to be enjoying herself. She had found common interests in gardening with one of their aunts, she shared musical talent with several cousins, and she could speak on the subject of art with their grandmother.

Cyril drifted out of the parlor, where his sister and grandmother chatted, the moment they weren't looking. He walked along the edges of the corridor, making his way to the staircase. Then he realized the steps themselves were currently occupied.

Jane Allen, his grandmother's companion, who didn't seem to actually keep as strictly by Grandmother's side as she ought, sat midway up the steps next to one of the younger boys. It took Cyril a moment to recall the child's name—introductions to the children had been given quickly by a nursery maid early that morning, and Kitty had been the only child who hadn't looked at him with suspicion.

Edgar Grant, the eldest child of one of Cyril's first cousins, was the boy's name. He had the same black hair and brown eyes Cyril had inherited from the earl. And those eyes, Cyril realized as he approached, were red-rimmed and watering.

"It isn't fair," the boy said in a tone most adults wouldn't tolerate from a child. "Everyone else can hold them, but as soon as I do, I start sneezing and crying like an infant."

Miss Allen had her arm around the child's shoulders. She looked up as Cyril approached, and her expression changed so

quickly that he couldn't be certain, but he thought he had seen something like relief upon her face. That couldn't be. Why would the sight of him give her any comfort? Then she smiled. "Mr. Grant."

The boy's head jerked up, his mouth popped open, and then his shoulders fell. "Oh. I thought you meant Papa."

Cyril raised his eyebrows. "That would be confusing. I suppose that's why we're all going about as Cousin This and Uncle That." He hesitated at the foot of the staircase. Now that he'd been addressed, he couldn't simply walk by and ignore them. That wouldn't be polite in the least. "What seems to be the trouble, Cousin Edgar?"

The boy sniffled. "Everyone is in the kitchen with a box of kittens, having a jolly good time, and I'm being sent to wash my face and hands when they aren't even dirty."

Miss Allen gave Cyril another sort of look, communicating that she sympathized with the boy but didn't know quite what to do for him. "Edgar has an aversion to kittens, it would seem. And a strong one. He'd barely touched the little orange tom when he started sneezing."

"Ah." He understood the logic. Usually, people with an aversion to animals reacted only while touching said animal, but he knew someone who sneezed horribly every time they entered any stables, and he himself was prone to fits of sneezing when he encountered lilies—which rarely happened in St. Kitts. "Washing up might solve part of the problem." Though, it wasn't likely to cheer the boy.

He stood there, rocking back on his heels with uncertainty, wishing he had gone around the two of them with no more than a nod of acknowledgment. He had no experience with helping a boy who was upset over kittens.

When he offered no further ideas, Miss Allen's lips turned upward. Then she gave her full attention to the child again.

"Does Cupid make you sneeze?" Miss Allen asked, and the boy's eyes turned round. "Perhaps you could pay him a visit so he doesn't grow jealous of the attention the kittens receive."

“He doesn’t make me sneeze. Cupid likes me too.” Edgar stood. “I’ll wash up and then play with Cupid. Thank you, Jane. You have the best ideas.”

And Cyril had an uncomfortable feeling he ought to know who or what Cupid was. He’d heard the name before, but surely it didn’t belong to a relative. He watched the boy charge off, then looked down at where Jane Allen still sat on the steps. She offered him an amused smile that tilted up higher on one side.

“Edgar is a dear boy. Sometimes he’s a bit sensitive, but I’ve never found it difficult to perk him up after a disappointment.” She remained where she was, not quite at eye level with him, hands folded in her lap and posture as correct as it would be in a parlor. Somehow, she made sitting on the stairs look quite natural.

“Does it often fall to you, Miss Allen, to cheer up the children in the house?” It seemed a strange way for a companion to spend her time.

That question made her smile grow into a grin. “It isn’t one of my particular duties, though I try to help where I am able.” Then she held her hand out to him, and Cyril took it without a thought. Once her slim hand with its delicate fingers was in his grip, he froze. What was happening? Why were they touching? Neither of them wore gloves. And her hand was so soft. Why had she entrusted it to him?

Then she made to stand, and he realized his mind had completely turned over without reason. He added some leverage to help her rise to her feet, and that put her several steps above him, making her taller than he was, looking down at him with her Caribbean-blue eyes.

“What about you, Mr. Grant?”

He blinked up at her. “I beg your pardon? What about me?”

Her lips pressed together as though to hide the widening of her smile. Did she find him amusing or merely think him a lackwit? She certainly hadn’t been impressed with him that morning before she took the children out into the snow. “Do

you help where you are able?”

Cyril gave a tight nod. “I try. I think it is only right that a gentleman, that any good soul, offer of themselves when they see another in need.”

The teasing tilt of her mouth returned. “That is lovely to know. I wonder if you might help me with something, then?”

“I am at your service.” He probably should have hesitated or asked what she needed of him before offering such ready agreement. But somehow, the sparkle in her eyes, accompanied by her merriment, made him speak without thinking. Just who was this woman who charmed children, grandmothers, and gentlemen alike with no more than a few words?

“First, I will need you to return my hand.”

Heat raced up the back of his neck and into his ears. He released her fingers at once, shocked at himself. How long had they stood there holding hands, where anyone might see? Where anyone might notice and form inappropriate ideas? Miss Allen, under his grandmother’s protection, was still in a vulnerable position as a paid companion. He gulped and stepped back. “I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t realize—”

“Please, you needn’t apologize.” She tucked her now free hand behind her. “As for that service you promised, it’s quite simple. Your grandmother asked me to find a box for her, full of little things she intends to give the children. I found the box, but I cannot reach it. I was about to go in search of one of your cousins, but as we are both here, I thought you might not mind helping.”

The simplicity of her request left him oddly disappointed. She needed someone taller than her, and nearly anyone in his family would have done. Why had he hoped her request was specific to him? He cleared his throat and bowed. “As I said, I am at your service. Lead the way.”

She turned on the steps and went upward, and he followed. She spoke as she led him through the house. “She collects trinkets all year, you know. Anything that is small and fanciful

or odd she tucks away for Christmas. Did you ever win one of her prizes?”

“I cannot recall doing so.” Most of his childhood memories had little to do with Christmas. He’d visited his grandparents in the summer, usually. His stepfather had liked to be in London before the start of the Season to ensure his storehouses were full and shipping everything to the merchants of the largest city in England. Cyril had spent only his earliest Christmases at Mardale House, which made things for him all the more difficult. Everyone in the house at present had spent years and years performing the same games and traditions, while he felt like he had entered a foreign land. “What do the children do to win these trinkets?”

“All sorts of little things. They play games, like hunt the slipper, hide-and-seek, or have races in the corridors. Last year, everyone took off their shoes and attempted to slide in their stockings across the ballroom floor for the longest distance. They brought all the cards in the house together and made towers with them. Any silly thing we can think of to make everyone laugh will do.”

He couldn’t imagine what that would be like, spending hours of time on amusements. He’d worked with his stepfather for as long as he could remember, when he wasn’t at school. Then the years in the Caribbean had been too full of toil and long days in the sun for there to leave energy for socializing. “Is it always like this?” he muttered.

Miss Allen heard him. “Oh no, of course not. Everyone will go their separate ways after Twelfth Night. To school, university, London, or their homes in other parts of the country. I think your grandmother makes up for the quiet times and empty house with Christmas and summer parties.”

His stepfather had often scoffed at “soft toffs” and their frivolity. What would he say if he knew Cyril and Elizabeth were now among them? He hadn’t been an especially affectionate man, but he had raised them as though they were his own. And Cyril had done what he could to prove he wasn’t soft or above work, the way he imagined lords to be.

Miss Allen stopped before a wall, took hold of a small dip in a bit of wood trim, and tugged. The wall opened to reveal a closet. “There it is.” She pointed upward, as though it were perfectly normal to turn a bit of normal-looking wall into a door. For her, it must be. “That box with all the flowers pasted on it.”

The box sat on a shelf at the top of the tall closet. One even Cyril couldn’t reach without aid. He looked down and spotted a stool slid beneath the lowermost shelf. “If she adds to this box year round,” he said as he tugged the stool out, “why is it so inaccessible?”

“We hide it before the children come.” She folded her arms and leaned against the edge of the door. “A few of them have been here for days, you know, poking about and looking for hidden treasures.”

That made sense. He stepped onto the stool and reached upward, the fitted sleeves of his coat making the movement somewhat difficult. Gentlemen weren’t expected to reach overhead often, he supposed. The cloth protested, but he caught hold of the wooden box’s edges and tugged it forward with a grunt. “It’s heavier than it looks.” He slid it out inch by inch and then had it directly overhead. The position of the shelves and narrowness of the closet meant he couldn’t lower the box before stepping down, so he tried to step backward off the stool instead—and the stool tipped.

For one awful moment, he knew he would land on his tailbone and scatter the box with its contents all over the floor.

“Look out!” Miss Allen shouted, and he felt her hands connect with his back, pushing him upright. He wobbled, the perilous feeling still in his gut, but steadied. And then both of them stood there, not breathing, until she whispered, “That was unexpected.”

He looked at her through the crook of his elbow. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, quite well.” Then she grinned at him. “It seems I’ve paid my debt to you, when you kept me from falling this morning.”

He shifted, and she released him. Then he half turned on the stool and handed the box down to her, as he should have done before attempting his awkward dismount. She took the box, her arms dropping beneath its weight, and moved away. When his feet were finally upon the floor and the closet door shut, he tugged at the sleeves of his coat to ensure they fit properly once more.

“I would wager you didn’t think fetching a box would lead to such an adventure,” Miss Allen said, the sparkle in her eyes causing a strange tug at his heart.

He made a quip without thinking. “I can only imagine the danger associated with your other chores, Miss Allen. It seems a companionship to my grandmother isn’t without its risks.” The way her eyes lit up when she giggled at that made the ridiculous comment worth it. He held his hands out. “I will take the box, if you will lead the way to the countess.”

“A perfect arrangement.” She released it to his care and led him through the house again, and Cyril followed as dutifully as any porter.

The extent of her knowledge about the family impressed him. Perhaps, if he was clever, he could make an ally of her. With her cheery disposition and friendliness, she wouldn’t mind helping him navigate his family. It rankled to need an outsider’s help for anything, but how else would he ensure the family’s help in securing a suitable match for his sister? He didn’t know anything about presenting a young lady into Society. His sister’s happiness was the most important reason he’d left behind the life he knew best. If his grandmother, an aunt, even a married cousin, took an interest in Elizabeth, Cyril would have a far easier time of things.



# Chapter 3

THOUGH CYRIL EXPECTED TO DELIVER the box and then make another escape, his grandmother quickly disabused him of that notion. Instead she invited him to sit with her, Elizabeth, and Miss Allen to go through the full box of trinkets, knickknacks, and curiosities she had accumulated.

“We must decide which prizes are best for which children,” she said, “or which games.”

Cyril couldn't imagine being of much use, given how little he knew of anyone in the household. Yet there he sat, next to his sister, while Miss Allen took out item after item for them to discuss. Elizabeth was tasked with making notes so they would not forget what they'd decided.

“A wood carving of a dog,” Miss Allen said as she showed them the latest in the long list of trinkets.

“That one looks like Cupid in miniature,” Elizabeth cooed, holding her hand out to accept the little wooden French dog.

That explained who Cupid was. His grandmother's French dog with the mop of curly fur. The dog reminded him of a water spaniel. Cupid must be off playing with Edgar still, as the large creature wasn't anywhere to be seen at that moment. Even that limited knowledge gave him leave to suggest, “If Edgar wins a prize, perhaps he would appreciate the carving.”

“An excellent idea, Cyril.” The countess beamed at him as though he'd said something brilliant. “What do we have next, Jane?”

Her companion drew out something wrapped in cloth. She carefully unwound it and revealed a magnifying glass, crafted with a metal handle that resembled a feather. She turned it over in her hands, and Cyril stared at the piece in some confusion.

He'd seen it, or something like it, before. Handled it with awe, in fact. He nearly asked to hold it, breaking his silence

for the second time since Miss Allen had opened the box. But he pressed his lips together. It couldn't be the same magnifying glass he'd once played with as a child. Could it?

His mind stretched backward into memory, recalling a time when he'd crouched beneath his grandfather's desk. The earl had known he was there. It was mere months after Cyril's father's passing, which meant Cyril couldn't have been more than five years old. He'd simply sat there, in the quiet beneath the desk, while his grandfather worked above him, until the earl's hand had appeared, holding a magnifying glass out to Cyril. He hadn't said a word, but Cyril had accepted the glass and used it to study the lines in his hands and the whorls of his finger pads, and finally he'd left the confines of the desk to see what else appeared different through the magical lens.

"It's a lovely piece." Miss Allen's voice brought him back to the present as she studied it. "I cannot think of anyone who might especially enjoy it. Have you a thought for this one, Miss Grant?"

"Please, call me Elizabeth." His sister didn't take the tool, though she tapped her pencil against the paper in her hand thoughtfully. "There are too many Miss Grants in this house, and I would very much like to call you Jane, if you'll allow it."

His sister had never acted so casually about her name before, but Cyril supposed it couldn't be helped. There were a large number of Grants in the home since it was the family's legal surname.

"What do you think, Cyril?" his grandmother asked, and he turned to see her studying him.

"I think it acceptable for Miss Allen to use Elizabeth's name, given the circumstances." Only after he gave the answer and his grandmother stared back at him with a raised eyebrow did he realize he'd answered the wrong question. "Oh, you mean the glass." His neck warmed beneath his collar and cravat, and he hoped his ears hadn't turned red.

Why did being near his family make him act like such a fool? He swallowed, pushing away his uncalled-for embarrassment. "Perhaps there is a game it would be an

appropriate prize for.” Then he stood. “My apologies, ladies, but I must excuse myself. There is something I need to see to.” And he left as quickly as he could.

At every turn, he made a fool of himself in this house, with these people. He didn’t belong here. He belonged in an office somewhere, or on a dock, overseeing the unloading of ships and the restocking of supplies. He hadn’t the first idea how to sit about and dream up games for the amusement of children. And he still had weeks left of pretending he was part of this noble family.

He stepped into the corridor that led to the family wing, where he’d been given a room, when he heard the harried call of Miss Allen from behind him.

“Mr. Grant? Do stop a moment.”

He slowed and turned around to see her hurrying after him, her stride as long as she could make it in her gown. Had his grandmother sent the companion after him? How long had she been following him? His heart dropped with shame.

When Miss Allen caught up to him, she took a moment to catch her breath before speaking. He maintained his silence until she managed her question. “Are you all right?”

He blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“You seemed distressed when you left.”

“Did Lady Mardale send you after me?”

“No.”

“Did my sister?”

“No. Neither of them said a word about your departure. They are still cataloging the boxed items.” She placed a hand to her chest. “I came of my own accord because you looked—I suppose I should say *unsettled*, though that isn’t the word for it. I hope we did nothing to offend you or cause hurt. Your grandmother would never forgive herself if—”

“No one did anything wrong.” He studied her, confused. His sister hadn’t come after him. His grandmother hadn’t sent her companion. Perhaps he’d done a better job of masking his

discomfort than he'd thought. But not good enough for Miss Allen. "You are an interesting woman, Miss Allen."

"Please, call me Jane. Everyone does." Her smile flitted briefly across her face. "Are you certain you are well?"

"Well enough. Thank you for your concern." He gave her a small bow. "You may return to my grandmother. I intend to rest until dinner." It wasn't a complete lie. He needed time alone, away from the noise and half-remembered feelings of belonging and loss.

She nodded. "If you are certain. I will see you later this evening." She curtsied, then walked away.

Before she'd gone more than a few steps, Cyril found he didn't wish her to leave, even though he'd been the one to dismiss her when all she'd done was show kindness in following after him. "Miss—Jane?"

She stopped and turned around again. "Yes, Mr. Grant?"

"You may as well call me Cyril." He tried to smile. "There are too many Mr. Grants. And everyone else in this house does."

The corners of her eyes crinkled. "Very well. I will see you this evening, Cyril." Then she continued on her way, leaving him to stare after her. The woman had to be a fairy, placing the whole of the house under her spell. He'd certainly started to fall under it. That could be the only explanation for the feeling he'd had when she'd spoken his name—a name he'd nearly always hated. Somehow, it sounded different when it came from her lips.

He needed to take himself straight to bed, if those were the sorts of foolish thoughts that came when he didn't get enough sleep.

\*\*\*

Later that evening, after dinner, all the adults in the family gathered in the large blue parlor. Jane took her customary place in a chair slightly behind the countess and earl's favored couch. She sat with a book in hand, though she was quite ready to join conversations or serve the countess as needed.

Good cheer and merriment filled the room to its brim. The earl's two sons played a game of chess in the corner, and several of the women clustered around the pianoforte to plunk out favorite tunes.

Jane watched it all with fondness, her eyes taking in each corner of the room. Elizabeth Grant seemed content to laugh with her cousins, fitting into their company quite naturally. But where had her elder brother run off to?

A chorus of laughter burst from a corner of the room where several men in the family attempted to create a house of cards. They had decided to practice their skills on the chance that their hosts repeated the competition from the year before, their forms bent close to the table where they took turns balancing cards on their edges. Cyril Grant's dark head of hair wasn't among them though.

She looked on the opposite side of the room, from the men to the windows. The curtains were drawn across the glass to minimize the effect of cold air seeping through the glass and into the room. One pair of curtains, however, had a masculine shoulder peeking out from behind it.

Aha. There he was.

Jane rose and drifted across the room at an unhurried pace to avoid drawing attention to her movement. Then she stood beside the narrow opening in the curtains, placing her back to them while facing inward, her gaze sweeping over the party.

"We do not play hide-and-seek until Christmas Eve, Cyril." She hadn't spoken very loudly, and she lowered her chin enough that anyone watching probably wouldn't realize she'd spoken at all.

A sigh emerged from behind the curtain. "It sounds as though I need more practice at that particular game since you found me so easily." His deep voice emerging from the shadows sent a tiny shiver through her, though she immediately blamed it on the cool air sneaking through the windowpane.

"I will happily show you the best places tomorrow if you

leave that spot tonight.”

A silence followed that made Jane rethink her words. Then blush. She hadn't meant the suggestion as flirtatious, but perhaps it sounded that way to Cyril.

But his next words were curious rather than offended or, thank goodness, interested in returning a flirtation. “Why would you offer such a thing, even in jest? I am nothing to you, Miss Allen.”

She considered her answer carefully, then turned and stepped behind the curtain beside his. There the two of them stood, facing the darkness outside the window. The faint light from the house made patches of the snow below them glow. “You are a part of this family, Cyril Grant. It just so happens that I rather like the people in that room behind us. They have been kind to me, though I am little more than a servant. Your grandmother gave me a happy and secure home. Given your extensive knowledge of the world, I will assume you know what the alternative to such an existence for a woman might be.”

She saw the shadows shift as he turned his head toward her, but he didn't speak.

“I care very much about your grandmother, and I know she is eager for you to enjoy your time with the family. I would do anything for her, and that means I will help in whatever way I can to help you.” She smiled to herself. “Of course, no one can force an attachment, even between family members. If you wish to make an effort, I promise I will do all I can to see that you come to know your family better.”

It was as direct as she had ever been with a man. With anyone, really. He still said nothing, so she peeked at him from the corner of her eye. At last he sighed. “You seem well intentioned, Miss Allen—”

“Jane.”

“—but my family members are strangers to me.”

“What better time to alter that than now? Christmas is a time of hope, is it not? We come together, in the first days of winter,

to renew our hopes and dreams and celebrate the joy of life.” She put her hand on the curtain. He had things to think on now. “We are to take the sleighs out tomorrow to look for greenery and festoon every rail and archway in the house. Volunteer to drive a sleigh, and I promise you will enjoy the experience.” She slipped back into the light and returned to her chair.

The countess glanced over her shoulder at Jane and raised her eyebrows. Jane smiled in return.

“Are you warm enough, dear? Should you move nearer the fire?” the countess asked.

Jane shook her head. “I am quite content as I am, my lady.” And doing everything in her power to help Cyril feel the same. What a shame he didn’t feel part of all the joy and laughter in the room. But how was she to help him if he didn’t wish to help himself?

The sleigh rides tomorrow were her best idea at present. If she convinced him to get away from the house and his hiding spots, out in the open air with the other grown grandchildren, he couldn’t help but speak to them. Their merriment during the greenery gathering the year before had made Jane laugh until her sides ached.

Even someone as somber as Cyril Grant wouldn’t be able to frown through a morning like that one. Had she seen him smile at all, even once, since their first awkward meeting in the corridor?

Not really. Which was such a shame. A man as handsome as he, with a sister who laughed easily, and surrounded by loving family, ought to have reason to smile.

Cyril came out from behind the curtain several minutes after she had and made his way to the table where his uncles played chess. He took a chair and watched their game but didn’t speak much.

She resisted releasing her sigh of disappointment. At least that was *some* progress.

Tomorrow she hoped for a great deal more.



# Chapter 4

THE EARL OF MARDALE OWNED three sleighs, and his grown grandchildren filled them easily. At breakfast, Jane listened as the men discussed who would drive the sleighs that year. She watched Cyril from behind the rim of her teacup. He had kept his head down throughout the informal meal, poking at a pile of eggs on his plate. She couldn't tell whether he even listened to the conversation.

Lord Mardale had three sleigh bells in hand, each with a ribbon tied around it to make a large loop. "One for each driver to keep as his own. Some of you are amassing quite the collection." They laughed at that because the men rarely kept the bells. They were given to children, sometimes to wives, or tied to Cupid's collar so the dog jingled through the corridors while the children gave chase, a favorite game for both the pet and the nursery's occupants.

William Grant volunteered, as he always did. "I would be happy to lead the expedition, Grandfather." The earl tossed him a bell, which William immediately asked his wife to tie around his wrist.

Then the eldest son of the earl's eldest daughter said he would drive another, so long as his pretty wife sat beside him. He caught his bell and tied the long ribbon with gentleness around his wife's throat, as though he adorned her with jewels rather than a rattly bit of metal.

"I would like to try my hand at it."

The table hushed as everyone turned to look with surprise at their cousin Cyril, and Jane held her breath. He sat the farthest from the earl's end of the table, and he didn't make eye contact with her as he stared at his grandfather. He had turned rather pale.

"Excellent." Lord Mardale's chest puffed out, and he nodded with enthusiastic approval. "Excellent, my boy. Yes, you should. And here's your bell, Cyril." The earl tossed it in a

great arc along the table, and poor Cyril's eyes went wide and as round as the moon as he leaped to his feet to make the catch. For an instant, Jane feared he'd miss and his cousins would tease him, but Cyril caught the bell in one raised hand, and the red ribbon dangled between his fingers.

His cousins cheered, and a few of them clapped.

"Perfect catch, Cyril."

"He'd be a dab-hand at cricket."

"Can't play cricket in the snow. Are you daft?"

"Good throw, Grandfather."

Jane lowered her eyes to her plate with a smile. The murmurs of approval and excitement continued, and someone suggested they hurry along and dress for the weather. A dozen of them meant to make the journey, several married couples in the group. Elizabeth secured a seat with her brother, and their cousins argued over who else would join them, as though it were a treat. Cyril would have a lively sleigh.

Rising from her seat, Jane followed the crowd from the room, when Cyril appeared at her side. "Are you coming on the excursion too?" he asked, voice low and unheard by anyone but her.

"If there is room in a sleigh for me." She looked him up and down, but no ribbon or flash of silver peeked from his cuffs or at his throat. "What did you do with your bell?"

"It is in my pocket."

"You had better give it to your sister if you don't wish to wear it."

"Why?"

"It's tradition." She shrugged and paused at the foot of the steps, watching as the others hurried upward to their rooms. "Someone in your sleigh wears the bell. At least, while we're out. I haven't any idea why, but it's what the family does. Perhaps it's for luck."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the bell. "Ah. Do

you want it?"

She drew back a step. "Me?" No one had offered her a bell before. "I'm not certain it's done. I'm not family."

"You told me to drive a sleigh," he reminded her, sounding somewhat gruff. "And all of this means something to you, more than it does to me or even Elizabeth. Please, take the bell and ride in our sleigh. Then the tradition is intact."

"Your cousin gave his bell to his wife," she reminded him. "It may mean something to your family that it doesn't mean to you."

His glower darkened, but she noted his ears turned red too. Oh dear. Had she offended him? Before she could apologize, however, he gave a tight nod. "I hadn't considered that." He looked up the stairs, the set of his shoulders tense. "But you will ride in the sleigh with us?"

The poor grumpy fellow sounded rather nervous. Or shy. Things she hadn't known a man from the earl's family could be. Perhaps, once he overcame such feelings, he'd find the time spent with his family more comfortable. "If you wish, of course I will."

He nodded, as stiff as if he were frozen, and gestured to the stairs. "Then you had better hurry and dress for the weather, or you will delay the whole party." Had he almost smiled? He had attempted to tease her, she realized with some delight.

Her mouth popped open in surprise. "You are the one detaining me from that very thing, sir."

His lips pressed together, and she caught the barest glimmer of humor in his dark eyes. "Am I?"

She laughed but had no further reaction from him, so she gathered up her skirts and ran up the stairs as quick as a wink. She had a seat in a sleigh, and she couldn't be happier about it. The snow from the day before had piled high, and the sky promised still more to come. A world full of white awaited them.

Jane wasn't the last in the large entryway, but most of the others had already gathered when she arrived. The ladies wore

capas and coats of deep greens and blues. The gentlemen were in black and gray woolen overcoats, some with as many capas as London dandies, and others were dressed like country vicars with mile-long scarves wrapped thoroughly around their necks by their wives. Jane wore mittens rather than carrying a muff, and her wool coat was a gray-blue that Lady Mardale had bought her the winter before.

“I hear I have you to thank for my brother’s sudden enthusiasm for snow.” Elizabeth Grant had crept up to Jane’s side without the companion noticing. She wore a deep-red cloak, the hood lined in white and gray fur, framing her face beautifully. “However did you manage it, Jane?”

“Oh, you must be mistaken. I mentioned last evening he might enjoy driving the sleigh, nothing more.” Jane looked about, avoiding Elizabeth’s suspicious smile. “Who else is in your brother’s sleigh? Has everyone found their places?” Because if there were too many who wished to go, Jane would stay behind. She knew her place, and as much as she enjoyed pretending she was part of the family, she tried not to overstep. Overstepping was the surest way to lose everything she loved about her position, although thus far, no one had ever reminded her she was little better than a servant. She’d prefer to keep it that way.

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows skeptically. “You forget I know my brother quite well. Whatever you have said to him, I thank you for it. Here.” She pulled a hand out of her fur muff and offered it to Jane.

Without pause, Jane held her hand out to accept whatever it was the other woman handed her. The instant a round ball touched her palm, she tried to return it. “Oh no, Elizabeth. I cannot take it.”

“You can. I asked.” Elizabeth batted her eyelashes innocently. “Someone in the sleigh is supposed to wear it, and that person tells the rest of us what to do.”

That was the tradition? Jane had never asked, though thinking back on it, she supposed she ought to have realized how the bells worked. That was why the driver or his wife

typically told the others which bits of mistletoe to cut from trees or how many branches they still needed to pack onto the servants' wagon that accompanied them to the stand of evergreen trees upon the hill.

“All the more reason I shouldn't take it.” Jane held out the bell again, but Elizabeth's hands were both secure in her muff.

“Neither I nor my brother know what to expect from this outing. You are the perfect candidate for our group.”

Before Jane could argue the point, William flung the front door open from the outside. “Are you lot coming or not? If everyone continues to dawdle, Christmas will be here before we've returned. Come along, you lot of overgrown children.”

Jane followed the others out amid their good-natured teasing. Each sleigh could take four people comfortably, but on this day, they filled them with five or even six. The horses snorted and stamped their feet, eager to be on their way, as grooms held their leads. Sleigh bells jingled with each toss of the animals' heads, and laughter flowed as freely and prettily as song as everyone found their places.

Cyril stood at the ready beside his sleigh. He handed his sister and married cousin into the rear of the sleigh. The married woman's husband joined them there. Jane scampered across the snow-swept gravel drive to where the sleighs waited on what was normally a long green lawn.

Archibald Weatherford, Nancy's eldest brother, was all of nineteen and joining Cyril's group too. He waited for Jane and tipped his hat to her. “We've decided you're to sit between us in front, Jane. That'll keep you warm and safe.”

“Thank you, Archie. That's quite thoughtful of you.” Jane let him hand her in while Cyril circled around to the other side of the sleigh. Most likely, Archie had liked the idea of sitting next to a woman more than that of squeezing in beside another male. Jane didn't mind though.

The groom handed Cyril the leads, then went to climb onto the back of the sleigh, where a seat was suspended between the runners. He would care for the animals and could help

direct the sleigh from the rear in a pinch.

Cyril slid onto the benched seat beside Jane, his shoulder pressed against hers, and she caught her breath. He leaned toward her, and Jane breathed in the scent of bergamot, as she had when they first met. He must wear the scent as cologne, or perhaps it was in the soap he used to shave. The pleasant smell distracted her for a moment, and she almost didn't realize he was whispering to her.

“I have never driven a sleigh before.”

She tipped her chin up, meeting his concerned brown eyes. “Never?”

He shook his head. “One hopes it's like driving a carriage,” he said, as though confiding another secret to her. “The horses do all the work.” Then he smiled. Barely a tilt at the corners of his lips. But she saw it, and the effect it had was quite pleasant, as she'd known it would be. In fact, he was twice as handsome when he smiled. Her cheeks grew warm. He was teasing her a second time?

How perfectly lovely!

There was hope for him after all.

\*\*\*

Driving a sleigh wasn't precisely the same as a carriage, but it was near enough that Cyril adapted quickly. He followed his cousins, content to bring up the rear of their party. The rush of the iron runners over the snow, the crisp air, and the scent of pine combined to make the experience of riding in the sleigh exhilarating.

When Jane lifted her face to the sky, closing her eyes, he knew instinctively that she felt the same, that she tried to preserve the moment in her memory. He looked over his shoulder at his sister, and she met his gaze, her eyes alight with joy and wonder. Neither of them had seen snow for years, and somehow, he had only remembered all the trouble that came with it. All the ways snow slowed down shipments and that the cold weather made merchants cross.

He'd forgotten the magic of white-covered hills and crisp,

cool air in his lungs.

“This is breathtaking,” Elizabeth said loudly enough for him to hear over the sounds accompanying the moment.

The bells jingled along the harnesses, and the horses’ hooves broke through the blanket of white with a pleasant sort of clomping sound. And when Cyril looked down at Jane again to find her expression glowed with an emotion he couldn’t name, he had to agree with his sister. *Breathtaking*.

The sleighs arrived at the edge of the earl’s woodland, where groundsmen waited with saws and tree-pruning tools on long poles. The servants were cheerful and polite as they followed the family through the trees, awaiting their orders. Jane, as their leader, knew each servant by name and asked their opinions as she pointed out growths of mistletoe on oak trees, then long, pliable evergreen branches. She discussed decoration with Elizabeth, Archie, and their married cousins. Cyril hung back, taking the scene in and enjoying each moment more than the last.

The wagon the servants brought was soon filled with greenery, and the scent of fresh-cut pine filled the air. The servants would take the wagon back to the house, where the boughs would be delivered to the ballroom for the women to decide where each piece would go to make the house festive.

“We found holly bushes,” William shouted as his group emerged from another path in the tree line. “With red berries still intact.”

“Marvelous,” Jane said from a few steps ahead of Cyril. “With our mistletoe, the red-and-white berries together will make lovely kissing balls. Elizabeth, do you think—” She turned around, energetic and cheerful, and nearly ran into Cyril. He caught her forearm to steady her.

“Careful, Jane,” he murmured, keeping his tone gentle.

Her bright smile accompanied an unapologetic laugh. “Poor Cyril. It seems I am to make a habit of stumbling into you.”

“I don’t mind.” He hadn’t meant to say those words aloud. He didn’t even realize he had until he saw her eyebrows shoot

upward while her crystal-blue eyes went wide. “That is to say—what I meant, of course, was—”

A cold, large clump of snow hit him in the back of the neck before he finished attempting his explanation. It broke, sending smaller pieces flying over his shoulder and into Jane’s face. She spluttered and blinked, peered over his shoulder, then dove away from him to hide behind a tree at the same moment something else, presumably another snowball, hit Cyril’s shoulder.

“We’re under attack!” Jane shouted, already bending to scoop up her own ammunition.

Cyril nearly slipped in his hurry to huddle behind the tree with her. He put a gloved hand on the tree and looked around its trunk, trying to see who had taken the first shot.

Another snowball took off his hat. “It’s Archie,” he said, pulling back to safety. He looked down to see that Jane hadn’t stopped at a single snowball. She had several lined up and held close in her left arm. She took one in her right hand.

“Of course it’s Archie,” she said, sounding matter-of-fact, as though his cousin started battles with regularity. She grinned, then nodded to Cyril. “Arm yourself, Cyril. Your cousins do not take these things lightly.”

Then she ran from the tree, throwing snowballs as she went, and balls of white pelted her from several angles. Archie may have launched the first shot, but everyone else had joined in, volleying their frozen ammunition through the trees.

“Madness,” he muttered, bending down to scoop up a snowball. He packed it tightly, replaced his hat while still under cover, then stepped out into the open.

His hat didn’t stay put long, and he soon learned that Jane’s method of having several rounds of snowballs ready to go at once worked best. Somehow, he worked out that there were alliances at work between certain cousins. Archie seemed to have it in for Cyril, and Elizabeth laughed gleefully every time she lobbed another ball in her brother’s direction.

This meant he enlisted on William’s side. He crouched



behind a fallen tree, making snowball after snowball while his cousin planned to attack the stronghold of the other snow army across a small clearing. They took up places behind a crumbled stone wall.

“Lilian, Caroline, and Anna”—William pointed across the way—“you will take their eastern flank. Clara, my darling, you will go with James and Garrett to the west. Henry and Louisa will mind our place here and give us cover fire while Cyril and I charge over the barrier.”

Cyril looked across the clearing. He could see only the tops of bonnets and bare heads—most of the men had lost their hats, it seemed.

“We’re to charge directly at them?” he asked, incredulous. He had a thousand questions. How would they know when the battle was over? Would there be victors? Was it sporting to attack ladies? His sister certainly hadn’t minded firing at him. Attacking head-on couldn’t be the best plan.

General William didn’t allow any time for questions, however. He scooped up his share of ammunition, tucked it in one arm, and nodded grimly to the others. There was nothing for Cyril to do but obey orders, like a good soldier, while wondering again how it had come to this. Surely, this was a children’s game. That grown men and women, some of them married with children of their own no less, were fully engaged in snow combat absolutely boggled his mind.

“Flank them first, discreetly,” William reminded those designated, and they crept off quietly. “Distract them as you can,” he told the two remaining behind as they started throwing snowballs in a wide arc. “Ready, Cyril?”

Not in the least, but he nodded anyway.

“Charge!” William commanded, and Cyril had to scramble over the fallen tree beside him. Snowballs flew overhead toward the enemy. Cyril ran for the wall at a full gallop, throwing several snowballs along the way without much regard for proper aim, then jumped over the wall.

“Ambush!” someone shouted. Probably Archie. “Fall back,

fall back!”

There was a scramble behind the wall of snow, and tree limbs went flying as people ran this way and that. Cyril threw a snowball directly at his sister as she gasped, and most of it went into her mouth. He felt a pinch of guilt, but a moment later someone grabbed the back of his coat and shoved snow down his back between his collar and waistcoat. He yelped and spun around, grabbing for his attacker.

He looked down into his armful of Jane, who grinned impishly at him.

“Jane.” He still had one snowball in his hand, but he hesitated to use it against her. Even if she had quite literally attacked him while his back was turned.

She had no compunction about doing the same to his face, it turned out. She pushed a handful of snow into his hair and tried to break free at the same time.

Cyril didn’t allow her escape and kept his arm tight around her. “That was low,” he gasped out, still feeling the cold snow from her first attack creeping farther down his back. “Hardly sporting.”

Jane laughed, the sound coming out between deep breaths. “Oh, but the look on your face was worth the mark against me.” She tilted her head to the side, still unbothered that she remained at his mercy and in his half-embrace. “Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Incredibly, yes.” He looked away from her, realizing the others had gone deeper into the trees with the retreat. He could still hear their shouting. His breathing had slowed as they remained still, but when he returned his gaze to her pretty, upturned smile, his heart tripped at a faster rhythm.

“Am I to remain your prisoner, or shall we rejoin the fight?” she asked, her voice whisper-quiet as the shouts of their party echoed from a distance.

“I haven’t decided,” he whispered back. “I likely shouldn’t release an enemy combatant who has proved herself quite adept at sneak attacks.”

Her soft laugh came out as a visible puff of white air. “I’m unarmed at the moment. That makes me harmless.”

Cyril chuckled but used exaggerated caution as he released his hold on her. He heard only a few distant shouts now. “I have the feeling that underestimating you would be a mistake.”

Then she narrowed her eyes at him. “Why are we whispering?”

“I haven’t any idea. You started it.”

“Did I?” she asked, her voice still soft. She hadn’t moved, though his arm had fallen away. She could escape if she wished. Cyril rather hoped she didn’t wish to. “I suppose we could go back to the sleigh. I doubt the rest of them will continue much longer.” Her lovely blue eyes sparkled up at him. Entranced him.

Cyril bent toward her without meaning to. “I should find my hat first, I suppose.”

She blinked, a sudden look of alarm in her eyes, and the spell broke as she turned away. “The gentlemen are always losing their hats. I think they do it on purpose.” She pointed back the way he had come. “Did it fall off during the charge?”

“Sometime before that, I’m afraid.” Her sudden brusqueness marked the end of the strange, intimate whispers that had made him quite forget himself.

“I will help you look.” She walked away, and Cyril dropped the snowball in his hand with a sigh. The game was over. At least, for him.

They picked their way across the former battlefield, and soon enough, others joined them, out of breath and in search of hats, mittens, and anything else lost during their battle. Everyone laughed. Several voices relayed especially clever feints and well-timed hits. Cyril lost track of Jane and made it all the way back to the sleigh without finding his hat. Elizabeth edged up to him, hands tucked into her muff.

“You do not mind that we were on opposite sides, I hope?” she asked.

“Not at all.” He scratched the top of his head. “How did you fare in the battle?”

“Quite well.” She tilted her chin up with obvious pride. “I hit William directly between the eyes. Twice.”

“I commend you.” He looked around again. Almost everyone had come out of the trees, but no one had a second hat in hand. “I wonder if I’ve lost my hat until the spring thaw.”

“I hope not. It looked well on you.” She held her hand out and he helped her into the sleigh.

Archie returned, along with their cousins, everyone in high spirits. And Jane followed behind at last—his hat in her hands. “Is this one yours, Cyril?” She held it out to him upside down. Her winsome smile made his heart skip happily, as it had when he’d held her prisoner in those brief moments.

“Yes, thank you. I had despaired of ever seeing it again.” He couldn’t look away from her engaging grin or stop admiring the soft pink in her cheeks.

He accepted the hat, holding the brim in one hand. He stared directly at her as he put it on—only to douse himself with snow from inside his own hat. He blinked as snowflakes coated his lashes, and Jane covered her laugh with both hands. His sister showed no such hesitation, and her laughter pealed forth like a bell.

Archie snorted and slapped him on the back. “Oldest trick there is, Cyril. You can’t ever let a pretty smile distract you. Not in war.”

Jane’s smile faltered as Cyril bent forward and took off the hat, finding snow still coating the inside. It fell in clumps from the top of his head. He stared at the inside for a moment, then looked up at her. “You realize I must retaliate.”

Before she could answer, he pushed her bonnet back just enough to dump the remainder of the hat’s snow on top of her head. She shrieked, but the sound changed quickly into laughter as she danced away from him, shaking out her dress and swiping at her hair while the sleigh bell tied to her wrist

jingled merrily.

She let him hand her into the sleigh on his side, and then Cyril climbed in beside her. She used the lap blanket to cover the three of them in front, her smile assuring Cyril he hadn't taken the game too far. He drove them home, content to listen to the others in the sleigh as they conversed. His sister sounded especially cheerful as she recounted her attacks on William to the others. They were suitably impressed. She had found her place in their large family, it would seem.

Jane released a contented sigh at his side.

Perhaps he was on his way to finding his place too.

# Chapter 5

*December 23, 1816*

CUPID WASN'T ONE TO RUSH things. This included, of course, his exercise outside. Even in the snow. Jane followed him through the garden closest to the house. The walkways shoveled and swept clear by the grounds staff made it easy for both of them to wander about. The large dog sniffed every snow-covered bush as though to make certain it really was the same bush from before. Then he happened upon rabbit tracks and followed them around in a circle before coming back to Jane with his tail happily swishing through the cold air.

“No rabbits today?” she asked, bending to scratch him behind his long, floppy ears. “What of those squirrels you chased yesterday?” He tipped his head to the side and his ears twitched. Then he bounded away from her to the hedge, where he gave one sharp bark before darting into the bushes.

Jane hurried after him. She walked around the bushes rather than go through them, of course, and pulled the cloak around her shoulders tighter. “Cupid, wait for me.”

He barked again. When Jane rounded the hedge and stepped into the garden where the fountain stood, she saw a man patting Cupid on the head. The dog snuffled happily and rolled onto his back, begging for belly rubs.

Cyril, heedless of the fine gloves he wore or the cold stone beneath him, knelt to oblige his grandmother's dog. She watched for a moment, smiling to herself. Since the snowball fight two days before, his manner had relaxed, as if whatever bands had held him stiff and apart from his family had loosened, allowing him to venture among them. Cautiously, she knew, but it was still progress.

He had a wonderful family. They would make all the difference in his life if he let them. They had certainly changed hers.

As though sensing her gaze, Cyril looked up from his

attentions to the dog. She saw the moment he recognized her, his movements slowing.

She approached with a smile. “You escaped the billiard table, I see.”

He came to his feet, though Cupid immediately whined. “Once I convinced my cousins I had no talent for it, they released me from their clutches.”

“And you decided a walk in the cold was in order?” She stood an arm’s length away. Cyril Grant looked especially dashing that morning. He wore a dark-green coat that reminded her of the pine boughs they’d collected the day of the sleighride. Cupid gave up on getting more attention and rolled up to all four paws. He sneezed at them, then trotted away. “I need to follow him. You are welcome to accompany us.”

“It would be my pleasure.” He fell into step beside her, the two of them trailing the dog. “The cold isn’t all that terrible. Especially when I’m in need of a moment’s quiet.”

“I confess that is why I don’t mind taking my turn with Cupid.” She took in the statues and bushes still covered in snow, the gray sky, the distant trees. “Your family is lively, but after the hour I spent in the nursery this morning, coming out here sounded most refreshing.”

Cyril chuckled, the sound deep and pleasant. Hearing that small sound of his amusement made something featherlike wriggle in her stomach. “I was told you had taken it upon yourself to organize the children into making chains of ribbon and paper.”

“They wanted to make kissing balls.” She tapped a nearby bush to make the snow fall off the leaves and to the flowerbed beneath. “I thought paper and ribbons more appropriate for the nursery, though I promised I would bring them a holly wreath.”

“You take a lot of things upon yourself.” Cyril matched his stride to hers. “I didn’t realize a paid companion needed such versatility.”

Though she didn't think he'd meant his words as more than an observation, Jane felt the familiar prick of pain in her heart. *Paid companion*. The words were both a relief and a weight. "When Lady Mardale doesn't have guests, and it is only me to entertain her, I spend hours at her side doing anything she wishes. When she has her family about her, with daughters and granddaughters perched at her elbow, eager to see to her every comfort, I excuse myself to give them that pleasure and time together. But I do my best to be useful, no matter the circumstances."

"My grandmother is lucky to have you." He watched Cupid, perhaps unaware that she kept her eyes on his profile. His eyebrows were drawn sharply together, his lips turned down in a frown, and she practically felt his thoughts churning in his mind like the clouds before a thunderstorm.

"Are you always so serious?" she asked, and his gaze snapped to hers with the abruptness of a lightning bolt. She tipped her head to the side and tapped her own forehead with a finger. "You're giving yourself wrinkles on your forehead with all that frowning and thinking you do."

His eyebrows raised momentarily, then went down again. "I've been this way as long as I can remember. The cousins used to call me Serious Cyril. William did it again, just the other day."

"It's better than other things you might be called." Jane laid her hand against her chest. "For instance, I have been Plain Jane most of my life. Sometimes, Poor Plain Jane. Little Jane. Miss Lonely Allen. At least no one thinks the word *serious* a continual negative description. My school mistress used to plead with me to be more serious."

He appeared stunned. "Who would call you all those things?"

"Children, of course." She shrugged, the years of those dismissive names easily cast aside now. "Some who meant to be cruel and others who thought themselves superior."

"Did your family not reassure you on such matters?"



She hadn't any wish to discuss more of her past. Not when there were other, pleasanter things to converse on. She tried to dismiss the topic.

"It hardly matters now." She chuckled and kept walking. Perhaps she thought too much of herself, to assume the family gossiped about her. Then again, maybe they no longer cared about her history because she had proven herself worthy of her position.

Cyril followed her. "What does that mean? I thought you must be some far-flung relative or a friend's daughter in need of a position."

"I am only a very fortunate woman, I'm afraid, who met the countess at precisely the right moment." She didn't feel like talking about her past at the moment, though it loomed closer than ever at this time of year. On Christmas Day, she always met it head-on and with courage. But not today. Not before the preparations for Christmas itself had fortified her. "I would do anything for your grandmother, and your grandfather too. They are the best people I have ever met. They are kind, warm, and affectionate. Honest too."

Cyril stayed quiet, and when she sneaked another look at him, she saw his frown had returned, as had the thoughts swirling behind his eyes. Did her past trouble him? It didn't matter. She had no wish to speak about it at that moment. She prepared to change the subject when Cyril spoke of something else instead.

"I wonder, sometimes, what may have been if my father hadn't died so young. What it might have been like to stay near the family, to visit all the time. But my stepfather never approved of the way nobility lived. He didn't want to spend a moment in my grandfather's home."

"Perhaps he had a bad experience with another member of that class in the past."

"I suppose that's possible. When he spoke of lords and ladies, he always made them sound lazy, and he said they took advantage of those who worked beneath them." Cyril picked up a stick from the path and whistled for Cupid, who bounded

over only to dart away again when Cyril threw the stick for him.

Jane tucked her hands beneath her arms. She sighed. “I can see that perspective, of course. That must have been hard for you to hear since you are the grandson of an earl. Did it make things difficult between you and your stepfather?”

“I tried hard to show him I wasn’t like the nobility. That I was more like him.”

“Ah. And so you became Serious Cyril.”

One corner of his mouth turned up, the smile more sardonic than amused. “Perhaps. I wanted him to like me. And he did. He was affectionate in his own way. I never doubted he loved my mother, and he did his best for Elizabeth and me.”

She nodded her understanding, then took a turn tossing the stick Cupid brought back to them. The dog barked cheerfully and ran off again. “And you were loyal to him for that. But it created a distance between you and your father’s family.”

“Exactly.” He looked down at the ground, and Jane wanted to lay her hand on his cheek. To look him in the eye and tell him everything would work out for the best. That his family loved him, and he could love them back. But it wasn’t her place to offer such reassurances. All she could do, really, was give him encouragement.

Which was precisely what she attempted. “Your time here this Christmas is a gift, Cyril. For both you and your family. I hope you make the most of it and that you see how much they care for you.”

His shoulders slumped, and he turned away. “It will take more than a snowball fight to endear myself to anyone.”

Perhaps his stepfather’s dislike of the nobility had done more to Cyril’s opinion of himself than he knew. Not only had Cyril fought to prove himself different for his stepfather’s approval but he also seemed to believe he had to win his way into the affection of others. If he gave his family a chance, she knew he’d see their love for him. She could sense his place in their lives and hearts. He was the last stroke of the artist’s

brush, the final bloom in the bouquet, the missing piece of the puzzle. Cyril and Elizabeth completed the family, filling an empty place Jane hadn't seen before.

Cupid returned without his stick, finally ending their game. The three of them walked back to the house. "I hope you find a way to enjoy your time here, Cyril. I love Christmas at Mardale House. It's such a wonderful time of year."

Cyril offered her his arm to step over an icy patch, then kept her hand tucked close and warm. "I am starting to understand that." His frown disappeared and his eyes softened as he looked up at the large house. "Jane, I was wondering—"

An upstairs window opened outward, scattering snow from the ledge to the ground at Cyril's and Jane's feet. His sister popped her head out and called down to them. "There you are, Cyril. Grandmama and Grandpapa want to speak with us, if you can spare them a moment." She grinned and waved to Jane. "Of course, if you and Jane are otherwise occupied . . ." She trailed off, her eyebrows raising.

Though heat flooded her cheeks, Jane laughed and shook her head. "I am quite ready to be rid of him. Off with you, Cyril. It isn't polite to keep an earl and countess waiting."

His lips quirked upward. "After I see you safely inside, I'll attend to my grandparents." Everything changed when he smiled. His voice grew softer. His eyes glowed. And Jane was certain he was the handsomest man she'd ever seen when his eyes crinkled just a touch at the corners. He looked upward at his sister. "Does that suit you, Elizabeth?"

In answer, she gathered the remaining snow from the ledge and threw it down at them. Cyril ducked and put an arm over Jane's shoulders, covering her as much as he could, but she still felt bits of ice slide down her neck. She shivered, then laughed in delight as he threatened retaliation on his sister. They hurried indoors, and Cyril took his leave of her while she led Cupid to the kitchen to dry his paws.

\*\*\*

The house, large as it was, echoed with laughter,

conversation, and the distant sound of someone playing the pianoforte. Servants passed Cyril in the corridor, some carrying tea trays and others greenery to wrap around banisters. Two days until Christmas, and the house teemed with life and energy.

How different it was than the small house where he and Elizabeth had lived on St. Kitts, the two of them taking their meals in near-silence. Even before, when their stepfather had lived with them, days went by without more than a few words exchanged among them, unless they spoke of business.

Kitty and Nancy came skipping down the steps while he walked up, and Kitty greeted him with a cheerful, "It's another day closer to Christmas, Cousin Cyril."

"Indeed, it is. Where are you two going?"

Nancy, still somewhat shy, ducked her head as she answered. "Grandmama said she has hidden new furniture for the dollhouse, so we are looking for it. All the girls are."

"Ah. That explains the tiny chair I found under my seat in the dining room."

The girls exchanged wide-eyed looks, then scampered off at a faster pace. Cyril chuckled as he continued up to his grandfather's study. He felt certain that's where Elizabeth had been when she'd stuck her head out the window.

The door to the study stood open, so he entered without hesitation. His grandfather and grandmother sat in chairs next to one another on one side of the fireplace, and Elizabeth occupied a small sofa across from them. He bowed to his grandparents before taking the offered seat next to his sister.

"Cyril, lad. Thank you for joining us." Grandfather had a pipe in hand that he puffed away at. "You look bright-eyed today. Did you enjoy your exercise with Jane?" Though the question sounded innocent, the emphasis on Jane's name made Cyril hesitate to answer.

"Oh, don't tease him so, my love." Grandmother gave her husband a smile despite her admonishment. "Jane is the very soul of friendliness, Cyril. Pay your grandfather no mind."

It would be better to skip over any conversation to do with Jane. Cyril leaned back, trying to appear more comfortable than he felt. “I understand you wish to speak with my sister and me about something?”

“Indeed.” Grandfather pointed the stem of his pipe at Cyril. “You’ve grown into a remarkable gentleman, Cyril. Your stepfather . . . that man could turn straw into gold through sheer determination and work. Always fascinated me. It seems he taught you well, given the profit you turned selling his business. Those papers you gave me to look over are most impressive.”

“Thank you, Grandfather.” He’d hoped showing Grandfather his documents of sale and accounts might convince the earl to give Cyril something else to manage or that it would at least earn the earl’s favor in order for Cyril to start his own venture. He wouldn’t sit idle. Even with more money to his name than he’d ever thought possible.

“You have a keen mind. When we return to London for the opening of Parliament, I hope you will come with me. I would like your opinion on writing a new bill for the management of merchant taxes and laws. You have a unique viewpoint, thanks to your upbringing and practice in your stepfather’s trade.”

Cyril’s chest tightened, and his hopes rose. “It would be an honor, sir.” The contacts he would make, the opportunities his grandfather’s introductions would provide, would give Cyril everything he needed to be master of his fate.

“Of course, we hope you will both stay with us while you are in London.” Grandmother clasped her hands together in her lap and looked from Cyril to Elizabeth. “We have a beautiful house in Mayfair, with lots of room. We always invite people to stay for the duration of the Season, and I would especially like Elizabeth to accompany me. In fact, if it is all right with you, Cyril, I would very much like to sponsor her introduction at court.”

Elizabeth gasped and took Cyril’s hand, her wide brown eyes and every line of her face bright with excitement. “That would be wonderful.”

“It would. Yes, of course. Thank you, Grandmother.” It was more than he had hoped for. He had wanted their introductions, their influence, but he hadn’t dared to presume they would take such an interest in their estranged grandchildren. Elizabeth, at one and twenty, was past the age most unmarried women were introduced. But this would mark her entrance into the highest realm of Society. Her chances of making a marriage of her choice, a marriage of comfort and respectability, increased with her grandparents’ support.

“Which means we really ought to discuss your dowry, young lady.” Grandfather’s eyes twinkled. “Knowing your brother’s head for business, I am certain he has a fine feather tucked away for you. I would like to add to it, my boy. Make certain your sister is well cared for and may wed where she chooses—when the time comes, of course.”

Elizabeth’s eyes sparkled with tears, and Cyril gave her hand a squeeze. She spoke with a tremble in her voice. “Thank you, Grandfather. That is generous of you. Though, you mustn’t feel obligated to do such a thing.”

“Tush.” Grandmother took out a handkerchief and handed it across to Elizabeth. “None of this obligation nonsense. You are the only son and daughter of our son. You are our grandchildren, our pride and joy. We will see that you both succeed and find happiness, insofar as it is in our power.”

“Indeed.” Grandfather placed his pipe stem in his mouth, smiling around it. “We are grateful to have you both with us again, and I would wager your grandmother is going to do all she can to keep the two of you in her sight.”

“For as long as possible,” Grandmother said with an affectionate smile. “How does that sound?”

Elizabeth looked up at Cyril. “I think it sounds wonderful. Don’t you?”

“Yes. We absolutely accept. Thank you. Both of you.” Staying with them would mean Elizabeth’s future was brighter, and Cyril would find new connections too. Not that he looked forward to those interactions with Society as anything more than a necessity.

Jane would be there, too, acting as his grandmother's companion in London, as she did in the country. Living in the same house as the family.

His heart skipped happily in time with his thoughts.

He wasn't a romantic fool. He hadn't known Jane long enough to form any true attachment. But he sensed something when he looked at her. He *wanted* to know her better. To see if, perhaps, his instincts were leading him into more than a friendship with her.

All of them living in London in the same household made that a possibility.

"We can settle all the details after Christmas," the earl said, his smile growing. "But I would like to speak to you about one of those documents you gave me." He pushed up to his feet and went to his desk near the window. "You ladies are welcome to stay, if you wish."

"I would much rather show Elizabeth the fashion plates that arrived in *Ladies' Magazine* today. We must plan her wardrobe for the Season. Oh, Elizabeth, your cousin Caroline has an excellent eye for fashion. We must ask her opinion about the best colors for you." With that, the countess took Elizabeth by the arm and led her from the room, chatting about French hems compared to English hems and other things few men would ever understand about women's wardrobes.

He watched his sister go, with relief. His grandmother would see to her success. It wouldn't be left to him to bungle his way through introductions. His family would assist him in finding a suitable match for Elizabeth.

"It's been your grandmother's dearest wish to see both of you happy." The earl spoke with a gentleness Cyril hadn't heard in his voice before. He turned to see his grandfather settling into the chair behind the desk. "She has worried after the two of you ever since your mother remarried. She missed you both but respected your stepfather and mother's relationship too much to say anything of it to them."

Cyril lowered his head and swallowed. How much had he

and Elizabeth missed because of his stepfather's pride and the fear of giving offense? And here he was, near to making his own mistakes by keeping himself apart from his family.

Grandfather opened the drawer of his desk, and his tone changed markedly with a new subject. "What think you of Jane?"

The abrupt question took Cyril a moment to understand. "Miss Allen?" Perhaps his grandfather meant to tease him again about spending time in her company. "She is a friendly and cheerful person. Everything she says about the family is complimentary. Loyal, even."

"She is a remarkable woman. I'm glad the two of you are getting on. When your grandmother told me she'd asked Jane to befriend you, I wasn't certain how that would play out." His grandfather chuckled as he looked at the papers in his hands rather than at Cyril, not seeing when Cyril's body froze, his whole attention on his grandfather. "I think she would walk across hot coals if your grandmother asked her to. Thankfully, spending time in your company is likely pleasant for her too. And why wouldn't it be? Intelligent lad like yourself, you are an excellent person to pass the time with. I imagine the ladies find you handsome too. You get that from your mother's side though." The earl tapped the top of his balding head. "The hair, too, fortunately for you."

Cyril forced a smile when his grandfather glanced up, but his thoughts had taken a less than pleasant turn. His grandmother had asked Jane to spend time with him. Told Jane to befriend him. How much of his interactions with the lovely companion had come from her desire to please his grandmother rather than from any wish of her own?

He tried to reassure himself. A woman couldn't feign that sort of friendliness, surely.

Whatever the case, the conversation with his grandfather at last moved into a much more comfortable topic. The shipping business. Yet a strange feeling had taken root in Cyril's stomach. It felt the way others had described seasickness to him. Unsettled. Twisting. Roiling. And entirely uncomfortable.



# Chapter 6

*December 24, 1816*

MARDALE HOUSE, OVERFLOWING WITH PEOPLE at the end of December, still had rules. Not that anyone paid much attention to them beyond the most obvious. But when it came to the holiday games, the earl and countess expected everyone to adhere to those rules. Christmas Eve had come, and with it, the game the family loved most.

The countess stood at the center of the ballroom, her hands folded and head held regally, as she listed the rules of that morning's game. Jane stood a few steps behind and to the side of Her Ladyship.

“The rules for hide-and-seek are simple but will *not* be broken.” The countess's voice carried over all the adults and children present. “Bedrooms are out of bounds, as are the servants' quarters. All doors to other rooms have been opened and remain open for the entirety of the game. Closets and cupboard doors may be closed and used for hiding places. Everyone who wishes to play is permitted, but once caught, no one may give up another person's hiding place.”

Though Her Ladyship didn't look directly at one of her grandsons, Jane saw the boy squirm. He'd informed on several of his cousins out of spite the previous year. His father gave him a pat on the shoulder, perhaps offering reassurance that he'd been forgiven, even if the offense wasn't forgotten.

The earl, standing beside his wife, pointed to a chest on the ground. “I will give out all prizes after the game is over.”

Jane loved that part, and the children's excited squeals proved she wasn't alone in that feeling. The earl and his wife always awarded prizes for things such as the most absurd hiding place, the person who hid the longest, and so on. Indeed, every year the list of reasons for awarding prizes grew longer. They had become an excuse to distribute small gifts to the family.

She sneaked a glance at Cyril and Elizabeth. While Elizabeth's shoulders brushed cousins on either side, Cyril stood a few steps away from the group, at the outskirts of the gathering. Not quite part of the excited crowd of family. He looked as uncomfortable as he had that first day in their company, and given the way he kept glancing at the doorway, he likely planned an attempt to flee at any moment.

The earl took out his pocket watch. "Last year, Archie was the last one found. That means he will be our seeker this year. Come, Archie. Everyone else will have ten minutes to find their hiding place. Is everyone ready?"

"We're ready, Grandfather," William said, holding his wife's hand and giving his son a pat on the head. "Aren't we, George?"

"Then your time starts now." Lord Mardale handed his watch to Archie. "Ten minutes."

Shouts, squeals, and all manner of exclamations followed the pronouncement as everyone scattered across the ballroom and out the doors on opposite ends. Jane followed Cyril, who trailed behind his sister. Elizabeth had linked arms with her cousin Lilian, and the two of them had their heads bent together.

Nancy appeared at Jane's elbow. "Do you have a spot to hide, Jane?" the little girl asked. "I've been planning mine all year."

"Good for you, dear." Jane gave the child her full attention. "Do you need any help getting to it?"

Nancy's expression turned serious, with her narrow eyebrows bending sharply together. "No. But will you do me a favor? If no one finds me very soon, will you make certain they don't forget me? I'll be somewhere in the music room."

Jane wrinkled her nose. "You think they will find me before they find you?"

Nancy giggled and skipped away without answering.

"She seems certain of herself." Cyril had appeared next to her while she'd been distracted, and the sound of his deep

voice made her stomach perform an odd somersault. Really, the man had no right to have such a pleasant voice.

Taking a handful of her skirt, Jane turned to face him. “Last year, the ten minutes to hide were not even complete before she came out of her spot, convinced everyone had forgotten to look for her.”

“I suppose a child’s grasp on the passage of time is quite different from ours.” Cyril’s smile hitched up on one side, but it didn’t quite make it all the way to his eyes.

Jane took a step toward him, halving the distance between them. “Would you like me to help you find a hiding spot?”

Cyril chuckled, and his voice lowered. “Now you are the one who seems certain of herself.”

This time her heart performed acrobatics at the drop in his tone. Her neck grew warm, and she knew her cheeks would turn pink if she didn’t take hold of herself. So she tipped her chin up and narrowed her eyes at him. “If you don’t want my help, Cyril, you need only say so. But we really are wasting our time, and I have been planning my hiding place for the last year too.” She tried to walk around him, but Cyril took two steps backward to stay in front of her.

“Jane, wait. I apologize for teasing.” He stepped backward again, and when his smile reappeared it was more open and honest. Even sheepish. “I don’t suppose you would offer me at least a hint of where I might hide?”

“That depends.” She kept walking, finally getting around him and forcing him to fall into step with her as she went down the corridor. “Do you want to be found early so you needn’t spend an hour kneeling in a cupboard, or do you want a chance to win?”

“An hour?” He sounded horrified by the idea. “How long does this game usually last?”

Jane opened a door to one of the large open galleries. She marched across the rug to a large potted tree next to the window. Six-year-old Winston stood with one leg thrown over the rim of the pot but was quite stuck. Jane lifted him the rest

of the way into the pot. "This isn't a very good spot," she warned him. "Mind the roots."

"Yes, Jane," he whispered, then pulled a blanket usually wrapped around the trunk of the tree over himself.

Cyril looked into the pot, which was waist-high on him, and then at Jane, his eyes widening. "Are all the hiding places this ridiculous?"

Winston stuck his head out of the blanket. "Hush. You're going to get me caught."

"As I said, do you want to be found early, or do you mean to win?" She grinned at his horrified expression as she ran across the room to a door that opened to a servants' staircase. Cyril followed.

"I cannot be sure which is best. I have the feeling if I'm found earlier than a boy hiding in a potted tree, I will be teased mercilessly by the entire family." He followed her down the flight of steps and out the door into the less formal of the two dining rooms.

Jane crept quietly along the side of the table and looked under it, only to be immediately hissed at by Kitty. "This one's taken, Jane!"

"I beg your pardon." Jane chuckled and lowered the tablecloth. "You might consider laying across the chairs rather than on the floor. You will be less easy to spot that way." A moment later she heard shuffling and knew the child had taken her advice.

But where was Jane to hide Cyril? He stayed close to her, his brow furrowed. "Do you even have a plan for this game?" he asked.

"Of course I do. I have the perfect place. But it's not at all suitable for you."

"I wouldn't expect you to give me your place." He followed along behind her when she went into the small ante-library, an oval room with books from floor to ceiling and a statue of a maiden reading.

William peered around the statue at them, his eyes wide, then relaxed. “Oh, it’s only the two of you,” he hissed. “You need to hurry. Time must nearly be up.”

“This isn’t up to your usual job of hiding,” Jane whispered back. “And where is George?”

A little hand shot out from a bottom shelf, from behind the books, and waved. Jane gasped and bent down. “Did your father put you in there?” she asked.

George’s little face beamed at her. “I’m hiding behind books. No one will look here.”

“Not so long as you’re quiet,” Cyril said, bending down to look too. “How did you make this work? You must’ve pulled all the books out, put him in there, then put them back in.”

“Just so.” William hunched behind the statue again. “Off with both of you. Some of us are actually trying to win this game.”

Cyril’s mouth dropped open, and he looked ready to question his cousin further about putting his son and future earl in such an odd location. Jane smothered a giggle with one hand and snatched up Cyril’s hand in the other, dragging him along with her into the main library.

They caught the end of whispered conversations as Jane hurried them through the room, and she saw curtains move and feet draw up beneath desks. Given the way Cyril’s head turned one way and the other, she knew he’d caught the same movements. She went through the open doorway into a small sitting room.

“Here we are. This is usually one of the last rooms people check. Archie will search first where he hid last year since he thought it such a good hiding place. That was in the attic. Then I would lay wager that he will gallop through all the largest rooms, tossing aside every curtain and looking underneath every table.”

Cyril followed her deeper into the room, his fingers entwined with hers. “That sounds like something a young man his age would do. Rush through the obvious places.”

“It’s always important to consider the person seeking out those in hiding.” Jane looked up at him, and her heart stuttered when their gazes caught and held. She needed to release his hand before he realized she’d never truly needed to take it in the first place. “Archie wouldn’t give much thought to something as simple as decorative pillows and cushions.”

The man standing above her blinked, and were it not for the sunlight streaming through the window, she would have missed the slight tilt of his head. “Cushions?”

She pointed to the sofa, which she herself had filled with coordinating cushions two months prior. Everyone in the household was quite used to this particular piece of furniture and its row of tasseled pillows. Finally, she released Cyril’s hand—did she imagine that he seemed as reluctant to let go as she was?—and removed the back layer of pillows. She went to the window seat and lined them up there, then went back to the sofa.

“I’ll lie against the back and cover myself in the cushions. Archie won’t realize someone is behind them.”

He stared at her, then looked down at the sofa, then back at her again. “Would you like me to help?”

“But I have to help you.”

“But I don’t even have—”

“There is a closet to the left of the fireplace. It’s narrow, but you should fit, and if I put the fire iron against it, no one will think anyone is inside.”

The sound of small running feet from the corridor momentarily halted their conversation, and both froze, looking at the door. The feet ran past, and that sent Jane into a hurry. She went to the small closet and opened it. “Oh dear. Maybe you won’t fit.”

Cyril came up behind her, looking in over her shoulder. “The shelf gives you pause? It looks as though I can lift it up. Here, let me try.”

She stepped aside, their shoulders briefly colliding. He was right. The shelf lifted up and stood against the back of the

closet, allowing him to stand upright.

“Perfect,” he said. “It’s a good thing I haven’t ever been bothered by confined spaces.”

“A happy circumstance indeed.” Jane went to close the door on him, but Cyril put his hand out to stop her. “Are you certain you don’t need my help?”

“It is sweet of you to worry, but I have actually practiced tucking myself into hiding.” She couldn’t resist bouncing up on her toes. “I am quite prepared to win the game this year.”

He chuckled. “I have no doubt of that. And leaning the fire iron against my door isn’t necessary. If we leave it open for a few more minutes, since we have time until Archie makes his way here, perhaps we could talk.”

Jane stared up at him, her heart picking up speed as his warm brown eyes gleamed from the shadows of the closet. She swallowed and nodded, then hurried to her spot. She settled at the back of the sofa and wasted no time concealing herself with the brocade and silk-tasseled pillows everyone had grown used to seeing on that couch. When satisfied that she had hidden every bit of skirt and curl of hair, she called out to Cyril. “Are you still all right in there?”

“Quite comfortable, actually. What was this closet for, I wonder?”

“There used to be a powder room on the other side of the wall, for guests to touch up their wigs before dinner.”

His deep chuckle made her shiver in her hiding place. “Wigs. I am relieved that bit of fashion has faded from favor.”

“That closet opened on both sides. I think they kept powders and brushes and such inside. Now that there’s a guest room on the other side, they walled up the other door to give the closet a back.”

“Fascinating. And you know all of this because . . . ?”

Jane smiled beneath her pillows. “Because I pester your grandmother for all sorts of explanations about this house, her family, and anything else I can think of to ask.”

“Do you know what I’ve heard said about curious minds?” he asked, sounding amused.

“I imagine it isn’t anything nice.”

He laughed, and she heard him shift against the wall. “I read it in a poem in the *Imperial Magazine*. Let me see if I can do it justice.” He was quiet for a moment, and when he spoke again his tone was softer and thoughtful.

“‘But they are curious’—Let them have their due.

‘Twee well, methinks, were men as curious too—

Then ignorance would vanish, for we find

The only learned, is the curious mind.’”

“‘The only learned is the curious mind,’” she repeated to herself, closing her eyes. “I think you are attempting to flatter me, sir.”

“Not at all. I think showing curiosity about things is a mark of a person’s good character. And intelligence.”

“I thank you for the compliment, then.”

“You are most welcome.” He was quiet for a moment, and then he spoke softly into the room. “Jane? I wonder if—that is, I had a conversation with my grandfather. And he said something I wished to ask you—”

More running feet pattered in the corridor, accompanied by laughter and shouting. Cyril stopped speaking, and Jane held her breath. Though she desperately wanted to know what he had meant to ask her, there came no further opportunity. People were soon walking in and out of the rooms surrounding them. Occasionally they heard laughter or shouted protests as Archie found his family, and before long their hideouts were discovered too—Jane’s first, and she left the room before she inadvertently gave up Cyril with so much as a glance at his hiding place.

She returned to the ballroom, as all who were found must, and found a delightful spread of baked treats laid out upon a table. The people already found were enjoying a picnic of sorts, sitting on the floor of the ballroom while their



grandparents told stories to entertain them.

Cyril was one of the last to return. His eyes searched the room, and when his gaze met Jane's, she saw him grin and step toward her. But then Elizabeth called her brother's name, and he went to her and their cousins. Elizabeth spoke eagerly, begging to know where he had hidden to last so long in the game.

When the earl gave out the prizes, Cyril—as the last one above twenty years of age to be found—received a magnifying glass. This time when he held the prize, the same one that had sent him fleeing his grandmother's company days before, Jane watched him smile fondly at the instrument before he tucked it into his coat.

She needn't worry over him any longer, she realized. He'd found his place in his family. Or at least was comfortable enough to no longer need her assistance. Though happy for him, she couldn't deny a prick of disappointment in her heart.

He would grow closer to his cousins, uncles, and aunts, and spend more time with them. As he ought. And her own time with him would lessen, and then she would be only Jane to him, his grandmother's companion and nothing more.

\*\*\*

Cyril had almost asked Jane a question he wasn't even certain he wanted her to answer. Did she spend time near him, smile at him, laugh with him, only because Lady Mardale had asked it of her? Though he imagined most men would suffer a blow to their pride if such a thing were true, for him, the hurt went deeper than that when he thought too long upon it.

He had known her for only a few days, yet he already felt closer to Jane than he did most of his cousins. He'd kept them at a distance by necessity. He hadn't grown up as they had, the privileged sons, daughters, and grandchildren of the Earl of Mardale. And while his opinions of them had shifted away from his stepfather's prejudices, he couldn't help but wonder whether he would ever find a place to fit within his large, noisy, loving family.

Elizabeth had practically abandoned him after the snowball fight. He'd seen her only at meals, and their female cousins always surrounded her, which was precisely what he'd wanted. She needed them to help her have a successful social Season in London.

The rest of Christmas Eve continued the same way it had started, with more games than he could count, though most were played after dinner, when the children were sent to the nursery and the adults had gathered around the hearth in the largest of his grandmother's sitting rooms. They called that room the King's Room because of the large portrait hanging above the fireplace, which featured William of Orange.

The hour grew late, and Cyril drifted between the dark window and the chair where Jane sat near his grandmother. Slowly he came nearer to where she was, drawn by the friendship he'd felt spring up so easily between them.

And yet his grandfather's words stood like a wall between them.

Did it matter that Jane had sought only to fulfill the countess's wishes in her every encounter with him? What would it mean if it were true?

He sighed and made his way instead to an empty chair on the opposite side of the room. The adults played a rhyming game, in which each person had to speak in rhyme to answer a question asked of them, then ask another question in turn.

William had answered his rhyme, and he asked one to their cousin Archie. "How do you like the snow this year?"

"More than I like the spring, I fear." Archie grinned smugly and turned to Elizabeth. "Cousin Elizabeth, how does Christmas in England compare to that on the island?"

Elizabeth's eyes widened momentarily. "I'd much rather spend the holiday here, on dry land." Her answer was met with approving applause. Elizabeth blushed and tucked her hands together tightly, a nervous gesture that made Cyril chuckle. They were both still finding their place, it seemed. His sister's eyes found his. "Brother, do you think all the greenery looks

nice?”

“I’d far rather have halls warm and green than full of ice.”

His grandfather chuckled around the stem of his pipe.  
“Capital, lad. Capital.”

Cyril thanked his sister for the easy rhyme with a quick wink. Then he found Jane watching him, the corners of her mouth tilted softly upward. Did he imagine the way her eyes softened when their gaze met?

“Jane Allen,” he said, preparing her to match his question with her rhyming answer. “Does your family miss spending this holiday in your company?”

The room went still, all murmuring conversation and teasing stopped, and only the crackle of the fire built up in the hearth made a sound. Worst of all, Jane’s smile faltered.

She cleared her throat, though, and a larger, artificial smile appeared on her lovely face. “Perhaps I’ll one day tell you of them, in summary.” She turned away, looking to the countess. “My lady, would you like a turn in this game?”

“Absolutely, my dear, if you’d fetch me more of the same.” The countess cleverly held out her empty teacup, making the rhyme apply as both a directive and part of the game. And Jane took it, eagerness for escape evident in her quickness. The countess’s rhyme broke the tension Cyril’s question had caused, and he wanted to sink into his chair or disappear entirely into the floor. Somehow, he’d offended the whole room with his question.

Archie leaned over and whispered, “You didn’t mean any harm, cousin. We know that.”

Yet he’d obviously done a harm, from how stiffly Jane walked to the tea things to make another cup for his grandmother.

This always happened to Cyril in social situations. He inevitably found a way to offend someone or say the wrong thing or otherwise make a moment awkward. He left his chair, circled the group of people all talking and playing at the ridiculous game, and went to where Jane stirred a spoon of

honey into his grandmother's lavender tea.

"Jane," he whispered, and she jerked her head up to look at him. Her eyes appeared somewhat clouded, but she blinked and they were luminous once more.

"Cyril." Her lips curled up softly. "Do you know, I cannot think of anything else that rhymes with *company*? That was a difficult word. I'm not entirely certain it was fair either."

He shook his head, not caring about that part of the game. "I said something that distressed you. I am terribly sorry for that."

"Oh." She tapped the excess tea from the spoon and laid it aside. "I am perfectly well. Please, don't worry about me." She turned away to return to her place beside his grandmother.

Cyril brushed her arm with his fingertips, halting her. "Will you speak with me for a moment by the window? Please?" When she offered a nod as an answer, he stepped away. He walked as casually as possible to the same window where she had found him practically hiding behind the curtain.

He waited. As he waited, he rehearsed what he had asked and the room's reaction. He'd asked about her family. Something he ought to have discussed with her before that moment, given the many opportunities they'd had for conversation. Somehow, she had evaded more than vague references to her past. And he'd let her.

When Jane joined him, staring out into the night, she leaned forward to look down at the squares of light upon the snow, light from the house's windows. "Last year, it didn't snow until Christmas Eve. We are lucky to have enjoyed the pretty picture it makes to have the countryside covered in white."

Should he let her direct the conversation away from the uncomfortable subject? That hardly seemed right. Though, there had to be a gentler way to address what he had said, and the room's response, without causing more harm. He considered his options carefully, and perhaps a moment too long.

Jane placed a gloved finger on the windowpane, tracing a

small rectangle as she spoke. “I appreciate your concern, Cyril, but truly, I took no offense to your question.”

“Then why the dramatic response from everyone else?” He watched her profile, studying the soft crest of her forehead, the gentle slope of her nose, and the curious pucker of her lips as she thought on his question.

“The subject of my family is not one brought up in polite company, though it certainly isn’t a secret.”

That could mean any number of things about the woman’s parentage. If her family was unmentionable in Society, that put a new layer upon her relationship with his family. One he didn’t understand. And what would such a thing mean for his friendship with her?

“I have discomfited you.” Jane lowered her head and tucked her hand around her waist. “If you would like to know—”

“No.” The word burst from his lips like an impatient racehorse, interrupting her. She blinked up at him as he floundered to say more. “That is, if it doesn’t matter to my family, it doesn’t matter to me.”

“It isn’t that it doesn’t matter,” she said, her eyebrows drawn sharply together. “I would say my history matters quite a lot. To me, at least.”

“I am certain it can’t be pertinent to me, or my grandparents would have said something.” If there was a scandal in her past, surely someone would have mentioned it to him. Cautioned him.

Unless, of course, no one ever imagined he’d form an attachment with his grandmother’s companion. Or want to form one, anyway. He had to remind himself his heart was yet his own. He couldn’t have given it over to her when their acquaintance was so new. It didn’t matter that he had looked forward to spending more time in her company in London. Or imagined seeking her out in crowded ballrooms or walking down the winding paths of Hyde Park with her on his arm. He hadn’t made promises. Not yet.

“Pertinent?” she repeated, confusion in her tone. Then she

frowned at him. “Cyril, are you trying to be a snob?”

“Not at all.” He took a step back and studied her while his stomach rolled about as though to convince him he was at sea rather than in his grandparents’ home. “Jane. Did my grandmother ask that you befriend me?”

Whether the new direction of the conversation or the question itself surprised her, Cyril couldn’t tell. But he watched as Jane’s eyes opened wider. Then she took a step closer to him. “Did someone tell you she did?”

He fought his instinct to lean closer, instead stiffening every muscle in his body to keep his posture correct. “Yes. And I find it an uncomfortable idea, if it is true. I thought you wished to know me for yourself. Not because of a sense of duty.”

“Wait a moment.” She touched her temple, wincing as she did. “Not only do you wish to discard the matter of my family, as though you wish to know nothing more about me, but you are offended I would befriend you if someone asked it of me?” Slowly, she shook her head. “This is most ungentlemanly of you, Mr. Grant, to think my friendship, my regard, can be commanded by another.”

Mr. Grant? She hadn’t called him that since they met. He had misstepped terribly. He could feel it. But— “You haven’t answered my question, Miss Allen.” There. Two could play at formality. “Did my grandmother tell you to turn me into your Christmas project?”

“I would do anything your grandmother asked of me, Mr. Grant,” she said, her tone firm and unapologetic, though her eyes gleamed suspiciously. “And no, she did not command who I am to befriend. She only asked me to be kind to you. I’m afraid I was foolish enough to form a friendship with you all on my own.” She blinked, and the gleam faded as tears wet her lashes. “Now, if you will excuse me, I think I will turn in early tonight.”

She was gone before he said another word or formed an apology. Or another question. And he watched, helpless, at the window as she went to his grandmother. She bent to whisper into the countess’s ear and then left the room with no one else

taking notice. They were all busy preparing for a new game. Charades.

But Cyril's grandmother turned enough in her chair to cast a concerned glance in his direction before her grown grandchildren called for her attention to the tableau they had created with shawls, fans, and themselves.

Cyril's heart joined his stomach in sinking all the way to the floor. He had done something terrible. He felt certain of it. And he knew, without a doubt, his grandmother would disapprove of his part in the conversation by the window.

Not in the mood for her to take him to task or to admit to his embarrassing mistake, Cyril withdrew from the room as quietly as Jane had. Perhaps making an early end to the evening would be best for both of them. He might better understand things, and correct them, in the morning.

What better day than Christmas to put things to rights?

# Chapter 7

*December 25, 1816*

CYRIL SAT THROUGH THE MORNING Christmas service with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He sat several pews back and to the side with other members of his family and a perfect view of the front pew. His grandfather, grandmother, and their heir and his children, took up the entirety of that pew. Then his other uncles and aunts. And more members of the family spilled into every single place a local family did not already occupy.

He couldn't see Jane anywhere.

Had his grandmother left her behind, as the servants were, to attend a later service? Or had Jane decided not to come? Was it his fault?

Above the lower level of the chapel, and traditionally meant for a choir, were several rows filled with young girls. He looked up that direction only once, when the children shuffled in and were hushed numerous times by the teachers who accompanied them. It seemed like they were schoolchildren, given their ages. But why had they not been sent home for Christmas? Most boarding schools closed their doors from late December until mid-January.

He didn't give them another thought as he stretched his neck, turning this way and that, looking for Jane.

Finally, Elizabeth nudged him with her elbow and brought his attention to the rector standing at the pulpit.

"I thank you all for coming today as we celebrate Christmastide. For the next twelve days, until Twelfth Night, we will reflect on what it means to us and to the world that the Christ child was born. In our *Book of Common Prayer*, we read the words of Simeon, which he spoke upon the steps of the temple in Jerusalem: 'For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou has prepared before the face of all people; to be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory



of thy people Israel.””

The rector looked about the room with a kindly smile, and Cyril stilled beneath the churchman’s gaze.

“I will not keep you overlong, dear friends,” the rector said. “I encourage you to think on what we truly celebrate every year. Not on the feasts or the gifts we might exchange, as the magi of old brought gifts to the sacred child. But think on Simeon’s words. Let us follow the example laid before us, to be a light to others. Let this be a time of reflection, of kindness, and of service to our fellow man. Join me in singing the beloved hymn ‘While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks.’”

Cyril, not the best of singers, stood with everyone else and opened the hymnal to hold for his sister. Elizabeth sang beautifully, of course, but as he listened to the parishioners around him, the sweet voices of the children he had seen sitting in the balcony above rang out clearest of all.

Indeed, he could well imagine a starry night sky swelling with angelic voices, proclaiming to humble shepherds—and to him, a mortal man with many mistakes in his past—that a Savior had been born. Cyril looked over the heads of those around him, at his family. Cousins. Aunts. Uncles. His grandparents. All of them sang, their shoulders pressed against one another, their heads raised and smiles upon their faces.

A sudden rush of emotions took him by surprise. Regret touched his heart, regret that he had not always known the love of his family as he had come to know it in the last several days. Then relief. Relief that he had finally stepped into their household and into their embrace. His eyes burned as he realized he owed this feeling to more than those around them. Jane Allen had done much to ease his way back into his family too. She had encouraged him, made him laugh, and helped him see the way his family cared for one another. And for him.

In a moment of discomfort, his pride injured, he had given her enough of an insult that she had withdrawn from him. Hurt and offended by someone she had chosen to befriend.

He wanted to speak with her. He needed to tell her that what mattered to him was whether or not she wanted to continue

their friendship. Whether she might, one day, consider becoming more. Because over the short time he had known Jane, he found her more charming, intelligent, and attractive than any other woman of his acquaintance.

And he hoped, during their time together in London—well, it wouldn't matter what he hoped unless he apologized and made things right between them.

When the service ended, it took a great deal of self-possession for Cyril to escort his sister out of the church rather than rushing directly to his grandmother to ask after Jane. Even after he helped his sister step into a carriage, he had to wait for his grandparents' neighbors to finish their Christmas greetings and well-wishes at the front of the churchyard.

No one seemed to mind the cold or the crunch of the snow beneath their feet as they spoke of the celebrations soon to come. A Christmas feast, Boxing Day, a coming ball, and New Year's celebrations. Excitement buzzed about like unseasonable bees, especially when the colony of schoolgirls came out through the church doors with their angelic voices now raised in delight.

Cyril, still waiting for his grandmother, turned to watch the children as they passed, the memory of their voices raised in song warming his heart once more.

And then he saw Jane.

She walked with the schoolgirls, all of them cloaked in red and wearing sensible brown dresses. Jane stood out among them, taller than most and wearing a deep-green coat and bonnet lined in fur. She kept pace with them, and Cyril realized she held the hand of a little girl.

Jane's eyes skimmed across the crowd, and then her gaze met his. The bright smile she wore faltered, but only for a moment. Then her chin tilted up, as though daring him to judge her for the company she kept. But why need she look so defiant? He didn't understand the challenge in her eyes. She looked away before he could guess at what it meant, and she walked in the middle of her flock of children and left the churchyard by another gate.

A light touch on Cyril's arm brought his perplexed gaze to his grandmother, who now stood at his side and watched him beneath raised eyebrows. "Is something the matter, dear? You appear quite muddled."

"I am," he admitted, covering his grandmother's hand with his. Though he had a dozen questions ready to ask, only one mattered at that moment. "Where is Jane going?"

Lady Mardale tilted her head to one side, studying him carefully as their breath turned to fog in the air around them. "Where Jane always goes for Christmas. To Mrs. Harper's School for Girls."

His chest tightened around his heart. Was she not welcome at the family celebration? "A boarding school?"

"Indeed." The countess looked to where the children had disappeared. "She spends the day with the girls who have nowhere to go on Christmas."

"That is . . . kind of her." There was something in this explanation that he didn't understand, though his mind reached for an explanation he felt was quite important. "Grandmother, why wouldn't she stay with—"

"Grandmother," Archie interrupted, coming to stand on the countess's other side. "I have the honor of driving your carriage home today."

Lady Mardale beamed at Archie. "Wonderful. I know I am in good hands." She released her hold on Cyril, and he had no choice but to let her go, his questions still on the tip of his tongue. Thankfully, she looked back at him once more. "You know, I think Jane left this morning without a handkerchief. You ought to take her one." The crinkles at the corners of her eyes deepened with her smile.

Cyril snatched at that thin, and patently false, excuse. "Of course. Right away. Will you make my excuses to Elizabeth?" He didn't wait for an answer to his question. His grandmother had given her blessing for him to follow Jane. Though his pride would have him return to the house and wait for her there, he had already let that emotion spoil things once. He

wasn't about to do so again.

\*\*\*

Leaving the church amid a crowd of girls stirred Jane's memories, most of them fond, of a time when she hadn't been fortunate enough to be Lady Mardale's companion.

Mrs. Harper's School for Girls occupied an old stone house that had once been home to a baron. The barony had extinguished, and the house had fallen under the care of the Earl of Mardale. For three generations, the earls had seen fit to lease the building to the school at a most reasonable rate. Lady Mardale recommended the school to many of her acquaintances, ensuring the quality of students and teachers remained excellent too.

Most of the girls were from wealthy merchant families or minor nobility, though there were also several who attended on scholarship from interested benefactors.

Jane had once been one of those scholarship students.

The little gaggle of girls turned up the lane leading to Mrs. Harper's School as one of the girls walking with her tugged on her sleeve. "Miss Allen," Beth whispered. "Who is that man behind us?"

Jane turned fully around, walking backward to study their single follower, a tall man with an elegant hat and a handsome coat she recognized immediately. She nearly tripped, and Beth grabbed her arm to steady her.

Cyril Grant waved and doubled his speed, coming up the path with longer strides and a wide grin.

How dare he smile like that at her when he'd hurt her feelings so thoroughly the evening before? He had no business looking so handsome when she wished to be cross with him. And yet her breath caught at the fine figure he cut even as he rushed to catch her up.

Beth and Jane's halt had caught the attention of several other girls, who also turned to see the approaching gentleman.

"Who is he?"

“He’s so tall.”

“Handsome too.”

The whispers and giggles made Jane’s cheeks grow warm, despite the cold morning air. She looked down at Beth, then at the others who lingered, and made a shooing motion with her hands. “That is Mr. Grant. The countess sent him with a message for me, most likely. All of you keep going. It’s too cold for you to dawdle out here. I’ll rejoin you soon.”

A few of the girls appeared skeptical, but Jane shooed them again. The last one was no more than ten steps away when Cyril stopped, his breath creating puffs of fog in the air between them. “Jane.” He spoke her name as his only greeting, smiling at her in such a way that her heart skipped happily in response. Her determination to remain aloof faltered.

More giggles came from behind her, and she winced. “I think it had better be Miss Allen while we aren’t at Mardale House,” she said.

“As you wish.” Cyril took another step closer. “My grandmother sent me after you.”

That was oddly disappointing, even if it made her supposition to the girls correct. “Oh? Is something wrong?”

“She worried you forgot to bring a handkerchief with you.” He reached into his coat and pulled out a folded square of linen with blue embroidery and his initials in one corner. “I wanted to offer you mine.”

Though she knew quite well that a handkerchief of her own was tucked tidily up her sleeve, Jane held out her hand to accept his offering. “All that way for a little bit of cloth?”

“Yes.” He kept hold of his corner, though she had taken up another. “And perhaps, now that I am here, you might permit me to offer something more. An apology for last evening.” Here at last his smile faltered, replaced with a more earnest expression. “Jane—Miss Allen—not only did I bring up a subject that pained you, but I also implied something about your character that was unacceptable.”

Jane watched his eyes as he spoke, noting the depth of them,

the richness of the brown ringing his pupils, the wrinkles at the corners as he winced. She quite liked his eyes. “Cyril, you needn’t apologize. I didn’t respond in the best way, because I was flustered and—and a little afraid.”

“Afraid?” He stepped closer, and his expression grew soft. “Of me?” Those two words were laden with sorrow, and Jane had to speak the truth quickly before he could take that idea to heart.

“Not of you. I know you are a kind man. But I was afraid to tell you about me. The truth about where I am from and why I wanted to be your friend. Because I wasn’t sure how you might react. But then, this morning, I spoke to your grandmother, and she helped me understand something important.”

Somewhere in the course of her speaking, they had lowered the handkerchief between them and his gloved fingers had released its corner to enclose her hand in his.

His thumb brushed across the back of her wrist, along the bare skin above her glove. “She is a wise woman, I am coming to learn.”

Indeed, Jane had discovered the same thing after the two years she’d spent in the woman’s company. She gestured to the path and the now-out-of-hearing flock of girls. “Will you walk with me?”

Cyril gave her hand a gentle squeeze before tucking it securely in the crook of his arm. “Of course, Miss Allen.”

Their first unhurried steps together were in silence as Jane put her thoughts in order. He did not press her for an explanation but waited with a patience that calmed her racing heart.

She took in a deep breath, the bracing cold air filling her lungs. “I was a student at Mrs. Harper’s School, at the will of my guardian, from the time I was eight years old until two years ago. When I grew too old for classes, I was kept on as a teacher.”

“Your guardian didn’t wish you to return home?” Cyril

asked, perplexed.

The difficult part of the conversation had arrived, the same conversation she'd had with the countess on the day the noblewoman had asked whether Jane would consider becoming her companion.

"I don't actually know who my guardian is." Jane tightened her hold on Cyril's arm, at the same moment feeling in her heart the rightness of her confession. "I was raised by a farmer and his wife. All my earliest memories are of their home, where they raised me alongside their own child." She swallowed, but the thickness in her throat remained. It never grew any easier to share her past—or lack of one. "They were kind, in their own way, but made it quite clear I wasn't kin to them. They told me often enough that they were paid to look after me, nothing more. Now I wonder if they were worried, if they thought someday I would be claimed and that they would be punished if I loved them rather than whoever came for me."

"It sounds as though you give them more credit than they deserve," he muttered, and she offered him a shaky, thankful smile.

"I prefer to think the best of people. But they were relieved when I was taken from their home. I saw that quite clearly. When I reached eight years of age, a lawyer who said he represented my guardian brought me to this boarding school. All I know of this guardian is that they paid the farmer and his wife to raise me, then paid all my expenses at this school. But even at my majority, I have never been told to whom I owe my education and my life."

She lowered her head. "Allen is the surname of the farmer who kept me fed and clothed. There are no records of my past except the letters with payments for my upkeep, sent by the lawyer every year to this school. I have requested to know my guardian many times, and those requests have always been denied. They have no wish to know me."

"Whoever they are, they have made a foolish, terrible mistake." Cyril's hand covered hers on his arm as he stopped walking and turned to look her directly in the eye. "I'm so

sorry, Jane. I cannot imagine how that must feel.”

A sad little smile turned up her lips. “Can you not?” She watched Cyril tip his head to one side, considering her words. She continued. “Your grandmother and grandfather tried to help me, of course, but they were rebuffed. Whoever my parents are, whatever guardian has kept me tucked away in the country, I am never to know them. And it has taken me a long time to make peace with that.”

“How could you possibly be expected to?” he asked, his voice gentle. His dark eyes swam with compassion.

“Your grandmother met me when she came to tour the grounds of the school, as she does every few years, to see where she can help the school.” Even thinking of that fine autumn afternoon, with leaves of gold hanging above and the countess wearing a gown of deep green, set a peaceful spirit about Jane. “When she realized I was a teacher who had also been a student, she had quite a lot of questions. We spoke on several occasions, until the day came that your grandmother asked me to serve as her companion. And she has given me even more than that, inviting me to become a part of her family. And that is why,” Jane said, taking his other hand, “I am content. I may not know where I began my life, but I know the love and acceptance of a family. Your family. All I have wanted is for you to feel the same. You’re a part of them, Cyril.”

“I’m beginning to believe that,” he murmured. “Because they all love you, Jane.” Her heart stuttered. Had he meant to say . . . ? No, of course not. “I must confess that when I saw how easy it is for you in their company—I had moments of envy.” He winced as he said the last word. “Forgive me, Jane.”

“There is nothing to forgive. I know how it feels to think you don’t belong. Which is why I wished to be your friend, Cyril.” She wanted to step closer, to touch his cheek or lay her hand over his heart. Would it be too forward of her? They hadn’t known each other long, yet already she felt the same sense of belonging with him that she felt with his family. And perhaps even the seed of something more growing in her heart. Something that would need nourishment and time, but the



prospect of taking that time filled her with hope.

Cyril studied her, searching her eyes, and then he winced. “You saw how lost I was when I came into my grandparents’ home.”

“Your grandmother did, too, which is why she asked me to do one thing for her.”

He watched her, his eyes soft. “What was that?”

“She asked me to be kind to you.” It was as simple as that. To have a kind and gentle heart, as the countess did, meant being loving and accepting. And Jane had tried, with every breath she took, to emulate Her Ladyship. And it had been so easy with Cyril. So easy to show him acceptance. To let him into her heart. “So I was.”

Cyril looked down at their joined hands, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “Thank you for that, Jane. Thank you for befriending me and helping me find my place in my family. Though, I confess, I don’t feel the work is done yet.”

“Things like this take time, patience, and love.”

His eyes darted to hers on the last word, and a slow smile overtook him. “So you hope to treat me as friendly as you would any other member of the family? Or perhaps”—he held up their joined hands—“perhaps you would grant me the honor of something more. In time.”

“Perhaps,” she admitted, her cheeks warming beneath his earnest gaze. “Would you like to spend some of Christmas at the school with me? I always stay until dinner. We play games and sing, and I do all I can to make certain the girls who cannot be with family on Christmas still know they are cared for.”

“That sounds like you.” Cyril returned her hand to his arm. “Yes. I would be honored to join you. I may even be of help. You see, I have recently become quite good at hide-and-seek. And snowball fights.”

“Really? How lovely.” Jane fell into step beside him again as they made their way to the school through the snow. “You don’t mind missing the time with your family? You needn’t

stay at the school for as long as I do.”

“They are my family. I will forever have a place among them. A few hours spent in your company, seeing where you grew into the impressive person you are, sounds like an excellent way to spend my day. I also have a suspicion that my grandmother knows exactly where I intend to be and approves.”

At that Jane had to laugh. “She did send you after me with a rather contrived excuse, didn’t she?”

“Most certainly.” Cyril chuckled, and his eyes danced with laughter. “I think she’s trying her hand at matchmaking.”

With her shoulder pressed to his, and the warmth in her heart, Jane didn’t mind that idea in the least. And as the hours passed among the pupils at Mrs. Harper’s School for Girls, and Jane watched Cyril laugh, sing, and play games, she sincerely hoped Lady Mardale succeeded in her attempt. Because Cyril, despite his initial frowns, had a gentle and loving nature that stirred her heart.

# Chapter 8

THE BALLROOM WHERE CHILDREN HAD picnicked on the floor, where they had held indoor races and ridiculous tournaments, transformed into something magical on New Year's Eve. Jane, though she assisted with bits and pieces of the transformation in the course of her duties, never failed to feel awe the first time she entered the room as the earl's guests arrived. Greenery and sparkling silver ribbons adorned the columns, and music filled the room as musicians played from a balcony at one end of the grand hall. Local artists had chalked the floor with intricate patterns of swirls, ribbons, and stars. Hundreds of candles danced in the crystal chandeliers, and mirrors reflected the gentle glow to make the whole room flicker with golden light.

The guests would arrive at any moment. Jane hurried to stand near the grand doors, where the earl and countess stood waiting to greet their friends and neighbors. Their family, all those old enough to attend the event, milled about the ballroom, chatting among themselves.

Jane carried a shawl for the countess and a reticule with smelling salts, a fan, hairpins, and other odds and ends her mistress might have need of before the end of the evening.

"Jane, dear, here you are at last." The countess looked her over carefully. "Oh, how lovely you look in your new gown."

"It is perfect, my lady." Jane twirled once, the midnight-blue gown glimmering with small silver embellishments. "I never expected to own anything so fine. It is a marvelous Christmas gift, and I will treasure it always."

Lady Mardale folded her hands before her, satisfaction evident in the way she smiled during her inspection. "I am pleased you like it, my dear. Now, do hand those things over to Anne." The countess gestured to the maid standing along the wall. "She will attend to me this evening. Your only duty, my darling Jane, is to enjoy yourself."

Jane's lips parted as she glanced at the maid, who smiled and came forward to eagerly accept command of the countess's belongings. "But, my lady, I do not mind," Jane said. "I am your companion. I'm supposed to look after you."

"And you do a marvelous job of it, Jane." Lady Mardale nodded again to Anne, and the maid took the shawl, fan, and reticule gently from Jane's reluctant hands. "Which is why I think you deserve something special this evening. Tonight you are not my companion. You are, as I hope you feel, part of the family." The countess took up Jane's hands and squeezed them gently with her own, keeping her gaze trained on Jane's. "You are young only once, my dear, but you have given me a gift and let me feel young every day we spend together. Now, off with you. Drink punch, speak with all your friends, dance as much as you please, and perhaps indulge yourself in a little flirtation." The countess actually winked as she said the last, and Jane couldn't manage to sputter out a response before the sound of guests arriving echoed through the corridor leading to the ballroom.

Lord Mardale and his wife turned to welcome the first arrivals.

Jane turned, feeling somewhat lost and quite confused, and found herself facing Cyril. He stood not ten paces away, dressed in a dark-blue evening coat, a sapphire stickpin winking within the white folds of his cravat and his whole attention fastened upon her.

He bowed at the waist but didn't lower his gaze. A pleasant flutter in Jane's stomach made her cover the spot with a hand, and then she sank into a curtsy. Cyril approached, his steps too slow, his movements too deliberate. At once Jane wished to flee the room and throw herself into his arms.

How did he make her feel like this? What spells had he worked to make her feel as she did about him?

"Jane," he said when he stopped before her an arm's length away. His voice had somehow grown deeper. "How beautiful you are tonight."

Something warm and soft uncurled from her heart, and Jane

failed to sound unaffected as she said, "That is kind of you to say. Thank you."

He halved the small distance between them with a step. "I mean it, Jane. I regret that I dare not ask you for more than two sets this evening. Will you consent to stand up with me that long? I would ask for all your dances if I could, though you would grow bored and wish for a better partner after the first."

A startled laugh escaped her. "I highly doubt it, as I quite enjoy our time spent together. But you cannot wish to devote so much time to me."

He closed the remaining distance, and her heart nearly stopped altogether when he lowered his voice to say, "I know I am quite bad at this, as I have not often had opportunity to practice. But please know, my Jane, that I am trying my best to flirt with you."

Her cheeks blazed. "Oh."

He glanced away momentarily, over her shoulder, to where the earl and countess were welcoming people to their home. "My grandmother suggested I give it a try, though I am quite hopeless."

For an instant, Jane felt disappointment. His grandmother had told him to . . . ?

His gaze came back to meet hers, and his eyes went dark and soft. "I asked her how best I might win your affection, you see. You deserve more than my poor efforts, but perhaps you will grant a besotted man mercy, out of the kindness of your heart."

"You needn't win my affection, Cyril." She raised her hand, then tentatively let it rest on his chest, above his heart. "I am already won over."

He covered her gloved hand with his, one corner of his mouth tilting upward toward a smile. "Are you?"

"Indeed." She released a quiet, trembling laugh. "But we will make a spectacle of ourselves if we stand here much longer."

“Then we had better begin dancing.” The musicians had begun a lively tune meant for dancing, and couples joined together at the center of the room. Cyril raised her hand toward his lips, brushing the tips of her fingers with an almost-kiss, and she found herself suddenly despising the gloves she wore that separated her skin from his lips. He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and led her to the floor.

She had danced before. She’d learned at school, with all the girls as partners to one another. And then the countess had encouraged her to dance when there were balls, at least once or twice at such events. But never had Jane felt as light on her feet or as happy as she did than when she looked across the line of gentlemen to see Cyril looking back at her.

They danced a set, and then Archie appeared to ask for her hand. “If Cyril can bear to part from you that long,” he added, and Cyril laughed.

“I wouldn’t dare try to keep Jane to myself.” He bent to murmur in her ear, “I hope this evening is everything you wish, my dear friend. Save me the supper dance?” And then he went away.

One gentleman after another asked to stand up with her, and Jane enjoyed every moment of her evening. But every time she looked away from a partner, it was Cyril’s gaze she sought. And there he would be, smiling back at her, ready, when she rested between one partner and the next, to offer her cool drinks and warm glances. And every time he spoke to her, said her name, or tried to flirt, he won another piece of her heart.

# Epilogue

THE TWELFTH DAY OF CHRISTMAS passed, filled with merrymaking and a ball that transcended all other balls before it. At least, that's how it felt to Cyril. Each day with his family had given him new gifts of memories shared and traditions performed. Elizabeth had formed close friendships with her cousins, and all of her aunts promised to escort her to various balls and events during London's Season.

But best of all was Jane.

Jane, who met his eyes across a crowded room and blushed or laughed and sometimes inspired him to wink at her. Jane, who had visited the school on Boxing Day with more gifts and treats, taking him and Elizabeth with her. Jane, whose sweetness of temper and bright mind made each of their conversations a delight.

Jane.

With January came preparations for the family to decamp from the house, many of them going straight to London to take up residence in leased homes and town houses. The earl and countess made all the arrangements for their household's departure, and the last night with everyone together arrived to find the family gathered in the largest sitting room once more.

Cyril sat beside his grandmother, listening to a story she told about his father when he was a child. In a few short weeks he had found a place of comfort and respite in his overly large, overly loud family. And he adored them. And remembered most of their names. Most of the time.

"You know, Cyril," his grandmother murmured to him in hushed tones. "Your coming gave me such a hopeful case of anxiety."

He chuckled. "Did it? You never once hinted at such a thing. Indeed, you made me feel welcome from the moment I entered your home."

“I cannot tell you how it pleases me to hear that.” She patted his arm. “I have missed your father for many years, and I often wished for more time with you and your sister. This Christmas, you have given me a gift. I feel almost as though I have your father back, when you are here, and when I hear Elizabeth laugh.”

Cyril took his grandmother’s hand. “I feel the same. He would be happy to see us together, wouldn’t he?”

“I believe so.” Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears. She leaned closer to him. “I think he would also be quite pleased that a young lady has caught your eye.”

Cyril ducked his head. “I have been meaning to speak to you about that. Since you are Jane’s family . . . Grandmother, would you consent to a courtship between myself and Miss Allen?”

“My dear boy, nothing would make me happier. Of course.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I have much to say on the matter, but I imagine you wish to tell Jane the good news. She is by the window, you know, waiting for you.”

That had become their place, when his family gathered and he or Jane wished for a moment to speak in private. Cyril chuckled, kissed his grandmother’s cheek, and withdrew to the window to find Jane.

She wore a deep-green gown, her hair up with holly leaves woven into its curls and braids. She looked the very picture of Christmas. Her blue eyes twinkled merrily as he approached, and she held her hand out to him. Their fingers entwined, and he stood close. Perhaps their family watched. He didn’t care. They all loved Jane and wanted the best for her, as did he.

And he loved her more each passing day.

“You look well pleased with yourself,” Jane said, her lilting voice music to his heart. “What are you up to?”

“I am pleased, but I’m also quite hopeful.”

“Hopeful?” Her expression grew curious. “What is it you are hoping for?”



“I am about to ask a wonderful, kind woman if she will consent to being courted. By me.” He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “I’m hopeful she will say yes.”

Jane’s cheeks flushed, and her smile grew. “What are you waiting for? You had better ask her and find out.”

“My dear Jane.” He bent toward her. “Will you do me the honor of allowing me to court you, with the hope that you will fall desperately in love with me and agree in due course to marry me so I can spend the rest of our Christmases—and all the other days of the year—at your side?”

Jane leaned closer to him too. “I would very much like all of that. Please.”

He captured the last word against his lips, and she returned the kiss—a token of their start, a promise of their future—with enthusiasm.

They broke apart to the sounds of cheering and applause from their very large, very loving family. Where their family was, they would always belong, in a place filled with acceptance and love.

# About the Author



SALLY BRITTON LIVES IN OKLAHOMA but loves to go exploring with her husband and four children. She started writing her first story on her mother's electric typewriter when she was fourteen years old. She knew fairly early on that romance was the way for her to go. Reading her way through Jane Austen, Louisa May Alcott, and Lucy Maud Montgomery, Sally also determined she wanted to write about the elegant, complex world of centuries past.

Sally has a bachelor's degree in English, her emphasis on British literature. She met and married her husband not long after, and they've been building their happily ever after since that day.

Learn more about Sally at [authorsallybritton.com](http://authorsallybritton.com), and follow her on social media.

Facebook: [Sally Britton](#)

Instagram: [@authorsallybritton](#)

# Other Books And Audiobooks by Sally Britton

## CASTLE CLAIRVOIR SERIES

*Mr. Gardiner and the Governess*

*A Companion for the Count*

*Sir Andrew and the Authoress*

*Lord Farleigh and Miss Frost*

## INGLEWOOD ROMANCE SERIES

*Rescuing Lord Inglewood*

*Discovering Grace*

*Saving Miss Everly*

*Engaging Sir Isaac*

*Reforming Lord Neil*

## DEVOTED HEARTS SERIES

*The Social Tutor*

*The Gentleman Physician*

*The Earl and His Lady*

*His Bluestocking Bride*

*Miss Devon's Choice*

*Courting Miss Ames (formerly Courting the Vicar's Daughter)*

HEARTS OF ARIZONA SERIES

*Silver-Dollar Duke*

*Copper for the Countess*

*A Lady's Heart of Gold*

# **Christmas Forevermore**

SARAH M. EDEN

# Chapter 1

*London, December 1818*

MINNA SCHOFIELD WAS SINGLE, TO begin with. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful, extraordinary, or heroic can be attributed to the efforts of Mrs. Mary Jackman to address the woeful state of Miss Schofield's matrimonial circumstances. As Mrs. Jackman was deeply proud of her status as monarch of London's busiest busybodies, she would not be best pleased for her Herculean exertions to go unheralded.

Minna was, of course, aware of her lack of a husband, fiancé, or beau of any kind. But, though she was an orphan without siblings or aunts or uncles with only a cousin to claim by way of family, she was not devastatingly lonely nor in any way destitute. She was certainly not desperate to address her matrimonial status. Her father had left her money enough for living quite comfortably and a London house she had made her own.

Her time was spent as she chose. Sometimes in the whirl of Society, sometimes at home in the blessed quiet. There were days when she filled her quiet hours perusing the *Times*, alternating between the pressing matters of the day and the frivolous matters of the *ton*. On other days, she happily lost herself in a novel. Sometimes she dedicated her hours to charitable endeavors; sometimes she passed those hours in the company of her dearest friends. And, as her one and only cousin lived in her house with her, she never wanted for conversation, kindness, or a person with whom to laugh.

"The poor, suffering dear," Mrs. Jackman regularly declared at any mention of Miss Schofield, ignoring the fact that Miss Schofield was neither poor nor suffering. "She can set aside her worries, though, as I mean to rescue her," she would add, ignoring the further fact that Miss Schofield was also neither worried nor in need of rescue.

And thus it was, a mere week before Christmas Day, that Minna, sitting beside the low-burning fire in her very cozy London house, enjoying a delightful conversation with her cousin, Lettie—a cheerful lady only two years younger than Minna, in whose eyes resided a constant sparkle of joy—found herself, within a single sentence, deep in a discussion about the Queen of the Gossipmongers herself.

“Mrs. Jackman has informed anyone who will listen that she intends to find you a husband by Christmas Day,” Lettie said, smiling at Minna over her teacup.

“Christmas? In one week?” Minna shook her head. “Does she think herself a miracle worker?”

Lettie shrugged. “And a saint, no doubt. She is ‘saving’ you, after all.”

“I have told her time and again that I am quite happy.”

With a shocked expression rendered humorous by the twinkle in her eyes, Lettie said, “What right have you to be happy? You’re single enough.”

To that Minna replied, “What right have *you* to be happy? You’re single as well.”

Their laughter filled the space, something Mrs. Jackman would insist was impossible in a household “burdened” with two spinsters. Minna was, after all, nearly twenty-three years old, which placed her quite beyond any hope of making a match, good or otherwise, in the estimation of far too many in the *ton*. And Lettie, at twenty-one, was nearly as ancient and devoid of hope.

“I suppose you will be cross with Mrs. Jackman when next you see her,” Lettie said.

“What else can I be when I live amongst such fools as she?” Minna was far more amused than angry, but playing the role of put-upon victim of a scheme was far too diverting. “If I could work my will, Mrs. Jackman and her fellow meddlers would be flooded with their own well-meaning gossip and washed away on a crushing wave of officiousness.”

“Cousin!” Lettie whispered in shocked laughter.

“Cousin!” Minna replied in a very well-executed echo. With a good-natured smile she added, “Allow me this bit of grumbling. It is the only way I can think of to endure Mrs. Jackman with equanimity.”

“Should Mrs. Jackman and her ilk turn their sights on me, *I* mean to endure her efforts without grumbling.” Lettie’s show of pride was undone by the very obvious amusement in her expression. “*I* will be perfectly angelic, outwardly grateful, and subtly uncooperative.”

From the doorway to the drawing room, the sound of clapping answered Lettie’s impassioned speech. Rupert Crawford, a dear friend of both Minna’s and Lettie’s, had arrived in time to, apparently, overhear the declaration.

Minna waved him in, happy as could be to see him. Rupert was delightful, and time spent with him was always enjoyable. “Is not my cousin a very persuasive orator? What a shame Parliament does not accept female members.”

“That is a shame for a great many reasons.” Rupert dipped them both a bow and sat with a calm and quiet air. That was his way. He did not dominate a conversation, and when he did enter one, his voice and comments were generally soothing and tranquil, though he could also be roaringly funny. “Am I to assume Mrs. Jackman is on yet another mission on your behalf, Minna?”

“She is indeed. Her latest undertaking is to find me a husband by Christmas Day.”

“And if she doesn’t?” Rupert, true to character, remained focused in the face of so ridiculous a declaration.

“She will, I assume, eat her bonnet,” Minna replied.

A bit of a smile tugged at Rupert’s lips. “An odd choice for a Christmas feast, to be certain.”

“We should invite her here to dine with us on Christmas, Minna,” Lettie suggested, eager anticipation on her face.

“An odd choice for a Christmas *guest*,” Rupert said, earning him laughter from both of them. “What do you intend to do, Minna? Mrs. Jackman is unlikely to approach this undertaking



in anything short of utter and complete earnestness.”

“I haven’t the first idea,” she said. “As much as I grumble about her and her efforts, I am not actually fond of being sharp with people, however warranted such sharpness might be. I suppose I will simply pray for my own Christmas miracle: that she will suffer a bout of temporary forgetfulness and won’t remember that she needs to ‘rescue’ me from my spinsterhood.”

“Even if the Princess of Prattle forgets,” Rupert said, “her two Countesses of Confabulation are unlikely to also do so.”

“How wonderful for me that I shall have the Royal Family of Gossipers pay me such unwavering attention,” Minna said dryly, but she was not so aggravated as she allowed herself to appear.

Mrs. Jackman was, truth be told, rather harmless, more buzzing fly than stinging wasp. But the topic was one of well-established enjoyment amongst Minna’s group of closest friends, and they all took the very parts they were then embracing: Lettie the ray of hopeful sunshine, Rupert the voice of reason, Minna the expressor of annoyance, and Simon Vaughn, the fourth member of their close-knit group, who was not in that moment present, the unabashed moral compass. They had enjoyed countless afternoons of laughter on the subject of London’s gossip brigade, and Minna relished it far too much to abandon it.

“You could always flee Town until after the holy season has run its course,” Rupert suggested. “Mrs. Jackman is unlikely to follow you all the way to the country, or farther afield, if you feel the need.”

“Oh, do not quit London,” Lettie begged. “I would miss you terribly if you left.”

“Not to mention,” Minna added, “without me here to add propriety to our household, you would need to be *very* well-behaved and go essentially nowhere, lest you become the subject of the latest whispered on-dits.”

Lettie shuddered theatrically. “Further, cousin, if you rush

off to the countryside, Rupert and Simon would also be denied the joy of spending Christmas with you, as neither of them are known to ever quit Town.”

Simon’s health was unreliable and had stifled an increasing amount of his social activities of late. His was not a degree of illness that warranted concern but did require a bit of caution on his part. Some in the *ton* dismissed him entirely on account of his sometimes-struggling constitution. It was entirely their loss. He was one of the best people Minna knew. He was one of the best people *anyone* knew.

“And if you flee,” Rupert said, “you’ll miss the Felingums’ annual Christmas ball.”

Minna smiled at him. “Would you miss me if I didn’t attend?”

“I most certainly would. Mrs. Jackman might discover something about the rest of us she finds unsatisfactory and ruin *our* Christmases.”

“And if I avoided the Felingums’ ball in order to avoid the Queen of the Tea-Tattlers, you would likely think yourself ill-used.”

Rupert didn’t rise to the bait, though Lettie seemed to be enjoying the exchange.

For her dear cousin’s amusement, Minna pressed onward. “You likely won’t think *me* ill-used should I attend that evening of merriment only to endure Mrs. Jackman redoubling her efforts in my direction.”

“The ball is only once a year,” Lettie reminded her.

“A poor excuse for knowingly ruining my own Christmas.”

“Suppose Mrs. Jackman proves successful?” Rupert asked. “Will you acknowledge her miracle?”

“I won’t be able to.”

Curiosity filling his green eyes, he asked, “Why not?”

“Because I will have died of the shock.”

While laughter tucked itself once more into the carved

moldings, the floorboards, the windowsills, the very air itself, Minna inwardly sighed at Mrs. Mary Jackman and her utter inability to leave people well enough alone. For Minna's part, she would do her best to endure the interference and find a means, somehow, of still enjoying her Christmas.

## Chapter 2

A MERE HALF HOUR OF pleasant conversation had flowed amongst the dear friends when their pleasurable interlude was intruded upon by two ladies not unknown to any of them and, while not particularly disliked, also not generally sought out by any of them. There was no need. Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Mabey sniffed out gossip like hounds on a foxhunt. If Mrs. Jackman was the Queen of the Busybodies, these two were her ladies-in-waiting. The Countesses of Confabulation, Rupert had called them, and well he might.

Mrs. Shaw dispensed her gossip with all the subtlety of a hurricane. Mrs. Mabey absorbed on-dits with an expediency that would have put a sea sponge to shame. And, as the two of them were widowed sisters and lived together and went about together, one was never seen without the other, a formidable combination for anyone who wished to retain even the tiniest of secrets.

Standing alongside Lettie as the ladies were ushered in, Minna prepared herself for an exhausting interlude with the sisters.

“How fortunate we’ve found you at home, Miss Schofield.” Mrs. Shaw spoke, as she always did, with a rapidity that, were her lips a horse running in a race, she would have been the winner by a margin unheard of in the sporting world. “We were not certain we would and rather hoped that we could see you. There is so very, very much to talk about, as I am certain you realize, or at least must suspect. Again, how fortunate we have found you at home.”

While Minna and Lettie *were* both at their home, they were not at home to callers in the truest sense. Rupert and Simon were always considered exceptions, and the staff knew this. But Minna was not willing to toss the well-meaning if misguided ladies out onto the pavement over their breach in etiquette. They were actually rather lovely people, though one was best advised to discuss nothing of a sensitive nature when

in company with them.

“Lettie and I are most pleased to see you.” Minna made certain to answer in such a way as to emphasize what she considered her cousin’s equal claim on the position of lady of the house. As the older of herself and Lettie, as well as the one who had the actual claim on this house, Minna was usually defaulted to, treated as hostess, while Lettie was too often overlooked. As she made her home here as well, the two of them serving as each other’s companions in order to satisfy the demands of Society, Lettie ought not to have been brushed aside as often as she was. Minna could not, however, resist the urge to tease Rupert just a little. “Mr. Crawford is here as well, and delighted to see you, I am sure.”

It was to her friend’s credit that he maintained perfectly somber expressions when Minna was certain he wanted nothing more than to laugh. She loved to hear him laugh. There was something in his laughter in particular that she completely and utterly adored.

“Oh yes.” Mrs. Shaw nodded enthusiastically. “Which of you is Mr. Crawford calling on?”

Mrs. Mabey’s eyes darted from Minna to Lettie and back again in quick succession, her gaze assessing and sharp.

“He is a dear friend to both of us,” Minna said, motioning for the new arrivals to be seated.

Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Mabey saw themselves quite comfortably settled. Once all the ladies were seated, Rupert sat as well. His eyes met Minna’s for the briefest of moments, and the amusement in their depths nearly undid her hard-won composure.

“While it is not the Season,” Mrs. Shaw said, “it is the *festive* season. How fortunate for us that there are those who go to such pains to make London merry despite the cold and damp.”

“Those who light the fires, for example,” Minna said. “And the cobblers and glove makers.”

The sisters looked confused by her attempt at a clever turn

of phrase.

“I cannot imagine who else makes the cold and damp endurable if they do not.” Minna offered the explanation in what she hoped did not come across to them as condescension. She did not mean for her bit of levity to be insulting.

“Oh.” Mrs. Shaw nodded and offered a light laugh. “Also those who heat bricks for the carriages.”

Mrs. Mabey seemed to catch on to the jest. “And the modistes who make pelisses.”

“Oh yes,” Minna replied. “All who wish to be both merry *and* warm, must go there.”

“I, for one,” Rupert said, as solemn as a parson, “would almost rather die than be fitted for a pelisse at a modiste’s shop.”

“If you would rather die,” Minna said, “you had best not undertake the errand, lest you decrease the already sparse population of eligible gentlemen.”

“The festive season would be dismal indeed without you.” Lettie most certainly knew Minna was in jest, but hers was too good a heart to allow for even the possibility of Rupert’s departure to go unmourned.

“You are very good to me, Miss Fairburn.” He dipped his head.

Mrs. Mabey noted this exchange with wide eyes, something which spelled almost certain doom for anyone on the receiving end. Bless them, if Rupert and Lettie weren’t terribly careful, they would soon be the subject of whispers between Mrs. Mabey and her sister and subsequently the subject of extremely fast-paced gossip between Mrs. Shaw and anyone else who would listen.

“Will you be attending the Callons’ musicale this evening?” Minna asked the two ladies, praying it would prove enough of a distraction to prevent future declarations on the ladies’ parts of having discovered a great secret they would reluctantly share with all and sundry.

“Oh, most certainly!” Mrs. Shaw turned her full attention to Minna once more. Being the focus of an unrepentant gossip was not an overly comfortable experience, but she would endure it for the sake of her friends’ peace. “We came, in fact, to inquire as to *your* plans to attend. Mrs. Jackman has quite insisted you are expected. Everyone is on tenterhooks, all but holding our breaths.” That would be quite a feat for one who rarely stopped talking.

“Is something of note anticipated to occur at the musicale?” Minna asked innocently.

The ladies exchanged confused glances before setting their sights back on her once more and, in near perfect unison, answering, “Yes!”

Unable to entirely hide her misgivings, Minna replied, “Dare I ask what?”

“Mrs. Jackman will be there.” Mrs. Shaw clearly thought that ought to be explanation enough.

“Is she intending to perform?” Minna asked.

Under her breath, Lettie said, “I suspect she is, after a manner.”

Rupert very nearly didn’t keep his laughter tucked away.

“I don’t believe so,” Mrs. Shaw said. “She is an observer, you know. Never misses any detail, small or great.”

“You are both quite observant as well.” Minna’s comment, not unkindly meant, clearly pleased them. Smiles wreathed their faces, especially Mrs. Mabey’s. She was, after all, the watcher and gatherer of information in this duo.

“Do *you* wish to perform tonight?” Mrs. Mabey asked, eyes somehow wide and narrowed at the same time. “I can’t remember whether you have a talent that lends itself to performances.”

What Minna wished most was to be left alone by the Royal Court of Rumormongers, but that seemed entirely unlikely to occur. “Performing is not my specialty.”

The gossip-hungry ladies were not deterred.

“I cannot imagine you are entirely without accomplishments.” Mrs. Shaw seemed rather to hope Minna would next confess to being unable to do anything up to and including forming complete sentences.

“I can claim a few of the usual ones,” Minna said, “but none with such a degree of expertise that I would deign to display them at such a fine gathering as the Callons’ musicale.”

If one was not interested in either exchanging rumors and speculations or providing fodder for future such exchanges, conversations with Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Mabey were often brief. This one proved precisely that.

“But you *will* be in attendance tonight?” Mrs. Shaw pressed. “It will be such an evening! And one mustn’t miss the delights of the festive season. One simply must not!”

“I have no objections to attending” was all the answer Minna provided.

The ladies seemed to realize it would be useless to root about for further morsels to share elsewhere. With expressions of delight tinted with inquiry, they again expressed hope of seeing Minna, Lettie, and Rupert that evening before withdrawing with a rush of whispers between them that did not cease by the time they were out of the house and on their way.

“You did them a bad turn, Minna,” Rupert said, not returning to his seat, having risen when Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Mabey did. “You told them you do not perform, yet that was a performance unrivaled by anything offered on Drury Lane.”

Minna laughed. “Consider it my Christmas gift to you.”

Rupert shook his head as he turned to Lettie. “Generous, is she not?”

“Utterly magnanimous.”

These two did wonders for her spirits. When Simon was with them as well, Minna was merrier than she imagined she could be amongst any other people. How she would have survived the past years without them she did not care to ponder.



“Allow me to expand my legendary benevolence into a moment of remarkably useful bestowance of information.” She motioned subtly toward the tall grandfather clock against the opposite wall. “If we are all to conclude our preparations for this evening with time enough to arrive at the Callons’ home before the evening is over entirely, we’d best part ways.”

“I wish our visit had not been interrupted,” Lettie said to Rupert. “We were hardly able to talk at all.”

Minna and Lettie walked with Rupert from the drawing room to the front entry. “Will you be collecting us all in your carriage this evening, or shall I?”

“Whichever you would prefer, Minna.”

She had not always liked her given name, but there was something so musical in the way Rupert said it that made her think she might very well have the most beautiful name in all the world. Everyone should have someone in their life like Rupert Crawford, someone who softened the sharpness of life.

“You provide the carriage tonight, Rupert.” She folded her arms across her chest. “I would prefer remaining locked away in this house until after Christmas. But, as Mrs. Jackman is as able to find me here as in the Callons’ music room, I suppose I shall have to attend. And since I *have* to attend, I’ll at least not use my own carriage to deliver me to the beginning of my matchmaking misery.”

Lettie smiled faintly. “You need only endure her for a week.”

“Unless, of course,” Rupert said, “she proves successful. Then she will never stop crowing, and you will not ever be rid of her.”

“And if she is *unsuccessful*,” Minna countered, “I fear she will never stop trying.”

“Let us hope Simon is able to attend this evening,” Lettie said. “He is a good influence on us all, and if Mrs. Jackman is to be endured, a good influence will be an absolute must.”

Minna’s eyes fell on the tall front windows flanking the

heavy door. Outside, the approaching wintertime arrival of early-evening dusk had begun ushering in the all-too-familiar fog and darkness. London *could* be merry during this festive time of year. But it was often a bit dreary.

Rupert had pulled on his overcoat and gloves in preparation for the chill air awaiting him. His deep-red gloves, the same as he always wore, seemed to her particularly festive just then with Christmas hovering on the horizon. This was only the second Christmas in the past five years that she was not in mourning for a family member. She would, of course, always grieve them, but the passage of time had allowed for a bit more of the Christmas cheer to tiptoe back into her heart. It brought with it, though, the prick of sorrow that her parents and brother would never share this holy season with her again. And that reminder revived itself even in the color of gloves and the early arrival of dusk. Perhaps that was the way of grief; it whispered itself into even the smallest of things.

“Until this evening.” Rupert dipped his head to them both.

Minna sighed a little. He arched a single brow at her in inquiry.

“I am always a bit sad when you leave, Rupert.”

He shook his head, smiling in obvious amusement. “I will be back this evening.”

“Which is why I sighed only *a little*. Were you not planning to return for days, I would likely have simply crumbled into a heap of sorrow.” She was teasing, of course, but there was some truth to it. She *was* always sorry to see him go, and she missed him when he was away.

“No need to crumble, Minna. I will be back this evening.” He set his hat on his head. “I wouldn’t miss the beginning of Mrs. Jackman’s crusade for all the world.”

Lettie shooed him out with a laugh.

As he made his way down the front walk, the mournful bell of the nearby church struck the hour, declaring the day not as fully gone as the dim light would lead one to believe. By the time night truly fell, the carriages would require leading flares

to guide them along the streets. Those people with sense enough would remain home and out of the piercing, searching, biting cold. Minna, though certainly sensible enough, did not have much choice in the matter. Mrs. Jackman would only respond to her absence by redoubling her efforts, and Minna very much wished for her Christmas not to be ruined entirely.

“I mean to lie down for a spell,” Lettie said, already making her way up the stairs. “If I am to enjoy your discomfort this evening, I would do well to be fully rested.”

Minna could laugh at the poke. “Wait until she turns her attentions on you, Lettie Fairborn. You will not find it so amusing then.”

Lettie paused on the landing and looked back at her, eyes dancing with delight. “And what if I told you I intend to find my own match, saving Mrs. Jackman both the trouble and the satisfaction of finding one for me? What say you to that?”

“I do not doubt you, Lettie. Not for a moment.” Indeed, she sincerely hoped her cousin was able to secure the match of her choice. Minna would miss having her nearby all the time, as a delightful companion, a dear friend, her only remaining family. But she wanted Lettie to be happy, even if that happiness required that she eventually leave.

Minna pushed the thought of farewells and departures from her mind and made her way, alone, to the dining room, where she knew a light repast would be laid out for her.

The staff were both efficient and thoughtful, which Minna greatly appreciated. Upon the loss of her parents and older brother, she had been relieved to discover she could free her mind of any worries about the running of the household. All was as it should be, and she needn't add those concerns to her already often overwhelmed mind.

She sat alone at the table, grateful for the bit of nourishment but a bit melancholy. Was it the arrival of the holy season and the reminder of those with whom she would not be spending it that dampened her spirits? Was it Lettie's offhand remark about one day leaving Minna behind? Was it Mrs. Jackman's machinations and the vexation her attentions were likely to

cause?

*Mrs. Jackman.* The lady had managed to take up residence in Minna's thoughts, which felt utterly unfair. At the very least, the very determined matchmaker ought to pay rent if she was to occupy such prime property. Further, Minna ought to be permitted to evict so bothersome a tenant, oughtn't she?

She rose from the table, having eaten all she meant to and needing to make her way to her bedchamber in order to submit to the ministrations of her lady's maid. The echo of her footfalls on the bare floor resounded through the house like the crack of a door knocker. Every room she passed, even those on the floor above her, seemed to fill with the sound. The house was hardly empty, yet it had something of a cavernous feel just then. Night came early in the winter, filling the rooms with darkness as well as quiet.

The corridor was lit with candles, as was her bedchamber when she arrived and the dressing room beyond. All was as it should be, yet her mind was not at ease.

Mrs. Jackman meant to make mischief that night; Minna was certain of it. As the saying went, what cannot be avoided must needs be endured. And Mrs. Jackman was not the sort to be avoided for long.

# Chapter 3

CHRISTMAS HAD ALWAYS BEEN A very festive time of year in Rupert's family. His parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins would all congregate at one house or the other and spend Christmas Eve and Christmas Day together. There had often been another gathering on Twelfth Night to close out the Yuletide season.

He still enjoyed Christmas, still found it special and uplifting. But he had an odd sense of dissatisfaction this year that he didn't usually experience. He couldn't quite place what it was that felt different or why his heart didn't seem fully invested in the usual Christmas merriment.

He wished he could blame it on his annoyance with Mrs. Jackman. She was making Minna's Christmas less than merry, and that was inexcusable. Minna deserved to be happy during the most festive time of the year. She deserved to be happy during the *entire* year, but life had been painfully cruel to her the past half decade. Watching her heart repeatedly break with each new loss had broken his heart as well. And yet he knew, as he made his way from Minna's house in the direction of Simon's, that Minna's difficulties with the *ton's* most determined matchmaker didn't entirely explain his heavy mood.

How was it that something could be weighing on a person to the point that the mental heaviness felt almost physical and yet that person could not actually identify the source of his discouragement? It was markedly unfair.

Rupert called at Simon's family home to see if his friend felt equal to attending that night's musicale. Simon's health was often less than ideal, and he was not always able to participate in everything he would have liked.

The housekeeper led Rupert to the drawing room, where the family was gathered. The Vaughns were a large family, not poor but not wealthy, especially by the standards of the *ton*.

But in the seven years since Rupert had lost his own parents, they had begun to feel like family to him. They were kind and considerate. They took an interest in his life and what he was undertaking. They remembered the things he told them and asked after those things later. It was a relief to know that someone was aware of him.

His grandparents were wonderfully attentive, but the passage of time was beginning to take its toll on them. His visits with them were far more often spent listening to reminiscences of bygone years than sharing his plan and undertakings. He truly didn't mind. They were the dearest of people, and the memories they shared warmed him through.

A glance around the very busy drawing room revealed that Simon was not present. That was not generally a good sign.

Mr. Vaughn greeted him with a firm and hearty handshake. "Rupert. It's wonderful to see you, as always."

Rupert offered a genuine smile of gratitude. "And it is always an honor to be here in your home."

"I can guess what's brought you around. You are hoping Simon will be joining you this evening out in Society."

"That is precisely why I've come. Am I right that his absence from the drawing room indicates this has not been an easy day for him?"

Mr. Vaughn nodded, though the movement was free of any pity. The Vaughns were always very forthright about their son's illnesses, but it did not seem to overwhelm the family or diminish their bonhomie.

"Is he equal to having a visitor?" Rupert asked. Simon was not always strong enough.

Without hesitation, Mr. Vaughn said, "I daresay he is. He's in his bedchamber. Have a look in on him. You'll lift his spirits, which always does him good."

Rupert had visited with Simon many times before and knew precisely how to reach his friend's room. After his quick knock on the bedchamber door was answered with an invitation to enter, he stepped inside. Simon did, indeed, seem

pleased to see him. He also looked paler than he had the last time Rupert had seen him.

“I’ve heard rumors you aren’t going to be joining us this evening,” Rupert said.

“I haven’t the stamina today,” Simon said, smiling a little. His was an excellent sense of humor, and one he often utilized when discussing some of the struggles he had. He didn’t do so to make light of or ignore the reality of what he experienced. He simply had a natural knack for finding something to keep his spirits afloat even in treacherous waters.

He was seated in a chair near the fireplace, and there was an empty one directly across from him, which Rupert claimed for himself. “Shame, that, and not merely because you would enjoy the music. Mrs. Jackman has redoubled her declaration that she means to find our Minna a husband.”

“Oh dear,” Simon said with a laugh.

“It gets better still. Mrs. Jackman has insisted she will manage this feat by Christmas Day.”

Simon’s eyes pulled wide. “In one week?”

Rupert nodded. “And she, no doubt, means to begin her efforts tonight.”

Simon shook his head. “Poor Minna.”

“*Poor Minna?*” Rupert repeated in tones of mock outrage. “*Poor me.* I will have to watch this ridiculousness without you there to exchange dry commentary with.”

“I *will* miss that,” Simon acknowledged. “But I still say *poor Minna.* Though I do not doubt her ability to withstand pressure even from Mrs. Jackman, this will rob her of some of the enjoyment she ought to have in these last few days before Christmas.” Simon had a good heart, that was for sure and certain.

“Mrs. Jackman’s efforts would be ridiculous under ordinary circumstances. Minna, of all people, deserves a match she is enthusiastic about, one that will bring her joy. I have my doubts Mrs. Jackman has had Minna’s happiness in the

forefront of her thoughts while she's been scheming." Rupert wished he could have some reassurance that he was wrong about Mrs. Jackman's approach, but he felt certain he was not. "Minna deserves better. She deserves so much better."

"Should Mrs. Jackman toss a truly horrible gentleman in Minna's path tonight, do you mean to call her out?" Simon asked, not quite keeping his amusement tucked away.

"I would never call out Minna."

Simon shook his head. "I meant Mrs. Jackman, of course. I would be devastated to miss a moment that would, no doubt, be talked of for years to come."

"I promise to come by tomorrow and fill you in on all the best details."

Simon laughed lightly but also a bit weakly. It was clear he did not, in fact, have stamina today. "The gentlemen of the *ton* insist it is the ladies who indulge in the most gossip. I suspect that's not as true as we profess it to be."

"I prefer to call it 'scientific curiosity,'" Rupert said.

"Call it what you like; it is still gossip."

Rupert just smiled.

While Simon's amusement didn't entirely dissipate from his expression, a bit of seriousness entered it once more. "I do wish I didn't have to miss quite so many things. I have family enough to keep me busy, and I do enjoy their company, but I'm lonely sometimes. Lonely for people my own age and for all the adventures I ought to be having." He didn't often speak of these things. It wasn't self-directed pity or anger at his struggles; it was simply a very real and very sincere expression of the reality of his life at times.

"I'll confess to you, Simon," Rupert said, "I have been feeling a bit dissatisfied of late myself."

That appeared to thoroughly surprise his friend. "Has life been treating you poorly?"

Rupert shook his head. "There's nothing specific I can complain about. I get to see my grandparents regularly. My



investments are paying good returns. I can claim the very best of friends.”

“One of those friends is currently being harassed by a very resolute matchmaker. Perhaps the unfairness of that is what keeps niggling at you.”

Rupert did feel the heaviness of his mind and heart more acutely after visits with Minna, but they didn’t always talk about Mrs. Jackman. And he was certain this sense of dissatisfaction had been gnawing at him *before* that lady had ever entered their conversations.

“It is more than that,” he said. “Lately I feel an odd but impossible to discount feeling that something in my life needs to change.”

“Just anything at all? Or has your mind hit upon a particular change that is needed?”

Rupert shrugged. “The specifics of it I cannot seem to discover. *Something* is not what it should be. There is something more that I am longing for. Something that rests just beyond what my mind can sift through and just out of reach of my heart’s ability to translate, yet my heart needs this indefinable something so much that it aches without it.” Rupert felt rather foolish. “I realize that doesn’t make any sense.”

“It makes more sense than you might expect,” Simon said. “I suspect we have all had that feeling at one time or another. The feeling that either a change is coming or changes are needed. We know it’s there, we know it’s true, but life hasn’t yet opened that window and given us a clear view of the new vistas yet to come.”

*New vistas yet to come.* Rupert liked that description far better than “necessary changes that cannot even be identified.”

“Perhaps part of my discontent arises from the fact that my ‘vistas’ have been limited to London for so long.”

“You’re thinking of leaving Town?” Simon asked. “Not altogether, I hope.”

“I’d not thought of the possibility of shaking the dust of the

metropolis from my feet until just this moment, but perhaps a change in scenery is precisely what would do me the most good. Not permanently, I assure you. But for long enough to address my slightly blue mood.”

“You’ll likely find this proof that I am a rather dull fellow,” Simon said, “but I’ve never seen anything outside of London. Nothing at all. Not even the nearby countryside.”

“I can’t boast of having seen much more,” Rupert said. “I made a few trips out into the countryside when I was younger, generally to visit relatives. Even that wasn’t very extensive. While I was school age, I always thought I’d have a grand tour, like our fathers’ generation and their fathers’ generation did. That, of course, didn’t happen, Napoleon being the absurdly ambitious fellow he was up until Waterloo.”

Simon nodded. “I had believed a grand tour was in my future as well. I didn’t imagine I could undertake anything as extensive as most gentlemen did. I certainly couldn’t make the journey by myself on account of my strength diminishing so quickly and so often without warning. But I sometimes sat down with my father’s atlas and planned a somewhat-grand tour and chose a few select places I thought I might be able to see.”

“Well, my friend,” Rupert said, “I haven’t put my thumb on what this something is that won’t stop whispering in my thoughts, but maybe you and I can see if a bit of traveling might do us both some good. Whether we embark for the Continent or simply make a journey out to the countryside for, as you put it, new vistas, we might both find satisfaction in fulfilling a boyhood dream.”

A little smile tugged at Simon’s face, one that was equal parts agreement and hesitancy. That was intriguing.

“You don’t think new vistas are quite what you are looking for?” Rupert asked.

“It couldn’t hurt,” Simon said in a way that closed the conversation.

It seemed Rupert wasn’t the only one feeling oddly

dissatisfied with his life, as if there were something more he was meant to make of it, something that, if he changed it, would change everything. That was an unnerving yet vaguely exciting possibility. His biggest hurdle was not knowing what that something might be.

Mrs. Jackman meant to attempt a Christmas miracle. It seemed Rupert needed one too.

# Chapter 4

MINNA'S LADY'S MAID HAD VERY nearly finished arranging her hair for the upcoming musical evening when, somewhere in the house, the servants' summoning bells began to ring. Minna couldn't be certain how many of them were pealing, but it did seem to be more than one. That made the sound of the seldom-used bells all the stranger.

In her dressing-table mirror, Minna met the eye of her abigail, Ruth, who looked as confused as Minna felt.

"What do you suppose the commotion is?" Minna asked.

"I can't rightly say, but it must be something significant. I don't hear the bells ring often."

"Neither do I."

They were not left in suspense long. A chambermaid stepped inside, her expression a bit frantic.

Minna was careful as she moved her head, not wishing to complicate the task Ruth was undertaking. "We heard the bells. What has occurred?"

"There's a caller here for you, Miss Schofield," the chambermaid said.

Ruth looked at the maid and spoke quietly out of the side of her mouth. "Miss Schofield is not at home to visitors just now. Why was this new arrival not sent away?"

Looking ever more miserable, the poor girl explained. "Mr. Robertson did try, but she wouldn't go. He didn't think Miss Schofield would want us tossing a lady out onto the street, no matter that she was being a nuisance. There'd be whispers. And the lady would probably happily start them."

Someone who was too resolute to leave when arriving outside of at-home hours and who was so enamored of being the source of a good tale that she would even embarrass herself in order to spread one? This arrival could only be one

person: Mrs. Jackman.

Minna sighed. “She is unlikely to stop hounding the staff until I speak with her.”

The maid’s gaze turned apologetic. “That’s what Mr. Robertson thought too. Otherwise we’d not’ve disturbed you at all.”

“Miss Fairborn has not been bothered with this, has she?” Minna asked.

The maid shook her head. “Though, I can’t imagine she’s not heard the bells, if nothing else.”

Minna could easily imagine the havoc Mrs. Jackman was wreaking below. She met Ruth’s gaze once more. “I will see if I can send her on her way, and then we can finish preparations.”

Ruth nodded, looking equally frustrated on her behalf and grateful on behalf of the staff.

Despite knowing she would look rather unkempt and likely a bit ridiculous, Minna left her dressing wrap on over her gown, and allowed Ruth to place a loose cap on her head to prevent her hair from growing too chaotic. She could not permit Mrs. Jackman to cause distress in this place where she herself had fought so hard to find peace and where Lettie had found a home after her own losses. Minna guarded this sanctuary fiercely. She had buried too many people and grieved too long and too hard to allow her respite from it to be invaded overly often or without putting up a fight.

Mrs. Jackman was standing in the middle of the drawing room, watching the doorway as Minna stepped inside. She didn’t think Mrs. Jackman intended to appear menacing, but she did just the same.

“Mrs. Jackman.” Minna managed to keep her frustration out of her voice. “Was there something in particular you wanted from me?”

“Much, in fact.” The lady’s gaze didn’t waver. “I wanted, first, to make certain you were planning to attend the musicale this evening.”

“I am, though my preparations have been interrupted.” The gently worded rebuke did nothing.

Mrs. Jackman sat down on the opposite side of the fireplace from where Minna stood, as if she were quite at ease in the decidedly awkward situation.

“Mercy,” Minna whispered. “Why must she make so much trouble for me?”

“I have come on a matter of great importance,” Mrs. Jackman said.

“It must be of *tremendous* importance to have been undertaken during the very hour in which you, I imagine, would otherwise be preparing for tonight’s musicale yourself.”

Mrs. Jackman nodded solemnly. “Is not the matter of matrimony always of tremendous importance?”

“Are you marrying again?” Minna kept her tone entirely innocent. Mrs. Jackman was a widow, and though she had dedicated much of her time to securing spouses for unsuspecting young ladies, she had given no indication that she was the least eager to marry again herself. “You are, after all, quite an advocate of marriage.”

“Marriage? Well, yes. Marriage is a fine thing. But *matchmaking* is, you might say, my business, my expertise. Securing the happiness of others, bringing together like-minded and like-hearted people, doing all I can to successfully match everyone I have predicted I will, is all part of my business. The actual weddings that have resulted are but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business.”

If Minna had been mildly annoyed before, she was truly worried now. Mrs. Jackman’s dedication to gossip seemed almost reasonable when compared with the grandiosity with which she apparently viewed her efforts as a matchmaker.

“While I will not deny that you have found matches for many young ladies,” Minna said, “I feel I must dissuade you from your efforts on my behalf. I have no desire to form an attachment or pursue matrimony. I am perfectly satisfied with the current situation in which I find myself.”

Mrs. Jackman did not appear the least moved by that. In fact, she waved off Minna's objections with a quick flick of her hand. "I have three gentlemen in mind already, any of whom would be an excellent husband for you. I mean to see to it that they all cross your path in the days leading up to Christmas."

"I—I think I would rather you not."

"Without my efforts, you cannot hope to make an excellent match."

A match, excellent or otherwise, was not something Minna hoped for at all. Whole hearts hurt a great deal less than those given to the keeping of others. A succession of devastating losses had left her heart too shattered for lending out any longer. She was not cold, nor did she eschew friendships or company. But she did not feel herself ready for anything more than that. Not yet.

"Expect to meet the first of these gentlemen tonight," Mrs. Jackman said, "at the Callons' musicale."

"Couldn't I meet them all at once and have it over?" Minna suggested.

"You'll meet the second and third at subsequent gatherings this week." On that firm declaration, Mrs. Jackman rose and made her way from the room.

She was not an unpleasant person, neither was she unkind. Minna knew she meant well. But, while Minna had found some degree of entertainment upon hearing of Mrs. Jackman's efforts on behalf of others, having had her own visit with the matchmaker, she found herself increasingly less pleased with the experience.

Three gentlemen would be tossed in her way, spread out over the days remaining until Christmas. There was no predicting precisely when Mrs. Jackman meant to make the introductions or push her chosen option into Minna's path. For the remainder of the festive season, Minna would not be able to relax and simply enjoy herself. And every gentleman she came across would have to be treated with wariness.

Would Mrs. Jackman always be present when the introduction was made? Was it a foregone conclusion that none of the three potential suitors would be someone with whom Minna was already acquainted?

She told herself that Mrs. Jackman was overstating the situation, that she simply meant to *encourage* Minna to interact with people in the hope that someone would catch her notice.

That was all. Mere encouragement.

And yet, as she made her way back up the stairs to the bedchamber where Ruth would be waiting, she could not stop her imaginative mind from half expecting ghostly gentlemen to hop out from every corner, waiting for her, eager to propose, unbothered by her wish to be left in peace.

No. The next week was not likely to be a peaceful one. And few things in life were as important to Minna as peace.



## Chapter 5

MINNA DID HER BEST TO recover her spirits as Ruth finished helping her prepare for the evening. She likely would have endured the vexation of Mrs. Jackman's attention with greater equanimity if she hadn't been anticipating a far quieter Christmas season than the lady's attention was likely to allow.

She'd found solace in the quietness of her home, in the easy companionship of her cousin, in the ability to determine how often and with whom she spent her time. Gatherings of the *ton* were endurable in large part because she had the ability to come and go as she pleased, to interact as much or as little with whomever she chose. Mrs. Jackman was going to ruin it all.

It was in this less than cheery frame of mind that she met Rupert in the entryway of her home, he having called with his carriage as he'd promised to do. She attempted to appear more enthusiastic than she felt, but friends of such long-standing as they could hardly keep secrets from each other.

"Do not tell me the prospect of Mrs. Jackman has undermined your joy so entirely," he said with a bit of a laugh.

"Do not make light," she said, feeling less put out than she had mere moments earlier. Rupert had offered only one sentence thus far and had still managed to lift her spirits. What would she do without him? "I believe we shall find, over the next week, that Mrs. Jackman's efforts on my behalf will outpace those she has made before."

"What makes you so certain of that?" he asked.

"She called here an hour ago." Lettie made the declaration as she glided down the last of the stairs, through the entryway, and out the door.

"Say what you will for our quiet friend," Rupert said, watching her pass, "but she does know how to make an entrance."

“She does indeed.”

Rupert walked with Minna to the carriage, only a pace or two behind Lettie. He offered his hand to assist Lettie into the carriage, then turned to Minna. She set her hand in his, a simple connection, a very common moment, but it settled her nerves as nothing yet had that evening. She felt far more equal to facing the discomfort that awaited her.

The moment they were all settled and the carriage moving, Rupert asked the question she knew he would. “What did Mrs. Jackman say when she called?”

“She wanted to be certain I was attending tonight’s gathering because someone will be there who is on her very short list of prospects for me.”

Rupert and Lettie exchanged looks, their expressions best described as mingled confusion, amusement, and exasperation, everything Minna herself was feeling.

“I am, according to her declaration, to be introduced to three gentlemen, between now and Christmas, with whom she is convinced I could make an absolutely glorious match. Though she didn’t say as much, I suspect she has rested her entire reputation on her success in this matter. Which, as we all know, means her efforts will be relentless.”

“You had teasingly declared you might choose to leave London until after the holy day,” Lettie said. “And, as miserable as I would be without you, I find myself suspecting that might actually have been a good idea.”

Minna looked to Rupert. “What of you? Would you be horribly miserable if I left London?”

She enjoyed the sight of his familiar smile. “It is difficult to imagine London without you in it.”

She laughed lightly. “It is also difficult to imagine London without the smell of horse excrement, but that doesn’t mean one would be bereft should it suddenly disappear.”

Rupert shook his head as his smile grew to a grin. “Let us hope Mrs. Jackman has secured the cooperation of three gentlemen who do not mind having their perfectly friendly

declarations twisted about.”

“Or are, at the very least, unlikely to compare me with horse excrement.” Minna gave him a look of feigned accusation. “Simon never does, I will have you know.”

“He is a saint among gentlemen.” Though Rupert was joining in her teasing tone, there was enough sincerity in his voice to match the accuracy of his observation.

“Are we fetching him now?” Lettie asked.

Rupert shook his head. “He was not feeling well enough to join us this evening, poor bloke.”

They all adored Simon. Anyone who truly knew him adored him. There were, of course, those in Society who felt a person who faced the challenge of chronic and debilitating illness was neither desirable company nor a person worth making room for if doing so was the least bit inconvenient. Some were not overly concerned with hiding their view that those of poor health or limited abilities ought never to leave home so as not to cause any degree of discomfort to those they considered worth keeping company with.

Simon endured it all without bitterness, but Minna’s heart hurt for him. Robust health and limitless abilities did not determine a person’s worth. Those who could not see how remarkable Simon was were decidedly the worse for it, though they seldom realized and were unlikely to ever admit as much.

“I hope he is able to join us for at least one grand event this week,” Lettie said. “It will simply not feel like Christmas if we do not get to spend at least some of it with him.”

The carriage arrived at the Callon home, one in a long line of carriages belonging to those in London Society who had received the coveted invitation. While Minna, Lettie, and Rupert waited for their turn to alight, they could continue conversing and enjoying each other’s company. In such a large crush as this evening promised to be, they would be afforded few opportunities once they entered the stately house.

“Thank you again for taking up the task of transporting us this evening,” Minna said. “The next evening we all spend

together, Lettie and I will provide the carriage and driver.”

“That is likely for the best,” Rupert said. “Our next planned outing is two days from today, and I will be visiting my grandparents tomorrow. If they are in poor health, which is worryingly possible, I might remain with them for a couple of days.”

Minna reached across and set her hand in his, squeezing it. “I am sorry there is reason to believe they might be unwell. I do hope they prove quite hale and hearty.”

He set his other hand atop hers, sandwiching hers in a cocoon of friendly regard. Rupert had always been a comforting and peaceful person. She appreciated that about him. “If you’re not overly busy tomorrow,” he said, “perhaps you might go with me to look in on them. They do enjoy when you come to see them.”

She nodded without hesitation. “I would like that, thank you.”

Sometimes Rupert smiled at her in a way that made her wonder what he was thinking but wasn’t sharing with her. The expression was not one of sadness, necessarily. Neither was there any hint of disapproval. But there was something in his eyes at times that she could not identify, something that made her want to hold tight to his hand and not let go until she’d solved the riddle.

But, as seemed to always happen, he pulled his hand away from hers and returned to his jovial self before she could so much as formulate a hypothesis.

“I understand the Callons have invited an opera singer to perform tonight,” Rupert said. “No amateur offerings at this Christmas gathering.”

“Oh, then I doubly wish Simon had come,” Lettie said. “He enjoys opera. And if the performance is in German, he could have translated for us.”

That sent Lettie and Rupert down the conversational path of operas they’d seen and people they knew who spoke various languages. Minna retreated into a silence that was unusual for

her when in company with her friends.

Why was her mind so very heavy today? Yes, Mrs. Jackman was likely to be a bit of a pest. Yes, she would miss Simon, as he was such a joyous member of their group. And yes, she was worried for Rupert's grandparents and grieving for him as he worried over them, knowing herself how it felt to lose family. But she, too, enjoyed musical evenings. And she particularly enjoyed the Christmas season. Perhaps her burdened mind was, as she had been telling herself, merely tired and worn out and anticipating a Christmas season that wasn't as peaceful and joyous as she would have hoped.

At last it was their turn to disembark. Rupert walked with Minna and Lettie through the front doors of the grand London house of the Callon family. All of Society knew of the abiding friendship between the three of them and Simon. Even still, they were careful not to give any false impressions of impropriety or romantic attachment.

The moment they stepped into the large and expansive drawing room, where a pianoforte had been moved, along with a large and varied assortment of chairs and sofas, Minna could feel herself grow tense. Somewhere in this glittering gathering, Mrs. Jackman was watching her; Minna knew she was. And somewhere in the midst of it all was a gentleman that lady meant to foist upon her.

Rupert leaned the tiniest bit closer and, lowering his voice, said, "You look very much as if you anticipate seeing a ghost at any moment."

"Knowing what I *am* likely to see," she said, "I believe I would prefer a ghost."

He offered her a smile, the sort that had buoyed her during times of trial. "Consider this a test of your endurance, Minna Schofield. And take courage in knowing that you have endured worse."

"If I do not survive, I fully expect you to eulogize me in a way that no one could mistake for anything but an apology for having dismissed the enormity of all I was facing at the time of my tragic demise."

He laughed quietly. “You have my word.”

Lettie and Minna hooked arms and made their way about, speaking to the ladies of their acquaintance, while Rupert interacted with the gentlemen. As there were more guests than places to sit, the ladies would, no doubt, have use of the chairs while the gentlemen would stand along the walls for the entirety of the musical performance. It was likely a mercy that Simon had been unable to attend. His limbs grew easily fatigued, and he struggled to stand for overly long periods of time. The demands of that evening would have been quite difficult for him.

As it was, the first half of the evening proved tremendously enjoyable. The operatic singer who had been procured for the evening did not perform any arias or excerpts from operatic selections. Instead, she favored the guests with various songs connected to the Christmas season.

“Oh, this is delightful,” Lettie whispered to Minna between selections.

It was indeed. Minna’s heart was particularly touched when the performer sang the hauntingly lovely lyrics and tune of “Adeste Fideles,” a selection in Latin that her brother had, when they were younger, translated for her.

*“Adeste, fideles, laeti triumphantes*

*Venite, venite in Bethlehem.”*

She could no longer remember what the words meant, but how readily she recalled hearing them in years past and how quickly the sound of them sung so beautifully transported her to happy Christmases past with her beloved family.

*“Venite adoremus,*

*Venite adoremus,*

*Venite adoremus, Dominum.”*

Her heart both swelled and broke with the recollection of all she’d had and all she’d lost. She found it necessary to press her lips together to stop their slight trembling and to dab discreetly at the tear that slipped from her eye. She was more

than merely tired; she was lonely.

*Stop this now, Minna.* She could acknowledge that she was weary, but allowing herself to feel lonely was a path strewn with trouble. Only by pushing such thoughts from her mind had she managed to emerge at all from the swirling sea of grief she'd been nearly swallowed by. Knowingly swimming out in it once more would be a dangerous thing.

The interval arrived and the guests were invited to partake of the light repast the Callons provided while the performer rested her voice for a spell.

Minna rose, the sorrow that had arrived alongside the nostalgia not having entirely eased. She knew well how to clear her thoughts of such things; she had been doing so for years. But she managed it best when she was alone, a luxury she did not have in that moment, and not merely because Lettie was at her side in a grand drawing room surrounded by the *ton*.

Mrs. Jackman was approaching. And she was not alone.

# Chapter 6

MINNA KNEW THE GENTLEMAN WHO walked at Mrs. Jackman's side, though she had seen Abner Lloyd only a couple of times since her brother's death. He and her brother had been dear friends at school. Minna had seen him on occasion when they were children, but with decreasing frequency as they'd grown.

Not much about him had changed, at least outwardly. He still had blond hair so light it was very nearly white. He still had an almost angelic quality to his appearance. Though he didn't look like a child, there was an unaffected innocence to him. He leaned more toward Town buck than languid dandy, having the look of one who undertook physical exertion often enough to build up strength but not so much as to render him physically intimidating.

She watched him as he and Mrs. Jackman drew closer, hoping to ascertain whether or not he was participating in this scheme willingly or under duress or, more likely still, was entirely ignorant of the actual game being played.

For a moment, Minna's attention was captured by the intricately embroidered waistcoat he wore, the colorful patterns there of green sprigs of holly mingled with summer flowers. It was somehow quite fitting for Christmastime while still bringing to mind the warmer and brighter days of the midyear. It suited him. He had arrived, whether he knew it or not, as a reminder of times gone by.

"Miss Schofield," Mrs. Jackman greeted. "See who I have found! I believe you know Mr. Lloyd."

"I do indeed." She offered a curtsy and he a bow. "I do not know if Mr. Lloyd remembers Miss Fairborn." She motioned to Lettie, standing at her side and barely holding back her amusement.

"Your cousin, if I recall correctly." He offered a bow. "It is a pleasure to see you again, Miss Fairborn."

"And I you," Lettie returned.



“I have not seen you in at least two years’ time,” Minna said to him. “What brings you back to London?”

“I have not spent Christmas in London in many years and found myself longing to do so once more.”

“How fortunate for us that you decided to do so.” If not for Mrs. Jackman’s interference, Minna would have been more than pleased to see him again. Her eyes darted to that lady and saw a look of immense satisfaction that told her Mrs. Jackman already considered herself quite successful in her schemes. Though Minna did not care to encourage the lady, she liked Mr. Lloyd too much to be unkind to him, especially since the awkward silence growing between them seemed to indicate that he was a rather unwitting participant in Mrs. Jackman’s efforts.

“I was sorry to hear of your mother’s passing,” she said.

“I was sorry to hear of yours,” he replied.

His father was yet living, but as far as she remembered, Mr. Lloyd hadn’t any living grandparents. She might offer her condolences on that loss as well, and he could return by saying he was sorry for the loss of her father and her brother, at which point she would need to return the condolences since he had, in her brother, lost a friend. But she did not overly wish to speak of death and loss. It hung over her mind enough as it was. Reliving that sorrow would be an unnecessary journey through the valley of grief.

“I will leave the two of you to discuss . . . everything.” Mrs. Jackman’s pointed look brought confusion to Mr. Lloyd’s face. The eager matchmaker slipped away, no doubt meaning to crow to her companions about what remarkable progress she felt she was making.

“When last I was in London, the two of you ladies were almost never seen without the other,” Mr. Lloyd said. “I suspect that has not changed.”

“Not in the least. As neither of us have living parents or brothers, and we do not employ companions, we fill that role for each other.” The explanation did not do justice to the

friendship she and Lettie had. They were more than cousins, more than friends. Lettie was the nearest thing to a sister Minna could imagine having.

“Do you remember, during the 1812 Season,” Mr. Lloyd said, “Mr. Bickle returned to Town with his newlywed wife and his sister, and on account of his not having been in London for many years and neither his wife nor his sister being well-known in Society, the two ladies were continually mistaken for each other?” Mr. Lloyd laughed lightly, though not in a way that gave even the smallest impression of poking fun at anyone but merely the enjoyment of a fond memory. “The poor gentleman was constantly correcting everyone and managed to thoroughly confuse himself. Before a fortnight was out, no one knew who anyone was, and he was in both his sister and his wife’s black books.”

Minna suspected he did not require the memory to be shared for his enjoyment of it to be secured. This was fortunate, as neither she nor Lettie had participated in the Season four years ago, both being in mourning for a parent.

“And, do you remember,” Mr. Lloyd continued, “that time when I was visiting your family during school break, when your brother and I undertook a footrace around the green outside your family home?”

“I do not recall who emerged victorious in that competition.”

Mr. Lloyd sighed, but not in frustration or unhappiness. “He did, I am afraid.”

She could smile at the memory, which she was grateful to discover. Not every recollection was one she wasn’t weighed down by. The years gone by were so often too interwoven with her grief.

Mr. Lloyd continued on in this vein, beginning one sentence after another with some variation of “Do you remember . . .” and then recalling something he held in fond recollection. Some of the things he recalled were moments she too had memories of. Most she did not. And none seemed to require her to join in the conversation.

Determined to pull his thoughts away from the past, she asked, "Do you mean to return to London for the Season?"

"I am hoping to," he said. "I don't suspect that a tremendous lot has changed since I last joined in the annual activities."

She shook her head. "Very little has changed. That seems the way of London, doesn't it?"

"It does at that. And I, for one, am rather glad that is the case. There's something very comforting in that which is familiar."

She could not argue with that. Hers was not a disposition to dwell in the past, but she did appreciate the comfort of familiarity.

"Do the Felingums still hold their annual Christmas ball?" he asked.

"They do," Lettie answered.

"Capital!" he said. "I do hope I receive an invitation."

"I'm certain the moment the Felingums hear you are in London, an invitation will be eagerly delivered to your home," Minna said.

She hoped she was proven correct. Mr. Lloyd was not unpleasant, and he certainly deserved the opportunity to enjoy himself. Of course, that would mean that in years to come, *this* year's Felingums' Christmas ball would join his list of "Do you remember when . . ." topics of conversation.

Rupert joined them the next moment, which brought a feeling of relief. More than relief, if she were being fully honest. She felt happier when Rupert was nearby. "Abner Lloyd," he said. "I've not seen you in years."

"I've missed the last couple of Seasons on account of being in mourning."

Rupert nodded his understanding. "It is good to have you among us again."

Minna's eyes happened upon Mrs. Jackman standing at a distance beside Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Mabey. They all looked

immensely pleased with themselves. Minna didn't quite know what to think of that.

She was not displeased to have renewed her acquaintance with Mr. Lloyd. She would not dislike crossing paths with him again at social events they might both happen to attend. But this was not the miraculous reintroduction Mrs. Jackman seemed to think it was.

Minna liked Mr. Lloyd well enough. He was a good person with a good and generous heart. He'd been a very dear friend to her brother. But his purview appeared to be the past, and she had no desire to dwell there.

# Chapter 7

MINNA AND RUPERT RIDING ALONE in his carriage would not necessarily be approved of by Society's sticklers. But the two of them had often visited Rupert's grandparents employing this exact arrangement. The older lady and gentleman lived in London a very short drive from Minna's home. Such a brief trip, undertaken with the intent to show kindness to two respectable people could hardly be reason for abject disapproval. Of course, there were those who would fault any person for nearly anything, but Minna chose not to be overly concerned about earning those people's good opinions.

Rupert was unusually quiet on the drive, which worried Minna. She knew he was concerned about his grandparents. She knew what it was to lose people, and her heart broke for him, knowing he would, if not soon, then eventually lose these two people who were dear to him.

When they had ridden out to see Mr. and Mrs. Crawford in the past, she had sat on the forward-facing bench and he on the rear-facing. But not five minutes into this drive, she slipped across the carriage and sat beside him. She took his hand in hers and silently urged him to look at her. He did, and she was relieved to see his gaze wasn't crushingly heavy.

"You are very quiet today," she said.

He squeezed her hand. "I am a bit weary, though I'm not entirely certain why."

"The musicale did not go overly late last evening, so it's unlikely you are suffering from loss of sleep."

He smiled a little. "I'm not so much in my dotage that a sedate musicale will render me exhausted."

"Are you concerned for Simon?" she asked.

"I am, but no more than usual."

She shifted her arm so that it hooked through his. "Are you offended on my behalf that I'm being subjected to Mrs.

Jackman's machinations?" she guessed with a lighthearted tone.

"Thoroughly offended," he said with a laugh of his own.

"And worried she might turn her attention to you next?"

His smile grew into the eye-crinkling one she adored so much. They'd been friends for nearly five years now, and that smile had been a source of joy for all five of them. She missed it when it was not in evidence.

"Are you worried about your grandparents?" she guessed.

"I will feel better when I have had a chance to see them and know how they are faring."

She nodded. "I always enjoy spending time with them."

"Thank you again for coming with me. They enjoy having callers but are seldom favored with any."

"They long for visitors but don't have any. I long for quiet and, lately, cannot claim that. Perhaps your grandparents would consider a trade."

He looked at her once more, his brow pulled low. "Would you rather have stayed home today?"

She patted his arm. "Not at all. Some people are worth disrupting one's peace for."

"And am I one of those people?" he asked. "Or are you applying the description to only my grandparents?"

"After last night, I am applying the description to almost anyone other than Mrs. Jackman."

Rupert continued watching her with that same expression of mingled concern and uncertainty. "Was her choice of Mr. Lloyd not to your liking?"

"Allow me to answer your question this way." She assumed a very somber expression. "'Do you remember when . . . ?'"

A bit of amusement entered Rupert's expression once more. "He *was* waxing very sentimental last night."

She nodded. "I don't recall him being that way in years'

past. I wonder if this is a permanent change in him or simply the natural result of having been away from Society for so long that he has little connection to people beyond what once existed.”

“Which makes him a poor choice for you, Minna.”

“Why do you think that?” She agreed, but she was deeply curious as to Rupert’s reasons for thinking so.

“You work very hard, my dear friend, not to think of what has been. The past is a far-distant land for you, one you will go to great lengths never to explore.”

Minna could not be certain whether he was making a mere observation or offering a gently worded rebuke. “Is it so terrible that I have found a means of emerging from years of devastating loss and am living my life despite the grief of it?”

“Not terrible at all.” It sounded more like a concession than an agreement. And he was looking at her in the way he sometimes did, the fleeting something in his expression that told her he wasn’t saying everything he wished he could, that something about what he held back made him sad.

The carriage came to a gentle stop in front of the home of Mr. and Mrs. Crawford. Rupert was immediately back to his very content and quiet self. Minna, however, struggled to find her sense of contentment again. Rupert had been a rock in so many of the storms of her life. The very possibility that something about her disappointed him pricked at her.

The butler, nearly as old as the people for whom he worked, showed Minna and Rupert to the sitting room. Minna took a deep breath and told herself to focus, to push thoughts of sorrow from her mind.

Mr. and Mrs. Crawford were utterly beside themselves with delight to have their grandson visiting. And they expressed again and again their pleasure that Minna was calling as well. She had accompanied Rupert to their home many times and was deeply fond of them.

They wanted to hear all the latest on-dits and updates on what was occurring in Society. Knowing Rupert was unlikely

to whisper her annoyances into his grandparents' ears, she did it for him. They would be diverted by the tale, and that would allow Rupert to worry a little less for them.

"Mrs. Mary Jackman has decided I'm to be the focus of her latest matrimonial effort," Minna said with a dry tone she knew clearly communicated how amusingly uncomfortable the experience was.

They both immediately laughed, the sound hale and hearty. Neither was seized by coughs and neither seemed out of breath. That must have been a good sign.

"And what do you mean to do?" Mr. Crawford asked.

"Do?" Minna pressed her hand to her heart. "What *can* I do? Mrs. Jackman is as undeterrable as a brick wall and I daresay twice as thick-headed."

"I knew her mother when we were both young ladies," Mrs. Crawford said. "I can tell you authoritatively that Mrs. Jackman comes by her tenacity rightly."

Minna looked to Rupert and assumed her most heartbroken and sorrowful expression, one far too exaggerated to be taken seriously. "It seems I am done for. Best begin writing that eulogy, my dear friend. Take care to include poetic references to the holy season and the poignancy it has added to the tragedy of my untimely passing."

"Shall I reference snow in my brokenhearted remarks?" Rupert asked.

Minna nodded somberly. "Whether or not there is any on London come Christmas Day, I believe it should be included in your recounting of my heroic endurance this week and the great loss that followed."

"No need to uncork any inkwells, Rupert," Mr. Crawford said. "Minna is made of far sterner stuff than that."

"You think I will emerge victorious?" Minna asked. "Despite Mrs. Jackman having generations of hound dogs in her blood?"

"Victorious, yes," Mrs. Crawford said. "But perhaps a bit



worse for wear.”

They all laughed. Rupert looked less burdened than he had during the drive. Perhaps it was his grandparents’ health weighing on his thoughts after all. This visit was doing his heart good. It was doing hers good as well.

“Has Mrs. Jackman been undertaking her matchmaking efforts *recently*, then?” Mr. Crawford asked. “One would hope she would afford you a bit of peace during the holy season.”

“Quite the opposite,” Rupert said. “Mrs. Jackman has declared that she will find Minna a husband by Christmas Day.”

The older couple exchanged surprised and amused glances.

“Unfortunately for Mrs. Jackman,” Minna said, “she has staked her reputation as the Marchioness of Matchmaking on me falling desperately in love with one of the three gentlemen she intends to parade before me in this week leading up to the Felingums’ ball.”

“The Felingums’ ball.” Mr. Crawford sighed. “That family has held a Christmastime ball for decades.” He reached over and set his hand atop his wife’s. “We first met at one of their balls.”

“Yes, we did.”

“Mr. Felingum, grandfather to the current Mr. Felingum and quite aged already at that time, was such a jovial fellow,” Mr. Crawford continued. “One could not help but be merry at any gathering he participated in. But one he *hosted*”—he smiled and shook his head, clearly having been part of many such an evening—“those were the merriest of all.”

“With the Christmas ball surpassing all others held at the Felingum home,” Mrs. Crawford added. “That night was as magical a Christmas night as I could imagine. Some found it a bit bold to host so gregarious a gathering on the holy day itself, but the annual ball was so filled with joyfulness and the delight of friends and a celebration of the season that even the naysayers could offer nothing but quick and quietly muttered words of uncertainty.”

It *was* the only Society event Minna knew of that was held on the very day of Christmas.

“One of the musicians in that year’s quartet had the greatest difficulty keeping in tune.” Mrs. Crawford offered the memory with a delighted laugh that was joined in by her husband. “Bless him, he grew more flustered as the evening progressed. Everyone was so merry, however, that no one seemed to mind overly much.”

“And, upon being provided with a glass of negus, he suddenly found his musical ability again.” Mr. Crawford’s addition to the memory brought the entire room to laughter, despite Rupert and Minna not having experienced the moment he was recalling. “From that moment forward, everyone in attendance made quite certain he was in ample possession of warming beverages, slices of cake, and an abundance of mince pies.”

“Oh, I do love a mince pie,” Minna said. “Is there a morsel more delightfully associated with Christmas than a mince pie?”

“Our cook, when I was still a small boy,” Rupert said, “made the very best mince pies at Christmastime, always with just the right amount of cinnamon and cloves. Such an indulgence, and one I will forever associate with this time of year.”

“Were the mince pies at that ball as memorable as the struggling musician?” Minna asked the Crawfords.

“Everything about it was wonderful,” Mrs. Crawford said.

“And when I first saw Millicent amongst the shimmering crowd, the evening was no longer merely delightful.” Mr. Crawford watched his wife with utter adoration. “I knew, in that moment, that my life had changed for the better.”

“A fitting thing to be changed for the better on Christmas Day,” Rupert said.

“Millicent wore a gown in a shade of deep green with silver threads woven throughout.” Mr. Crawford’s voice took on a note of being far away. “I remember thinking how perfectly

Christmaslike she was, smiling so happily and decked in the very color of the bows and wreaths adorning the room, and the silver of her gown shimmering in the candlelight like the very star of Christmas. She even had a sprig of holly in her hair.”

Minna watched Rupert as he listened to his grandparents reminisce. There was a softness in his expression that, while not entirely absent at other times, was clearer just now. His grandparents’ variety of “Do you remember when” was soothing and sweet. One felt invited to add the joy of their memory to one’s own recollections rather than awkwardly attempting to participate in a narrative in which they had no role or place. And the Crawfords’ memory was one that uplifted rather than weighed down, which Minna particularly appreciated.

“Will you be attending this year’s ball?” Rupert asked his grandparents.

“What good would we be, aging and past our prime as we are, at a festive gathering like that?” But Mrs. Crawford sounded as if she wished the answer were different.

““What good’?” Minna repeated, allowing her disagreement to be reflected in her tone. “I, for one, have never found anything but the utmost enjoyment in your company. Having you present at a festive gathering like the Felingums’ ball would increase my enjoyment of it one hundredfold.”

“We have not attended in a few years.” Mrs. Crawford hemmed a bit, but there was every reason for Minna to suspect the older lady had missed the gatherings and would, despite her misgivings, thoroughly enjoy attending one. “I don’t suppose they still serve mince pies.”

“They did last year,” Minna said. “And, though there were no musicians who were quite as entertaining as the one who played best when well fed and the tiniest bit tipsy, the music was invigorating and perfectly suited to dancing.”

“And the entire house was decked for the day with boughs of holly and branches of evergreen,” Rupert added. “Cake, just as you recall from that ball years ago, and yes, mince pies. The supper they provided included roast beef and boiled mutton.

And from every lip dropped an easy and sincere ‘Happy Christmas.’ All who attend find themselves happier for having been there, their burdens lightened for an evening, their worries replaced by pleasure.”

Mr. and Mrs. Crawford, having nodded as he spoke, answered his description with matching ones from balls gone by. They had attended so many and had such beautiful memories.

Mr. Lloyd’s recollections of previous events and experiences, while not truly unpleasant, hadn’t lightened Minna’s heart or offered the same joy she heard now. Hearing Mr. and Mrs. Crawford share such magical moments in their lives touched her much the way the Christmas carols had the night before.

She closed her eyes. How easily she imagined in her mind’s eye the places and people being described to her. She could smell the wassail, hear the musicians playing festive tunes, feel the enjoyment of all present. She could imagine a very young Mr. Crawford spying an equally young Mrs. Crawford from across the room, his heart soaring, his mind spinning with hopeful possibilities. She could feel the way their hearts must have pounded as they’d drawn closer, each wondering what the other thought and felt.

Warmth expanded and grew in her chest as she thought about it, imagined it. What would it be like to experience a moment such as that? To see someone in the midst of the festively joyous holy season and realize that person had captured one’s heart?

It was such a different feeling than what Mrs. Jackman’s efforts conjured up. For her, such things were a calculation and a source of pride.

To Mr. and Mrs. Crawford, who had married for love at a time when such was unheard of, moments of meeting and seeing and falling in love were a thing of beauty to be cherished.

But a connection like theirs felt so rare. To love someone so entirely, so deeply, with all of oneself, was a gift but also a

vulnerability. It meant all the more pain when one lost that person. Minna's heart couldn't bear the thought.

Her and Rupert's visit with his grandparents lasted three hours, and yet the time seemed to pass in an instant. Minna would have remained longer, as would have Rupert, she suspected, except his grandparents had begun to look tired. Minna suspected a spot of rest would do them greater good than continued conversation.

Rupert's traveling carriage was summoned, and they were soon making their way back to Minna's home.

"It is now my turn to say that you are unusually quiet," Rupert said.

"I've found my thoughts filled with that moment at the Felingums' ball, when your grandparents found love, a moment so beautifully perfect and extraordinary they still recall it with delight."

"You don't always look on recollections of the past with pleasure," Rupert said.

"I am not so antagonistic toward remembrances."

He shook his head. "I've known you for a long time, Minna. Few things turn you close-lipped and closed off as quickly as thoughts of days gone by."

"What would you have me do, Rupert? If I had allowed myself to dwell on my past these last years, I would have drowned in the unforgiving sea of sorrow."

"My grandparents have known sorrows. They've lost all their family other than me. But they don't deny themselves the joy of remembering the delightful moments they've had."

She shook her head. "I have tried, Rupert. I have. But remembering those moments only serves to remind me that the people in them aren't with me anymore. If I am to go on, I cannot dwell there. I must move forward."

"How long does it take after you haven't seen someone for him to be relegated to a thing of your past and, therefore, a tie in need of severing? Were I to be away from London for a

time, would I return to find I was part of your past and therefore no longer had any place in your present?"

"Of course not." She spoke fervently. "I could not imagine my life without you in it."

"I think, in actuality, you could." He sighed as the carriage came to a stop in front of her home. "You have cut people off before, and I worry about that."

"You do not need to."

His gaze flickered away from her. "I wish that were true."

His words and his tone and the weary set of his shoulders remained in her mind long after she had returned to the echoing cavern of her home. He wished he didn't need to worry about her ceasing their friendship. But something in the way he'd said it, in the way he'd looked, made her worry that what he might have actually wished, at least at times, was that they had not been friends to begin with.

# Chapter 8

LONDON WAS DAMP AND COLD, but the heavens had seen fit to hold back the threat of drizzle long enough for Rupert and Simon to escape their respective homes for a brief time. They spent a bit of time at their club but didn't remain overly long. The lure of Gunter's was too great. It was to that London establishment that they retreated, finding they were not at all the only people to do so. The famous tea shop was not so busy as it was during the height of the Season, but it was nowhere near empty.

They sat at a table, one larger than they needed but conveniently open, and awaited the delivery of their order of custard, sweetmeats, and biscuits, along with a hot pot of tea, an absolute must on such a cold day. Nothing in the interior of the famous shop had been adjusted to mark the Christmas season, yet it felt somehow festive.

"If you do not have other plans for Twelfth Night," Simon said, "my family hopes you'll join us."

"I would love to," Rupert said, honestly grateful for the invitation. He'd parted company with Minna the day before on a note of awkward discomfort. He hadn't meant to hurt her feelings, but he suspected he had done precisely that. And in the time since, his feelings of dissatisfaction had only increased. Parting with Minna had, of late, had that impact on him, even when their partings had been on entirely friendly terms.

"If either of my siblings is crowned monarch for the night," Simon said, "prepare yourself for a great deal of silliness." He offered the warning with a great deal of humor.

"I am not opposed to a little silliness."

His gaze flicking away for only a moment, Simon said, "And how do you feel about a little company?"

*Company?*

Simon motioned to the door of the tea shop just as Minna and Lettie stepped inside. He had, no doubt, seen them through the shop window. They spotted Rupert and Simon in the next instant and took up the offer to join them.

“What brings you two out on such a blustery day?” Simon asked.

“A spot of shopping.” Minna eyed the window. Outside, the wind had picked up. “We sent the footman and coachman home so they would be out of the weather. Should the state of things grow particularly terrible, we might struggle to hail a hackney, as they will be very much in demand.”

“Never fear, ladies,” Simon said. “We will make certain you are not made to walk home, no matter the weather.”

“How very gentlemanly of you, Mr. Vaughn,” Lettie said. When in public, they were all certain not to use Christian names, as doing so pushed the bounds of propriety. “What brought you both out in such weather?”

“After a couple of days of feeling less than well, I had grown rather tired of seeing only the inside of my house,” Simon said. “Rupert and I planned an excursion to save me from losing my grasp on my faculties.”

The delicacies Rupert had ordered arrived. Not wishing to interrupt the conversation that had sprung up between Lettie and Simon, he waved over a waiter and, in a quiet voice, added to what had already been delivered, wanting to make certain the ladies could eat their fill and be warmed by tea as well.

With that task seen to, he returned his attention to the discussion at their table. But he was hardly needed for it. Conversation between Lettie and Simon flowed easily. And Minna appeared lost in her thoughts.

Either that or she was uncomfortable speaking with him.

He’d expressed concern for her during the carriage ride from his grandparents’ house but had quickly realized his words had struck her differently than he’d intended. He’d been pondering taking time away from London when the Season arose, the



possibility of traveling to the Continent growing more appealing every day. But he knew how Minna distanced herself from people and things she worried would leave her behind. And when someone had been away long enough, that distance turned into a chasm.

How would he recover if he lost her friendship? If she stopped being part of his life?

“Why, Miss Schofield!”

Nothing short of the shrill sound of Mrs. Jackman’s voice could have pulled Rupert from his weighty thoughts.

“How delightful that we’ve crossed paths once more,” the busy-minded lady said as she approached the table. She was not alone. Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Mabey were at her side.

Rupert and Simon stood, offering silent acknowledgment of the ladies’ arrival.

“Mrs. Jackman, Mrs. Shaw, Mrs. Mabey. What a pleasant surprise.” A lifetime of practiced civility had, no doubt, come to Minna’s rescue with this unexpected greeting. Rupert didn’t imagine she was at all pleased to see them. “Gunter’s seems *the* place to see and be seen just now.”

“Are there important people here?” Mrs. Shaw looked about eagerly.

Mrs. Mabey glanced about as well, brows and mouth turned down in confusion. She very much seemed to be confused at not finding the *crème de la crème*. If Rupert had been any less secure in his standing, the likely unintended slight might have hurt. But he worried for Simon; his footing in Society was more precarious.

“Perhaps not *the* place,” Minna said, “but Gunter’s boasts a fine collection of patrons just now.”

Mrs. Mabey continued studying the space.

“We must add Gunter’s to our list of places and people who make London merry at Christmastime,” Mrs. Shaw said. “Our list is growing. Mantua-makers, glovers, the people who heat the bricks for our carriages. And now Gunter’s.”

That had been an entertaining discussion two days earlier at Minna and Lettie's home. Rupert had been hard-pressed not to laugh out loud. Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Mabey were not unkind nor simpleminded ladies. They meant well and, he felt certain, truly wanted to help and improve people's lives. Mrs. Mabey did so by studying people so closely they were excused for squirming a bit under the scrutiny. Mrs. Shaw did so by making conversation, whether someone asked for it or not.

"If only Gunter's served a clove-spiced mince pie," Lettie said. "How wonderfully merry that would be."

Rupert looked to Minna, hoping to exchange an amused glance at hearing mince pies discussed again. They had, after all, played a role in their discussion at his grandparents' house. But Minna was not looking in his direction.

When no one joined immediately in Lettie's enthusiasm, she colored a little. "I am quite fond of clove-spiced mince pie." She offered the further explanation with a hint of apology.

Rupert hadn't meant for his hesitation to embarrass her. But before he could come to her rescue, Simon did.

"I am fond of mince pies as well," Simon said earnestly, "particularly at this time of year."

Lettie's smile was filled with gratitude and relief. Minna still wasn't looking at Rupert, though he wasn't at all certain whether she was ignoring him intentionally.

"We have whiled away so much of the afternoon," Simon said to Minna and Lettie. "Allow Mr. Crawford and me to summon a carriage and see you both home once you have finished your tea. We would not for the world see either of you chilled or made ill by exposure to this cold weather."

"Thank you, Mr. Vaughn." Spots of color remained on Lettie's cheek. "How very thoughtful of you."

"Yes, thank you," Minna added.

Rupert and Simon slipped out of the tea shop. Rupert's coachman had found a spot a bit away to sit and wait to be summoned. It wasn't too far to go, but Rupert wasn't certain Simon's stamina could take him that far and that he'd still

have the endurance to join them at the upcoming soiree.

A street urchin, one likely no more than six or seven years old, stood somewhat nearby. Rupert motioned him over. When the lad arrived, Rupert hunched a bit and handed him one of his calling cards. “Will you take this to the coachman over by that equipage”—he pointed out his carriage—“and ask him to drive over this way?” He gave the boy a sixpence. “Come back when you’ve delivered the message and I’ll give you a shilling as well.”

“I’ll be fast as can be, sir.” The boy rushed off to deliver the message.

The wind was proving too significant to simply stand out in it, waiting. Rupert and Simon dipped back into the tea shop but kept near the door.

Over at the table they had left, Mrs. Jackman was saying something to Minna that was not being well received. The annoyance in Minna’s expression would not be easily discerned by anyone who didn’t know her well. But Rupert did. He could see that Mrs. Jackman was diminishing Minna’s endurance.

“Are you upset with Minna?” Simon asked without preamble and without warning.

“Why would you think I’m upset with her?”

“You haven’t said a word to her since she and Lettie joined us,” Simon said. “And when you look at her, you get that crease between your eyebrows that indicates you are either concerned about or irritated with whatever or *whomever* you are looking at.”

“I was a bit put out with her yesterday after our visit to my grandparents,” he admitted, “but today I’m more irritated with myself for having spoken sharply to her.”

Simon didn’t seem to fully believe it.

“Perhaps not *more* irritated,” Rupert amended. “Our disagreement was over something I am still concerned about, something that weighs on me.”

“Could that be the mysterious ‘something’ that has been nagging at you of late?” Simon asked.

Could it be? Rupert did worry that, eventually, Minna would cut him from her life the way she had so many others. Thinking once more of the possibility made his heart drop.

“Life is sometimes shockingly complicated, isn’t it?” Rupert let his tone turn lighter, not wishing to give his friend the impression that his spirits were horribly dampened.

Simon smiled, as he almost always did, but Rupert thought he looked weary beneath his tranquil expression. He had, on previous occasions, confided that he could seldom predict from day to day how far his energy would stretch. Some days he felt himself equal to nearly anything he wished to do. Some days a chair near a fire and a book to read were all he could manage. How frustrating it must have been, and yet he was not felled by it.

The little urchin arrived back in front of the shop.

“Would you go gather the ladies?” Rupert asked his friend. “I’ll see to it our speedy messenger receives his coins and a hearty thank-you.”

Rupert stepped outside as Simon made his way toward the table where Mrs. Jackman and her comrades were still talking at Minna and Lettie.

“I delivered your message, sir,” the boy said.

Rupert gave him the promised shilling, then added a second. “For managing the thing even faster than I thought you could.”

“Oo-ee, sir.” His little eyes pulled wide. “I’m always about, iffen you’s ever in need of another message being delivered. Or just ask for me. All the street children know me. Say as you’s looking for Wink.”

“Is that your name? Wink?”

He nodded, puffing out his chest with pride. “On account of I’m quick as a wink.”

The street children were clever; there was no denying that. “Other than being swift, have you any other skills?”

Wink nodded. "I stand about outside shops and hold horses while the Quality is mucking about inside."

"If my coachman could use a stablehand, would you be interested?"

"Would I? Oi."

Rupert gave a quick nod, and as the coachman pulled up to the pavement ready to receive the passengers, he moved to the front of the carriage.

"Are you at all in need of a young stablehand at the mews?" he asked his coachman. "Wink, here, has a knack with horses, or so he says."

His coachman nodded, expression thoughtful. "I could find work for the boy. And I saw how swift he ran and dodged. He'd make a fine messenger boy for the house."

That he would. "Let's bring him back with us and see if he would make a good addition to the staff. If nothing else, it would give the boy a night or two out of the cold."

"Very good, sir," the coachman said.

Rupert stepped back, allowing the driver and the urchin an unimpeded view of each other.

"Climb up, then, Wink," the coachman said. "Seems you've landed in clover."

Wink looked to Rupert, uncertain.

"This is your chance," Rupert said. "Seize it."

As fast as his name promised, Wink was up beside the coachman, being given instructions and information. The footman who rode standing at the back of the carriage had climbed down and pulled the carriage door open.

In the very next moment, the door to Gunter's opened as well, and Minna and Lettie emerged, Simon directly behind them. The ladies climbed into the carriage and out of the wind without comment.

Simon hung behind, offering Rupert a quickly delivered summary. "Mrs. Jackman has chosen her next matchmaking

victim to toss at Minna's head.”

“Who is it to be?”

With a dry tone of utter disapproval, Simon said, “Mr. Addison.”

Rupert hadn't thought Mrs. Jackman could make a second choice as poor as her first had been, but she'd managed it.

Poor Minna indeed.

## Chapter 9

AS LITTLE AS MINNA HAD enjoyed Mr. Lloyd's constant retreats into Christmases gone by, she was finding herself wishing she could avoid her Christmas *present* as well. If she was being fully honest, she could not place the blame for her misery entirely on Mrs. Jackman's shoulders. The lady was proving something of a nuisance, yes. But that experience wasn't what weighed heaviest on her mind.

Rupert had never been upset with her before. She wasn't entirely certain *upset* was the right description, but there had been something more than frustration, more than disappointment in his final words to her two days earlier after their visit with his grandparents. He'd not been unkind when they'd been in company at Gunter's the day before or on the short journey home afterward. But he had been more than a little distant. His frustration with her, it seemed, remained. He'd always known she was reluctant to spend time in the past, but he'd not taken such issue with that until now. Had her grief finally grown tiresome to him? Was she to lose him next, not to death but to rejection? How could she possibly bear that?

She had no answers to the questions her mind would not stop asking by the time her carriage arrived at the Vaughn home. Simon was feeling well enough to join them. Minna and Lettie remained in the carriage while the gentlemen were summoned. Simon had sent word that Rupert, in an act of consideration that was true to his nature, had arranged to be at Simon's family home so they could be fetched together and save a stop as the four continued to a soiree at the Hollingsworths' house.

If Minna found herself with the opportunity to speak with Simon privately at some point in the evening, she intended to do so. He had known Rupert longer than she had, and he was the sort of person who had the intelligence to solve problems and the compassion to do so in ways that considered the good

of all concerned.

He could help her understand what was pushing Rupert away and, more importantly still, could help her make things right again. Unfortunately the soiree was unlikely to afford her any such opportunity.

The houses surrounding the Vaughn's home were but dimly illuminated, most of the light coming from within and spilling in vague patterns on the pavement. Rain had fallen that day and stagnant puddles of dirty, icy water lay amongst the thick yellow mud and blackened cobblestones. The air was heavy and gloomy, though with fog or the soot of a city filled with chimneys, Minna could not say. There was nothing inherently cheerful in the sight that lay beyond the carriage windows, nothing to lighten the heart, nothing to proclaim this a night of enjoyment. And yet that same smoky air and those same muddy streets seemed to echo with the joys of Christmastime. How was it that such a contradiction could, and ever did, exist at this time of year?

"I hope Simon is able to join us for the rest of the gatherings leading up to Christmas," Lettie said. "I do so enjoy when he is with us."

"As do I," Minna said.

"And I further hope Rupert attends the Season next year."

It was something of an odd thing to say. Rupert was always in attendance during the Season. "Do you have reason to believe he might not?"

Lettie nodded. "He said, during the interval at the Callons' musicale, that it was very likely he would be traveling next year."

He must have said that when Minna wasn't within earshot; she would have remembered such a shocking declaration. "Did he happen to say how long he meant to be journeying?"

Lettie's brow puckered, and her mouth twisted in the way it did when she was attempting to sort puzzles or remember something difficult to recall. "I don't know that he specified a particular length for his journey. It's possible he doesn't yet



know. I believe a jaunt about the Continent is what Rupert has in mind.”

A grand tour? From what Minna understood, such things often lasted months, perhaps more than a year. Would he truly be away for so long? A year or more without seeing Rupert? No. There had to be a way to prevent that. “Has anyone explained to him that Continental Europe is both war ravaged and . . . filled with Europeans?” Minna asked.

Lettie shook her head and sighed, with a hint of a smile. “If one is being quite technical, Minna, *we* are European.”

“He might not remember that, and the prospect might convince him not to go wandering the Continent for months on end.”

“Do you think Simon will make the journey as well?” Lettie sounded particularly worried at the possibility, likely on account of Simon’s often fragile health.

The door to the carriage opened. No matter that Minna was perfectly well aware that Rupert was currently in London and would be riding with them to the soiree, she held her breath. Her mind was not entirely convinced he would actually appear at the carriage door. Their last conversation had ended with him saying, at least as it had felt to her, that he didn’t always find himself pleased to be her friend. The recollection struck her heart with all the intensity of a church bell tolling a mournful message of loss.

Even when Rupert appeared in the open carriage doorway, heavy overcoat buttoned high against the bitter winter air, looking content as ever, she didn’t feel entirely reassured. He’d been so quiet at Gunter’s, and not in the way he generally was. The thought of him being frustrated with her, especially if there was any chance he was leaving, sent cracks of pain through her heart.

In the periphery of her thoughts, she was aware of Lettie speaking with Rupert as he took his place on the bench opposite them. “Is Simon joining us still?”

“He is indeed.”

“He seemed a bit fatigued when we parted company yesterday.” Minna found her voice enough to join the discussion. “He is well tonight?”

“Well? Better than that. He is as good as gold.”

From the carriage doorway, Simon himself responded, “Good as gold and better.” He smiled, and the sight did Minna’s heart good.

She did worry about him. His tendency toward illness, she had been assured, was not likely to prove fatal. It simply meant he could not endure the same rigorous social schedule the *ton* was most accustomed to. And he would never be a sporting sort of gentleman, expending hours and energy on physically demanding pursuits.

Simon sat beside Rupert, settling himself comfortably. Minna studied him quickly, wanting to know for herself that his declaration of goldlike status was more accurate than optimistic. It could be difficult to tell with Simon. His was such a hopeful personality. That, in combination with how accustomed he had become over the course of his life to difficulties that others might be crushed under, colored the way he perceived his circumstances. In that moment, he seemed to be genuinely whole and healthy and rested, more so than he had been after their brief time at Gunter’s the day before.

“We missed you at the musicale,” Minna said. “You would have enjoyed the selections sung by the guest performer: all songs of Christmastide.”

“I would have enjoyed that.”

“But you are here with us tonight.” Lettie smiled sweetly at him, sincere pleasure in her expression. “I am so glad you are.”

“Do you suppose the Hollingsworths’ soiree will be a terrible crush?” Simon didn’t sound as if he were worried by the possibility, more that he recognized the strain such things placed on him and wished to prepare himself.

“There will not be as many as attended the musicale,”

Minna said, “but I do believe there will be several dozen people in attendance.”

Rupert said, “As always, we will consider ourselves quite ill-used if you do not tell us if you need to leave early.”

Simon smiled softly and with appreciation. “You are all very good to me.”

“Nonsense,” Minna said. “We would simply be using you as an excuse to avoid interacting with people we don’t care to. It is deviousness on our part and nothing else.”

Amusement twinkling in his eyes, Simon said, “Am I correct, then, in assuming Mrs. Jackman will be present this evening?”

“When we saw her at Gunter’s yesterday,” Lettie said, “while you were summoning a carriage, she very heavily implied that she would not, in fact, be attending tonight. I suspect she wasn’t invited.”

That brought Simon’s surprised gaze to Minna. He had not attended enough evenings at the Hollingsworths’ house nor been forced to listen to hours of gossip during various morning calls to know precisely why Mrs. Jackman was tremendously unlikely to be included in the guest list.

“Mrs. Hollingsworth confers invitations to her soirees exclusively to those she considers to be members of her own generation,” Minna explained.

Rupert looked confused, as well he might be. “Isn’t Mrs. Hollingsworth some twenty years older than we are?”

Minna arched a brow and let her smile begin sneaking out. “I absolutely dare you to ask her that question tonight.”

Rupert answered her cheek with a raise of his own brow. “Are you attempting to get me banned from all Society?”

“Are you saying you are afraid to pose the question to Mrs. Hollingsworth?” How she liked to tease him. He always responded perfectly. And for him to do so now set her heart at ease on the matter of his frustration with her.

“I am not *afraid* to pose the question so much as I am far too

intelligent to do so.” He kept his tone quite serious, but she knew that laughing sparkle in his eyes.

“Intelligent?” She shook her head. “Bowling to societal pressure—that is what this is. You should pose the question, Rupert, and prove to one and all how very, very unshackled you are by the requirements of others to behave in any particular way.”

“You are attempting to gain me the cut direct from all and sundry, I daresay.”

Not quite keeping the laughter out of her voice, she said, “Coward.”

In a remark clearly meant to be overheard by them all but directed at Lettie, Simon said, “Do you sometimes feel, during these carriage rides, as if you are watching a reenactment of a Punch and Judy show?”

Lettie nodded seriously. “I fully expect one or both of them to produce a cudgel at any moment and begin pounding the other atop the head.”

“Those puppet shows are quite popular during Christmastime,” Minna said with all her dignity intact. “I feel what they are attempting to tell us, Rupert, is that we are a *wonderful* addition to their Yuletide celebrations.”

“That was precisely the message I received.”

All four of them laughed and shook their heads at each other. How good they were for her oft-heavy heart. How good she hoped she was for them as well. But, lately, she’d found herself worried that her friendship was not as vital to them as theirs was to her.

Rupert had asked if she would stop being his friend if they were apart for a length of time. It no longer seemed like a hypothetical question. He had posed it with the thought of leaving, of traveling far away, of being gone for some considerable length of time. Did he mean to be gone so long that their friendship would become a thing of the past? Did he mean to be gone that long *in order to assure* that their friendship became a thing of the past? Her heart responded

immediately with the anticipatory grief she knew would seize her heart when he left.

Allowing herself to feel that would break her open. Too much grief lay just out of sight, just out of reach. She kept it there by sheer determination, having built a levee to hold back the tears she'd once been drowning in. Should she so much as glance at the reservoir beyond or allow herself to truly think on how very full it was, the dam would burst entirely.

She promised herself she wouldn't think on it. She would clear her thoughts of his impending departure, and simply enjoy the present.

What other choice did she truly have?

# Chapter 10

IF THERE WAS ONE REFRAIN heard from one generation to the next with predictable frequency, it was that the younger generation did not meet with the approval of those coming to be considered the older. These declarations contained variations on the theme of perceived laziness and ignorance, often flavored with sprinkles of how much different—by “different” the speaker generally always meant “better”—the no-longer-young generation had been at that stage of life. And, as this cycle had likely been occurring since the very beginning of time, even the slightest consideration of the recurrent pattern ought to have led all to conclude that neither was the incoming generation so bad as it was painted nor the more established generation so saintly as they remembered themselves being.

Those gathered at the Hollingsworths’ home that evening were of the younger set, those who, generally speaking, had not lived enough life to now be spending every moment of the evening reminiscing. But neither were they so very young that their activities were curtailed, leaving them merely imagining the joys of years yet to come. It was in this gap that resided those who fully believed their greatest moments were happening in the present. That was not to say they didn’t anticipate a future of increasing happiness. They simply had so very much that was delightful in their here and now that living in the current moment was remarkably pleasant.

The Hollingsworths’ soiree boasted as many guests as Minna had imagined it would. And everyone in attendance, with the exception of the host and hostess, were likely no older than thirty-five. That Mrs. Hollingsworth declared these were her generational peers was not precisely accurate. But she meant well and, to her credit, possessed the energy and vivacity of even the youngest of her guests. More pleasing still, she did not think ill of those younger than herself.

When Minna had attended gatherings at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Hollingsworth during the Season, she’d enjoyed the

relaxing and congenial evenings. No one among the guests was likely to ask after her parents or express unprompted grief at their passing. While there were those who had known her brother, they seldom did more than briefly mention him, not dwelling on the sorrow of his loss. Among them she could breathe. Relax. The weight of her sorrows was not nipping at her heels. And, with her Christmas season proceeding in the manner it had been thus far, she meant to enjoy this evening entirely.

Miss Mason was in attendance, allowing Minna a moment to express her sorrow at having not been home when Miss Mason and her mother had called two days earlier. Miss Booth, a young lady who would have her second Season the following year and with whom Minna was only vaguely acquainted, was in attendance as well and offered a few words of greeting.

At some point in Minna's wanderings amongst the crowd, she was separated from those with whom she had arrived. Knowing Lettie was not always treated as kindly as she ought to be by the *ton*, on account of her having fewer connections and a lighter purse than they would have preferred, Minna immediately began searching for her.

She needn't have been worried. Lettie was with Simon, chatting amicably with other guests. Simon would never allow anyone to be unkind to Lettie. Not ever.

Rupert wasn't with them. He certainly didn't need Minna looking out for him. Her search was not made out of concern but a longing to spend time with him and a hope that the uncomfortable tension between them would dissipate and she could have her dear friend once more, his kindness, his camaraderie. He was considering leaving London soon. But she felt as though she was losing him already.

Before she located Rupert, she spotted amongst a growing contingency of guests Mr. Addison, the second of the three gentlemen among whom Minna was meant to find her dearest love, or at least someone she was willing to marry.

Mr. Addison was a handsome gentleman; Minna could not

deny that. His brown curls couldn't help but draw the eye. His features were genial, his eyes sparkling. Though Minna could not make out his precise words, she could hear his voice, and it rang with cheer and joy.

Under any other circumstances, she might have enjoyed encountering him and making his better acquaintance. But Mrs. Jackman had her hand in that night's interaction, which all but guaranteed it would, for Minna, prove a misery.

\*\*\*

Enough people were in attendance that the guests split into three groups, and separate games were undertaken simultaneously by each. Minna and Lettie were both participating in the same one, though Simon and Rupert had been pulled into a different one. And, in a turn of events that likely would have pleased Mrs. Jackman to no end, Mr. Addison was sitting beside Minna. Being undertaken by this portion of the gathering was the game Yes and No.

It was a simple enough game, and always diverting. The one standing before the group was charged with thinking of a thing and the rest with discovering what that thing was by posing questions, which could be answered with only yes or no, though slight variations on those words were generally permitted.

Minna felt she had some degree of skill in this game, it being one reliant on clever turns of phrase and a bit of a quick wit. Though her mother had, at times, warned her that a lady ought always to at least outwardly indicate that she thought herself not overly sharp when compared with those she found herself in company with, Minna had never managed the pretense. Why, she had always asked herself, must ladies be required to pretend they were something less than they were? Of course, as she had grown older and better acquainted with the world, she had come to understand it a little more. There seemed a fine line between what Society considered an acknowledgment of one's strengths and an inappropriate show of arrogance, especially where ladies were concerned. Minna hoped she managed the balance between the two without belittling herself.



She was attempting to strike that balance during their game of Yes and No. Though she did not always speak her guess out loud, Minna was very often correct and nearly as often discovered the correct answer before it was spoken by anyone else. Lettie also seldom answered aloud, but Minna frequently saw on her face an expression of discovery before the answer was revealed. Lettie was quite clever, though she was not often given credit for being so.

Mr. Addison leaned toward Minna. "This game is most diverting, isn't it?"

She nodded. "I'm quite fond of it."

"Do you play it often?" he asked.

"I have never refused to play when it was the game being suggested. I cannot say, though, that I have spent hours hoping it would be offered as a diversion at some future gathering."

He nodded staunchly. "It doesn't do to spend so much time *anticipating* joy that one is left unable to enjoy the *current* moment."

That was what she had been attempting to explain to Rupert. Well, not precisely, but a sentiment similar to it. Not so much choosing not to wait for some future time to feel joyful but the unadvisableness of dwelling so much on past pain that current joy was overwhelmed by it. Perhaps she would use Mr. Addison's explanation when she was next afforded a chance to speak with Rupert. Though, much as she wished to make him understand why she approached life the way she did, she found herself far more eager to simply have his company, his good opinion, and some reassurance that he did not actually intend to abandon her when the Season came.

That was rather selfish of her though. He would enjoy seeing the Continent. And if he meant to take Simon, how could she justify denying both of them a diversion they would undoubtedly enjoy?

She would still have Lettie, which was a comfort. Lettie was personable, beautiful, and a joy to be around. How long would it be before she made a match of her own and built a life

without Minna in it?

In the next moment, Lettie leaned a bit closer to her from her other side. "I do wish Simon had been in our group for this game. He is quite good at it."

That was true.

"If I forget what guesses have been made, he always remembers and tells me what they are without embarrassing me. If someone said something too quietly for him to hear, I relay it to him, which I think he appreciates."

Lettie had always been fond of Simon, but there was something different in the way she'd spoken of him lately, something more tender, more attached. It was particularly noticeable just then, as her eyes continually sought him out in the group across the room.

A new round of guessing began, this time with Mr. Addison the one to whom the others posed their guesses.

"Is the thing an animal?" someone asked.

"Yes" was Mr. Addison's response.

"A disagreeable animal?" someone else sought to clarify.

"Not always." It was a deviation from the standard responses but acceptable.

As the guesses continued, the animal being thought of by Mr. Addison was further defined as being found in London, seldom wandering beyond, and a source of difficulty to some, though not a pest.

"Are the bothersome attributes of this creature being addressed?"

"Yes."

"By an expert or by the population in general?" Miss Booth asked.

"That cannot be answered yes or no," Mr. Addison offered by way of reminder.

"By an expert, then," Miss Booth amended. Minna's slight

acquaintance with the lady was enough for her to know that Miss Booth was clever.

“Yes.” Mr. Addison was clearly quite amused by the direction his questioning was taking.

What did he have in mind?

“Has the expert seen success?” Mr. Downy asked.

“I don’t believe so.”

The questions and answers were not leading Minna to a specific answer.

Lettie whispered to her, “Do you suppose he is thinking of a person, rather than a non-human animal?”

“A person, I think.” That did seem likely, and it added a certain additional meaning to the questions being posed as well as the manner in which he was answering them. One could not help but see that Mr. Addison was inexpressibly tickled by the humor he saw in it all.

“Is the expert actually lacking in expertise?” Miss Booth pressed.

“No.”

A gentleman not many seats distant from Minna but who was not well-known to her posed the next question. “Has the expert been successful in past efforts of this nature?”

“Quite.”

“In the matter of this *same* creature we are quizzing you about?” the gentleman continued.

“Others of the same type.”

“That is not a yes or no answer,” Miss Booth pointed out.

Mr. Addison dipped his head, undeterred and not the least bit less amused. “Then I will amend my answer to yes.”

“Would Society benefit from this expert addressing the troublesome aspects of this creature?” Mr. Downy asked.

“Oh yes.” Mr. Addison was full grinning.

“I have found it out!” Miss Booth declared. “I know what it is, Mr. Addison.”

“And what is it?” His eyes danced with merriment.

For her part, Minna hadn't the first idea. What had Miss Booth ascertained that she had not?

“It is a creature that dwells in London, has an aspect of its existence that is irksome or, at least, in some way troublesome, which is being addressed by an expert who has been successful in saving other poor creatures from a similar fate but is struggling to find such success this time,” Miss Booth recalled the information known. “And there would be a decided benefit if this poor creature could be saved from the unwanted state in which it is currently found, though there seems to be waning indication that such is possible.”

Mr. Addison nodded eagerly.

With a smile of triumph, Miss Booth declared, “It is Miss Schofield!”

All eyes turned to Mr. Addison, who wasted not a moment in saying, “Well done, Miss Booth.”

The entire group burst into delighted applause and laughter.

The sound pelted Minna like a punishing hailstorm. A cold flood of misery washed over her heart even as heat stole over her neck and face. Lettie must have noticed; she took hold of Minna's hand, offering a degree of silent reassurance.

Despite feeling certain that at least some of the group's amusement arose at the earnestness with which Mrs. Jackman was touting her “expertise,” Minna knew a painful part of the laughter was aimed at her. Mr. Addison knew perfectly well that he had been made part of those efforts and was finding amusement at her expense. She had not exchanged enough words with him for the man to have been operating under any degree of assurance that she would enjoy being the recipient of his jest. It was possible he'd assumed she would find it funny, but it seemed far more likely that he hadn't the least idea how she would feel about it and was not overly concerned about the pain he might inflict.

Perhaps that was the danger when one was entirely focused on the here and now: little thought was given to the past anguish of others or the future suffering one might cause. Minna was not overly enamored of recollections, and she did her best not to anticipate pain that was yet to come, but she hoped she was not so unaware of such things as to be thoughtless in the way Mr. Addison was showing himself to be.

Lettie did not often speak her mind in public, but she chose to do so just then and in a voice loud enough to be heard over the merriment. “I realize that for some there is a certain delight in embarrassing others. I admit myself surprised that so many in this gathering belong to that unfeeling and ill-mannered crowd.”

The gathering looked a little sheepish at the reprimand.

Fearing the deserved calling to account would lead to Lettie being the focus of unkindness next, Minna chose to dispel the situation. “How fortunate we are to know Miss Fairborn, who rises to the defense of anyone she feels is being ill-treated. It is a characteristic I think all people must admire.”

From amongst them, a smattering of sincere declarations of “Hear, hear!” and “Well said” joined the nods of agreement that were evident nearly everywhere. Mr. Addison, who had clearly lost the favor of his audience, looked less impressed. But, as one who understood how to navigate the current moment, whatever that moment might be, his spirits were not noticeably dampened. But, before he could regain his seat, Minna excused herself, and she and Lettie left this particular circle of merrymakers. They wandered closer to the one where Simon and Rupert were.

Rupert caught her eye in the very next moment. A question flitted over his expression. Her discomfort must have shown, as she needed to make no effort to answer his inquiry before he and Simon both rose and offered their excuses to their group.

“What has happened?” Simon asked.

Minna shook her head, attempting to dismiss it, but the

unkindness was proving more difficult to shake off than she would have hoped.

“Do you suppose we can make our excuses without offending our hostess?” Lettie asked.

“I believe we can,” Rupert said. “I’ll think of something we can tell her.”

“No need,” Simon replied. “Only tell her that I’ve grown a bit weary and would like to return home. She will consider it so very expected as to be unremarkable.”

“There is nothing about you that is unremarkable, Simon Vaughn,” Lettie said forcefully.

Minna reached out and squeezed her cousin’s hand. “You are to be champion to us all tonight, it seems. Where would we be without you?”

“I, for one,” Simon said, “have no intention of ever discovering the answer to that question.”

# Chapter 11

THEY MADE THEIR EXCUSES TO their host and hostess and were soon settled in Minna's carriage. She was a bit dismissive about what she had endured, but Rupert suspected she was underplaying the reality of it. She had been in London Society long enough to have developed resiliency when faced with the *ton's* unkindness. And she was usually so easily amused by the ridiculousness of the people she interacted with that she had developed a knack for letting their provocations be turned quickly to humor. But never had Rupert experienced a moment in which Society's mistreatment had led to her wishing to leave a gathering altogether. That worried him.

He reached across the carriage and took her hand in his. "Now that the four of us are far from prying ears and eyes, tell us what happened. I'm certain Simon is as concerned as I am."

Simon nodded, watching Minna and Lettie with an expression of concern.

"Our group was playing Yes and No," Minna said, her voice smaller than it usually was. "The game was rather unexceptional and vaguely interesting, until Mr. Addison's turn to be the question answerer."

*Addison. Blast it all.* "I cannot believe Mrs. Jackman chose him as her latest possibility," Rupert said. "He's not an utterly terrible choice, but he isn't at all a good choice for you."

"After this evening," Minna said, "I will take that as a compliment."

Rupert still hadn't released her hand. He set his other one atop it, enveloping hers. "What did he say?"

Minna met his gaze, the soft light of the occasional gas streetlamp offering just enough illumination to show that she was torn between feeling simply annoyed with the man and feeling truly hurt. "The thing he thought of that everyone was meant to guess he described as a creature that is irksome and troublesome, which exists in a state of misery, and even the

attention of an expert is proving insufficient to address the creature's suffering no matter that 'fixing' this poor creature would do all of London good because of how very pathetic it is."

Rupert looked to Lettie when it became clear that Minna either could not or was choosing not to continue her explanation.

Lettie, her eyes filled with sadness at the memory, said, "He was describing Minna. She was the 'creature' he wanted everyone to guess."

Rupert felt every joint, every muscle, every bone go perfectly still throughout him. *Irksome. Troublesome. A creature in need of fixing.* His jaw tight and voice quiet, he said, "You're certain this was meant to be Minna?"

"Miss Booth guessed, in tones of triumph, that it was Minna, and Mr. Addison quite gleefully confirmed that she was correct."

Were he exclusively in Simon's company, Rupert would have offered a few very colorful and very unflattering evaluations of Mr. Addison before insisting the carriage be turned around so he could let Addison know precisely what a cad he was. No one ought ever be permitted to cause Minna pain. Not anyone. Not ever.

"Though I'm reluctant to ask," Simon said, "how was this revelation received?"

"Oh," Minna said with forced lightness, "with laughter and exclamations of approval and amusement."

Lettie's miserable expression confirmed that Minna was not exaggerating. Little wonder, then, that Minna had wished to leave. It would have been one thing if Addison's cruelty had been met with shock or disapproval or at least not universal enjoyment. For her to have been an object of ridicule from everyone in her portion of the gathering was more than ample reason to leave the entirety of the soiree behind.

"Will you trade seats with me, Lettie?" Rupert asked.

It took a bit of doing, but they managed to rearrange their



locations, with Lettie sitting across from and Rupert beside Minna. He set his arm around her. Minna leaned her head against him. Her shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath.

“Mrs. Jackman has ruined my evening, Rupert,” she said on a sigh. “And she wasn’t even present.”

“But the person she chose to toss at you was,” he answered. “I believe we can still lay this disaster, to an extent, at her feet.”

“Do you suppose Mr. Addison was correct? It is entirely possible people do find me pathetic.”

Before Rupert could answer, Lettie and Simon did so, defending her and denouncing Addison. Minna relaxed against him. He squeezed her shoulders.

“If I had the right to do so,” Rupert said, “I would meet Addison at our club tomorrow and call him out.”

Minna tilted her head and smiled up at him. “While I appreciate the sentiment, if you did so and got yourself shot, I’d kill you.”

With that very sincere but rather ridiculous declaration, laughter once more filled the group. It had been a balm to all of them time and again as sorrows had washed over their lives. Minna’s laughter was something more in that moment. It bubbled as warmth in his chest.

“I’m not certain how this evening’s events will be portrayed in the gossip columns come morning,” Minna said. “I do think I’ve a far better chance of being portrayed in an empathetic light, thanks to Lettie’s intervention.”

All their attention turned to Lettie. Rupert tucked Minna closer. The restlessness he’d been feeling of late, the dissatisfaction and incompleteness, didn’t nag at him as loudly in that moment. In contradiction to the descriptors that Mr. Addison had chosen to attach inaccurately to her, Minna was calm in the storm, a lighthouse in the dark, and as far from pathetic as he could imagine any person being.

While Minna repeated Lettie’s championing of her and the very expertly delivered bit of humbling she had given to the

group who had so quickly fallen in line with Mr. Addison's cruelty, Rupert kept his arm around her. In fact, he did not let go until the carriage left him at his front door. And not until he was dressed in his nightclothes and ready to retire did he stop to think much on it.

Mrs. Jackman's choices for Minna thus far had been horribly chosen. Mr. Lloyd's myopic focus on the past was not merely incongruent with Minna's struggle to acknowledge the past, but in the long run, it would have added to her struggles to heal from the grief and losses she had endured. Mr. Addison was so concerned with his popularity and his standing here and now that he didn't overly care whom he hurt or what damage he caused in the pursuit of current enjoyment.

Minna deserved so much better than that.

She was caring and clever, intelligent and thoughtful. She was a true and loyal friend in ways few people knew how to be. While her losses had added weight to her thoughts and heart and she had struggled to truly face the pain that rested in her past, she was one of the strongest people he knew. She had emerged from more loss than most people would ever experience in so short a time, and she had done so with a heart that still loved and with a hope that, while battered, had not been destroyed.

Minna was remarkable, though too many didn't see it, including, at times, herself. Mrs. Jackman certainly didn't. Mr. Lloyd and Mr. Addison were unlikely to.

Sitting alone in the darkness of his bedchamber, his mind whirling in every conceivable direction, Rupert experienced a rare moment of utter clarity: he was in love with Minna Schofield. Utterly and completely in love with her.

When had that happened? When had his feelings changed so entirely? Her friendship had always meant the world to him, and he didn't want to lose that. But he didn't know how long he could be satisfied with only that.

On the heels of that unexpected self-revelation came another. He knew where his feeling of dissatisfaction, of something needing to change, had come from. Loving Minna

and not realizing it had been prickling at his mind, giving him the sense that something wasn't quite what it should be.

The discovery didn't ease his restlessness. He didn't know how she felt, didn't know if she could possibly see him as anything other than her friend. At some point, he would have to get the answer to that; he would have to cross that bridge not knowing what awaited him on the other side.

Come spring, perhaps he and Simon could take a journey to the Continent after all, even if for only a fortnight or so. It might give Rupert some much-needed distance. It also might simply prove to him that the old adage was right after all: absence did, in fact, make the heart grow fonder.

But unrequited love, he very much suspected, made the heart grow lonelier.

# Chapter 12

THE VAUGHNS WERE A JUBILANT and welcoming family. Minna always enjoyed the time she spent with them. Sometimes, being around family made her lonely for her own. She and her three dearest friends gathered at that family's home the next day, Simon's parents having eagerly invited them to do so.

With eight children in addition to the two parents residing under the same roof, the Vaughns' house was remarkably busy. Simon was the oldest of his siblings. His often frail health had not in any way earned him a place of diminished esteem in his family. His younger siblings clearly adored him. His parents did not coddle him. And when Minna, Lettie, and Rupert were visiting, they were treated as cherished guests.

Minna had tossed and turned all the night before, dozens of revelations and declarations spinning in her thoughts. Rupert's frustration over her approach to life. Lettie's changing attachment to Simon. Rupert's intention to leave London and, perhaps, Simon's intention to join him. Mr. Addison joking at her expense and the laughter that had followed. The knowledge that Mrs. Jackman was not yet finished with her efforts, that there was one more gentleman Minna was meant to endure.

Despite Grace's best efforts that morning, Minna knew she appeared a little haggard. A night of unbroken rest would have been more efficacious to restoring her appearance, but such did not seem possible so long as she was wrestling with so many things.

Mrs. Vaughn seemed to notice. She brought Minna a cup of tea and sat beside her. "I hope you will treat this house as your own while you are here. If you need a moment's respite from the chaos, you are more than welcome to lie down in a bedchamber for however long you need."

Minna smiled over her teacup. "You are always very gracious. I'm tired is all. And no matter the boisterous energy

of the younger children, this home is a peaceful place, something I truly appreciate.”

“Simon worries a little about you and Miss Fairborn,” Mrs. Vaughn said. “He often says he cannot imagine living in such a quiet home. He is all but convinced the two of you are crushingly lonely at all times.”

“Dear Simon. He has such a good heart.” Minna took a quick sip of her tea. “If my cousin did not live with me, I suspect I would be every bit as lonely as your son fears I am.”

“I have told him that is my summation of your situation,” Mrs. Vaughn said. “But it is difficult for him to imagine living in a home so different from the one he has always known.”

“Do you suppose he will ever set up his own house?” Minna asked.

Mrs. Vaughn nodded. “Oh yes. He still lives here because he chooses to. I believe he enjoys having the company of his brothers and sisters. And, though I am his mother, I suspect he enjoys mine and his father’s company as well.”

“I know he does,” Minna said.

Dropping her voice to a whisper that was far more careful than conspiratorial, Mrs. Vaughn said, “I have, of late, harbored suspicions that our Simon has developed a tenderness for someone. He has not admitted as much to me, but I know the symptoms. I see them whenever he is with . . .” Her eyes darted, if Minna was not mistaken, to Lettie.

Minna nodded. “I will confess I have found myself with the same suspicions recently regarding *Lettie’s* tenderness for *him*.”

Mrs. Vaughn pressed a hand to her heart. “So many dismiss the goodness and the worth of people like Simon, people who are, in their estimation, weak and dispensable. When concerns are expressed over their health or their continued existence, far too many believe these ‘weak’ one’s deaths would do society good or, at the very least, would not be grieved or mourned because their lives aren’t considered overly worthwhile to begin with.”

Anger and frustration bubbled in Minna's chest on the instant. She knew Mrs. Vaughn was not exaggerating, as she herself had heard people express such sentiments. "The people who feel that way would likely be surprised to learn that, in the eyes of heaven, their worth and value does not exceed that of the people whom they have declared worthless and dispensable."

Mrs. Vaughn looked over at her son once more. "He was born on Christmas Day; I don't know if you knew that. A tiny baby. So tiny, in fact, that we knew only a miracle would see him through. Every Christmas I find myself rejoicing that he remains with us. Every year he is my reminder that this holy day is meant to mark the life of One who saw value in people just like him."

"May we all follow that example," Minna said.

One of her children beckoned Mrs. Vaughn over, leaving Minna to her own thoughts.

Christmas was a time for reflecting on moments and thoughts and ideals. Perhaps it was that aspect of the holy season that made it a difficult time for her. It was a crossroads of all that had been, all that would be, and all that ought to be celebrated. She struggled with that.

The empty seat Mrs. Vaughn had left behind did not remain empty long. Rupert came and sat beside her. How was it that his mere presence offered her a sense of relief? He was a comforting and calming presence, yes, but it was something more than that. He saw so much of who she was and what she struggled with. And though he had expressed some frustration with her of late, he had never expressed condemnation. And he had absolutely never humiliated or belittled her the way Mr. Addison had the night before.

Every person had vulnerabilities, and every person needed someone with whom they felt safe being vulnerable. Rupert was that someone for her. He'd held her so kindly in the carriage, had reassured and comforted her. What would she do without him?

"While I was too cowardly to ask Mrs. Hollingsworth last

evening how old she is,” Rupert said, “I find myself quite equal to the daunting task of asking you if you are unwell.” He studied her face. “You look worn to a thread.”

“I will reward your frankness with frankness of my own. I did not sleep well last night.” She set her teacup down on the table beside her chair. “I wish I could say with certainty what, precisely, it was that kept me awake, but I cannot. That inability is not so much a matter of the sources of my uneasiness being vague as that those sources are so very numerous.”

Rupert took her hand in his. Had the Vaughns any guests other than themselves, he likely would not have done so. It was a breach of etiquette, even for two people with their deep and abiding friendship. She could only imagine how the *ton* would have reacted had they seen her sitting in his arms the evening before.

“Your mind is so often heavy, Minna. My heart breaks to see it. But that heaviness has grown more pointed of late, which worries me more than usual. I don’t like seeing you unhappy or knowing you’re burdened enough not to be sleeping.”

“Do you suppose I could place the blame for all of this on Mrs. Jackman’s shoulders?” She felt herself more equal to smile through her burdens while buoyed by his support.

“You’re certainly welcome to. Most of Society would accept that explanation.”

“But you won’t?” She knew the answer before she’d finished posing the question.

“I think I know you too well to believe that. Mrs. Jackman’s interference has caused you some distress. That she thought to attempt any sort of courtship with Mr. Addison does make me question her abilities as a matchmaker though. The man is relatively harmless, but he gives too little thought to the impact of the things he does.”

“He is a man entirely of the present moment,” Minna acknowledged. She held Rupert’s gaze. “Some of your recent evaluations of me have worried that you think I am cut

from the same cloth.”

He shook his head earnestly. “Not at all. He is thoughtless, whereas I think sometimes you overburden your mind.”

“My father used to call me a great fretter.” She could smile a little at the memory, which was a rare thing for her. “I suppose that hasn’t changed.”

“Not everything about a person needs to change.” His thumb rubbed lightly along the back of her hand, which she enjoyed quite a lot. “I suppose that is one of life’s great mysteries: identifying what about ourselves we ought to improve, what we ought to expunge from ourselves altogether, and which aspects of who we are, however odd or unusual, deserve to be guarded and celebrated.”

“That might be an easier question to answer if the *ton* didn’t have so many contradictory feelings on the matter.”

“Let me offer a bit of unasked-for advice, and I hope that you will forgive me for it.” He stopped, then offered a fleeting and contrite smile. “I do, though, still need to apologize to you for my unasked-for comments in the carriage from my grandparents’ house. I know I gave the impression of disapproval, and I suspect I caused you pain. I am truly sorry for that.”

“There is nothing to forgive, Rupert.” She held his hand more tightly. “You are the dearest of people to me. And your words gave me much to think on.”

“But you did seem less than pleased with me in the days that followed,” he said. “I don’t want you to decide that you’d rather I wasn’t a part of your life any longer.”

Emotion swelled in her throat. “I’ve been worried *you* were deciding you’d rather *I* wasn’t a part of your life any longer.”

He shook his head. “Never.”

For the first time in days, Minna truly breathed. He didn’t intend to cut her out of his life. His tenderness the night before had certainly seemed to confirm that, but to hear him say so in such clear and impossible-to-misunderstand terms set her heart at ease.



“What is the unasked-for advice you have for me today?” she asked with a smile.

He laughed silently. “Rather cheeky, aren’t I?”

“Shockingly.”

Smiling broadly, Rupert said, “My thought was that Society is fickle and selfish and horribly ill-equipped to evaluate the worth of a person, let alone the depth of her character. Do not give them the ability to make you question yours.”

He raised both of her hands to his lips and pressed the lightest tender kisses to her fingers. It was a simple gesture, one that was easily employed among people not harboring deeper or more romantic attachments to each other. Indeed, she was almost entirely certain he had kissed her fingers on previous occasions. This time, however, the impact shook her.

He rose and made his way across the room to where Simon was playing jackstones with the youngest of his siblings. How she wanted to plead with him to remain with her, and not merely in that moment. She wanted him to stay in London, nearby, near her, where she could see him and talk to him, where he could hold her hand, kiss her fingers, smile at her, lift her burdens. With him nearby, she knew she could weather the storms she faced. With him in her life, she knew life would be rich in ways it could never be without him.

# Chapter 13

MINNA AND LETTIE WERE AT home to visitors the next day. Simon called, much to both their delight. Rupert came with him, which both pleased and upended Minna. Her response to his simple act of kissing her fingers still confused her. That his arrival at her house brought back those same fluttering feelings only added to her uncertainty.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Jackman called as well. Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Mabey rounded out their numbers. It was hardly the ideal circumstances in which to sort out terribly confusing feelings.

Fate seemed determined to prove the truthfulness of the old adage that troubles came in threes. That had shown itself aggravatingly true this Christmastime. Mrs. Jackman's interference involved a shocking repetition of that pattern: three members of the Gossip Brigade, three gentlemen, three social events. How fortunate that there were not three days yet remaining in her campaign, else Minna would have been forced to take drastic measures to avoid her efforts.

"I understand from Mr. Lloyd that you did not speak with him at all at the soiree two nights ago," Mrs. Jackman said with absolute exasperation. "How could you not? Did you not find him delightful?"

"He is everything a gentleman should be," Minna said diplomatically. "I did not realize that your introduction of him obligated me to spend all of my waking hours in conversation with him."

Her dry sense of humor, which tended toward exaggeration, did not appear to hit its mark with the three visiting ladies. Mrs. Jackman was flustered. The other two looked mostly confused. Minna suspected Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Mabey would be fine company if not for the influence of Mrs. Jackman.

"Offering a good evening to someone at a soiree is not dedicating all your waking hours to him," Mrs. Jackman said, brow pulling fiercely.

“The second gentleman you have tossed your weight behind,” Minna said, “was present at the soiree last evening. Did you wish me to neglect him?”

Mrs. Jackman shook her head quickly. “Of course not. Certainly you are versed enough in the social graces to be able to juggle two suitors in one evening.”

“We’ve heard whispers that you didn’t remain all evening,” Mrs. Shaw said. “Though various reasons are being given for your departure, I find myself most inclined to believe it was a matter of exhaustion, having been provided with two such remarkable choices of gentlemen.” She looked to the Queen of the Gossipers. “A fine reflection on your wisdom.” If Minna was not mistaken, Mrs. Shaw was attempting to placate the lady. It was a kindness Minna appreciated.

“What other reasons have been given for my decision to leave?” Minna asked, not because she was truly interested but because Mrs. Shaw was actually rather fun when animated by the delight of sharing a ladle’s worth of scandal broth. And she was never cruel the way some gossips could be.

“A few have said you were a spoilsport, not caring for the games,” Mrs. Shaw said. “I cannot imagine that was the case. I have seen you participate in games before and enjoy yourself. And I have not ever known you to dampen the enjoyment of others.”

Mrs. Mabey shook her head firmly. “I could not imagine you being anything but a wonderful addition to the evening.”

Their kindness proved surprisingly touching. Perhaps Minna needed the bit of generosity more than she had realized. “I do like games,” she acknowledged. “And I was sorry to have needed to quit the soiree earlier than I’d intended.”

“What *was* your reason for departure?” Mrs. Shaw pressed, eyes wide and ears no doubt ready for whatever tidbit might be dropped.

“Allow me to shed some light on the evening,” Simon said, his attention apparently having shifted from his conversation with Lettie and Rupert to the one being undertaken directly

beside him. “I was feeling particularly fatigued before the evening was over. I am certain you have heard enough whispers on the matter of my health not to need an explanation of that.”

The ladies nodded eagerly, clearly proud of how much gossip they had collected over the years. There was, thankfully, no mockery in their expressions, no unkindness.

“These two ladies and this gentleman here”—Simon indicated his three friends—“are the very embodiment of kind compassion and abiding friendship that this holy season is meant to remind us of. They, not wishing to cause me the least distress, and showing such care for me, allowed their evening to be cut short so that I might return home, and I say God bless them, every one.”

Even the most hardened cynic could not help but be moved by the sincerity with which he expressed his gratitude at having friends who treated him like a human being. It truly was a poor reflection on Society in general that acts of basic humanity warranted heroic words of approval. Such ought to be the default, rather than the exception.

Mrs. Mabey, who was by far the least talkative of the ladies, spoke. “And are you feeling better today, Mr. Vaughn?”

“I am, thank you,” he said.

She smiled in a very sincere and maternal way.

The conversation amongst them all turned at that point to other matters, none of which seemed of much interest to Mrs. Jackman. Her studying gaze remained on Minna. The lady was not finished with her efforts to see Minna matched by Christmas. And Christmas Day was tomorrow.

The three tea-tattlers soon declared their intention to return home in preparation for their Christmas Eve activities. Minna’s exhausted mind and weary heart felt relieved.

As they were rising to leave, Mrs. Jackman offered one last comment. “My promised third gentleman will be present at the Felingums’ ball tomorrow. He represents the very best sort of match I could possibly find. I hope you will not waste this

one.”

“I offer the same sentiments to you,” Minna said.

Mrs. Jackman didn't quite know what to think and left with a demeanor of both perplexed sadness and frustration. Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Mabey offered expressions of apology as they followed in their monarch's footsteps.

“Do you think Mrs. Jackman knows your final words to her were, in fact, a bit of a setdown?” Rupert wondered aloud.

“My hope is that, if she has not realized it yet, she won't piece it together until she is well on her way.”

“It was not so much a setdown,” Lettie said, “as a deserved correction.” She looked to Simon. “It was very kind of you to speak so highly of us to them.”

The look in her eyes, now that Minna was truly looking, could not be mistaken. Lettie had lost her heart to her dear friend. Minna could not blame her; Simon was a wonderful person. Though her own feelings for him were firmly that of a friend and an honorary sibling, she could understand Lettie's attachment. She hoped Mrs. Vaughn was correct and that the sentiment was returned. The two could build an exceptionally happy life together. They would have the sweetest of families and likely a deeply happy existence.

While Minna wanted to believe there would be room for her in that changing and expanding life, she knew that was not always how such things played out. She would be happy for them regardless of the role she was relegated to. She would take such delight in knowing they were happy.

But she would be lonely. Even more than she often was now.

And, in the midst of it all, Rupert meant to hie himself away from England. He had said he didn't wish to stop being part of her life. She would see him again when he returned. *If* he returned at all. Some people, upon discovering a temperate clime or a particularly gorgeous bit of Continental countryside, chose not to come home.

She would be so very alone.

Simon and Rupert had arrived separately, which they didn't always do. But that meant Simon had his own carriage, and as there would be nothing untoward in him driving Lettie to the home of a paternal cousin with whom she would be spending Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, when he proposed precisely that, no objections were made. Lettie, for her part, seemed absolutely overjoyed.

They were soon on their way, leaving Rupert and Minna alone in the drawing room. The doors remained open, lending propriety to the moment, though perhaps the greatest of sticklers would have insisted a maid be stationed in a corner.

As it was, Rupert and Minna stood near the front windows, watching as their friends departed.

"For some time now," Rupert said, "I have thought Simon and Lettie would make a good match. I am beginning to suspect they are in agreement with me on that."

"I have been noticing the same thing, and Mrs. Vaughn told me yesterday that she has as well."

"I believe we would be wise to plan on attending a wedding come spring," Rupert said.

"Will you be here in the spring?" Minna asked, looking back at him.

Rupert looked away from the window, allowing the curtain to fall back into place. "I didn't know if you heard me when I was speaking of that."

"I didn't. Lettie told me you mean to travel next year and will likely be absent for the Season."

"I have been thinking about it, yes." There was that look again, the one that told her there were things he hadn't told her, things he wasn't admitting to, thoughts he was holding back.

"Are you thinking of traveling because you wish to, or are you doing so under duress? I only ask because you do not seem particularly excited about the possibility."

"You are not the only one who has had a great deal weighing

on the mind lately,” he said.

“This is one of the things that has been on my mind. You are going to be traveling, and I don’t know how long you will be gone. And if Simon and Lettie marry, they will begin a new life. You may begin a new life somewhere as well. And I will still be here. Alone.” She took a much-needed breath. “I felt so alone after my brother died and after my parents’ deaths. I cannot bear the thought of feeling that way again. How am I ever to survive it once more if the very people who saw me through it are the ones who leave me behind the next time?”

He drew closer, standing so near she could see every movement of his eyes as he studied her face. “I’m beginning to suspect I’ve misunderstood you, Minna.” He took her hands in his, his gaze never leaving her face. “I cautioned you against continuing to take such pains to avoid recollections of the past, fearing that you were isolating yourself, even from the joy that can be found there, out of fear of the sorrows that reside in recollections of days gone by. But I don’t think it is the past that truly frightens you. I think you’re more fearful of the future, terrified of the possibilities it might hold.”

The truthfulness of his words shuddered through her. “It is the past that has taught me to be afraid, Rupert. Running from the past while living in fear of the future makes it difficult to find joy in the present, and I don’t know how to reconcile that. The only thing I know with any certainty is that I am so terribly tired, Rupert.” The surge of sudden emotion caught her by surprise. She could no sooner have stopped the tears that formed in her eyes than she could have stopped the rain from falling.

Rupert gently set his arms around her, and she answered in kind, leaning in to him. The arrangement felt as natural as breathing, as familiar as if they had undertaken it every day of their lives. His hand slowly and gently rubbed her back in a soothing motion. Minna had never before taken specific note of the scent of him, and yet she knew it as well as she knew his face, his voice, his smile.

“You have endured more than any one person ought, Minna. Of course you worry about being asked to endure more.”

“What am I to do? I feel as if I’m dragging heavy chains with me everywhere I go, chains that bind me to pain I cannot outrun, a constant reminder that living life means the inevitability of more moments of sorrow and grief, moments that are coming for me that I cannot avoid.”

His hands slid from her back to cup her cheeks. His sparkling emerald eyes met hers. “You begin by realizing you aren’t as alone as you fear you are.”

She couldn’t speak. Indeed, she couldn’t think. Him kissing her fingers the day before had sent shock waves through her. His embrace just now had warmed her to her very soul. The feel of his gentle touch on her face, the tender way he brushed a tear from her cheek with the pad of his thumb, the nearness of him, the warmth in his eyes as he looked at her, was something different entirely.

Her heart pounded so strongly and so loudly in her neck that she was half convinced it had taken up residence there permanently. If asked to predict a response to this change in his position, she would have declared she would miss being held so gently by him. But she would have been wrong. She wanted to stay precisely as they were, with him touching her precisely the way he was.

And yet, not *precisely*.

The very instant he stepped back and dropped his hands away, she realized what it was she actually wanted: she wanted Rupert Crawford, her dearest friend, the gentleman who was intending to simply up and leave, to kiss her.



# Chapter 14

GREENERY WAS NOT EASY TO come by in London. Thus, those wishing to make their homes festive on Christmas Eve had to obtain their bits of greenery from hothouses or enterprising flower sellers who added to their usual offerings things more fitting to the day.

The staff had undertaken the collection of necessary things while Minna and Lettie had been at home to visitors. They had established this approach the previous year, it being the first during which she was no longer in official mourning and the first during which Lettie had lived here. Everything about their Christmas celebration had been new. Things would likely continue to change over the years to come, especially if Lettie did indeed marry dear Simon in the coming year. Minna would need to hire a companion if she was to participate in anything at all. With all her actual friends gone, she would need to pay someone to pretend to be one.

Was this, then, to be her last Christmas during which Lettie, Simon, and Rupert were truly a part of her life? She didn't know whether that possibility most made her want to cling to every moment of this one or to fortify her walls once more so that all Christmases to come weren't so very painful.

"You're fearful of the future," Rupert had rightly said. "Terrified of the possibilities it might hold."

Yes, it was the future she feared more than almost anything else. But she was attempting to do better, to live more joyously, to heed Rupert's good advice.

"You aren't as alone as you fear you are," he had promised her. And she was doing her utmost to believe him.

Her heavy spirits made a sharp contrast to the growing cheerfulness of the house, which was quickly filling with the trappings of Christmas. Evergreen boughs were being placed artistically on the various mantels. The housekeeper and maids had created lovely wreaths of green dotted with holly berries.

Grace had informed Minna that the staff had hung a kissing bough in the servants' dining hall. Her lady's maid had shared the information with what had appeared to be an expectation of slightly scandalizing Minna. On the contrary, Minna was pleased to hear it. This was a very quiet household without a great deal to break up the likely monotony of the servants' days. Being able to have something a bit silly while also very familiar was a good thing for them.

There were no kissing boughs in the main part of the house.

If only there had been one hanging over the windows in the drawing room earlier that day.

Her mind had refused to let go of the idea of being kissed by Rupert. But if he did, she wanted it to be because *he* wanted to kiss her, not because Christmas tradition required it of him.

For what must have been the hundredth time, Minna shook off the thought of kissing her friend and focused instead on tying ribbons around the evergreen branches as she and the staff continued bringing the festive season into the house.

The Felingums' home was always decorated with abandon for their annual Christmas ball. One never forgot what time of year and what holy day was being marked when in attendance there. Yet they somehow managed to strike a balance between abundance and opulence.

What was it about greenery combined with the music of the holy season and the aroma of festive foods that made tradition so easy to associate with Christmas? The musicale had featured Christmas music, and while it had turned Minna's thoughts to pleasant Christmas memories, the event hadn't been dripping with that magical something that came this time of year. The soiree had been held in a room that, while not containing the greenery that was usually brought in only on Christmas Eve, had still had something of the feel of it in bits and pieces. That event had not felt truly Christmaslike.

Perhaps the Felingums' ball merely benefited from being associated with so many decades of Christmases; generations of that family had kept the tradition. Perhaps it was because it was held on the day itself. Perhaps it was the anticipation of

spending the evening surrounded by the trappings, the sounds, and the aromas of Christmas while amongst people one could not imagine a truly happy Christmas without.

People like Lettie, Simon, and Rupert.

“It looks lovely, Miss Schofield,” the butler said, motioning to the greenery artistically arranged in the drawing room.

“Yes, it does. The house is so cheery when decorated this way. I have long felt it needed a bit more cheer.”

She received looks of empathy from all the staff. Until recently, she likely would have bristled at feeling pitied rather than realizing she was, instead, being empathized with. How such expressions were heard and received depended so much on what the recipient of them was feeling. In her sorrow and fear, she could hear nothing but the pity she knew often accompanied such things.

She was trying to do better.

With Lettie spending the next few days at the home of her cousins, Minna took her dinner that evening on a tray in her room, choosing not to require the staff to set a place at the table in the dining room. This was simpler, if less festive. All over London, indeed all over Britain, families were gathering to mark the beginning of Christmas. They would attend Christmas Eve mass together, followed by the traditional very late supper afterward. Minna didn't really have a family to mark the tradition with.

She dressed with care for mass, not because she gave great weight to her appearance when at church but in deference to the holiness of the day. This annual pilgrimage to the chapel nearest her home was a significant one for other reasons as well.

She always attended Christmas Eve mass there, not merely because it was her local parish church. Some people, after all, spent that evening at the church nearer a family member's home, that member being the one to host the Christmas Eve supper. Minna continued attending here because it was in that churchyard that her parents and her brother were buried, and

mass there was the only aspect of Christmas observances that still felt as if they were included. She felt closer to them on this night than she did the rest of the year, while also feeling their loss more acutely.

She had spent the years over which she had lost them doing her best to push thoughts of the past aside. This was the one night when she didn't even attempt it. Rupert's observation on that tendency had woven itself through her thoughts, and she had begun to realize she needed to change. Not change the fundamental person she was or change into something other than herself in order to meet with anyone's approval. She needed to change this fear that held her captive. She could not go on, refusing to have memories or make memories out of fear that those memories would one day become tinged with grief as well.

How and where to begin eluded her, but she felt deeply in her bones that tonight's service would be a turning point for her. In the moments of quiet reflection, she would find answers and a way to move forward.

Was not Christmas itself the celebration of a beginning that changed all endings?

It was time she found her own miracle, her own place of healing, her own new beginning at Christmastime.

Minna sat in her usual pew during services that night, the same one her family had occupied all her life, all *their* lives before they'd been taken from her. Mr. Davidson, the vicar, had officiated those funerals and had spoken very kindly to her with each loss. She admitted she had not always been comforted by seeing him again, connected as he was to those sorrows, but she found herself heartened by his presence now. Yes, he was attached to many of the sorrowful moments of her recent past, but he had also been a source of reassurance and comfort in those difficult times. In that, she could find reason to reflect on him with happiness. She would not ever be happy that she had lost her family, but she could feel gratitude for his kindness and sincerity.

Perhaps that was part of the transformation she was

attempting: not ignoring the difficulties and pains but acknowledging the acts of compassion and reassurance and the quiet moments of joy that were intermingled with them.

As he read the passage from Luke telling the story of Christmas long past, she found herself reflecting on the holy family, the shepherds, and those who must have assisted with the birth of that tiny baby. That night, no doubt, had held sorrows and difficulties and pain and fear, and yet how tragic it would have been if those present had not looked back at that time and rejoiced in it.

Minna closed her eyes and did her best to breathe as the choir sang “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” The words were familiar but rested on her anew.

*“Hail the Heav’n-born Prince of Peace.*

*Hail the Son of Righteousness!*

*Light and Life around he brings,*

*Ris’n with Healing in his Wings.*

*Mild he lays his Glory by,*

*Born that Men no more may die;*

*Born to raise the sons of Earth,*

*Born to give them second Birth.”*

The text lay like a balm on her heart. This was what she had been seeking for: light and life and healing, this second birth, this new beginning.

She could remember the joyful moments of her past, even if they came with reminders of her grief. She could. She *would*.

Should Lettie and Simon make a match between themselves, and should doing so result in Minna not seeing them as often as she would like, she could still reflect back on the last few years and what a joyful delight their friendships had always been. She could reflect on those moments in childhood when she and Lettie had played together and built the cousinly bonds that now held them together. She could think on the many thoughtful and uplifting conversations she’d had with

Simon, the goodness of his heart, and how kind he was.

And if Rupert decided to leave for the Continent and remained away for months or—she swallowed back a tear—*forever*, she could look back on the gift his friendship had always been. Somehow, her heart would heal from that grief as well.

*Healing in his wings.*

This was the journey she was on. Not one merely of change but of healing.

All around her, the faces of her fellow parishioners were filled with the joy of this most hopeful of seasons. There was a peacefulness that seemed to descend upon the world on this holy day when past, present, and future converged and showed to all who would see how very much each was influenced by and dependent upon the other, testifying to that truth that all mankind is likewise connected to and influenced by and dependent on each other.

The services came to a close. The parishioners took time to offer their Christmas greetings to the vicar as they slipped out of the chapel, though Minna suspected they would all have preferred to simply rush home and begin the festivities in earnest. She was not the last to leave, but neither was she first. She, too, paused in the doorway of the chapel to speak with the vicar.

“I have reason to beg your pardon, Mr. Davidson,” she said.

He looked confused.

“I have been reflecting on the last few years and have realized I neglected to truly express to you how much your compassion and kindness in each of my losses has meant to me. You are a source of great comfort, and I appreciate that far more than I have said, though I intend to make an effort to do so in the days and years to come.”

He smiled softly, that same look of compassion in his eyes that she’d seen so many times. “Allowing our hearts to break with the breaking of others is not merely a calling to all who mark this holy day, but it should be considered an honor. In

doing so, we reflect the life that began with Christmas. And I sincerely hope, Miss Schofield, the Christmases ahead for you are filled with joy to offset the sorrows you've known."

She dipped a small curtsy. "As do I."

Not wishing to slow the departure of those behind her, nor keep the vicar any longer than was necessary at this late hour, she made her way from the chapel but did not follow the path all the way to the lane beyond. She stepped from the path and into the churchyard, making her way carefully, on account of the dim night, to where her family were buried.

She brushed her fingers lightly over the top of each grave marker. She forced her thoughts to wander where they seldom did: to moments in the past, spent with each of these beloved people, moments that she remembered with fondness and tenderness. She would always miss them, but missing them didn't mean she had to forget them.

She meant to begin to find the joy in the past and present and anticipate with delight the joys yet to come in her future.

# Chapter 15

RUPERT HADN'T WANTED TO BE disruptive during services, but attending Christmas Eve mass at the chapel where he knew Minna did had seemed the right thing to do. She was struggling. He knew much of the grief she had experienced in recent years was beginning to require a reckoning. And he further knew that his comments on the day they had visited his grandparents had, in retrospect, been too harsh and too lacking in compassion and had been offered with a limited understanding of what it was she was truly struggling with.

Seeing her wander off the churchyard path, he'd known immediately where she was aiming for. She had stopped in front of the final resting place of her parents and her brother. His heart broke for her as he saw her standing there, alone in the dimness of night, as close to surrounded by her family as she would ever be.

It was a difficult thing, being alone on Christmas. He had his grandparents still, and while they weren't the entirety of his family, it was more than she had. He loved her too much to wish for her to be so unhappy. It was a sentiment he had expressed often but without realizing it was love and not merely friendship that inspired it.

He didn't think she was actually truly *unhappy*. She struggled with loneliness. She was still wading through waters thick with grief. But Minna, his Minna, his amazing, strong, unflinching Minna, continued to press forward, continued living her life the best way she could. And the heavens knew he wanted to be part of that life in more ways than he currently was.

"Are you wanting me to fetch the coachman, Mr. Crawford?" Wink asked, having accompanied him on this Christmas Eve journey. The boy had taken to the household, and the staff at Rupert's home adored their newest addition.

"Once he has the carriage prepared and ready, have him



drive around to Miss Schofield's home," Rupert said. "He'll know which one it is."

Wink rushed off, just as quick-footed and reliable as Rupert had promised the driver he would be.

Rupert slowly made his way down the row of grave markers toward where Minna stood. He wasn't certain what he would say or how he would explain his presence there. He knew his feelings for her but didn't yet know her feelings for him. And this moment was not the right one in which to make such a confession. He simply wanted her to know that she wasn't alone.

She looked up at him as he approached, likely hearing his footsteps on the ground. "Rupert? What are you doing here?" Thankfully, she didn't seem upset at seeing him, simply surprised.

"I've spent the time since I left your house thinking about you and knowing how difficult this time of year can be for someone who has lost so many loved ones. And I thought about you coming to this church for services and sitting on your own. I just didn't want you to be alone." Trying to explain his motivations was proving awkward in the extreme.

"Why did you not come and sit with me?" she asked.

"I wasn't entirely certain whether you needed solitude during the services more than you might want support. And, further, I didn't wish to start whispers, which sitting with you in your family pew with no one else there would most certainly have done."

She slipped her arm through his. It was not an unusual arrangement for a gentleman and a lady, certainly nothing that, in itself, indicated any tender feelings. But, in that moment, it felt like a rush of warm water on a cold day, like the warmth of fire glow on a winter night. He had come to offer her comfort but was finding it himself.

"I'm glad you came, Rupert. I have felt very alone, and not merely tonight. I hadn't realized until our conversations lately how much I have ignored those feelings."

They walked through the churchyard, careful on account of the uneven ground and the darkness of night, back to the path leading past the walls.

“I think sometimes,” he said, “when we have been overwhelmed by grief, we decide to ignore it as much and as firmly as possible because we know we haven’t the strength to sift through it all, not after everything that’s already happened.”

She leaned a little against him. It meant he couldn’t see her face, the brim of her bonnet blocking his view. How easily he could picture her pensive expression. She often wore it. “I suspect all this time I have been telling myself how very strong I was being by not letting myself feel all the pain that has been taking up residence in my mind and heart. Only now am I beginning to realize that true strength lies in facing grief and loss and struggle and walking through those thorny paths even knowing how difficult it will be.”

“I hope you also realize you needn’t walk those paths alone.” He set his hand atop hers where it rested on his arm. They both wore heavy coats and gloves on account of the cold night, and yet this touch had the same effect that it had of late. The comfort he offered was returned to him a hundredfold.

What he wouldn’t give to walk every Christmas Eve back to a home he shared with her, arm in arm, just like this, talking of whatever it was that sat in the forefront of their minds and lives. In some years, the conversations would be lighter and happier. But, when life demanded it, they would strengthen each other through the sorrows as well.

He was so certain she had come very close to kissing him, or allowing him to kiss her, as the case may be, earlier that day in her drawing room. He’d wanted to. Heavens, how he’d wanted to! But he also knew she was struggling. He would never have been entirely certain whether she had kissed him out of loneliness, gratitude for his kind words, or simply as a way of alleviating some of the pain she felt. A kiss offered in a moment of sorrow could be a comfort, but it could also be misconstrued.

Minna didn't live overly far from the chapel, and her carriage was not waiting for her outside the wall of the churchyard, so Rupert felt certain she had walked. On they went, down the streets, with the slightest hint of snow in the air. It was a quiet night. And though he knew her mind was heavy with sorrow and his heart was heavy with uncertainty, there was something deeply peaceful in that moment.

"There's nothing quite like London at Christmastime," Minna said softly. "Though I've never spent the holy season anywhere else, I can't imagine its equal can be found in any other place."

"People make a place special," Rupert said. "So long as you and Simon and Lettie are in London, I can't imagine another place in all the world holding my heart as it does."

She turned her head enough to look up at him. Her nose and cheeks were pink with the cold air. A single loose strand of hair hung over one temple. There was something in the naturalness of the sight that made his heart hitch. He'd always thought her lovely. With just the two of them walking through a light sprinkling of snow in the earliest hours of Christmas, he couldn't imagine being happier than he was in that moment.

He saw her all the way to her door and wished her a good night and a happy Christmas. Promises were made in both directions to see each other at the Felingums' ball. Then she disappeared inside, the door closing behind her. And that was the entirety of the moment, of their quiet Christmas walk together.

Rupert stood on the pavement, watching the occasional fluttering snowflake, feeling the bite of the cold night air, listening to the silence of a city that was so seldom still.

He knew Christmas could be a time of miracles, though he often felt himself unequal to pleading with the heavens for one on his own behalf. But standing there, watching as his carriage arrived, he pleaded for a miracle just the same. He pleaded with the heavens to at least give him a chance of spending all his Christmases forevermore with Minna Schofield.

# Chapter 16

MINNA AND HER FRIENDS WERE arriving at the Felingums' ball separately, it having made more logistical sense to do so. Originally, the cousins with whom Lettie was spending her Christmas Day had offered to bring Minna with them, as a single young lady would be frowned upon should she arrive alone and unaccompanied. But Minna had sent word that she had secured companions for the evening and would not need to take advantage of the kind offer.

As her carriage pulled to its place at the very front of the line of carriages arriving for the annual celebration, she couldn't help but smile at the mingled glee and nervousness she saw on the faces of her companions.

"Do you suppose it has changed much in recent years?" Mrs. Crawford asked her husband, eyeing the facade of the Felingum house through the carriage window.

"Likely some," he said. "Few things are unchanging. But the fundamentals are likely no different than they were: lively music, enjoyable offerings to eat and drink, greenery as far as the eye can see, and most important of all, a gathering of people filled with the joy of the season."

Minna had initially gone to the Crawfords' home to ask if they would come to the ball with her because she thought they would be pleased to return to the memories they'd made there and that their pleasure would bring Rupert an added degree of happiness on Christmas Day. She was discovering, though, that their presence was a gift to her as well. She was more eager to attend than she had been in the past. The very types of memories they now recalled were the types she hoped to make. She wanted to be able to look back and remember these balls and these gatherings with fondness.

Mr. Crawford was very gallant and entered the home and the ballroom with his wife on one arm and Minna on the other. They were announced, and no sooner had they entered the

ballroom than a couple of the Crawfords' generation accosted them with excited words and welcoming embraces.

"We hadn't heard you would be attending," the woman said.

With a look of gratitude sent in Minna's direction, Mrs. Crawford said, "Miss Schofield convinced us to. I confess, though it does me no credit, that I have had my doubts up until this moment that it was anything but ridiculousness on our part to attend a lively evening such as this."

The gentleman grinned, the lines of his face settling with such ease into the expression that Minna knew he must have smiled often. "For my part, I think those of our generation enjoy ourselves more here than anyone else. There is so little expectation of making a good showing for ourselves, and any misstep we make is generously forgiven as the foibles of people in their dotage." He offered the last few words with a very entertaining imitation of a theatrically portrayed elderly individual.

Minna set a hand lightly on Mrs. Crawford's arm. "I suspect you will find many of your friends here this evening. I mean to see if I can locate your grandson and thoroughly surprise and delight him with your presence."

Mrs. Crawford nodded. "Thank you again for convincing us to come. It is far better to be here tonight than to simply be reminiscing about it."

The Crawfords walked off with their friends, all engaged in a lively conversation.

Minna was glad they had come. She hoped their evening was as splendid as they anticipated it being, that this night provided yet another memory for them to reflect upon.

She turned to survey the large and boisterous crowd, intending to see if any of her friends had arrived, only to come face-to-face with Mrs. Jackman. Her eyes had that wide franticness people sometimes assumed when desperate to accomplish something that had been elusive so far. It was one of the reasons she was more nervous about this, the last of the lady's efforts, than she had been about any of the others.

Desperation did not generally make a person more sensible.

Mrs. Jackman indicated the very elegantly dressed gentleman beside her. “Miss Schofield, have you met Lord Beaufort?”

Lord Beaufort. She knew of him. Everyone in the *ton* knew of him.

“I have not yet had the pleasure,” she said.

Mrs. Jackman made the required introductions. Lord Beaufort was the oldest son of a duke. He himself would be a duke one day. He’d been primed from birth for the title. He had influence and importance, but everything Minna had heard said of him was a reflection upon the person he would be. She had no idea about the person he was now.

Mrs. Jackman gave Minna an overly long and pointed look. No explanation was needed. The woman felt this was Minna’s last chance. But Minna knew perfectly well this was, in a very real way, *Mrs. Jackman’s* last chance. She had declared she would find Minna a match by Christmas Day, and this was Christmas Day. She had until the end of the night to make good on her declaration.

The lady stepped back a bit, far enough to provide some privacy for a not-overheard conversation between Minna and her latest victim but not so far that she couldn’t keep an eye on all that was happening. Minna would not be left to her own devices that night, apparently.

“Do you often spend Christmas in London?” Lord Beaufort asked.

“Always.”

He nodded, not as if he agreed or approved but seemingly only as an indication that he acknowledged she had spoken.

“Do *you* often spend Christmas in London?” She could think of nothing else to do but return the inquiry.

He shook his head. “My family divides our time between our London home and our various country estates. This year we are in London.”

“What a pleasure to be with your family.”

He nodded. “When I am duke, I intend to continue that tradition.”

“Traditions are very important.” Indeed, she’d found, over the previous few days, that those things that were tradition and were familiar reminders of the past often came with the least overwhelming degree of sorrow. Perhaps that was why the Crawfords still thought so fondly on this ball, though they had lost many friends, and even children and grandchildren, over the years. This night was part of a joy-filled tradition.

“What are your political leanings, Miss Schofield?” Lord Beaufort spoke far more bluntly than gentlemen usually did. Discussions of politics, especially with a lady at a ball, were considered rather gauche.

“I confess the topic is not one I ponder overly much.” That seemed a decent enough way to avoid a topic that was so riddled with potential difficulties.

“Do you not see yourself in the future as a political hostess, arranging soirees and gatherings for your future husband’s political acquaintances?”

“That is *decidedly* not something I have pondered.”

Considering he had met her only two minutes earlier, he was already making a great many assumptions and an even greater number of intrusive forays into subject matters not usually introduced so quickly. Even if she weren’t one who looked to the future with more than a little trepidation, she would find his approach a touch alarming.

“What experience do you have running households?” Lord Beaufort asked.

“You will forgive me, I hope, for saying that this conversation is beginning to feel like I am under consideration for employment.”

Far from embarrassed by the softly worded rebuke, the future duke seemed almost proud and impressed. “Are not most introductions at social gatherings, in their own way, discussions of suitability for combined efforts yet to come?”

What is matrimony if not the cobbling together of two people to accomplish future goals?"

Under her breath Minna muttered, "How wonderfully romantic."

He clearly heard her answer. His brow pulled deep, and he looked at her with surprise. "You may have held more romanticized views of such things years ago, Miss Schofield. But, as far as I've heard, you've not had any suitors over those years. I can't imagine anyone, upon reaching your time of life, would continue to harbor any romantic ideals about courtship."

"I have reached the age of desperation, I fear." She allowed only the slightest bit of her dryness to enter her tone. "Indeed, I am hopeful that I will receive as a gift this Christmas a full set of matrons' caps so that I may fully embrace my role as an ancient and decrepit lady of fading charms."

His mouth twisted a little. It wasn't disapproval, really, but rather the face one made when weighing options. "You are clever and have the ability to turn a witty phrase. Now and then that is a benefit, but I cannot say that sarcasm is entirely to my liking."

"Because you do not understand it?" she asked innocently.

"Sarcasm can sometimes come across as biting and, when employed by a lady, can be off-putting to gentlemen of ambition and influence."

"Do you promise?"

His brow dipped ever further.

She nodded solemnly. "It would be a shame, don't you think, if a person were to accost a guest at a fine gathering with insults, however neatly tied up to appear harmless, and if that person, a guest in another's house, were to be the recipient of unkindness and hurtful words? Would you not consider that a sign of poor manners?"

His lack of self-awareness did not allow for the tiniest bit of guilt to enter his expression, though she had described his behavior quite perfectly. "I will give this some thought, Miss



Schofield, but I confess I am having significant doubts.”

“Allow me to assuage a few of those,” she offered.

He gave her a look not unlike that tossed in the direction of a child asking to be permitted to undertake something she was far too young and unknowing to accomplish. “You certainly may try, but I know what it is I want and where I am going and what would aid me in the pursuit of my goals for the future. I doubt you could offer me insights on those topics, as you are not familiar with them.”

“I had not meant to explain to you *your own* future, my lord. Only to say you needn’t fret over whether or not you think I would make a suitable addition to that future. I will save you the trouble of expending further thought on it and simply tell you that we would not, under any circumstances, suit.”

That did surprise him. “My future is quite a bit brighter than yours. Mrs. Jackman rightly felt you would recognize the shocking good fortune it is for you to receive any degree of interest from a future duke.”

“I am shocked, I assure you,” she said, “but not so much that I am rendered unaware that you deserve a lady who shares your ambitions and your vision for the future. I do not think I am that lady.”

She could tell at a glance that he didn’t know whether to be relieved or offended. She chose not to require him to come to a conclusion while she was watching. She offered a quick curtsy, one she hoped didn’t come across as sarcastic, both because she knew his feelings on ladies striking that particular tone and because she did not actually wish to hurt his feelings. She turned away and began walking along the edge of the ballroom. She spied Simon and Lettie sitting near Mr. and Mrs. Crawford, enjoying an animated conversation. Again and again, Simon looked at Lettie or she at him, but never at the same time. There was such tenderness in their faces, such blatant adoration. Surely they could not be unaware of their mutual affection. She hoped they found a means of confessing as much to each other.

Minna continued walking slowly, offering greetings to

people as she passed. She did her best to stay as far away from Mrs. Jackman as possible. That lady was likely to hear at any moment that her final effort to save “poor Miss Schofield” had ended in another failure. She would not be best pleased.

Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Mabey would likely be disappointed but were far less likely to direct any frustration at Minna.

She had joked that she meant to put on her caps and declare herself an old maid. But, truth be told, she *was* older than most ladies of her class and station were when they married. Still, she was not ready to abandon hope, not when she had only just, during that Christmas season, grabbed hold of it once more.

It was in that moment of self-reflection that Christmas produced yet another miracle. Across the room, Rupert arrived.

# Chapter 17

MINNA HAD ENDED HER CHRISTMAS Eve walking with Rupert from her family's final resting place to the house that had been hers since losing them, and for the first time since losing her parents and brother, she'd made that short journey without being shattered by it. Because of him. He gave her strength when hers faltered. He always had.

In the moments following their brief time by the windows of her drawing rooms, when Minna's thoughts had been filled with a longing to kiss Rupert, she'd been confused by her newly discovered feelings for him. Seeing him enter the ballroom, dressed sharply in a tailcoat of deep green set against a silk waistcoat in alternating stripes of gold and scarlet, his quietly content expression matching the steady presence of him and the serenity that seemed to follow him everywhere, she wasn't confused any longer.

Her heart simply melted.

She hadn't suddenly grown curious about the possibility of kissing him. Somewhere along the way these past years, she had fallen in love with him. It was a change she didn't quite know how to navigate. Love had never been part of their connection to each other. She'd been so worried upon hearing that he was contemplating an extended holiday on the Continent and that, as a result of that separation, she would lose his friendship, that it hadn't occurred to her to wonder why that possibility ate away at her even more than the possibility of a lessening of her connection with Simon and Lettie.

But as she watched him make his way through the ballroom, greeting guests and friends, received warmly by all, she knew that if she lost him, she would lose her very heart.

What was she to do now?

Rupert cared about her. He was kind and thoughtful and wouldn't wish to cause her pain. But she had no proof that he

thought of her in terms other than as his dear friend who had spent so much time running from her past and fearful of her future that she had missed so significant a truth in her present. There was every possibility that if she told him how she was feeling and the things that were in her heart, he would be unable to return the sentiment. That would make everything awkward between them. But living in fear of the future had caused her no end of grief.

It was time she began living her life with a bit of bravery.

Rupert's slow journey closer to his grandparents stopped quite suddenly. His gaze fell on the two of them, and his eyes pulled wide. His mouth froze in a small *o*.

Minna hadn't told him of her plans to bring them, wanting to surprise him—her Christmas gift to him. She knew that would mean more to him than anything else she could possibly have given him. He loved his grandparents, and seeing them happy meant the world to him. She'd intended to be there when he made the discovery, but fate was not being kind at the moment.

Still, she could join him soon enough by making her way to where his grandparents sat. They would, no doubt, talk for a time about the welcome addition to the evening's festivities. And somewhere in the midst of that friendly conversation, she would broach the topic she knew she needed to.

Wrapping her courage around her like a thick winter cloak, she began walking in that direction.

But she did not get that far.

Mrs. Jackman hooked her arm through Minna's, and with a force that was a bit shocking, considering it was being utilized in the midst of a ballroom, Minna was "guided" to the tall French doors and out onto the terrace beyond. It was winter and therefore cold. Minna was hardly dressed for being out in this weather.

"Are you this intent on spiting me?" Mrs. Jackman demanded.

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about,"

Minna said. “And I would appreciate being permitted to return to the ballroom, where it is warmer.”

“So that you can humiliate me further?” Mrs. Jackman was clearly quite upset.

“If you tell me what I have done to humiliate you, I will gladly move directly to the apologies. Then we can return inside posthaste.”

“I knew you were headstrong and tended to speak your mind more than most young ladies do, but I had not expected you to be vindictive.”

“Headstrong I will admit to. But vindictive, I assure you, has never been in my nature.”

“Then how do you explain the past week? Three exceedingly eligible bachelors, all willing to come to know you better, and you rejected all of them out of hand.”

Mrs. Jackman’s declared ability to find Minna a match by Christmas had been shown to be a matter of overconfidence on the self-declared matchmaker’s part. She was facing the imminent reckoning of so public a failure. But to lay blame for that at Minna’s feet was unfair.

“None of them were rejected ‘out of hand,’” Minna insisted. “I have known Mr. Lloyd a great many years, as he and my late brother were friends. Neither Mr. Lloyd nor I felt the least inclination toward one another beyond a bit of reminiscing over times we had once been in company and acquaintances that we have in common.”

Mrs. Jackman blinked a few times. “Well, if *he* wasn’t interested . . .”

It was, apparently, perfectly acceptable for a gentleman to reject Minna but an utter travesty for Minna to be the one doing the rejecting. Very well; she knew how to proceed. “Mr. Addison could not possibly be interested in making a match with me, as he chose to make me the recipient of a rather cruel joke whilst surrounded by others who were led to laugh at me because of him. And as those hurtful bits of so-called humor were aimed at the fact that no one could ever wish to marry

me, I cannot imagine that he ever would.”

Again Mrs. Jackman appeared momentarily dumbfounded. In a voice that held a bit less criticism, she said, “I hadn’t heard that.” But she seemed to recollect herself. Her posture straightened. With a look that absolutely dared Minna to explain the most recent failure of her efforts, she said, “Lord Beaufort informed me that you informed him that the two of you would not suit, and you came to that conclusion within a single brief conversation.”

Minna knew she wasn’t truly obligated to explain herself to this interfering lady, and yet she chose to. “Did you ask Lord Beaufort if he felt the same way?”

“Of course not.”

“I suggest you do. Because I can guarantee you he will tell you that he agrees entirely that we will not suit. It was evident immediately.”

Mrs. Jackman shook her head. “He is a future duke. With that prospect dangling in front of you, I would fully have expected you, a lady who seems to have some degree of sense, to do all you could to *make* yourself suit. Think of the future you would have.”

“I assure you I have given ample thought to my future. And it is with that future in mind that I tell you once more that he and I do not, would not, and will never suit.”

The misery that crossed Mrs. Jackman’s features upon realizing that she would have to face the *ton* having failed at the goal she had so confidently set for herself almost made Minna feel sorry for her. Almost.

That moment of empathy might have stretched a little bit longer if not for the fact that Mrs. Jackman’s fleeting moment of penitence disappeared quickly. “There are any number of eligible gentlemen here tonight,” she said. “There must be one among them who would suit.”

It was not Minna who answered, but the calm and even tone of the one gentleman present that night whom she thought she could *ever* suit. “No gentleman will have a chance to

determine that if Miss Schofield dies of an inflammation of the lungs from having been kept out in the cold all night without so much as a wrap to keep her warm.”

Mrs. Jackman spun a bit, enough to see who had spoken.

There he stood, Minna’s champion. He had over his arm a cloak, one she was almost certain was his grandmother’s. He stepped past Mrs. Jackman with only the tiniest dip of his head and stopped directly in front of Minna. He flung the cloak open and twirled it around her shoulders, settling it expertly into place.

“My grandparents were very concerned when they saw you escorted onto the terrace. Your remarkable kindness to them tonight, they feared, was to be repaid by succumbing to illness brought about by the neglect of others.” Rupert’s back was to Mrs. Jackman, so he could not possibly have seen the frantic look of embarrassment his words brought to her face.

“They are such dear and wonderful people,” Minna said. “It was my absolute delight to bring them tonight. I suspect it will be the highlight of the ball for me.”

“I’ve not given up yet,” Mrs. Jackman said from behind them. “I will find someone. You will see.”

Rupert looked over his shoulder at her. “You have time to sort out a likely candidate while Miss Schofield regains the feeling in her frozen fingers and toes.”

Only Rupert could have offered what was clearly meant to be a bit of a setback in such a way that it didn’t feel like one. But he also didn’t inadvertently make it sound like encouragement.

Minna felt certain Mrs. Jackman left with her confidence returning and her determination solidifying. As the lady disappeared into the ballroom, Rupert set a hand on Minna’s back and guided her to the nearby adjacent doors, which led into the house’s library. The room was not dark, which Minna thought a good indication that it wasn’t considered unavailable to guests. But it was quiet and empty, and there was a bit of privacy.

She clutched the cloak closed in front of her, not realizing how cold she had truly been until she was back inside, shielded against the arctic air. The room boasted only a low-burning fire and didn't have the bustle of people that had made the ballroom warm. Still, it was a welcome improvement.

"Thank you for your rescue," Minna said. "I couldn't tell whether Mrs. Jackman meant to give me a stinging setdown or dissolve into a puddle of pleading, trying to convince me to marry *anyone* simply to get her to stop blubbing."

"Who did she toss in front of you tonight?"

"Lord Beaufort." Minna actually laughed at the look of horror that crossed Rupert's face. "It was worse than you are likely even imagining. I felt I was being subjected to an assessment of my suitability to act as his secretary or housekeeper or something of that nature. He made it abundantly clear that I was not at all what he was looking for in a future duchess."

"Mercy, did he actually refer to his intended spouse that way?"

"He didn't need to. He uttered the phrase 'When I am duke' to make his point clear."

Rupert reached out and set a hand on her upper arm, looking at her with such tenderness she could have cried. "You deserve so much better than him, Minna. Mr. Lloyd thinks of little but what has been, Mr. Addison has no thoughts beyond enjoyment in the here and now, and Lord Beaufort is living in a future of his own imagining, defined by title and importance rather than happiness."

"They were terrible enough choices that I find myself deeply doubting Mrs. Jackman's ability as a matchmaker," she said. "But there is one good thing that came of her efforts."

His hand still rested against her arm, his thumb rubbing soft circles she could only just feel through the cloak. It was warming her through faster than even the thick wool.

"What is that?" he asked.

"I learned something from each of them. Through them I



saw flaws in my own way of looking at and thinking about life.”

“You have?”

She nodded, holding his emerald gaze with hers. “I have been living in fear of the future because I was still so pained by my past. Having seen the troubles with living in either of those extremes, I am determined to strike a better balance. I am determined to remember joy, to find joy, to anticipate joy. It’s been too long since I’ve allowed myself to do any of the three.”

His other hand slipped her face, brushing her cheek ever so gently, a whisper of a touch. “That is what I’ve wished for you, Minna. Happiness and joy.”

She closed her eyes, memorizing the feel of his hand on her face. This was one of those moments she would reflect on with joy, even if the future proved something other than what she wished for now. “Is that why you look at me the way you do sometimes?” she asked him, her eyes still closed.

“What way is that?” She felt him step closer. Even with her eyes still closed, she could tell he was near, could feel the increased warmth from him, could hear his voice more clearly, even though he spoke more softly.

“You look at me sometimes like there’s something you’re not telling me, something you want to say but can’t bring yourself to.” She opened her eyes at last, and he was indeed standing a breath away. “I’ve been afraid you were going to tell me you’d grown weary of me and my faults and”—his hand slipped from her face to the back of her neck—“that you were going to leave and not come back.” His other hand moved from her arm to her back as he pulled her nearer still. “What is it you haven’t told me?”

Ever closer he leaned until he was too near for her eyes to focus, too near for her to keep looking. Her eyes fluttered shut.

“I’ve been desperate to tell you,” he whispered, “that I love you, Minna Schofield. I have for so long, though I didn’t even realize it.”

With an aim borne of instinct, she lifted onto her toes ever so slightly and felt her lips brush his for an instant. The air around them crackled as it would in the moment before a lightning strike. She wrapped her arms around his neck, the cloak falling from her shoulders. But the warmth of his arms around her, his lips fervently searching and pleading with hers, sent waves of warmth through her more healing and more abiding than any mere piece of fabric could provide.

He kept her in his arms even as he pressed the lightest of kisses along her cheek.

“I love you, Rupert. So very much.”

He whispered in her ear, “Mrs. Jackman will likely take credit for this, you realize.”

“Let her,” Minna said. “We will know the truth.”

His breath tickling her ear, he whispered, “And what is the truth?”

“That this, my dear Rupert, was nothing short of *our* Christmas miracle.”

# Epilogue

FOR MINNA, LIFE WAS BETTER than even she had predicted. She lived with a heart filled with the lessons of the past, the beauty of the present, and the promise of the future. With joy, all three strived within her.

In her newfound joy, she was as light as a feather and as happy as an angel. At the dawning of the new year, she and Rupert were married. Within a fortnight, Lettie and Simon were as well. And the four of them were the merriest of participants as the social Season began not many months removed from those blessed occasions.

Mrs. Jackman, who did in fact claim credit for having successfully found Minna a match, crowed to all who would hear her of the miracle *she* had brought about. Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Mabey allowed the Queen of the Gossipers to claim responsibility whilst they were with her, but when whispering over tea in drawing rooms where she was not present, they offered all the credit to Minna and Rupert. Nearly all, at least. They felt themselves deserving of some acknowledgment, as they had, they insisted, put the idea of marriage into Minna's head with their visits.

Minna, with her beloved Rupert at her side, simply went about her days filled with happiness. And when Rupert suggested that they, in company with their dearest friends, journey to the Continent, she could imagine nothing better. She, who had thought herself perfectly content to spend her days closed off from the world, mourning her losses and fearing her future, could imagine nothing more delightful than a life filled with adventures at the side of her dearest whilst they dreamed of happiness yet to come.

Some people laughed to see the alteration in her from a lady even Mrs. Jackman could not convince to make a match to one utterly besotted. She let them laugh and little heeded them.

She had found peace and joy and a heart filled with love.

# About the Author



SARAH M. EDEN IS A *USA Today* best-selling author of witty and charming historical romances, including 2020's *Foreword Reviews* INDIE Awards Gold winner for romance, *Forget Me Not*, 2019's *Foreword Reviews* INDIE Awards Gold winner for romance, *The Lady and the Highwayman*, and 2020 Holt Medallion finalist, *Healing Hearts*. She is a three-time Best of State Gold Medal winner for fiction and a three-time Whitney Award winner. Combining her obsession with history and her affinity for tender love stories, Sarah loves crafting deep characters and heartfelt romances set against rich historical backdrops. She holds a bachelor's degree in research and happily spends hours perusing the reference shelves of her local library.

Learn more about Sarah at [SarahMEden.com](http://SarahMEden.com), and follow her on social media.

Facebook: [Sarah M. Eden](https://www.facebook.com/Sarah-M-Eden)

Instagram: [@sarah\\_m\\_eden](https://www.instagram.com/sarah_m_eden)

# Other Covenant Books by Sarah M. Eden

THE LANCASTER FAMILY

*Seeking Persephone*

*Courting Miss Lancaster*

*Romancing Daphne*

*Loving Lieutenant Lancaster*

*Christmas at Falstone Castle\**

in *All Hearts Come Home for Christmas* anthology

*Charming Artemis*

THE GENTS

*Forget Me Not*

*The Holly and the Ivy\**

in *The Holly and the Ivy* anthology

*Lily of the Valley*

*Fleur-de-Lis*

THE HUNTRESSES

*The Best-Laid Plans\**

*The Best Intentions*

THE JONQUIL BROTHERS

*The Kiss of a Stranger*  
*Friends and Foes*  
*Drops of Gold*  
*As You Are*  
*A Fine Gentleman*  
*For Love or Honor*  
*The Heart of a Vicar*  
*Charming Artemis*

STAND-ALONES

*For Elise*  
*Glimmer of Hope*  
*An Unlikely Match*  
*The Fiction Kitchen*  
*Trio Cookbook*

\*Novella

Chronological Order of All Related  
Sarah M. Eden GEORGIAN- & Regency-Era Books

*Forget Me Not*  
*The Holly and the Ivy\**  
*Lily of the Valley*  
*Fleur-de-Lis*  
*Seeking Persephone*  
*Courting Miss Lancaster*

*Glimmer of Hope*  
*Romancing Daphne*  
*The Kiss of a Stranger*  
*Friends and Foes*  
*Drops of Gold*  
*For Elise*  
*As You Are*  
*A Fine Gentleman*  
*For Love or Honor*  
*Loving Lieutenant Lancaster*  
*Christmas at Falstone Castle*  
*The Heart of a Vicar*  
*The Best-Laid Plans*  
*Charming Artemis*  
*The Best Intentions*

# **Christmas at Cranfield**

ASHTYN NEWBOLD



# Chapter 1

*December 1813*

HANNAH SOMERTON DREW A HEART on the frosted window of the carriage while her mother and William slept. She stole a quick glance at Mama, whose nose and mouth were buried in her shawl, and her brother, William, his head leaned back and mouth gaping open, to ensure their eyes were still closed before adding the final touch to her drawing.

*Samuel.*

She wrote his name in the frost beneath the heart, quickly swiping her palm across it when she heard William stir. He snorted, rubbing his eyes as he sat up. Hannah turned away from the window, crossing her hands in her lap over the carriage blanket. Writing Samuel's name on the window while William slept was the closest Hannah could ever come to telling her brother her secret. It had been a thrilling risk to draw Samuel's name right under William's nose, but now she had to pretend that instead she had been passing the drive staring at the shiny gray ringlets of Mama's hair as the carriage bounced over the road.

William threw a lazy glance at the streak Hannah had made on the window to hide her drawing. He didn't seem to think anything of it. He stretched his legs out in front of him, stealing what little space she'd had in the cramped carriage. "Are you not tired?" William asked through a yawn.

Hannah couldn't begin to feel tired, not when she was about to see Samuel again. They were only a few minutes from Cranfield, and she had been waiting four years for this moment. She gave a fake yawn. "I am."

William's brown eyes softened with understanding. "Are you thinking of your first Season? I know how eagerly you are anticipating it."

"Yes," Hannah said, crossing her hands in her lap. "You are right." She barely managed to refrain from groaning. William

was the one who was eager, not Hannah. She had been dreading the day she would be presented at court to the Queen. Not only that but the hundreds of days filled with parties and balls that she would have to attend. All the judgment, the expectations, and the hopes of her brother had been weighing on her back with more strength than if she were to pull the carriage in place of the horses. Since her father, the late Viscount of Northam, had died two years ago, William had become the new viscount and her guardian until she either married or reached her majority in three years' time. It had seemed, since that day, that he no longer viewed her as a sister.

He viewed her as an asset.

She could make a connection with another noble family, and that possibility was William's obsession. Was she pretty enough? Graceful enough? Accomplished enough to attract a viscount or earl or marquess or duke? Over the last two years, he had been asking himself such questions, and when the answer wasn't to his satisfaction, he pushed Hannah to change and mold herself into the perfect debutante. With her first Season approaching, William was even more attentive than usual.

She could pretend she was thinking of her Season as he was, but in reality, she was thinking only of Samuel. How might he have changed in the last four years? What would he think when he saw her? Would he find her much altered at eighteen? She had more than a fortnight ahead to spend in his company, exploring his new manor. Christmas Eve was a week away, and they would be staying until Twelfth Night.

"Do not fret, sister. Enjoy the Christmastide." William interlocked his fingers behind his head, burying them in the dark curls at the nape of his neck. "It shall be a joy to see Samuel again. I have missed our Christmases spent together." He closed his eyes. "I am happy for him. I thought he would have to spend his life as a clergyman." He snorted in amusement. "Or a woodcarver, like his grandfather."

Hannah stared at the smug expression on William's face as he drifted to sleep again. William knew all the good qualities his closest friend possessed, yet he still mocked Samuel for his

circumstances. Samuel had worked to have the opportunity to become a clergyman—that was where he had been the last four years, completing his degree at Cambridge. Even if he had been a woodcarver, living on meager wages, Hannah would still have loved him. His luck had turned, however, as was well-deserved, and he had been granted the small estate of Cranfield by his late uncle. With enough farmers working the land, Samuel could now live as a gentleman, without any other occupation.

He didn't have the wealth Hannah's family had, nor the connections, but growing up near their neighborhood, he had become a dear friend to them. William had been a much less arrogant, haughty boy than the man he had turned into. Hannah could still envision him laughing, running through the woods with Samuel while she had tried to keep up. As boys, they had been so similar, despite their difference in station. Now William seemed to revel in his superior circumstances, yet he still wrote to Samuel often, keeping their friendship alive from a distance. Perhaps it was because Samuel was the only man forgiving enough to remain William's friend despite his change in attitude.

Hannah's heart thudded as she anticipated the reunion that was only minutes away. The carriage slowed a little as it climbed a hill. She looked out the window at the frosted grass that flanked the road. And then, over the crest of the hill, she saw it.

Cranfield.

Red brick, stately, and symmetrical, the house stood alone amid the vast land encircling it. It wasn't near the size of her family's estate. It was much simpler, but that suited its new owner. Samuel was much like that house. Solid, dependable, but not desperate for attention. Unassuming, lovely, and unexpected. Her stomach fluttered, and she wrapped her arms around herself. Christmas was already her favorite time of the year. To spend it with Samuel would make it even more perfect.

Mama awoke to the scoff that escaped William when he observed the estate in the distance. "I thought it would be

larger,” he muttered.

Mama blinked rapidly, leaning toward the window. “Oh my. I think it is lovely.”

“As do I.” Hannah smiled, trying to appear less excited than she truly was. Part of her coaching for her Season had been to maintain a calm and collected expression at all times. She would have to remember to utilize her training during her time at Cranfield because if there was anything that could jostle her from her even disposition, it was Samuel Merchant.

Mama began smoothing her hair and adjusting her crumpled sleeves. Hannah had done all she could to remain presentable in the carriage, even though that had meant not resting. It would be worth it to present herself to Samuel in the most flattering way possible.

The carriage began the downward slope toward the house. Just when Hannah managed to convince her stomach to relax, the carriage jolted downward, and the sound of splintering wood cracked through the air. The carriage tipped, and Hannah slid roughly against the window, striking her head hard against the glass. She held the side of her forehead, groaning. Mama had crashed into William, who held on to her arm. He, too, had fallen against the window, but not as roughly as Hannah had.

“What the devil?” he said under his breath, catching himself against the side of the carriage as it wobbled again, finally coming to a stop.

“Did the wheel break?” Mama asked in a frantic voice.

William pushed the door open, stooping over to lean out of the carriage. He looked down at the ground with a grimace. “The ice and mud were concealing a hole in the road. It must have been caused by the weather.”

Not five seconds after he said the word *weather*, rain began sprinkling from the sky. Hannah had hoped the rain wouldn’t return, but at least it wasn’t snow. What fell from the clouds was something of a mixture between them—thick, partially crystalized droplets that coated the windows within a minute.

The coachman had already stepped out of the coach box and

was examining the broken wheel.

Hannah craned her neck to see his movements, but the icy rain was too thick, and William was still filling the doorway. “Well, can it be mended?” he asked.

The coachman’s voice was quiet and nervous. “I’m ’fraid it will take more than the tools I ’ave here.”

William let out a huffed breath, ducking back inside the carriage. “Shall I send him to fetch the tools while we wait here in the freezing coach, or shall we finish the walk to Cranfield?”

“Walk?” Hannah squeezed her right eye shut. Her forehead was throbbing beneath the place where she had struck her head. She removed her hand from the place just above her right eyebrow.

Mama and William gasped simultaneously.

“It is already swelling,” William said with a frustrated sigh. “Let us hope it heals before your debut in London.”

Hannah ignored their reactions, panic rising in her chest. It would not heal before her debut at Cranfield. Presenting herself well to the Queen was the least of her concerns. She wanted to present herself well to Samuel. With a swelling lump on her forehead, it already seemed impossible; if she were to walk in the cold rain and mud for five minutes, she had no hope at all. “Perhaps we should wait.”

William shook his head. “If we walk, we’ll be sitting by a warm fire with a hot cup of tea within five minutes. If we wait, it could be hours. Samuel will not judge our appearances once he knows the circumstances.” He laughed under his breath. “He has no right to judge us, at any rate. He should be pleased to have a viscount as a guest, wet and muddy or not.”

His arrogance grated on Hannah. Without another word, he stepped down from the carriage. She could hear his shout over the rain. “Gibbs, take our trunks to Cranfield the moment the wheel is repaired. I will inform the staff that their assistance is needed.”

The poor coachman crouched over the wheel, pulling his hat

down lower to block the rain. Hannah followed Mama, taking William's hand as she descended the step onto the ground. There was no saving her hem from the mud.

The icy-cold water poured down from the sky and onto every inch of them as they hurried down the hill toward the house. William began running, splashing mud droplets up from his boots that landed on Hannah's bodice and face. She grunted, gritting her teeth. She and Mama walked as quickly as they could in their gowns while William left them behind to jog to the safety of the front porch.

Hannah was completely soaked, her arms and legs numb. She shivered and her teeth chattered. The curls that had been framing her face beneath her hat were now limp and plastered to the sides of her face. William had been welcomed inside, and he was likely already sitting by a fire. She squinted at the open doorway of the house. Someone was standing there now, watching their approach.

As she drew closer, her heart gave a dramatic leap, confirming her worst fear.

It was Samuel. He was watching her slow and painful approach with no small measure of concern. When she and Mama reached the base of the stairs, he ran down to meet them, taking Mama's hand first, then Hannah's.

She looked up at his face. He had the same eyes as he had four years before, the same nose and mouth, but that was where the similarities ended. She had remembered him as a boy—a *young* man—but certainly not this fully grown man who stood on the step above her in the rain. His hair was darker, closer to brown than blond as it had been before. His eyebrows were thicker, his jaw squarer and covered in stubble. His broad shoulders, chest, and tapered waist were settled snugly into his blue waistcoat and navy jacket. Hannah wanted to melt into the piles of mud on her boots and disappear. Her heart beat so fast it hurt. Her face burned with inferiority and embarrassment. How could she have thought for one second that a man like Samuel would notice a girl like herself? She wasn't even out in Society yet, and he was . . . well . . . a *man*.

Hannah climbed the steps, tripping over her skirts with each one. She pulled up her sopping wet hem with one hand, avoiding looking up at Samuel's face. He ushered them quickly inside, closing the door firmly behind them, blocking out the cold.

Silence fell in the entryway. Hannah looked around at the ornate wooden table and molding, as well as the simple decorations, and then dared a glance up at Samuel. His eyes were fixed on her, head tipped slightly to one side.

"Dear Samuel, it has been far too long," Mama said. Hannah stood back as Mama took a step closer to him. "Forgive us for arriving in such a state. I imagine William already informed you of the condition of our carriage."

"Do not apologize," Samuel said with a chuckle. "It is my fault for not ensuring that the road leading to my house was in proper repair." His eyes slid to Hannah again. A soft smile curved his lips. Was he amused at her sodden appearance? She held her chin high. Even if she looked ridiculous, at least she could still hold herself with the confidence of a mature lady. She had been only fourteen when Samuel last saw her. Surely she had changed just as much as he had. That must have been the reason for the perplexing look he was giving her.

"You're injured," he said finally. His concerned gaze settled above her eyebrow.

Oh. That was the only reason he had been staring. She looked down at the floor. "It is nothing. It hardly hurts."

He seemed to ignore that statement, calling a maid forward from the row of servants who stood at attention near the staircase. "Please show Miss Somerton to her room and tend to her injury."

The maid curtsied and stepped forward. Hannah met Samuel's gaze again, and he gave her a reassuring smile, one that made her stomach flop. He had always been so very kind. She managed to stammer out a quick, "Th-thank you," before following the maid up the staircase. She kept her gaze fixed on the young woman's cap and ginger curls, forcing herself not to look back at Samuel again.

A few minutes later, a footman brought Hannah's trunk to her room. After changing into a dry, clean gown and holding a cold towel impatiently against her forehead, she insisted on returning to the drawing room, where she could hear William and Samuel talking. There would be plenty of time to spend talking in the drawing room in the coming days, but she couldn't bear the thought of missing any of it.

When she made it down to the drawing room, William sat closest to the fire, as she'd predicted. Samuel sat on the sofa. Mama must have gone to her room to change just as Hannah had. Hannah's gaze darted to the empty space on the sofa beside Samuel. Her heart picked up speed. Like the cowardly ninny that she was, she instinctively took the chair beside William instead. The warmth of the flames tingled on her skin, as did the awareness that Samuel was staring at her again. She could feel his gaze on the side of her face as keenly as she could feel the effects of the nearby fire.

She stared into the hearth, extending her palms toward it. Her hands were still freezing. She wanted to take another look at Samuel's face, but she felt much shier than she had anticipated. Perhaps if her hair had been dry and he hadn't just seen her covered in mud, she might have tried to make conversation. From the corner of her eye, she saw him stand and walk toward the fire. She swallowed against her dry throat as his hands appeared beside hers, extending toward the flames as well. Without thinking, she glanced up at him. He looked even better in the firelight. His face was all shadows and golden hues.

"Did your hands already become cold?" she asked in a skeptical voice. "You were not outside for very long." She immediately scolded herself for asking such an absurd question.

Samuel's lips pressed together as he suppressed a smile. "Not as cold as yours, I'd wager." His warm brown eyes bored into hers, their edges wrinkled with a hint of teasing.

"Nor mine," William said, stretching his legs out with a sigh. "The drive had been going perfectly well up until the very end."



“Well, I hope it isn’t indicative of what your stay here at Cranfield will entail.” Samuel gave William a wide smile. “I shall try my best to make it free of disaster.”

William laughed. “It will be nothing but joy and amusement from now on, I am sure. We shall be free from all cares.”

Samuel’s smile faded. He looked down at the floor, pulling his hands away from the fire and interlocking them behind his back. “If only I were so fortunate,” he said. “I’m afraid my Christmas will not be quite so carefree.”

William leaned forward, frowning as he studied his friend. “What is the matter?”

Hannah’s brow furrowed, her stomach twisting with foreboding.

Samuel looked up from the fire with a somber gaze. “Once our Christmas festivities are over . . . I am to be married.”

## Chapter 2

SAMUEL TORE HIS GAZE AWAY from Hannah to focus on William, who had practically leaped out of his seat. “Married? How did I not know of this? At the very least you should have informed your best friend.”

Samuel chuckled under his breath. “You wouldn’t have believed me.”

William gave a hard laugh, his eyebrows lifted with shock. “Who is the lady?”

Samuel raked a hand through his hair, letting a puff of air escape his lips. “The engagement is not official. Banns have not been read. But there was an . . . understanding passed between my uncle and me just before his death. It was agreed upon that I would marry his eldest daughter.” He averted his gaze to the fireplace.

He had known what he was getting himself into when he had accepted the inheritance from his uncle. At the time, it had been worth having a loveless marriage if it meant he could manage an estate like he had always dreamed but never thought possible. But since then, his dreams had evolved. He was content at Cranfield, but he could be truly happy there only if he was able to share it with a woman he loved, not one he was obligated to marry.

He glanced up from the fire, letting his gaze settle briefly on Hannah. He had hardly recognized her when she and her mother had come up the steps. In the last four years she had grown to be a young woman. A beautiful one. Her auburn curls, green eyes, and freckles were the same as they had always been, but her features sparkled with more wisdom and confidence. The silly, imaginative girl he had once known must still have been inside her.

For the last several minutes he had been exercising all his discipline not to look at her too frequently, but now when he looked at her face, her eyes were round, her skin pale.

He turned his focus back to William and continued. “The lady, Miss Merchant, will be returning to town after Twelfth Night, and we will proceed with the arrangement then.”

William’s eyebrows were still lifted. Hannah stared down at her gloves.

“It doesn’t seem you are very pleased with this duty,” William said finally.

“It doesn’t matter.” Samuel had made the choice himself; he couldn’t allow himself to regret it now. He needed to maintain a positive attitude. Though he hardly knew Miss Merchant, he had heard that she was amiable. As she was considered a spinster, her father had made arrangements for her to marry Samuel to ensure she was taken care of, as any good father would have done. “I am pleased to be fulfilling my duty.”

William sat back in his chair slowly. “Well, isn’t that what marriage is all about?” He smiled. “Duty? Connections that benefit both parties?” His gaze slid to his sister for a brief moment. “Hannah’s first Season is approaching, and I have high hopes for her.”

Samuel did not doubt that Hannah could make a very good match. Simply by looking at her, it was clear that she was a rare beauty. But once a man came to know her character, he would see just how delightful she truly was. At least, any man ought to see that. He would be a fool if he didn’t, and entirely unworthy of her.

“Marriages aren’t only about connections,” Samuel said. “An ideal marriage would be about love, friendship, and companionship.”

“Watch yourself.” William wagged a finger teasingly. “Do not go planting such ideas in my sister’s young mind.” He smiled as though it were ridiculous to aspire to such things. “She is too wise to be such a romantic.”

Hannah’s brow furrowed, but she said nothing. What was she thinking? As a child, she had never spared a single detail of what imaginations and thoughts were coursing through her head. What she didn’t speak aloud was often playing out on

her features without reservation. But now Samuel couldn't even begin to guess her thoughts.

Her brother had turned her into one of Society's statues. Beautiful, but rigid and quiet.

Samuel would make it his ambition to change that.

He studied William's face, struggling to hide his own disapproval. He hated the parts of his friend's character that had changed over the years. The William he had been friends with all his life was still there somewhere. Samuel saw glimpses of him from time to time, but with each year that passed, William strayed further and further from the friend Samuel had treasured from his childhood. He didn't want to see the same thing happen to his sister.

Hannah would be at Cranfield for a fortnight. That was plenty of time to uncover the old Hannah before she was lost forever to London's expectations and a husband who would prize her rather than love her.

Samuel's heart sank. He had only a few weeks before his own life would change forever. It would benefit his spirits to focus his attention on Hannah rather than on himself. It was clear that William's expectations of her were weighing heavily on her mind. She needed to have a chance to enjoy herself and relax.

William stood with a sigh, stretching his arms out in front of him. "I expect my trunk has been brought in by now. I should like to change into something dry."

Samuel nodded, stealing one last glance at Hannah and her stoic expression. Her eyes followed her brother to the doorway. A hint of panic crossed her face. "I-I will be going to my room as well." She stood, avoiding Samuel's gaze as she took her leave with hurried steps. He watched her go, a sinking sensation rooting his feet to the floor.

\*\*\*

Spearing a potato with her fork, Hannah imagined the vegetable was her heart. Punctured. Impaled. Never to be the same again. She ate silently at dinner, listening to William and

Samuel as they reminisced about their childhood. Not even their boisterous laughter could raise her spirits. She had spent the afternoon hiding her emotions, pressing down the ache in her heart, but it was catching up to her. It would take much longer than one afternoon to unravel the pain in her chest.

Samuel was unavailable. He was to be married. It had been foolish of her to think he would be interested in her at all, but now even the smallest bit of hope she had had was gone. She sat up straighter, eating that speared potato like it was her heart, destroying it for good. If she didn't have a heart, then she wouldn't feel anything. She could enjoy her time at Cranfield and view Samuel as her friend, nothing more.

She must have been chewing quite vigorously, because she caught William staring at her with disdain. He had been very concerned with her table etiquette as she'd prepared for London, and her display of violently eating her potato might have concerned him a little. She swallowed, taking a delicate sip of water from her glass.

"Are you enjoying the meal, Hannah?" Samuel asked from the other side of the table.

Her heart—*blast it, the thing still existed*—gave a distinct leap at his words.

She looked up from her plate, meeting his eyes. "I am. It is delicious."

He didn't look away from her face, his head tipping in curiosity, as it had earlier that day. "You have hardly said a word all evening. As I recall, you once prattled on and on without pause." His lips curved in a soft smile, perhaps even one of endearment.

Nervousness roiled in her stomach, but she stopped it. She didn't need to be nervous speaking with Samuel, or concerned with impressing him. Not anymore. Her shoulders relaxed, giving the other tense muscles in her body permission to do the same. She shrugged. "I have learned the importance of listening. For much of my life, others have listened to all of my nonsense, so it is time I listened to theirs."

Samuel raised an eyebrow with a teasing smile. “Am I to assume that you see our dinner conversation as nonsense?”

She almost denied it but decided to speak her mind instead. “Well, the two of you have been speaking of our old neighbor’s pesky cat for at least ten minutes.” Growing up, Samuel, William, and Hannah had been followed around by the cat almost every day. They had done all they could to direct it elsewhere, but it always returned to them.

Mama’s forehead wrinkled with dismay. “Hannah.”

“No, no, she is right. The subject has run its course.” Samuel chuckled, taking a drink from his cup. “What is it *you* would like to speak of, Hannah?” His eyes peeked at her from behind the rim of his glass, a challenge hovering in them.

Was this a game? She and Samuel had often spoken of silly, nonsensical things together, each of them feeding off the other. Perhaps this was another one of those moments. She searched her mind for something related to the Christmastide. “I should like to speak of mistletoe.”

Samuel did not seem surprised in the least, keeping an even expression. He rubbed his chin. “Ah, that is a subject of great curiosity. What is it about mistletoe that intrigues you?”

Mama’s eyes were round, and William’s mouth was quirked upward with amusement. He likely recalled all the conversations like this one that Samuel and Hannah had shared in the past. Hannah tapped her own chin, feigning deep thought. “Well, I find it quite interesting that the plant is toxic if consumed. I also find it to be a very beautiful plant, but I suppose the most interesting part of mistletoe is the tradition surrounding it.”

“Yes, kissing.” Samuel smiled when he said the word *kissing*, as if he already knew the effect it would have on Hannah. She couldn’t be embarrassed to hear that word, not now that she was about to be a fully grown lady presented in London. But there was something about hearing the word from his lips that made the tips of her ears grow hot. But she was the one who had brought up this subject, so she couldn’t be the one to end it.

“I find the tradition quite strange. If two people want to kiss one another, why do they need a bundle of leaves and berries to give them permission?”

“Hannah,” Mama scolded again, eyes still round. If there were any other people observing the conversation, Hannah would seem a very scandalous young lady indeed.

“Come now, Mama,” William said as he waved his hand. “This conversation is quite diverting. Please let it continue.” He wouldn’t stand for any such conversation while she was in London, but with Samuel, he clearly didn’t see any risk.

Mama’s posture relaxed as she smiled a little. “Very well.” It seemed she was secretly just as entertained as her son.

Samuel gave a resolute nod. “You make an interesting point. I think if two people wish to kiss, they do not need a mistletoe, if they are brave enough. But the mistletoe serves two important purposes, I believe.”

“And what are these two purposes?” Hannah asked.

“First, if two people already wish to kiss one another but haven’t found the right opportunity, the mistletoe readily provides it.”

“That is true.” Hannah nodded.

“Second, if two people who have never thought of kissing one another find themselves beneath a mistletoe accidentally, they might come to a realization they hadn’t before—that they *do* want to kiss one another.” He smiled, raising an eyebrow at the same time.

Hannah’s stomach fluttered. She certainly didn’t need a mistletoe to know she wanted to kiss Samuel. But no matter how their conversation was affecting her on the inside, she needed to pretend it wasn’t. With a smooth expression, she mused, “Hmm, I suppose you have convinced me of the mistletoe’s purpose, but I still find it quite curious that the plant is toxic. Can there be some sort of symbolism in this? Perhaps it is a warning that to kiss beneath the mistletoe is rather dangerous. It might act as a warning not to take such a kiss seriously, for risk of losing your heart to someone who

wanted only a kiss and nothing more.”

Samuel was silent for a long moment, taking another drink from his cup. “I think you may be right. It is probably best to avoid mistletoe altogether, and I think your mother and William would agree.”

Mama nodded immediately.

William simply laughed. Surely he wasn’t one to avoid a mistletoe kiss.

Hannah’s cheeks grew hot. “That was my intention,” she said quickly. “At any rate, the only men in this house are servants, my own brother, and you, and you are practically my brother as well.” She grimaced as she sipped from her cup. There was no longer any point in trying to convince him otherwise. He was marrying someone else, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. He had made a promise to his uncle that couldn’t be broken. It would make her feel better to convince everyone—including herself—that her feelings toward Samuel were nonexistent.

Samuel gave an amused smile—one he tried to hide behind his cup. But she saw it. Did he know she was lying? He must have suspected something of her regard when they were younger and she followed him everywhere like a puppy. Her chest sparked with anger. She refused to have him think that she was a heartbroken little girl over the news of his upcoming marriage. It would be her objective over the next few weeks to ensure Samuel thought the opposite. She would act excited over his news, happy, and show him that she did not care one bit who he married.

By the end of Christmastide, Samuel needed to think, without a doubt, that she didn’t want him and that she never had.



# Chapter 3

WRAPPING HER CLOAK MORE TIGHTLY around herself, Hannah slipped through the back door of Cranfield. She had hardly slept the night before, so if she was to remain alert throughout the day, she needed a bit of cold air to help her. She breathed deeply, already feeling the tingle of the lowered temperature on her nose and the tips of her ears.

What should she explore first? The property stretched far in all directions, and there was little snow on the ground to stop her from walking. The grass was coated in a thick layer of frost, crunching under her boots as she started in the direction of what looked like a small barn or a hut of some sort.

She moved with quick steps, elevating the rate of her heart and giving her body a little warmth. The faster she walked, the better she felt. All the emotion she had been contending with since the day before was rising off her like steam. She had shed her last tears over Samuel into her pillow the night before. There would be no more of that. She didn't have to mourn him—he could still be her friend. She had only been mourning the *idea* of what might have been.

She let out a gasp when she nearly stepped on a flustered hen. Hannah jumped back, watching as the hen fluttered its ruffled feathers and clucked with dismay. Its tan feathers looked golden against the white frost.

“What are you doing out here?” Hannah asked. “You’ll get eaten by a wolf.” She didn’t know if there were actually wolves in the woods bordering the estate, but imagining such a thing was rather thrilling.

She reached out to scoop up the hen, but it clucked and pecked at her hand. Hannah snapped her arm back, raising a scolding finger. “I’m trying to help you!”

The hen waddled away, legs moving much more quickly than she would have imagined possible. She followed it, breaking into a run and snatching it up from behind. The hen

squirmed for a moment before holding still, allowing her to hold it close to her chest.

Had it come from the barn? She continued along her path toward it, holding the chicken tight to keep it from leaping out of her arms. As she came closer to the barn—which did look more like a hut, with its windows and stone details—she noticed a stream of smoke curling out of the chimney. Did someone live there? She hesitated for a long moment before knocking on the door.

Only a few seconds passed before the door swung open.

“Samuel?” Hannah met his gaze, her momentary surprise causing her grip on the hen to loosen. The bird squirmed and clucked, falling without a hint of grace to the ground. It collected its footing and took off to the left.

“Come back here!” Hannah turned, chasing it for several yards until she was able to scoop it up again. When she turned around, her cheeks were hot with embarrassment. Samuel had seemed just as surprised to find her knocking as she had been to see him answer the door. She managed to cool her cheeks as she walked back to the front door of the hut. A laugh hovered in Samuel’s brown eyes as she approached. His clothes were casual, his cravat missing, and his curly dark hair was less tame than it had been the day before. So was his smile.

“I see you have found yourself a friend.” He chuckled.

“At the moment, this hen and I are not friends,” she grumbled as the chicken squirmed again. A strand of hair had fallen over Hannah’s eyes, but she couldn’t brush it away while holding the hen at the same time. She blew a puff of air upward in an attempt to clear it from her face, but it didn’t work. Why hadn’t she put on a bonnet? She hadn’t expected to meet anyone on her early-morning exploration, especially not Samuel.

He stepped outside the door a few paces, stopping just in front of her. To her surprise, he casually brushed the hair away from her eyes before taking the hen from her arms. She stared at him, willing herself to appear unaffected by his touch. She didn’t know whether to thank him or not, so she simply

remained quiet. Her rebellious heart still yearned for his attention, telling her silly things she shouldn't believe. Couldn't he have *just* taken the hen, therefore freeing her hands so she could brush the hair from her own eyes? Had he wanted to do it himself? She shushed her wayward thoughts.

"I found it wandering all alone," she said. "I wondered if this was a barn of sorts." She gestured at the small building.

"It's where I do my carving," Samuel said with a proud smile. "Before inheriting this house, I never had a place like this to work."

"The chicken doesn't belong here?"

He shook his head. "No. It must belong to one of my tenants." He motioned toward the door. "Come inside for a moment. I'll show you."

Hannah followed him, surprised by the size of the interior of the hut. It was open and clean, with plenty of room for him to work. A chair, table, and various tools stood at the center of the space, piles of wood shavings and pieces strewn across the floor. Daylight came through the windows, and two candles were lit, as well as a fire burning in the small hearth, filling the space with warmth and plenty of light.

"This is lovely," Hannah said as she looked around. She met Samuel's gaze.

He smiled. "I have never considered it *lovely* before, but now that you say it, I must agree."

She scoffed. "You cannot fault me for my feminine choice of words."

"It is not a fault at all. It's endearing." He spoke the compliment so casually, much like how he had brushed her hair from her forehead. She watched his back as he stooped over and set the hen on the floor.

As a boy, Samuel had often spoken of his grandfather, who had been a wood-carver by profession. Samuel's father had made a better living for himself, but Samuel's older brother had inherited the trade. Samuel had considered following in his grandfather's path as well, but now it seemed that wood

carving was simply an entertaining pastime for him. She walked closer to the table, gasping when she saw the intricate round frame on top of it.

“You did this?”

He gave a modest smile. “Do you like it?”

“It is . . . well, it is lovely.”

He laughed. “I have spent many hours learning since you last saw my work.”

“Yes, I can see that you have improved significantly.”

“Significantly? Was my elephant not in line with the level of skill you see now?” The teasing glint in his eyes made her smile stretch wider.

“Oh yes. I had nearly forgotten the beauty of that project.” She grinned at the thought of the little toys he would often carve while he sat with William and Hannah outside. He had once made a toy elephant that William had teased him about for years. It hadn’t looked at all like an elephant. “But now that you have reminded me,” she continued, “I regret that I must be the one to tell you that your skill has actually worsened. Nothing compares to the majesty of that elephant.”

Samuel stood on the opposite side of the table, tracing his finger along the edge of his frame as he laughed. “I always knew you liked it, despite what William tried to make you believe.”

She had always loved it. Not because it was an attractive toy by any means, but because Samuel had loved it. Because he had worked hard to make it with his own hands. She reminded herself that she was supposed to make him think she didn’t view him with such sentiment. “I confess, it did look more like a plump sheep than an elephant. Perhaps like a sheep who ate another sheep.”

Samuel threw his head back with a laugh before his features became serious again. “That was my intention. I told everyone it was an elephant only in order not to appear mad.”

“I will keep your secret, but for a price.” Hannah loved how

relaxed she felt with him again. It seemed like no time at all had passed since they had laughed together, usually at his expense or hers. Sometimes William's.

"What is your price?" Samuel asked, true curiosity burning in his gaze.

Hannah hadn't thought that far yet. She had simply been keeping the banter going without any idea of what she might ask for. What did she need from Samuel that he could actually give her? She tapped her chin in exaggerated thought.

"May I make a suggestion?" he said after several seconds of silence.

Hannah raised her eyebrows. "Are you going to suggest that hen?" She pointed at the hen that still wandered the hut without rest.

"No, though I know the creature is your heart's desire." He flashed a teasing smile. "I'll allow you to make the schedule for our Christmastide festivities. You can plan how we spend the entire fortnight."

Hannah crossed her arms. "That seems like I am offering *you* a service."

"Well . . . I thought you might find it enjoyable. Most women like planning creative activities, do they not?"

Hannah smiled to herself. He had called her a woman, not a girl. "I do."

"Think of any Christmastide activity, and I will ensure it is done on any day of your choosing. I want you to enjoy your time at Cranfield in the country before you are sent to London for months." Samuel's eyes were soft and caring, and it cut straight past the defenses Hannah had spent all night building around her heart.

She hadn't been free to express to anyone her dread toward going to London. She couldn't tell William how much she dreaded it, because he had spent so much money and time to ensure she could go. He was so invested in the Season, in more ways than one. Mama agreed with William, and none of Hannah's friends shared her distress at having to go. They

were all eager and giddy, yet nothing of the idea of London seemed worthy of Hannah's excitement. "I am told London is delightful," she said in a flat voice. "What should I have to dread?"

Samuel stared at her from across the table, a heavy look in his eyes. "It is not my place to tell you whether or not to listen to William, but promise me that you will not lose yourself. You know your own mind. Do not be manipulated. Don't lose sight of who you are and what your heart tells you." He paused. "Do not make any hasty decisions like I did."

Was he speaking of her choice of a husband? He had hastily agreed to marry Miss Merchant, so that must have been what he meant. Her heart stung. She didn't want Samuel to be forever unhappy in his marriage. She, on the other hand, was doomed to such a fate, unless she happened to fall in love with one of the men William would choose for her. That seemed impossible, though, especially when she was standing here with Samuel.

"I will not lose myself. I promise." Hannah wasn't entirely certain what he'd meant by that, but it seemed important to him.

He gave a soft smile. "Good." He walked across the room to where the hen had cornered itself by the door. He scooped it up with much less effort than it had taken Hannah. "Now, before the others in the house are awake, shall we return this hen to its home?"

Hannah didn't know how wise it was to continue spending time with Samuel alone. But they were childhood friends, and her family was staying on the property. No scandal could be assumed by Mama or William if she and Samuel did happen to be seen together. No harm could come from it besides harm that had already been done years ago. Hannah wouldn't love him less by avoiding him. Her feelings were fixed and constant. She could not be rid of them; she could only bury them and continue showing him that she was his friend.

So she smiled. "Very well. I shall be glad to be rid of it."

# Chapter 4

THE HEN WRIGGLED IN SAMUEL'S arms almost the entire walk. He suspected it had wandered from the Browns' residence—a small cottage nearby. The walk took only ten minutes, but he wouldn't have cared if it had taken longer. He and Hannah had been laughing almost the entire way.

He glanced over at her, studying the bashful smile on her face as she looked down at the ground. Her cheeks and the tip of her nose were flushed from the cold, and her green eyes were alive and bright. He could hardly look away from them. Each time she glanced his way, especially while she was smiling, he was completely captured, helpless to escape. She would take London by storm, that much was certain. He could only hope she would take his advice and that the man she chose would be worthy of her.

His heart pinched with a strange sensation. It took him a moment to realize what it was.

Regret—and perhaps a bit of jealousy.

He buried the feelings the moment he recognized them, following her gaze down to the ground as they took the final few steps toward the Browns' cottage. He cleared his throat, stopping in front of the door. "This family lives the closest to the house. I don't think the hen could have wandered farther than this." He knocked on the door three times.

Hannah walked up beside him. "Are you certain we should return her?" she whispered. "I fear I am becoming quite attached."

Samuel met her gaze. That was the danger in spending too much time with anything or anyone—becoming too attached. He swallowed before offering a teasing smile. "Unfortunately I don't think the hen shares your sentiment." The creature was still attempting to wriggle out of his arms and back to the ground, where it could run away from them.

Hannah covered a laugh just as the door opened. Mrs.

Brown stood there, a beige dress draped over her thin frame. She wore a cap and apron, and despite her haggard appearance, she greeted them with a kind smile. “Mr. Merchant, what brings ye ’ere?” Her eyes lowered to the hen in his arms. “Oh! Lily escaped again.” She put a hand to her forehead. “I hope she didn’t trouble ye.”

“Only a little.” Samuel smiled. “But it is no trouble at all to return her to you.”

“Ye are too kind. Thank ye, sir.” Her eyes darted to Hannah. “And I thank ye as well, miss.”

“Miss Somerton,” Samuel said. “A dear friend from my childhood. She and her family are visiting until Twelfth Night.”

“How wonderful.” Mrs. Brown curtsied to Hannah, taking a humble step backward. It was then that Samuel noticed the young boy peeking out from behind Mrs. Brown. He couldn’t have been any older than four. His tousled blond hair was falling over his eyes, and his hands were covered in dirt as he held on to his mother’s skirts. He gave a shy smile as he looked up at Samuel.

“Good day, boy,” Samuel said, stooping over to be closer to the boy’s height. “Are you happy to have your hen back?”

He gave a small nod, burying his smile in his mother’s skirts. “Lily likes to run away,” he said in a quiet voice. “But-but for Christmas I want a horse.”

Mrs. Brown laughed, letting out a sigh. “He won’t stop askin’ for one. It’ll be a task to explain why he can’t ’ave one.” She said the last part in a whisper. She turned toward the boy. “Henry, do ye remember what I said? And what Papa said? Per’aps when yer older.”

Samuel watched Henry’s smile fade. His shoulders drooped as he nodded. “I remember.”

Mrs. Brown drew a deep breath, brushing the hair from her face. “We won’t take anymore of yer time, sir. Thank ye so very much for returning our hen to us. We’ll be needin’ eggs.” She took the hen from Samuel and curtsied one more time



before closing the door.

Hannah turned to him once they were alone again. “Oh, that poor boy.” Her eyes were tipped downward. “Did you see how sad he was not to have his horse?”

Samuel nodded, the image of Henry’s sad eyes still hovering in his mind.

“You might invite him to come ride one of your horses,” Hannah suggested as they started walking again.

“He would love that, I am sure.” Samuel’s mouth twisted in a smile. “He would probably never wish to leave.”

“I will add it to the Christmas schedule.” She gave a wide grin. “We shall invite Henry to ride a horse on Christmas Day.”

“That sounds perfect.” Samuel’s smile had more to do with Hannah’s reaction than to the idea itself. He would love to give such a gift to Henry and the Brown family, but seeing Hannah so cheerful was like a gift for himself. He had been hoping the girl he’d once known wasn’t lost forever. It seemed she had only been hiding.

“What else might we do?” Hannah turned toward him as they walked, her eyes wide. “We must find the perfect Yule log, hang greenery, and have a dance on Twelfth Night.”

“We have been invited to a ball on Twelfth Night. William secured the invitation for all of us.”

“Very well. That will still be delightful, I am sure.” She clasped her hands together in front of her. “We should sing Christmas carols, go wassailing, and eat plum pudding. We might even play a game or two of snapdragon.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

“This is why I gave you this assignment. You will plan much better activities than I ever could.” Samuel met her gaze.

She gave a shy smile. “Well, I am grateful. Once I am in London, none of my schedule will be of my own making. Mama and William will have it all planned for me, right down to what dress I will wear to each event and how my hair is to

be arranged.”

Samuel’s heart ached. With wealth came a great deal of freedom, but in Society, it also came with many traps. By accepting this estate from his uncle, Samuel had gained wealth and freedom from some of the worries he had been burdened with before, but he had fallen into the trap of marrying a near-stranger. Hannah had never known a life like Mrs. Brown’s, but she might never have the joy Mrs. Brown had by being free to choose how she spent each day, and whom she spent each day with. Mrs. and Mr. Brown were in love, and that was perhaps the greatest treasure anyone could ask for.

Samuel stepped in front of Hannah as they reached his wood-carving hut. He was tempted to nudge her chin up with his fingers, but he thought better of it. “There is no need to dread London yet. You still have a few weeks of freedom ahead of you. We both do. Let us enjoy it.”

Her lips pressed together in a reluctant smile, her eyes searching his. Slowly, her smile faded again. “We shall both soon be married to people we did not choose.”

The truth of her statement settled into his bones, and his optimism faded. “Let us think of other things.”

“You’re right.” Hannah took a deep breath. “We shall have plenty of activities to distract us with once I write the schedule.” She gasped, glancing at the door of his hut. “The very best way, as you might know, to forget your own cares is to provide service to someone else. Your wood-carving skill has improved since the plump sheep . . . do you suppose you could carve a rocking horse for Henry? I could help you paint the details.”

Samuel couldn’t possibly say no to that idea, though it would likely take longer than the week they had before Christmas Day. “In the time we have, I’m not certain we’ll finish, but we can certainly start.”

Hannah beamed, clapping her hands together. “Shall we start tomorrow morning?”

He nodded. “Tomorrow morning it is.” At the sight of her

smile, rosy cheeks, and bright-green eyes, Samuel once again questioned the wisdom of spending much time with her. Already, with each passing minute, he was regretting his agreement with his uncle.

But did it really matter? Even though he would have liked more time to further his friendship with Hannah, to see if perhaps there could be something more between them, she was still going to London. She was a viscount's daughter, and William was determined to match her with a man with far greater social standing and wealth than Samuel could ever have. There was no point in regretting or wishing. He would enjoy each day with Hannah for what they were. Gifts. He looked down at the snow, noting how it buried the toes of his boots and Hannah's. How many times had they stood together in snow like this?

One Christmas, when they had been very young, an abnormal amount of snow had fallen. She and William had met Samuel outside between their houses to play with the fresh snow. Samuel had stolen some sugar from the kitchen, sprinkling it on the snow. William had been determined to build a snow castle, so he'd worked on that alone while Hannah and Samuel had laid on their bellies and licked up the sugar-coated snow.

He almost brought up the memory, hoping to prolong this time with her, but Hannah gave another bashful smile, glancing up at him from under her lashes. "Well, I should be going back to the house before my mother wonders where I have gone. Pray I do not find another hen on my way."

Samuel chuckled, his gaze never leaving her back as she walked to the house.

# Chapter 5

BEING SAMUEL'S FRIEND SHOULD HAVE been easy. He had been Hannah's friend for her entire life. But each morning she spent helping him with the rocking horse, she felt a mixture of happiness and grief. She tried so very hard not to think of the days beyond Twelfth Night, when all of this would be over, but it was impossible not to prepare herself for the pain that was coming. She reminded herself that it was better to be prepared. She viewed each day as one more step toward their goodbye. Even if their families resumed their tradition of spending Christmas together, Hannah would never again be free to sneak off in the early morning to watch Samuel work as she had for several days now.

Mama and William didn't know. They slept until ten each morning, and Hannah made sure to return to the house by nine as a precaution. Even if they did know, she was fairly certain they wouldn't be worried. For all they knew, Samuel was like her brother. A friend. Nothing more. She etched those ideas into her mind, willing herself to believe them. Sometimes it worked; other times it didn't. At the moment, as she observed Samuel, his brow creased with focus, sleeves rolled up, jaw tight, it was not working at all. He was far too handsome, and the fact that he was building this horse for a young boy in need was perhaps the most attractive part of it all.

She watched his arms from the corner of her eye as he held the head of the rocking horse in his lap, adding small, intricate details. She had been silly to think this project could be completed by Christmas Day. Perhaps Samuel could finish it the next year with his wife.

Her stomach sank.

Her own role in the building of the horse so far had been only to hand certain tools to Samuel when he needed them. Much of the time they spent talking and laughing over ridiculous things, such as the original width of the horse's head. It had been all wrong, so Samuel had started over again.

He truly was talented, even if he made a mistake or two along the way. In the end, Hannah was certain, it would turn out beautifully, even if she wasn't there to see it.

Now that she knew she could never have a future with Samuel, she needed to take her preparations for London as seriously as William had been telling her to. Her heart would always be Samuel's, so it would be best to do all she could to accept that she would not fall in love in London and simply seek the highest-ranking, wealthiest match possible. To do that she would need to be as enticing as possible. Her status as a viscount's daughter and her dowry wouldn't be enough. There would be plenty of other young ladies with just as much to offer as she had.

"I know we agreed not to speak of this," she said hesitantly, earning a curious look from Samuel, "but I cannot stop thinking of London." She wrung her hands together. "I have been taught how to behave, but I worry I will do something wrong." It was a relief to have someone who would listen to her concerns instead of brushing them aside.

Samuel stopped his carving, sitting back in his chair. "Is that what you fear most about London?"

"Well, I also . . . I don't know how I will catch a husband of the rank William expects of me. I don't . . . I don't know how to flirt." She covered her smile with the palm of her hand. "It is quite embarrassing to admit, but I have never even tried it before. I have seen other ladies do it, but I don't know how to offer such encouragement to a man."

Samuel's mouth curled upward in a sideways smile as he picked up his tools again. "You should not worry. So long as you smile, laugh, and make a few witty remarks, his heart will be stolen. I assure you."

"It cannot possibly be that easy," Hannah said with a scoff.

Samuel looked up from his work, meeting her gaze. "It depends on the gentleman."

The intensity of his eyes made her stomach tug. She looked down at her hands. "William told me to show great interest in

the things that interest each particular gentleman while conversing with them.”

Samuel sighed. “Well, you must still be genuine.” He set his tools down again, standing and walking toward where she sat. “Do not bury your own interests and thoughts in order to conform to his. Speak your mind.”

“Do men like that?” Hannah asked with a raised eyebrow.

Samuel shrugged. “I like that about you.”

Her eyes widened and her heart faltered for a moment. Samuel spoke the words casually, but her heart took them far too seriously. She stood from her chair, pacing in a circle around it as she twisted her hands together. “As for flirting, how might I stand out from the other young women in Town? I don’t wish to be scandalous, but I also don’t wish to be forgettable.”

Samuel bit his lip, shaking his head at the floor.

“What?” she snapped.

“You are not in danger of being forgettable.”

There it was again, another casual compliment. “You say that because you already know me. You know all the silly things I say and all the years of adventure we have shared. If I am standing in a row of young ladies in a ballroom, each with polite conversation and smiles to give, being unforgettable is not guaranteed.”

Samuel was silent for several seconds before he gave a nod. “Very well. Without being scandalous, as I, and I am certain your mother and brother would recommend, there are some things that may set you apart from the rest.” His jaw tightened as he seemed to debate whether or not to share his idea.

“What? What might I do?”

He took a step closer, an amused smile on his lips. “I cannot believe I am giving you this advice.”

“Just tell me!” Hannah laughed. “I am not a child any longer.”

Samuel crossed his arms in front of him, tipping his head to look down at her. “A touch—an innocent one, mind you—speaks volumes to a man.”

Hannah bit her lip in thought, ignoring the way her heart picked up speed. Samuel had never stood this close to her.

“While you are conversing with a man with whom you are already well-acquainted, or perhaps even courting, lightly touch his arm like this.” As Samuel finished the words, he lightly held the side of her forearm, keeping his eyes fixed on hers. Then, ever so slowly, his fingers moved, lightly tracing the curve of her elbow. “Do not make it so brief that it escapes his notice. Let your hand linger on his arm before pulling it away.”

A touch didn’t speak volumes to only a man. Hannah could scarcely breathe. She pretended to be unaffected, but the gooseflesh on her arm couldn’t be helped, and she found she was holding her breath. Had Samuel noticed how he affected her? It seemed he hadn’t, since his gaze was still on her face. After a few seconds he lowered his hand, and she could breathe and think clearly again.

“I suppose I could make my attempt at something like that,” she said quickly. “If you are certain it wouldn’t be too forward.”

Samuel shook his head. “It is not too forward. But it will leave him wanting more.”

That was certainly true. Hannah was already wishing Samuel would touch her arm again. In all the days of their friendship he had never touched her like that, nor had he ever looked at her like he was in that moment. There was something unfamiliar in his eyes, dark as coffee, digging up the feelings she had been working hard to bury.

“But,” he added firmly, “you should not give him more. I’m not encouraging anything improper. I’m simply trying to give you a man’s perspective.”

“I know.” Hannah crossed her arms, covering the shivers on them. “Thank you for the advice.”

Silence fell between them. She searched for something to say, anything to distract her from the awkwardness she felt. “But I shall not worry anymore about London today. It is Christmas Eve tomorrow, and we have a great deal of decorating to do.” She picked up her bonnet. She was leaving a little earlier than usual, but being alone with Samuel in the wood-carving hut suddenly felt much more dangerous than it had in days before. “I’ll see you at breakfast,” she said, turning around before she could see that strange look in his eyes again. Her heart pounded as she walked toward the door. Spending time with him as a friend didn’t feel the same as it had in their childhood. It wasn’t as simple.



# Chapter 6

ON CHRISTMAS DAY, THE HOUSE smelled of cinnamon. The banisters, mantels, and sconces were all adorned with greenery and gold ribbons, bringing a cheerfulness to Cranfield that Samuel hadn't yet felt. Two days before, he and his guests had gathered the greenery, according to Hannah's instruction, and they had all worked together to hang it around the house. The Yule log was burning in the hearth, and the spices from their Christmas Day feast were wafting through all the floors of the house.

As usual, Hannah met him at his wood-carving hut before the others were awake. The unfinished rocking horse still sat by his chair. He had carved the head, but the body and base were still in progress. After that it would still need to be painted. Henry wouldn't have his rocking horse yet, but Hannah's favorite plan of the entire Christmas schedule was clearly to give Henry a ride on Samuel's horse.

She stood in the doorway with a wide smile. Her green cloak complimented her auburn hair, and the morning light made her eyes even more striking. He had tried his best to forget the way she had looked at him when he had given her advice about flirting. The curiosity and longing he had glimpsed in her eyes had found a permanent place in his memory.

"Happy Christmas, Samuel." She walked inside just a few steps. "Shall we go surprise Henry?" With Samuel's help, she had arranged a gift basket for the family the day before, one filled with bread, tea, candles, and sweets. Samuel had brought it to the hut that morning, so Hannah walked to the table to drape the basket over her elbow.

"Are you certain you wish to face Lily again?" Samuel asked with a grin.

Hannah's brow scrunched in confusion for a moment before she seemed to realize what he meant. "The hen? No hen, no

matter how nefarious, could stop me from seeing that boy so happy to be riding a horse on Christmas Day.”

Samuel’s heart ached, as was becoming common of late. There had once been a time when all he’d felt was admiration, but now, each time he noticed the goodness of Hannah’s character, each time she did or said something he admired, and each time she simply appeared at the door looking as beautiful as she was now, the pangs of regret grew sharper and sharper against his heart. Each day that passed was closer to the last they would spend together, so he couldn’t help but mourn each one—each smile, each laugh. She had been a good friend.

*Only* a friend. That was the statement he couldn’t allow himself to forget.

He cleared his throat, hiding his strange emotions with a smile, and managed to reply. “Well, if it comes to it, I’m sure my cook would be pleased to have another bird for Christmas dinner.”

Hannah gasped, the sound quickly melting into laughter. “You are a wicked man, Samuel.”

He grinned, extending his arm for her to take as they walked out the door.

\*\*\*

Mr. and Mrs. Brown stood huddled together with their thin cloaks, watching as their boy climbed into the saddle of Samuel’s horse. Hannah’s chest flooded with warmth at the smile on Henry’s face as he gripped the pommel. But what made her heart nearly explode was the sight of Samuel standing beside the horse, casting an encouraging smile up at Henry. Seeing a man interacting with children in such a way could only make him at least twice as attractive as he was before.

The young boy squealed with delight as the horse took its first steps forward, guided slowly by Samuel as he walked beside them. Henry waved at his parents tentatively before gripping the pommel again.

A few minutes later, when Henry was all finished with his

ride, Samuel helped him down, and the boy immediately ran to his mother, jumping up and down in his worn boots. Mr. and Mrs. Brown offered their heartfelt gratitude before walking home with their very excited little boy.

Hannah beamed up at Samuel, her heart full nearly to bursting. “This is the best Christmas I have ever had,” she said, the words spilling out of her. Even though her heart had been broken when she had first heard the news of Samuel’s upcoming marriage, she had been doing well to forget that pain and forget her feelings. At least, most of the time.

Samuel drew a step closer. “Do you know what would make it better?”

“What?”

“If we were eating snow.”

Hannah grimaced before remembering the moment from their childhood that he was referencing. She tipped her head back with a laugh.

He bent over and picked up a handful of the fresh powder that had fallen overnight. With his gloved hands, he formed it into a small ball and popped it into his mouth.

Hannah gasped.

“Now it is your turn,” Samuel said after swallowing. He nodded at the ground. “You must eat the snow too. Christmas snow is magical, you see. If we both eat it, then no matter where our lives take us, we shall always be friends.”

Hannah’s eyebrow raised sharply. “That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard.”

“Do you not think we will always be friends?” Samuel looked down at his gloves, dusting the snow off them.

“I meant the fact that we would have to eat magical snow to ensure we remain friends.” Her heart hammered with dread. “But I do suppose . . . we can never be friends as we are now, not if you are married and I am married. Even now it is improper enough to be sneakily spending our mornings together without telling my mother. Even if this snow truly

were magical, nothing will be the same again after this week is over.”

Samuel’s eyes seemed to grow heavy at the edges as he looked at her. “Perhaps you’re right.” He dusted the last of the snow off his gloves, his jaw tensing. “Speaking of your mother, she will probably be waking soon.” He didn’t look at her. “You should go.”

Hannah’s chest constricted with sudden emotion. Her throat was just as tight. She blinked hard, turning around and starting back toward the house. There were still several days before she would be leaving. She didn’t need to cry yet. She straightened her posture and took a deep breath. But why did Samuel seem just as upset about the situation as she was?

When she walked inside the house, she made her way toward the breakfast room. As she neared the entryway, she stopped. Had she heard voices?

“Mama, he has other guests,” one female voice said. “We should not have arrived so early without informing him.”

“I am glad we came when we did. The weather seems to be worsening.”

Hannah stepped around the corner, catching sight of the two women whose voices she had overheard. Both wore black. The young lady had tightly coiled golden curls and large blue eyes. Her brow was furrowed with concern as she opened her mouth to speak to her mother again. When she saw Hannah, she stopped, clamping her mouth closed.

“Good morning,” Hannah said, her own brow creasing with confusion. The butler stood nearby, taking the women’s cloaks and bonnets. Their trunks had already been brought in, wet and dripping, near the front door.

“Good morning. I am Mr. Merchant’s aunt, Mrs. Merchant. This is my daughter, Miss Grace Merchant.”

Hannah’s heart pounded as her gaze jumped to the daughter again. So this was Samuel’s betrothed. She seemed much older than Hannah, more refined and mature. Her father had given her hand to Samuel because he’d thought she wouldn’t make

another match at her age. Hannah couldn't imagine how she hadn't found a husband already. She was beautiful. Did Samuel know how lovely she was? Hannah's heart sank deeper and deeper into her stomach the longer she looked at Miss Merchant.

"Is Mr. Merchant yet awake?" Mrs. Merchant asked.

"He—he is awake. I believe he is outside. He should be coming in shortly," Hannah said.

Mrs. Merchant nodded before casting a curious look at Hannah. "And what is your name, child?"

*Child.* An unexpected lump rose to her throat. As impolite as this woman was, Hannah still couldn't help but take her words to heart. Beside Miss Merchant, Hannah did look like a child. "Miss Somerton," she said. She didn't have the desire to explain any further details about her family or why she was there. With a quick curtsy, she rushed away toward the stairs. She no longer felt like eating breakfast. Her head ached and spun as she rushed into her bedchamber and closed the door.

She leaned against it, squeezing her eyes shut, but tears seeped out the edges anyway. She wasn't ready for her time with Samuel to be over. She wasn't ready to have him stolen from her.

She sniffed, covering her face with her hands. The rest of the week would be good practice for London. Hiding what she felt would become a valuable skill. But right now, hidden in her own room, she would allow herself to feel every bit of pain. She hadn't known, when she'd walked away from Samuel a few minutes ago, that it would be the last time they would be alone together.

That was for the best, wasn't it? She would have to become accustomed to losing if she were to have any peace in London. It was a competitive place, and now so was Cranfield. But she couldn't compete for Samuel's attention or future. Miss Merchant had already won it.

\*\*\*

From the moment Grace Merchant and her mother had

arrived at Cranfield, Hannah had hardly spoken to Samuel. They had been in the same room many times between Christmas and Twelfth Night, but she hadn't hardly acknowledged him or anyone else. Was he the only one who noticed? Was he the only one who cared? William had always been primarily concerned with himself and his own enjoyment, so Samuel hadn't expected him to pick up on Hannah's change in mood. Sometimes she pretended to enjoy herself, but Samuel could easily see the difference between her genuine smile and her false one.

The pit in his stomach had been growing, spreading, hollowing out the core of his heart. This Twelfth Night feast was the Somertons' last day at Cranfield. He couldn't blame Hannah for the distance she had put between them. She was wiser than he was, perhaps with more discipline. He needed to use this time to come to know the woman he would marry, and that was Miss Merchant. Hannah was simply giving him the chance to do that. She might even have missed their morning conversations just as much as he did.

His heart stung, the pain spreading more each time he checked the clock. When they all retired for the evening, it would be over. Hannah would be gone the next day.

He tightened his jaw, fighting against the wayward feelings in his chest. What was the matter with him? All throughout dinner he had been trying to keep his focus on Miss Merchant and her conversation, but Hannah, silent as she was, without even trying, had been tugging on him. He could hardly keep his gaze from wandering to her throughout the meal. She looked beautiful. She wore a pale-gold gown, with her dark hair providing a stunning contrast. Her eyes haunted him. They were distant and heavy.

When the group sat in the drawing room with just minutes remaining before they would all retire, Hannah's gaze flickered to Samuel. Every once in a while, he caught her. What did she think of Miss Merchant? Samuel had found nothing wrong with the lady, yet he felt nothing toward her besides obligation. She didn't seem to be fond of him, either, yet she did seem quite fond of Cranfield. He couldn't blame

her for that. It had belonged to her father, and the man had wanted her married in order to obtain it. This had been his solution. What would Uncle think if he knew how Samuel felt about their arrangement now?

He shunned his thoughts. There was no sense thinking of it. He was a man of his word.

“We shall leave early in the morning,” William said with a yawn. “Let us hope our carriage wheel does not break again. Soon we’ll have yet another journey ahead of us.”

Hannah met Samuel’s eyes briefly before looking away.

London.

William stood with a groan. “I think it is best that we retire a little earlier this evening.” He helped his mother, Lady Northam, to her feet. Hannah stood on her own.

Samuel hurried to his feet as well. “Will I see you all in the morning?”

Lady Northam shook her head. “Please, Samuel, you ought to sleep as late as you would like. I’m certain you are tired and don’t particularly enjoy arising early.”

Again Hannah’s eyes met his. She knew he did arise early, every single day. Their rocking horse was still unfinished. A knot tightened around his stomach.

“Thank you very much for your hospitality these weeks,” Lady Northam said. “It has been wonderful to see Cranfield and enjoy the holidays here.”

“Indeed,” William said, clapping Samuel on the shoulder. “I look forward to seeing you again.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “As a married man, I expect.” He winked.

Samuel feigned a smile, but his heart was racing. His gaze slid to Hannah.

She stood with her hands clasped together in front of her, her lips pressed together. “Thank you,” she said in a quiet voice. And then she curtsied.

Samuel’s heart leaped with protest. Was this to be their

farewell? A curtsy, a bow, a *thank-you*? He didn't have time to think of anything more he could say or do. In an instant Hannah Somerton turned and followed her brother out the drawing room door.

Samuel stared at the door, shaking himself free of the emotion that gripped him. As the poet, Lord Byron, had said, "All farewells should be sudden, when forever." He had never given much thought to those words before, but now they rang through his mind with enough force to make him ill. But had their farewell been sudden? This final moment had been, but in truth, Hannah's entire visit had been one prolonged, painful farewell, and only now was he feeling the weight of it in its entirety. He had made a mistake spending all those secret hours with her. Each one had rebelled against Byron's advice, and now Samuel would suffer for it.

And he would be left wondering, perhaps forever, whether Hannah was suffering for it as well.



# Chapter 7

*One year later*

*December 1814*

LADY REDDITCH WAS A PLEASANT-SOUNDING name. Hannah stood in front of the looking glass in her bedchamber, adjusting the pendant at her neck. She had been practicing how it might feel to be addressed as Lady Redditch, and she found she didn't mind it. She squared her shoulders, lifting her neck to a regal angle. There was only one way to avoid being sent to London for a second Season.

And that was to finish what she and William had started during her first one.

She needed to secure an official proposal from Lord Redditch.

Their attachment hadn't begun until near the end of the Season, and when they had parted ways, there had been something of an understanding between them. William had made it his mission to reunite them, so he had invited the earl to their Christmas house party, well in advance. He would be staying at their estate along with several other guests for the twelve days surrounding Christmas and the sixth of January, Twelfth Night.

Hannah had spent the entire day helping her mother decorate with all the traditional greenery in preparation for the arrival of their guests that evening. The house was warm and inviting, even down to the fragrant holiday scents. Everything was in order. Nothing was missing.

She held on to the sides of her skirts, swallowing the dread that crept up her throat. It was difficult to think of Christmas without thinking of Samuel.

She had spent the last year trying to forget him. More than any other endeavor, that had been the most important one. If ever he was brought up in conversation, she did not listen.

William had been so immersed in Hannah's Season that he hadn't tried to write to Samuel, and Samuel hadn't written to him. As she had hoped, any word about Samuel and his wife hadn't reached her ears, and she hadn't allowed herself to think of them without reprimand. Now she was pleased to say that, after all her effort, she was finally prepared to move forward. She had successfully banished every last one of her feelings. Perhaps one day she would be able to think of him and their memories together again. But not now. Not when she had such an important task ahead of her.

Securing Lord Redditch was vital. A Christmas season had never been more crucial to her future than this one was. William was counting on her. Mama was counting on her. She could not disappoint them. There had been a true connection between herself and Lord Redditch, and she still remembered the heartfelt farewell the earl had given her when he had left London five months before.

*"I will not cease to think of you until we meet again."* He had kissed her hand, smiled, and walked away reluctantly. She had no doubt that his attachment was strong.

Even as she reflected on her farewell with Lord Redditch, her hasty farewell with Samuel still tried to sneak into her mind. She crushed it like an insect, setting her jaw and taking a deep breath.

A knock sounded on her door just seconds before it opened. "Hannah, are you coming to the drawing room?" Mama walked through the doorway. Her layered white skirts matched the wrap on her head. "Some of our guests have already arrived."

"Lord Redditch?" Hannah asked, her eyes wide.

"No, not yet, but make haste. He will be arriving soon." Mama walked forward with a smile, adjusting a curl on Hannah's forehead. "You must be the first to greet him."

A spiral of nervousness struck her in the stomach. She caught her breath. "Of course."

Mama turned to leave but stopped halfway to the door.

“William is very pleased with the possibility of this match. I hope you will be too.” Her brow was creased at the center.

“I see nothing wrong with Lord Redditch,” Hannah said with a reassuring smile.

“Nor do I,” Mama said, letting out a slow breath. “He seems to be a respectable man.” She knew as well as Hannah did that a good match was very important, but she also wanted Hannah to be in love with her husband. Mama had been fortunate to fall in love with the man she married, so it was clear that, deep inside, she wanted the same for her daughter. She eyed Hannah carefully. “Do you have feelings for him?”

Hannah shifted, adjusting the ribbon at her waist. “I believe so. And I—I suspect they will grow with time.”

Mama touched Hannah’s shoulder, her blue eyes flooding with warmth. “What a wonderful attitude to have, my dear.”

Hannah swallowed. What other attitude could she have? She had no choice but to be optimistic, or she might suffocate.

Mama pulled her close, wrapping her arms around her. “You are doing so well. I hope you will not forget that.” She pulled back, and Hannah could see the fine wrinkles that had formed at the corners of Mama’s eyes from years of smiling. Would Hannah smile that much if she became Lady Redditch?

The question sent a prickle of doubt through her stomach.

“You will be pleased to see the guests who are joining us. I confess I was rather surprised.” Mama paused, a hint of worry touching her brow.

“Surprised?” Hannah tipped her head to one side.

“You’ll see once you join us in the drawing room,” Mama said.

Hannah lowered her eyebrows in confusion, but Mama simply walked away, leaving her alone in her room once again.

Hannah turned to the looking glass to share a concerned look with her own reflection. What did Mama mean?

Curiosity tugged at her as she made her way down to the drawing room. She calmed her nerves with a series of deep breaths, banishing all signs of worry from her expression. She had been trained for this. She had plenty of practice. She couldn't allow herself to be intimidated conversing with the man she had plans to marry, even if he was an earl. She was the daughter of a viscount. She was strong. She was master over her own heart and emotions. She could bend them to her will, and that was something that had taken an entire year to accomplish.

Her confidence rose as she listened to the voices coming from the drawing room. She would have time to practice her social skills before Lord Redditch arrived. No matter the pressure she was under, Christmastide was meant to be enjoyed.

With one final deep breath, she walked through the drawing room door. Many of William's house party guests were already gathered in the room, their trunks whisked away to the bedchambers they would be staying in during their visit. Among the five guests, Hannah caught sight of one who made her stomach drop to her knees. She felt the blood rush away from her head and a chill passed over her spine.

Standing with William near the pianoforte was Samuel.

She blinked hard, her hands already perspiring inside her gloves. What was he doing here? Why had William not mentioned that he was to be invited? Hannah hadn't asked for the entire list of guests, but she had expected it would include only the new friends William had met in London that year—all the new connections he wished to foster. It hadn't crossed her mind that he might invite Samuel to join them.

Samuel and his wife.

Hannah's gaze darted around the room. Where was the woman? Her heart hammered past her ears. She was still frozen in the doorway. Samuel hadn't seen her yet, so she still had time to run away.

"Hannah, dear sister, join us." William's boisterous voice indicated that he must have already been drinking a little. Just

a little spirits boosted his mood, but too much made his mood sour. He seemed to have struck the right balance that evening, but now all the eyes in the room were on Hannah.

Including Samuel's.

In a matter of mere seconds, all the work and effort she had put into the last year unraveled into a pile of thread at her feet. All it had taken was one look from Samuel, and she remembered everything again. How good he was. How kind. How happy he made her. How handsome he was. She couldn't hide from it when he was standing right in front of her.

But where was his wife? If she were clinging to his arm, Hannah would feel much more capable of remembering her place.

She walked forward, swallowing against her dry throat. Samuel looked nearly the same as he had the year before, except, perhaps, with a little more stubble on his jaw. His dark hair and warm brown eyes followed her as she moved closer to him and William. Was this why Mama had looked worried about the guests that had come? She was less oblivious than William about Hannah's past attachment to Samuel. Surely William didn't suspect anything, or he wouldn't have invited Samuel to this house party alongside Lord Redditch. Or perhaps he remembered the important detail that Samuel was married and therefore entirely unavailable.

Hannah curtsied as she stopped in front of Samuel, her legs shaking beneath her skirts. When she looked up, she could hardly gather any words. "You—you're here." She let out a small laugh of disbelief. "It has been years since you've walked these halls." Her heart still pounded against her breastbone, making it difficult to focus on anything else.

"When William invited me, I couldn't possibly refuse." Samuel's eyes never left her face, even when William spoke again.

"How could I call you my dearest friend and not allow you passage to my prestigious house party?" He raised his glass with a smirk. "Why should I keep all my beneficial acquaintances to myself?"

Samuel scoffed half-heartedly. He seemed more amused than irritated by William's haughtiness. "I didn't come to mingle with all your new friends. I came to mingle with my old ones. You. And Hannah."

Hannah met his gaze again, and her stomach flopped. So many questions coursed through her mind, but she didn't have time to ask them before William took hold of her elbow. "Come. I will introduce you to the others."

Hannah followed him away from Samuel's side, struggling to regain her composure. She greeted each guest with a smile as William led her around the room. She had already been acquainted with the young couple, Sir Miles and Lady Grantham, but she hadn't yet met the two other single gentlemen, Lord Watford and Lord Swanley. William introduced them as friends from his years at Oxford. By how highly William spoke of Hannah in front of them, she suspected these two men were secondary options should her engagement to Lord Redditch not come to pass.

Her stomach lurched. She met Mama's gaze from across the room. Mama still wore that same look of worry as her gaze followed Hannah. If Hannah had the strength, she would ensure that Mama's worries were abated. Mama had nothing to fret about so long as Hannah could hide her emotions from her face and keep her focus on Lord Redditch, where it belonged.

When Lord Swanley, a tall blond gentleman, engaged William in conversation, she slipped away, finding a solitary place to sit on the sofa. Every muscle in her body was weak, for all her energy was being expended by her mind. Her thoughts spun so quickly that she could hardly grasp a single one of them.

No. Her shoulders tensed as she saw Samuel from the corner of her eye. He was coming toward the sofa.

She looked up just as he took a seat on the cushion beside her. He leaned forward, tipping his head toward her with a cautious smile. "I see you survived London."

"Well, that depends on what you mean by *survived*." She laughed under her breath, but the sound was shaky. She

noticed her hands were shaking in her lap, so she tucked them under her legs. "I am still alive, if that is what you mean." Before he could respond, she asked the question that had been at the forefront of her mind. "How have you spent the last year? Where is your wife?"

Samuel's gaze faltered, his smile lifting more on one side. "Did William never tell you?"

Hannah raised her eyebrows, heart pounding. "What?"

"My engagement to Miss Merchant persisted for months before she finally broke it off. She fell in love with someone else, and she freed me of my duty to her father." Samuel's eyes burned a hole through the walls Hannah had built around her skin. "I am not married to Miss Merchant, nor will I ever be."

# Chapter 8

THOUGH HANNAH TRIED TO APPEAR composed, Samuel could see the signs of restrained shock in her. He had hoped she would be happy to hear the news, but instead she seemed distressed.

When William wrote to him at the close of the last London Season, he had mentioned that Hannah had yet to become engaged but that he still had high hopes for her. Samuel had never felt more relieved. He had extended an invitation to William to spend Christmas at Cranfield again, but William had informed him of his house party and invited him to join him here at Whitmore instead. Samuel had spent the last several months anticipating this visit. He hadn't been able to forget the previous December, and now fate had ensured that neither he nor Hannah were engaged or attached. They could continue as friends, as they had always been, and Samuel was free to hope for the possibility of more.

William would not be easy to convince, but Samuel couldn't worry about that yet. He was simply happy to be sitting beside Hannah again. She looked even lovelier than he'd recalled. A bit distressed, but lovely.

He tipped his head for a closer look at her face. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing." Hannah drew an audible breath, her eyes darting toward William. "I—I am simply surprised." She flashed a quick smile, but it was false, just like the last smiles she had given him the year before. "I have spent the last year misinformed. I was certain you were married to Miss Merchant."

"I'm not." He held her gaze. "Similarly, I confess, I was certain you would be married to a duke by now." He gave her a teasing smile. "I'm amazed that you managed to escape London without a match, especially with William's influence."

She didn't return his smile. She wrung her fingers together in her lap.



Across the room, William turned toward the window. “Ah! Redditch has finally arrived. That completes our party for the next fortnight.” He turned away from the window, searching the room until his gaze settled on Hannah. The moment it did, she stood, tossing Samuel a quick glance to excuse herself. Then she walked to the other side of the room to stand by William near the drawing room door.

Samuel remained seated, watching the signs of unrest in Hannah. She held to the sides of her skirts until she seemed to recognize she was doing so. Her face was pale, her shoulders pressed back so tightly her shoulder blades were pinching together. William whispered something to her, and she smiled.

Then the drawing room door opened, and a young man walked through it. His light-brown hair was swept over his head in the Brummel style, and his cravat was knotted in an intricate manner that only a man of the *ton* would bother to present. The man exuded power and prestige from the very instant he entered the room. Under most circumstances, William was smug, searching for people who were worthy of his notice; now, with this man, he seemed eager to impress.

But the man didn’t seem concerned with William at all. No, his attention was entirely fixed on Hannah.

Samuel stood from his seat on the sofa but didn’t stray far from it. He couldn’t quite hear their conversation, but he did see the prolonged manner in which the man was looking at Hannah and the smile that had taken over his face. After their exchange ended, William guided the man through the room, introducing him to each guest. When they circled to where Samuel stood, William presented the gentleman to him.

“The Earl of Redditch.”

Samuel bowed. His stomach twisted with dread. If this man was an earl, an eligible one, then there was no question that William intended him for Hannah. And by the way Lord Redditch had been looking at her, it seemed he intended her for himself as well.

Samuel stole a glance at Hannah, who stood near the doorway watching the introduction. Her eyes met his briefly

before flitting away.

“I became acquainted with Lord Redditch in London,” William said by way of further introduction. He turned toward the earl. “Mr. Merchant has been my friend since childhood. He recently inherited an estate, Cranfield, in Kent.”

“Ah.” Lord Redditch offered a polite smile. “What a stroke of good fortune.”

“Indeed.” Samuel swallowed. It was, perhaps, the only stroke of good fortune he would ever encounter. “Where is your home while you are not in London?” he asked the earl.

“Devon.”

Was there an understanding between Lord Redditch and Hannah? An attachment? Why else would he have come all the way from Devon to spend Christmastide here at Whitmore rather than at his own country estate? A heavy stone of dread had begun sinking through Samuel’s stomach. Perhaps it had been unwise for him to come. His parents and elder brother lived in the neighborhood. He had planned to visit them for part of his stay, but perhaps it would be better to stay there throughout the entire visit. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t come between Hannah and a match with an earl. This was William’s dream. And Hannah . . . well, she had appeared pleased to see the earl. Perhaps it was her dream now too.

Samuel maintained his air of politeness until the earl walked away. He returned to his place on the sofa, but Hannah didn’t rejoin him. She sat on a chair near Lord Redditch on the other side of the room. The earl whispered something to her, at which she gave a shy smile.

Samuel’s heart beat fast, his stomach pooling with disappointment as the seconds passed. He stopped himself. He was being selfish and ridiculous. Hannah deserved the very best in life, and if Lord Redditch could give it to her, then Samuel should be happy for her. He didn’t know for certain, but there did seem to be something between them. But even if she *was* unattached, there still remained one obstacle that would be the most difficult of all to overcome: William.

\*\*\*

The meal had been extravagant. Samuel's stomach would have been much fuller if he hadn't been so blasted nervous and distracted. Hannah and Lord Redditch had been flirting all evening, and he had been forced to watch it unfold. He had decided there was no greater form of torture.

In the drawing room, he sat beside William, with Lord Redditch and Hannah on chairs to the left of them. Lady Northam was seated on the opposite side of the room beside Sir Miles and Lady Grantham. Lord Watford and Lord Swanley had taken the last remaining seats, near the hearth. The party was small, with four gentlemen and only one eligible lady. That seemed to be precisely how William wanted it, creating several options for Hannah. Well, without counting Samuel. Of all the guests in attendance, Samuel was the only one without a title.

"Who would like to play a round of wit?" William had been exerting himself to entertain the guests all evening.

"Wit?" Samuel asked, leaning forward for a better view. "I didn't know you had any of that."

The guests chuckled, and William raised an eyebrow. "I have it in abundance."

"I will require proof, as will all of your guests," Samuel teased.

"And they will have it." William stood to gather paper and pencils for everyone in the room. He distributed them before returning to the center of the room to give his instruction.

"All of you must construct a poem using the following words: *bough*, *cow*, *pride*, *Yuletide*, and *bride*." William grinned. "I will not be participating in this first round since I have chosen the words, but the rest of you will have only five minutes to construct your poems."

Samuel raised his pencil, exchanging an unexpected glance with Hannah. She had hardly looked at him all evening, but now there was a challenge in her eyes. Ever since they were young, they had been competitive with one another.

“When the game ends, I will choose my favorite poem, and that poet will select the next set of words.” William glanced at the clock. “Your time begins now.”

Samuel looked down at his paper, scrawling at the top of the page the words William had just mentioned. He rearranged them, biting his lip in concentration. Halfway through, he glanced up at Hannah. Her brow was creased as she stared down at her paper, writing vigorously for a moment before pausing and scribbling out a word or phrase. She looked up for long enough to throw him a smirk, setting her pencil down before the time was up.

Samuel finished his final line quickly before setting his pencil down just as William yelled out, “Time!” He rubbed his hands together. “Hmm, who shall begin? My dear sister?” He stopped in front of Hannah.

She gave a shy smile, glancing up at Lord Redditch. The expression was much different from the smirk she had just given Samuel. She seemed to be putting on an act of sorts. William must have taught her to be coy. But something Samuel liked about Hannah was how she was *not* coy.

Lifting her paper, she stood and began reading.

*“The farmer made a wish for Yuletide  
While he hung his ribbons and boughs;  
He’d give up his farm, his home, his pride—  
Even his goats, pigs, hens, and cows—  
If instead he could have a bride.”*

The guests clapped as Hannah sat down. Samuel smiled, finishing his own round of applause for her poem. Had she mentioned hens just for him? How much did she remember of the previous Christmas? How much did she treasure the memory? He couldn’t tell. She was impossible to read.

“Very witty indeed,” William said.

“I am impressed you composed that in five minutes,” Lord Redditch said in a low voice. “You are quite talented.”

Samuel wished he had been the one sitting close enough to Hannah to offer such compliments.

“Lord Redditch, would you like to read yours?” William asked.

“My poem is not nearly as impressive as Miss Somerton’s, but I will read what I have.” The earl stood and looked down at his paper.

*“What else could I want but a bride?  
I might marry my very own cow  
If not for my own sense of pride.  
Feed her apples from a blossoming bough  
At a church on the day of Yuletide.”*

William clapped, shaking his head with amazement as the earl retook his seat. “You should not doubt your abilities, Redditch. That was extraordinary.”

Samuel watched Hannah’s enthusiastic reaction with a growing sense of hopelessness. Lord Redditch was a poet too? Not only did he have wealth and a title, but he also had wit.

William’s eyes shifted to Samuel. “Did you manage to write one in time?”

Samuel nodded, fighting the urge to exchange another glance with Hannah. Would she even look at him if he did? She seemed enthralled with the earl.

“Well then, read it for us.” William gestured at Samuel’s paper.

Samuel stood slowly. Clearing his throat, he spoke in a clear voice.

*“My dear, leave behind all your pride,  
Forget that I smell like a cow.  
Say you’ll marry me, be my bride,  
And find me at the kissing bough—  
For our time is short this Yuletide.”*

The crowd laughed as they offered their applause. Samuel threw a glance at Hannah, who watched him with a suppressed grin.

“I’m not certain I could forget if a man smelled like a cow,” she said. “Even if he did write me such a heartfelt verse.”

Her words earned a laugh from Lord Redditch, who seemed to have shifted closer to her in his chair.

“You think my verse was heartfelt?” Samuel asked, raising an eyebrow. “My competitor has offered me a compliment. That should be taken into consideration.” He glanced at William, who tipped his head back with a laugh.

“The game is not over yet, my friend,” William said. “We have not yet heard from five others.” He turned toward the other guests. Everyone except Lady Grantham and Lord Swanley managed to complete their poems. Each one was entertaining and humorous, but the ultimate decision would be left up to William. Once all the poems had been read, he surveyed the crowd, rubbing his chin.

“It is difficult to choose only one among such delightful offerings, but I do think there is one poem that stood out from the rest.” He extended a hand toward his chosen winner. “Lord Redditch.”

The guests clapped again, and Samuel grudgingly joined them. It was uncertain whether William had actually liked Lord Redditch’s poem the most or whether he had chosen him simply in an effort to win his favor. Either way, the outcome was vexing.

The earl stood, offering a bow before taking William’s place at the center of the room. The second round of the game was just as entertaining, and when it was over, Lord Redditch chose Hannah as his winner, which didn’t come as a surprise in the slightest. The game continued on for three more rounds, one of which Samuel was selected as the winner. But before he could begin his round, William stood.

“Shall we finish the evening with a bit of music?” He waved Hannah toward the pianoforte. “Perhaps a Christmas carol or

two? Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, after all.”

Samuel returned to his seat, observing as Hannah took her place at the pianoforte and lifted her hands to the keys. Her jaw was tight, her shoulders pulled back. She had been trained as any other lady to play with precision. She began playing “Joy to the World” as the guests in the room listened quietly.

Lord Redditch smiled fondly, and so did William and Lady Northam.

Samuel, however, couldn't smile. Much like the year before, he had only a few weeks to spend with Hannah before everything would change. But had it already changed? With Lord Redditch nearby, even if the earl and Hannah weren't yet engaged, Samuel couldn't possibly come between them. He was too late.

## Chapter 9

THE NEXT MORNING, FIVE MORE guests arrived at Whitemore, joining the party for breakfast and to make plans for the day. Two sisters, the Misses Gilbert, as well as their mother, Mrs. Gilbert; Lady Arabella and her mother; and the Dowager Countess Ellesmere. Hannah would have thought William wouldn't take the risk of inviting an earl's daughter to the house party to compete with the attentions of Lord Redditch, but shortly after her arrival it became clear that she was only invited because she posed no risk. She was loud, giggling at things that were not intended to be humorous, and yet most of the time she was far more interested in sketching in her book than conversing with others. Hannah had tried to befriend her, but the woman had snubbed her just like she had everyone else.

Hannah sat in the breakfast room, watching the doorway for Samuel's entrance. When she had awoken that morning, she had hoped that perhaps it wasn't true—that she had dreamed the whole thing and he wasn't really at Whitemore. Hearing his voice, seeing his smile . . . and wishing that he, instead of Lord Redditch, had been sitting beside her . . . it had driven her mad all night.

If she had known Samuel had never married Miss Merchant and that he was coming for Christmas, then she never would have encouraged Lord Redditch. Now it was too late. She couldn't begin ignoring him. She didn't even know if Samuel thought of her as anything more than a friend or sister. So what choice did she have? She needed to take what she had won, and that was Lord Redditch's affection. William's hopes were high for this match, and so were her mother's, and the earl himself had seemed very pleased to see Hannah. Allowing Samuel to distract her was not an option. She already knew from the previous December that she wasn't capable of being only his friend. Her feelings couldn't be so easily suppressed. It would be best to avoid him altogether.



She felt like the bars of a cage were closing in around her, and she could hardly breathe.

She tried to eat her breakfast, but the eggs and ham were entirely unappealing. She set down her fork and knife at the same moment Samuel walked through the doorway. Her fork clattered louder than she had intended.

From the corner of her eye, Hannah watched Samuel walk to the sideboard and begin filling his plate. When he finished, he came to the empty chair beside her.

“Good morning,” he said, meeting her gaze with a soft smile.

“Good morning.” Hannah’s voice was too quiet. She cleared her throat. If only she could read his mind. Had he come to Whitemore for Christmas as a friend to William, or had he come for her? What did he think of Lord Redditch? Had William told him about the understanding between them? It was as yet unspoken, but everyone fully expected a future engagement, one Hannah was trying her best not to regret. But that was difficult when both men were sitting next to her, and she was completely oblivious to the one she was supposed to marry yet overly aware of every single movement of the one she wasn’t.

“I don’t mean this as an insult to your cook,” Lord Redditch said, recalling her attention from the chair beside her at the long table, “but my cook in Devon makes the most delicious eggs I have ever eaten.”

Hannah raised her eyebrows, looking down at her plate. “I wasn’t aware cooking eggs required such skill.”

“I didn’t think so either.” The earl shook his head in amazement. “But my cook is extraordinary. I hope you will have the opportunity to dine at my estate in Leyburn one day soon.”

Hannah’s stomach twisted. He had been hinting more toward their marriage since the moment he’d arrived.

Samuel was listening, looking down at the eggs on his own plate with curiosity. He leaned forward slightly. “I don’t mean

this as an insult to *your* cook, Lord Redditch, but wouldn't you suppose most of the credit belongs to the hen?"

Hannah bit the insides of her cheeks. His eyes danced with amusement when he met her gaze, but when he looked at Lord Redditch again, she caught a hint of vexation in Samuel's features.

"The hen lays a bland egg. A simple ingredient." Lord Redditch gave a smug smile. "Without a cook to prepare it and give it flavor, I would not care for it."

"But if you take the egg away from the recipe your cook uses to prepare your breakfast, what would remain?" Samuel said. "A pile of spices and a splash of milk? The egg is vital, and without the hen, it cannot exist."

Lord Redditch scoffed. "That is true, but my point is that my cook knows best how to prepare an egg to its fullest potential."

Hannah shifted in her seat. She felt like a cucumber between two slices of bread—if bread could be compared to competitive men. "Does it truly matter?" she said. "I think we can give equal credit to both the hen and the cook."

She didn't know whether Samuel had chosen to argue with Lord Redditch to irritate him or simply to amuse her by referencing a hen. He sat back in his chair, taking a bite from his plate. She stole a glance at his expression. He was smiling. She gave him a look of exasperation. Whatever his motive had been, he seemed to feel he'd accomplished it.

William had already finished eating, so he called the entire room to attention, rising from his chair. "After our games in the drawing room yesterday, I discovered this group is quite fond of competition." He gave a broad smile. "So I have altered the plans for today in order to suit this discovery." He paused for suspense as his guests chuckled.

"The grounds and nearby woods have plenty of evergreen plants. Box, bay, holly, juniper, and pine. I even saw some mistletoe on a variety of host trees on the property when I examined the hawthorn and apple trees." William clapped his hands together. "So the first activity of the day will be a

competition.” He walked to the corner of the room and picked up a top hat from the floor. “I have written the names of half of you on strips of paper in this hat. Those whose names are not in the hat must each draw the name of a partner, and then we will set out to collect greenery with our companions. When we return, each partnership will fashion a kissing bough out of their greenery and the other tools provided in the ballroom. When we are finished, I will select a winner, and we will hang all the boughs through Whitemore to remain for the rest of Christmastide.”

“What a delightful idea!” Lady Ellesmere said.

Would William read the names himself? That would be the only way he could ensure Hannah was partnered with Lord Redditch, which would be her brother’s ideal scenario. To her surprise, however, he passed the hat to Lady Arabella first. She drew Mrs. Gilbert’s name. The hat was passed to Lady Ellesmere, who drew Lord Redditch’s name.

William didn’t let his disappointment show, though Hannah was sure he felt it. She, on the contrary, felt rather relieved. Her shoulders relaxed as the hat was passed to two others before it reached Samuel.

He reached into the hat, withdrawing a strip of paper. He unfolded it. “Miss Somerton.” His eyes shifted to Hannah, and her stomach flopped. Avoiding him would not be possible if they were to be partners for such a lengthy project. Fate seemed to be against her resolve to keep him at arm’s length.

The hat was passed on until all the guests had a partner. Hannah dared a look at Samuel’s face. Half his mouth lifted in a smile. “I think we have an advantage,” he whispered.

“How so?” Hannah raised an eyebrow.

“You were raised on these grounds, and I practically was too.”

“That is true.” She studied his mischievous smile, the tightness in her chest loosening. She recognized the expression like the back of her own hand. He was the source of her distress, but he was also the remedy. He had the ability to calm

her nerves when no one else could, but he could also set them off with one look. The contradictions were rather unsettling. Was it possible that she could come out of this unscathed? Was she strong enough to keep her emotions locked away?

“It is a shame we cannot be partners,” Lord Redditch whispered. “Though we cannot make a kissing bough together, perhaps once they are hung in the corridors, we can make use of them some other way.” The flirtatious tone in his voice sent a jolt of discomfort through her body.

She gave a quiet laugh, hoping Samuel hadn’t overheard. “You are incorrigible,” she teased, though her voice was flat.

Lord Redditch smiled, rising from his chair to find his partner, Lady Ellesmere.

Hannah didn’t have to move to find her partner. Samuel stood at the same moment she did, and she turned to face him, relieved to find him smiling.

“Shall we go make the most attractive kissing bough these corridors have ever seen?”

Her heart pounded in her ears, but she managed a weak smile. “We shall.”

# Chapter 10

“READY, GO!” WILLIAM SHOUTED AS the party gathered on the back lawn. Much of the snow had melted, leaving just patches of ice and frost in the areas of the property that were hidden from the sun. The sky was covered in clouds, with just a few cracks through which light was escaping.

Samuel tugged his greatcoat more tightly around himself, tossing Hannah a smile. She had been so reserved and quiet since the moment he had arrived. He wanted to put her at ease—and put himself at ease by pretending he wasn’t as disappointed as he truly was. He wanted to know the history between Hannah and Lord Redditch, but he was also afraid to hear it. At the moment, he was simply happy to have pulled her away from the earl for a time. The man hardly seemed capable of leaving her side.

“Where shall we begin?” Samuel’s eyes darted to both sides as the other guests dispersed, most of them heading toward the woods. He held a pair of shears in one hand, prepared to clip all the best greenery from the plants, and a small basket in the other.

Hannah’s bonnet hid most of her face from him, but when she glanced up, he finally caught a glimpse of her rosy cheeks and vibrant green eyes. Her auburn hair and red cloak were striking against her pale skin and the patches of snow on the grass. He could have stared at the picture all day. “Let us start with the woods like the others.” She started walking before he did, so he took long strides to catch up to her.

“You walk very quickly for a woman so small,” he said, laughing under his breath.

“We do wish to win, do we not?” There was a hint of a smile on her lips when she looked up at him again. Perhaps it wouldn’t take long for her to act like herself again. London might not have transformed her as much as he’d feared.

“You’re right. We have no time to waste.” He picked up

speed, walking as fast as his long legs could carry him. He passed Hannah with ease. He must have looked ridiculous taking such large strides, but the laugh of disbelief from Hannah was worth the embarrassment. He glanced over his shoulder. “Are you coming?”

She marched faster, swinging her arms and laughing as she tried to keep up. When she failed, she started running instead, just before they reached the tree line. She passed him again, so he ran too, laughing as he managed to pass her a second time. He held out his arms to the side in order to prevent her from beating him in his spontaneous race.

“Samuel!” she exclaimed through her laughter. She tried to duck under his arms. “You should not run while holding shears.”

He finally stopped running, pausing by a tree to catch his breath.

Hannah shook her head at him, still laughing as she breathed heavily. Each exhale sent a puff of fog into the air. “I always wished I could be faster than you.”

“I’m afraid not all of our wishes can come true, not even on Christmas Eve,” he said in a teasing voice.

She sighed, giving a reluctant smile. “It’s only because I’ve been in London, where it is impossible to run in public. I haven’t had a chance to practice.”

Samuel wanted to ask more about her time in London, and about Lord Redditch, but he also didn’t want to lose the lightness and ease of their current conversation. If she wished to tell him more, she could, but he wouldn’t pry. “You very well could have run in public. You may have been chagrined, but surely it would have been worth it.”

Her laugh, small as it was, flooded his chest with warmth. “I think William would have been more chagrined than I. He would have watched in horror while I simply would have been thoroughly enjoying myself.”

Samuel leaned his back against the tree, forgetting that they were supposed to be collecting greenery. “William has always

wanted the best for you and his family. But I do think, at times, he may take it too far.”

Hannah stared ahead, her eyes reflecting her silent agreement with his words. “He is a good brother. Overbearing, but good.”

Again Samuel was tempted to ask about Lord Redditch, but he held his tongue. None of the other guests were in sight, though he could hear them in the distance, so he changed the subject instead. “We ought to go find the best greenery before the others take it all.”

She nodded, taking a deep breath. “Shall we go this way?” She pointed to the right. “I think we will find a few useful branches here, but I know most of it will be in the gardens. I know where the holly and bay trees are, as well as the pine. The orchard will likely have the best mistletoe.”

“What are we doing here, then?” Samuel asked. “We ought to go to the gardens before the others do.”

She seemed hesitant to stray so far from the group, her eyes darting between Samuel and the direction of the other voices. Just the year before she hadn’t been afraid to be alone with him. Why did it hold more significance now? “Very well,” she said. Her expression transformed slowly, a hint of a grin on her lips. In an instant, she took off running in the direction of the gardens.

Samuel took a moment to recover from his surprise, and to give her a head start, before taking off behind her. She groaned with frustration as he passed her again, but soon she was laughing again, and so was he. They didn’t stop running until they reached the border of the gardens. The tall gate and stone statues were edged with frost, the garden path quiet and still. The only sound to be heard was their lingering laughter and heavy breathing.

“I’m afraid I’ll be too tired to continue,” Hannah said.

Samuel studied her flushed cheeks and wide smile. He shook his head with a chuckle. “You have no one but yourself to blame.”

“I cannot help but compete with you. Even when we played our game of wit in the drawing room, all I wanted was to win against you.” Hannah’s eyes sparked with mischief, and the expression reminded him of their childhood.

“Well, Lord Redditch won the first round. He stole the victory from us both.” For an instant, he questioned the wisdom of continuing his thoughts, but the words spilled out of him. “I do think William chose him only in an attempt to win his favor.” He started walking down the path, and Hannah walked beside him.

“Why do you think that?” she asked, her voice quiet.

“He wants you to marry Lord Redditch.” Samuel met her gaze, and she instantly looked down at the path. His heart wrenched that she didn’t deny it.

“And it seems to me that Lord Redditch wants to marry you.” Samuel’s curiosity could no longer be helped. He needed to know how hopeless his case was. “Do *you* want to marry him?”

Hannah turned left, stopping by another set of gates. She refused to look at Samuel as she pushed the gate open and walked straight ahead into the orchard. “He seems to be a good man. He is kind, and he does seem to care for me.” She examined the apple trees as they walked down the path.

“That did not answer my question,” Samuel said, walking a little faster until he caught up to her.

She stopped, turning toward him with her arms crossed. “It has never mattered what I want. It is about what Mama wants and what William wants. I have spent my entire life not contributing anything to our family. Mama has raised me and William, taught me, loved me, and since Papa died, William has worked hard to learn the management of Whitemore and his other duties as a viscount. He has provided me with opportunities other young ladies would give anything to obtain.” She paused, drawing a shaky breath. “I cannot simply take what I want after I have spent my entire life doing so. It is my turn to contribute something. To *give* something instead of taking and taking as I have always done.” Her green eyes



swam before she blinked the moisture away. “William intends for me to marry Lord Redditch, and if Lord Redditch makes an offer, then I will accept it.” She lifted her chin, as if daring him to challenge her.

Samuel’s heart ached all over again. He wanted to comfort her, pull her into his arms, and tell her that she was being too generous and selfless. He wanted to advise her not to accept Lord Redditch’s offer and to marry him instead.

But to do any of that would make him far too selfish to ever deserve her.

“Hannah—” He took a step closer, watching her stiff posture melt in front of his eyes. “You have always been so generous, and I admire that about you, but I disagree with some of your reasoning. You have given more, and still have more to give, to your family than an advantageous marriage. You have brought them joy and love, and I know without a doubt they would not love you any less for making a decision for yourself. You deserve to be happy.” He held her gaze, doing all he could not to involve his own emotions in his words. “I am not trying to advise you against a match with Lord Redditch; that is not my intention. I simply want you to recognize your worth, regardless of what you accomplish or whom you marry.” He touched her shoulder, running his thumb across it. There was still so much more he wished to say, and refraining was becoming more and more difficult. He removed his hand, lowering his gaze to the ground.

“I thought you were married,” Hannah said in a hushed voice. “For an entire year.”

He looked up, his heart pinching. If she had known sooner that he’d never married Miss Merchant, would she still have bent to William’s ambitions? Or would she have waited until she next saw Samuel? He hadn’t known she cared so much.

“I don’t wish to come between you and Lord Redditch,” Samuel said. The words burned his throat. “I wish to be your friend. Everyone needs a friend.”

She nodded, pressing her lips together. “I do.”

“Then let us forget our worries, just as we did last year.” The heaviness in Samuel’s heart made it difficult to breathe. “Let us pretend the only care we have at the moment is creating the best kissing bough Whitemore has ever seen.”

Hannah smiled, shooting another pang of emotion through his chest. “You act as though that is a small task.” She raised an eyebrow. “William will not be an easy judge.”

Samuel lifted the shears, examining the tree beside them. Mistletoe grew on the host tree, sticking out on the sparse branches. He ignored the fact that he and Hannah were standing directly beneath it, though his heart hammered in his chest. Kissing her, especially after the conversation they had just had, would not be wise. It wasn’t the way to show her they were only friends; that much was certain. He recalled their conversation from the year before about mistletoe and what purpose it served. In some cases, it helped two people realize that they wanted to kiss one another, but Samuel already knew he wanted to kiss Hannah. In other cases, when two people already knew they wanted to kiss one another, it provided an opportunity. But Samuel wasn’t at liberty to take that opportunity.

He set the basket down, lifted the shears, and cut four bundles, letting them fall to the ground. Hannah gathered them up into their basket. The moment she picked up the basket, she turned and walked away, likely just as uncomfortable as he had been standing beneath the mistletoe. She led them to a holly tree next, then a bay tree, and by the time they left the gardens, the basket was full.

“I hear voices,” Hannah whispered. “We mustn’t allow the others to find these.” She gestured at the trees.

Samuel nodded, meeting her gaze with a mischievous smile. “It sounds like they’re going back to the house.”

“Good. We shall win for certain. What is a kissing bough without mistletoe?”

“Precisely.” Samuel looked up at the nearby apple trees again, bundles of mistletoe swinging in the breeze. What was mistletoe without a kiss? Just a plant—a bundle of greenery

and berries. He needed to get away from those plants. With Hannah—his *friend*—standing so close, they taunted him. “Shall we race back to the house?”

Her cheeks widened with a smile. And then, without a single word, she broke into a run. He chased her, at a slower pace than he was capable of, to the back door, catching her by the arm before she could touch the door handle. She laughed, tugging her elbow away and bursting into the house. “I won!” she exclaimed through her laughter. The ribbons had come loose on her bonnet, and it now tipped to one side of her head.

Samuel stepped closer, adjusting her bonnet. He wouldn’t have usually willingly given up his victory, but the greatest victory in that moment was seeing her so happy and free. He met her gaze from beneath the brim, giving a quiet laugh. “Congratulations.”

“Miss Somerton.” A deep voice came from down the corridor. Lord Redditch stood with his basket, staring at Samuel, his eyes flashing with confusion, then anger. He took several steps before stopping, glancing awkwardly between Hannah and Samuel. He tugged on his cravat, clearing his throat. “Miss Somerton, I wondered if you might help me with my kissing bough. Lady Ellesmere felt unwell and retired to her room.”

Samuel stepped away from Hannah, leaving her bonnet only partially tied. She stared at him, then at Lord Redditch. “I—I would not be a very good partner if I abandoned Mr. Merchant to the task on his own.”

The earl’s gaze traveled to Samuel. “Mr. Merchant seems quite capable.”

Hannah opened her mouth to speak again, but Samuel quickly intervened. “You are right. I am.” He fought against the frustration rising in his chest. But he had told Hannah he wouldn’t come between them, so he would keep that promise. “Lord Redditch requires assistance more than I do. Go help him instead.” Samuel couldn’t help but slip the slight insult into his words. Lord Redditch had likely never built anything with his own hands in his life, but Samuel had.

His heart ached as he walked away in the direction of the ballroom, where the other guests had gathered to make their kissing boughs. This Christmastide hadn't been meant for him and Hannah to come closer, as he had hoped. It was meant for Lord Redditch and Hannah to continue their courtship.

It took all of his strength, but he didn't look back as he walked down that corridor. He didn't dare see Hannah's expression. The next day was Christmas, and the best way to put distance between himself and her would be to spend the holiday with his family instead of at Whitemore. If she was trying to sort out her feelings for Lord Redditch, she needed time and space to do so.

It would be best that he leave first thing in the morning.

# Chapter 11

DASH IT ALL, SAMUEL HAD won the kissing bough competition.

Hannah hadn't yet had an opportunity to offer her bitter congratulations. But she smiled to herself as she thought of the beautiful piece he had created with their greenery. While she had been helping Lord Redditch learn how to attach a single stem to wire, Samuel had been crafting a masterpiece. Two circular wires had been covered in greenery, the loops intertwining. He had added ribbon and a carved wooden pomander that he had made himself prior to coming to Whitemore. There had been some debate about whether he was allowed to use it, but the design was so beautiful that William had deemed it acceptable. The pomander had been filled with a variety of spices, so William's kissing bough even smelled as lovely as it looked.

Though her heart had sunk when he'd told her to work with Lord Redditch, she knew why he had done it. But now it was Christmas morning, and Samuel was nowhere to be found.

Hannah sat in the breakfast room while the guests offered one another warm wishes over a feast of ham, eggs, fruit, and fresh bread. Hannah sipped her chocolate from her cup, watching the doorway.

As if he had read her thoughts, William sat down in the chair beside her. "Samuel informed me this morning that he will not be spending the rest of the holidays with us. He has gone to spend it with his family, but he did say he'll be back for the Twelfth Night ball." He took a bite of bread, chewing noisily. "He was planning to spend most of Christmastide with us. I wonder what changed his mind." He swallowed, staring blankly forward as he ate more from his plate. Lord Redditch was still filling his plate at the sideboard, so William leaned closer to Hannah with a whisper. "I have no doubt that Lord Redditch will propose before leaving Whitemore. You have done well." He gave her a wide smile. "Don't stop encouraging him."

She only had time to nod her agreement before Lord Redditch sat in the chair beside her. Her stomach no longer craved the assortment of food on her plate. Her head was light, her heart pounding. Why had Samuel left so suddenly? Her insides twisted with disappointment. She stopped herself. It was better this way. He must have suspected he couldn't be here without distracting her, and he was right. By leaving, he had only proven that he was as good and noble as she had always known him to be.

"Is that holly in your hair?" Lord Redditch asked as he sat down.

She shook herself from her thoughts, turning her attention to the earl. Her chest felt hollow, each pounding of her heart seeming to echo. "Yes." She had only arranged it in her hair so Samuel would notice. But he wasn't even here.

"Only you could make the style look so lovely." Lord Redditch cast her a smile before turning toward his plate.

Hannah stared at his profile. He had kind eyes and a good disposition, but her heart didn't long for him. She didn't think of him often or look forward to seeing him when they were apart. Did those things really matter though? Or were they the dreams of a naive girl? She hardly knew, and she was running out of time to figure out the answers.

When breakfast was over, the guests dispersed to prepare for church. Samuel would surely be there with his mother, brother, and sister-in-law. It made sense for him to wish to spend the holiday with them, but it was strange that he had made the decision to leave without telling her or anyone but William.

It was a warm day despite the thin layer of snow, so she and her family and their guests walked to the church. Lord Redditch walked with Hannah the entire way, complimenting her appearance repeatedly. She realized that was all he knew about her. Was he attached to anything besides how she looked? He didn't know her heart and soul like those closest to her did. She had been taught to be so reserved and polite that the earl had no idea what she was truly like. Her thoughts spun so quickly that she hardly comprehended any of his

conversation.

When they walked into the church, Hannah caught sight of Samuel right away, sitting beside his mother. William and the other guests filled the pew directly behind them, and Hannah was the last to sit down, at the end of the row. During the four years of Samuel's absence at school, she had seen his family at church and around town. She loved his mother like her own. She reminded Hannah of Samuel, with her dark hair, brown eyes, and gentle kindness. When Mrs. Merchant saw the group file into the pews, she turned and flashed Hannah a smile. Samuel followed her gaze, his eyes settling on her as well. He gave a soft smile—one that tugged at her heart—before turning around.

Hannah glanced at Lord Redditch, who was staring at Samuel, his jaw tight. "I assume Mr. Merchant's family has always been close to yours?" He spoke in a quiet voice, apparently trying not to be overheard.

"Yes. Samuel and William were the very best of friends. I also played with them often as a child."

"Hmm." Lord Redditch's nostrils flared before he seemed to come out of his trance, looking away from the back of Samuel's head. "What a treasured friendship to have."

"It is indeed." Hannah hid her confusion from her voice. Did Lord Redditch sense her attachment to Samuel? He had seen the two of them coming inside from their greenery search; they had been laughing in a manner that could have appeared flirtatious. Samuel had removed himself from Whitemore so abruptly that Lord Redditch might have suspected the reason behind it. Hannah didn't dare think of the possibility that Samuel might have left to protect his own heart. Surely he had left only to protect hers. How could he not know by now how much she loved him?

Her stomach twisted in knots throughout the entire service, and when church was through, she stood as quickly as she could. There was one thing she needed to say to Samuel, even if it bothered Lord Redditch to see her speaking to him.

She stepped out into the aisle and walked to the churchyard.

Lord Redditch was close behind her. By the time Samuel and his family came out of the building, Lord Redditch had returned to her side, and she had taken his arm when he'd offered it. Her gaze caught on Samuel's face. He squinted against the sunlight, lifting a hand to shield it from his eyes.

"Congratulations," she said. "Your kissing bough now hangs in Whitemore."

Samuel smiled, walking a few steps closer. "I do enjoy being victorious."

Lord Redditch observed their conversation, a furrow in his brow. "I was surprised you managed to win even without Miss Somerton's help." He paused, tipping his head to one side. "Enjoy your victory on this one point, Mr. Merchant. I'll enjoy mine." Lord Redditch began walking away, with Hannah's hand still looped around his arm.

A muscle jumped in Samuel's clenched jaw just before she and Lord Redditch walked away. She was so shocked by Lord Redditch's words that she hadn't known what to say to Samuel in parting. "Happy Christmas," she said hastily over her shoulder.

Samuel didn't reply, and perhaps he hadn't even heard her. He turned on his heel and began walking toward where his family still stood near the doors. Lord Redditch walked quickly, leading her away toward where some of the other Whitemore guests stood.

"What is your victory, Lord Redditch?" Hannah asked in an innocent voice. Her heart hammered in her ears.

"Nothing of consequence," he muttered, offering her a warm smile. "What did you think of the sermon?"

All of Hannah's training had taught her to keep quiet and allow Lord Redditch to lead the conversation, but her skin prickled with vexation. She wasn't going to allow him to ignore her—not this time. "Nothing of consequence? All victories are of consequence. Tell me what you have won."

She knew he had been hinting that he had won *her*, but she wanted him to admit that he had been bold and impertinent



enough to say it aloud. He hadn't even proposed yet. Her stomach spiraled with nervousness, but she held her head high, awaiting his response.

Before he could reply, however, William stepped in front of them. The tips of her ears burned as the height of her nerves subsided. *Blast* William. Why had he come at the worst possible moment?

"Are you two looking forward to our feast? Did I mention we are eating venison?" William rubbed his hands together. "It will be splendid."

"I do not doubt it." Lord Redditch began walking again, following the other guests away from the churchyard.

Hannah stole one more glance at Samuel before he was out of sight. He was already watching her and Lord Redditch. The moment her eyes met his, he looked down at the snow.

She bit her lip to keep her emotions in their proper place. Perhaps he did want her. Perhaps he even loved her, and that was why he had left Whitemore. How could she know for certain if he didn't tell her before she tied herself to Lord Redditch forever?

All she knew was that the distance between her duty and desires was growing bigger with each step she took away from him.

# Chapter 12

THE SKY ON TWELFTH NIGHT was calm, free of storms or snow. The roads leading to Whitemore were peaceful and quiet. All of it contradicted what was happening inside of Hannah as she stood in front of the looking glass in her bedchamber. Her stomach twisted and spiraled with nervousness. Her skin was cold, her palms wet with perspiration inside her gloves. She took a deep breath as her maid pinched her cheeks to add color to her pale skin.

She wore an ivory gown with gold details on the edges of the sleeves, hem, and waist. Her hair had been arranged with a gold cord threading between the curls. The pendant attached to a ribbon at her collarbone sparkled in the candlelight. The Twelfth Night ball marked two occasions: Lord Redditch's final evening at Whitemore, and Samuel's return.

William fully expected Lord Redditch would propose to her before he left the next afternoon, and though Hannah had been doing all she could to prepare herself for that outcome, she had still been anticipating this evening with Samuel in mind instead. But why? She could already see how the evening would play out. He would stand on the outskirts of the room, watching, as she danced with Lord Redditch. She might not even have a chance to speak with Samuel before the night was through, and if she did, what would she say? She wanted to ask why he had left and stayed away for nearly a fortnight. Each day she had been hoping he might surprise her and suddenly appear in the doorway of the drawing room, that he might come to participate in one of the house party's activities. But the Boxing Day hunt, gift giving, wassailing, pomander making, and even more had all passed without him.

She made her way down to the ballroom. William and Lord Redditch were likely wondering where she was. The party had already begun, but she had been standing in her bedchamber for several minutes without the courage to leave. The lively music from the ensemble floated through the corridor, and she

paused one more time outside the ballroom doors. Her heart threw itself against her ribs, beating like a wild bird in a cage. She couldn't do this. She backed up a step, pressing a hand to her stomach.

“Hannah?”

She jumped, turning around. Samuel stood just a few paces away in the corridor. He must have just arrived. His dark hair was styled neatly, the fabric of his black jacket straining across his shoulders. His eyes were cautious, filling with concern when they settled on her face.

“Samuel.” She greeted him with a smile, clasping her hands together in front of her to keep them from shaking.

His eyes roamed over her face, his brows drawing together. He stepped closer, and the softness of his eyes and voice unraveled her. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Yes, I am perfectly well.” She swallowed, fighting against the emotion in her throat. She couldn't complain to Samuel about her fears that Lord Redditch would propose that evening, and especially not about her fears that her feelings for Samuel would never go away no matter how much she tried. She blinked hard, turning toward the open doors of the ballroom. “I was about to go inside.”

Samuel stepped up beside her. “It is daunting, isn't it? The corridor is much quieter.”

Her shoulders slumped. How did he know exactly how she was feeling? “I agree,” she mumbled.

“There is nothing wrong with prolonging the inevitable in this instance.” Samuel gave her a reassuring smile. “We can stand here as long as we would like. Tell me about how you have spent the last ten days.”

So much had occurred, yet she had hardly noticed. All she had been able to think of was his absence and how much she wished he had been there. “I spent them as you might have expected, participating in many activities of William's choosing.” She smiled. “There was hardly a dull moment.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“And you?” Hannah stared up at him, trying to memorize the way his eyes wrinkled at the corners and how his mouth moved when he spoke. She might never stand this close to him again. “I—I was surprised to hear that you had left so suddenly.” Her heart pounded. “Why did you?”

He was silent for a long moment, and there was an intensity in his eyes that she hadn’t seen before. “I had to.”

Her brow furrowed, but Samuel simply gave her a soft smile. “As beautiful as you look, you should not be hiding yourself away in the corridor.” His throat bobbed with a swallow, his eyes growing heavy at the corners. “I’m certain Lord Redditch is looking for you.”

Her breath caught in her lungs, but she gave a stiff nod. “Yes. Surely he is.” She turned away from Samuel, taking her first step toward the door, then another, then another. Each step took all her concentration, and each one heightened her anxiety. Once she was past the threshold, the bright candlelight revealed her. She had never felt so vulnerable entering a ballroom, not even when she had entered court before the Queen. Samuel stepped in behind her, and her skin prickled with awareness.

Lord Redditch had already claimed her first two dances. From the corner of her eye, she saw him weaving his way toward her. At almost the same moment, Samuel retreated to the outskirts of the room, just as she had predicted.

“Miss Somerton, you look extraordinary,” Lord Redditch said in a low voice when he reached her. “How privileged I am to have you as my dancing partner. The first set is about to begin.” His eyes were glossy. He had drunk a great deal during their Twelfth Night feast that evening. He gave a broad smile, extending his hand to lead her to the line of dancers.

They danced the first quadrille, then the cotillion, and when it was over, Lord Redditch asked her for a third dance. Considering his looming proposal, the idea of a third dance shouldn’t have been so terrifying, but she knew what it would mean to all the other guests at the ball. Three dances with the same partner in one evening indicated a strong attachment. It

was all becoming too real. She could hardly breathe as Lord Redditch led her to the center of the ballroom for their third dance. She glanced around the room, catching sight of William's proud smile, then Mama's. The women standing near Mama whispered amongst themselves, and then Mama nodded, as if confirming something they'd said.

Hannah didn't dare look at Samuel.

Was this Lord Redditch's way of showing that he intended to propose? Was he planning to do so that very evening? Or would he wait until the next day? He never took his eyes off her throughout the entire dance, and when the last note rang out, Hannah's emotions were held together by a thread. Against her will, her gaze traveled to Samuel, who still stood against the wall. His arms were crossed, his eyes lowered to the floor.

"I need a bit of fresh air," she muttered as Lord Redditch led her away from the dancers. She gave him a smile to ensure he would not follow her. "I will return in a moment."

"I'll come with you," he said.

"No." She shook her head as panic gripped her muscles. He would surely take the opportunity of being alone with her to confess his feelings and offer a proposal. She wasn't ready. Would she ever be ready? Her head spun as she tried to think of an explanation. "I—I must go back to my bedchamber. I need my maid to adjust my hair arrangement. But I won't be long."

Lord Redditch nodded, stepping aside as she walked as calmly as she could toward the doors and into the corridor. She breathed the cool air, pressing a hand to her chest. As soon as she was out of sight, her footfalls picked up speed. A single tear slipped from her eye, but it was followed quickly by more.

And then, for the second time that night, she heard Samuel's voice in the corridor. "Hannah!" His footfalls were faster than hers. She didn't turn around until he had caught up to her. "Where are you going?" His voice was gentle, tugging at her heart as it always did.

“Hiding,” she confessed, covering her face with her hands. She took a few paces away, until she reached the corner between the entryway and the staircase. She kept her hands over her face because more tears were falling, and she didn’t want Samuel to see.

She heard him step closer. While her eyes were still closed, his arms wrapped around her. He held her against his chest, and warmth enveloped every inch of her skin. She didn’t know whether she had come out of the ballroom to hide from Lord Redditch or from Samuel. Perhaps from both. But Samuel would never leave her alone. Even in his absence, thoughts of him haunted her. He was always with her, no matter how much she wished he wasn’t. At the moment, as she experienced how it felt to be in his arms, her resolve to marry Lord Redditch weakened, and she no longer wished Samuel wasn’t with her. She wanted him there. She needed him.

Finding her courage, she uncovered her face, wiping away her tears before looking up at him.

“I knew I didn’t believe you when you said you were perfectly well,” Samuel said in a quiet voice. “What is the matter?”

“I’m overwhelmed, that is all.” She sniffed, lacking the strength to pull away from his arms. “I will be well enough to return to the ballroom in a few minutes.”

“Is it Lord Redditch’s attentions that are overwhelming?” Samuel asked, his brow furrowing. “Has he made you uncomfortable?”

“No.” She shook her head. “It is difficult to explain, especially to you.” She drew a shaky breath. “I’m trying to be brave and make the right choice, but it is difficult.”

His gaze bored into hers, and he was silent for several seconds. “William is your brother. He loves you. He will understand if you make a different choice than what he wants. How do you know *his* choice is the right one? Perhaps yours is.”

“It isn’t just William’s choice,” Hannah blurted. “I explained

my reasoning to you. If I choose to marry Lord Redditch, it will be my own decision.” Did Samuel not understand the agony she had endured over the last year, thinking that he was married? She had been forced to move on, to try to forget him. It wasn’t fair that he had come back and muddied the clear path she had formed for herself.

A hint of anger unfolded in her chest. It would have been so much easier if he hadn’t come back. And if she had never loved him. As she looked at his face now, all she could do was blame him for being so easy to love. His dark curls and kind eyes taunted her.

And why on earth was he staring at the ceiling?

She followed his gaze upward. Her heart leaped.

The kissing bough Samuel had made was hanging directly above them. She had forgotten William had instructed for it to be hung near the entryway. She had spent the last ten days avoiding crossing under it at the same time as Lord Redditch, so she should have remembered its location. But she had been overwhelmed and distracted, and now it must have seemed as if she had led Samuel straight to it.

Her face burned when his eyes met hers. “My kissing bough,” he said, a slight smile tugging on his lips.

*His lips.* Blast it all, Hannah couldn’t stop staring at them. Her heart pounded even harder when she looked up at his eyes and saw that they were no longer fixed upward at the bundle of greenery. They had lowered to her mouth.

His arms were still wrapped around her, and for a moment, his hands applied pressure to her back. A thrill raced across her skin, and longing turned her heart to ice. It beat slow and weak as his head lowered down, his lips coming dangerously close to her own.

“Hannah?” William’s voice echoed in the corridor. She jumped away from Samuel, her face still burning. She met his gaze, urging him to hide on the other side of the staircase. He didn’t waste a moment, following her unspoken instruction.

By the time William came around the corner, she stood

alone against the wall.

“There you are.” William frowned, striding toward her. “What are you doing out here?” His eyes gleamed in the darkness. “You have secured Lord Redditch. I am certain of it. You need to remain available throughout the evening so he can offer a proposal.”

Had he noticed she had been crying? Her tears had dried quickly, but her eyes must still have been rimmed with red.

“Hannah, what is the matter?” He studied her face.

She shook her head. “I—I’m not certain that I’m ready to be engaged.”

William laughed. “Of course you are. Just before Lord Redditch arrived at Whitmore, it was you who told me how eager you were to see him again. You were quite determined to marry him.” His brow furrowed in confusion. “What could possibly have changed? It is a daunting step forward, I do understand, but it is a step we both wanted. Do not allow fear to control you.”

Hannah was silent. She couldn’t explain to William how Samuel’s arrival, and the fact that he was not married, had completely altered what slight feelings she might have had for Lord Redditch. At least, not in that moment, with Samuel listening from behind the staircase. William was right. She *had* wanted to marry Lord Redditch. But now it felt impossible to marry him if there was even the slightest chance that Samuel might care for her.

“I don’t understand,” William said, still staring at her face with concern. “I invited him here. He traveled far. You have spent all of Christmastide with him. Any man would take that as encouragement of the most straightforward sort.” He let out a nervous exhale. “If you do not accept his proposal now, he will think badly of us for giving him false expectations.”

“I know.” Hannah nodded, drawing a deep breath to calm the turmoil inside of her.

“Then come back to the ballroom with me.” He tipped his head down to look at her. “If you are not ready for a proposal



tonight, I'll look after you and ensure he doesn't yet have an opportunity to make an offer. By morning, you might be feeling more prepared."

"I will be." It was uncharacteristically thoughtful of William to give her more time to prepare. Surely after a night of rest her mind would become clearer.

"Good." William raked a hand over his hair.

She hated to have caused him such distress, but her own was at least ten times what his was. Her heart ached as William led her away from the staircase. She looked back one more time, but Samuel was still out of sight. Out of reach.

Hopelessness gripped each one of her muscles, making walking difficult. At this point, there was only one thing that could save her from accepting a proposal from Lord Redditch.

A proposal from Samuel.

If he didn't come for her, rescue her from her obligations, then she no longer had any choice. She would have to marry Lord Redditch.

\*\*\*

Samuel was well-acquainted with the dull glow of morning light, but that morning, it felt cruel and unfamiliar. He looked out the carriage window as he drove past Whitemore. His heart urged him to stop, to bid Hannah a proper farewell, but he knew it would do more harm than good. His heart couldn't endure it. It would be better to forget her—to stop intervening where he had no right to do so. After overhearing her conversation with William in the corridor the night before, he had been consumed with guilt. By coming to Whitemore, he had made Hannah's decision more difficult than it would have been otherwise. He had caused her enough pain already.

He looked away from the window as Whitemore faded in the distance, then closed his eyes and crossed his arms over his heart as the carriage began its journey to Cranfield. He was going home, where he would try his best to be happy for Hannah and William and their new connections.

And then he would try his best to forget the sorrow and

regret swirling through his chest. Eventually, he might even forget her.

# Chapter 13

*Ten months later*

*November 1815*

“WHO IS THAT FROM?” HANNAH asked.

William sat across from her in the drawing room, unfolding a letter. The footman walked away with the silver salver he had presented the letter on, returning to his place by the door.

Mama leaned closer to William on the sofa, peeking at the words on the page. “It’s from Samuel.”

Hannah’s heart thudded as she sipped her tea nonchalantly. “Oh. Does he write to you often?”

William looked up after several seconds. “Usually not, but over the last month we have exchanged a few letters.” He set the one he had just read down on the tea table. “He has invited us to spend Christmas at Cranfield.”

Hannah’s hand shook as she held her teacup. Relief flooded over her shoulders. She had been waiting for that invitation. She had thought it would never come.

“How delightful,” Mama said. “I do like the idea of leaving the planning and hosting to someone else this year. Your house party was quite the ordeal last December.”

“It was indeed.” William’s lip curled with distaste as his gaze flicked to Hannah.

Mama knew better than to bring up that house party. Even nearly a year later, the subject was a sensitive one to William. Mama seemed to recognize her mistake, taking a quick sip from her teacup before setting it down and clapping her hands together. “Well then, shall we make plans to go?”

William hesitated before nodding. “Of course. After all, there is no point in using the holidays as a reason to invite any eligible men here.” He rubbed one side of his face before casting Hannah an accusatory look. “Is there, sister?”

Hardly a day passed that William didn't attempt to make her feel guilty over the events of the past year. He reminded her of her failures over and over again, as if that made him feel better.

"Now, William," Mama scolded.

He let out an exasperated sigh. "Forgive me. I shall try to leave the past alone. We shall have an enjoyable Christmas at Cranfield and forget our cares for a few weeks." He gave a resolute nod, standing abruptly from the sofa. "I will write to Samuel to accept his invitation."

Hannah's heart leaped with hope and excitement, and she could hardly hold still. She needed to control her emotions. Samuel inviting them to Cranfield didn't mean anything but a friendly gesture. A tradition. He could very well be attached or engaged to someone else, for all she knew. The past two years had led her to bury her optimism.

Even so, she suspected the anticipation would prevent her from sleeping for weeks.

\*\*\*

Standing near the front window of Cranfield, Samuel watched the carriage pull up to the drive. He watched the door open. William stepped out first, dressed in a navy-blue jacket and black boots, a stark contrast to the snow that fell softly from the sky. William turned, offering his hand to the women inside the conveyance.

Samuel couldn't see past his friend's broad shoulders, reminding him just how real a barrier William was. He was standing between Samuel and Hannah, and he had been for far too long.

Samuel's pulse pounded weakly in his neck as William moved aside and Hannah stepped down from the carriage. It had been a year since he had seen her, and a smile immediately tugged on his mouth at the sight of her face. She was staring up at Cranfield, cheeks rosy, dark-auburn hair framing her eyes. Her hands wrung together in front of her. Perhaps she was just as nervous as he was.

Determination rose in his chest. This year would be different. Fate had granted him one last chance, and he couldn't let anything stop him. He loved Hannah Somerton. He wanted to marry her, and even her brother—his best friend—couldn't stop him.

Taking a deep breath, he met the butler by the front door. As it opened, the cold air burst through the doorway.

“Samuel,” William greeted with a broad smile. He jogged up the stairs, clapping Samuel on the shoulder. “It's good to see you, my friend.” He glanced around the open entryway. “It appears you still haven't found a mistress for Cranfield.”

“Hmm, and I haven't heard news of a mistress at Whitmore.” Samuel raised his eyebrows at William.

His friend laughed, then scoffed. “I don't live entirely alone like you do.”

“That is why I invited your family for Christmas.” His response could have been taken multiple ways. He had invited William's family for Christmas so he wouldn't be alone but also so he could finally find the mistress of Cranfield—the only woman, he had learned, who could ever fill that role. Samuel's heart thudded as he caught sight of Hannah ascending the steps beside her mother.

William stepped aside as Hannah and Lady Northam walked through the doorway. Samuel bowed first to Lady Northam, who returned the gesture with a wide smile. “Oh, Samuel, we have missed you.”

“I have missed you too.” He met Hannah's gaze, and she smiled. The expression lasted only a moment before she looked down at her boots. As usual, it seemed he would have to devote some time to helping her relax. He didn't know exactly what had occurred in her life over the last year, but he did know part of it from the letters he had exchanged with William.

Samuel never would have invited them to spend Christmas with him if he hadn't read that one very important paragraph in William's first reply.

*Life has been fairly disappointing this year, I must confess. Hannah broke off her engagement to Lord Redditch, which as you might imagine, was a dreadful ordeal, and ever since she seems to have lost all interest in seeking a husband. Her second Season has been wasteful. She rejects the attention of every man I seek to introduce her to.*

For the first time, Hannah was unattached and so was Samuel.

The only thing that still stood between them was William.

“I’ll have your trunks brought in at once,” Samuel said. “A pot of tea and other food has been prepared when you are all ready.”

William tugged off his gloves and hat, handing them to the butler. “That will be very good, thank you.”

Samuel’s gaze traveled to Hannah again as the butler took her bonnet and gloves. Her mother followed William to the warmth of the drawing room, but Hannah lingered behind. Samuel stepped forward, smiling down at her. “How was the journey?”

“Uncomfortable,” she said, drawing a deep breath. A light laugh escaped her. “I am glad to finally be here.”

“I am just as glad to have you here.”

Her green eyes flicked to his, soft and hesitant. Her lips held a soft curve, and a question hovered in her gaze. “You must be surprised that I am here without . . .”

“A husband?” He raised an eyebrow, leaning closer. “I cannot be more surprised than you were when I arrived at Whitmore last Christmas without a wife.”

“I suppose not.” She cupped one side of her face, as if trying to hide a blush on her cheek. He found it completely endearing.

There was so much more he wished to know, but he had plenty of time. He didn’t want to overwhelm her, nor make William suspicious right from the start. He needed to tread

carefully.

“It has been far too long since you’ve been here at Cranfield,” Samuel said. “That rocking horse is still unfinished in the corner of my hut.”

Hannah’s eyes widened. “Still?”

“I couldn’t finish it without you. It was our project to complete together.”

A hint of color touched her cheeks. Quite encouraging. “I suppose I will have to take an early-morning walk tomorrow, then.”

Samuel tipped his head to one side. “I suppose you will. Unless a hen comes in your way.”

She gave a quiet laugh, shaking her head. “Nothing will stop me.”

Samuel stared down at her face, memorizing every inch of it, every change he perceived since the year before. She had a few more freckles across the bridge of her nose, evidence of more exposure to sunlight, like she had as a child. Perhaps that meant she hadn’t been keeping all of William’s and her mother’s rules. That summer she might have abandoned her bonnet or parasol when other ladies did not. If she had broken off an engagement with an earl, then she likely had the courage to do anything.

He hadn’t thought it possible, but she was even more beautiful than the last time he had seen her.

They walked together to the drawing room, where Lady Northam and William were already sitting near the fire eating ginger biscuits and drinking from their teacups. Samuel and Hannah sat down in the remaining chairs on opposite sides of the hearth. Conversing with William and Lady Northam was always enjoyable, but Samuel could hardly focus.

And he could hardly wait for the next morning.

# Chapter 14

A TRAIL OF SMOKE CAME out of the chimney of Samuel's wood-carving hut, spiraling up into the white sky. Hannah approached the door, pressing a hand to her stomach. Why was she so nervous? She'd come to this door many times two years before, but this year felt different. This year Samuel wasn't practically engaged.

And neither was she. She had spent the last year making sure of that. In the battle between William and her own heart, her heart had won. That was the only way she could explain her actions.

Raising her fist to the door, she knocked three times. She heard Samuel's chair scraping the floor from inside, and then a few seconds later, he tugged the door open.

"Hannah." His dark curls were mussed, and his eyes were even softer than usual, like he had just barely awoken for the day. He smiled, ushering her inside. "Did you meet any feathery foes on your way?" He glanced over his shoulder, rolling up his sleeves as he approached the table.

"Fortunately no." She removed her bonnet, walking toward the rocking horse that sat at the center of the room and taking a seat. "Oh! We still have a great deal to do if we hope to give this to Henry this year."

"Indeed." Samuel seemed less interested in the horse than he was in Hannah, gazing down at her with unmasked admiration.

Her heart pounded. Was this how he had felt for her all along? With no reason to hide his feelings, perhaps now he felt free to look at her in the manner he was now. She wanted to feel the same freedom, but the walls around her heart still stood tall. What if she was imagining it?

"We will finish in time," Samuel reassured her. "I've already been working for nearly an hour. Soon the carving will be done, and all that will remain is the painting."



“With the painting I might actually be able to contribute something instead of just sitting here and keeping you company.” Hannah gave a shy smile.

“Your company is the best contribution you could make.” Samuel threw her a smile she hardly recognized. It took her a moment to decipher what it meant, but once she did, her skin tingled with warmth.

It was a *flirtatious* one.

She hadn't known Samuel was capable of acting so charming, but here he was, flirting with her. She gave a nervous laugh, though her heart skipped with joy. There was no mistaking the tone in his voice and the look in his eyes. He might have wanted her just as much as she wanted him.

She calmed her racing thoughts, forcing herself to see sense. There was no need to jump to conclusions like that on her second day at Cranfield.

She searched for a change of subject, looking around at the surroundings of the hut. “I can hardly believe two years have passed since I last came here and a year has passed since we last spoke.” She crossed her ankles under her chair. “How have you spent the last year? Surely we have much to catch up on.”

Samuel picked up one of his tools, bending over the rocking horse to carve away a detail on its ear. He was silent for a long moment. “I have mostly been here at Cranfield, managing the estate, carving various pieces of furniture for my library, making new acquaintances.”

Her heart dropped. Were any of these new acquaintances young women? She braced herself for the news that he was attached to someone. “Are your neighbors agreeable?”

He nodded. “Yes. I am quite fortunate.” He blew the flecks of wood off the horse's head, straightening his posture. “How did you spend the last year?”

Hannah exhaled heavily through her lips. “If I were to relay all the details, it would take all morning.”

“We have all morning, do we not?”

She smiled down at her lap, wringing her hands together. “I hardly know where to begin.” Her brow twinged with the pain that stabbed her heart. She had spent the entire year wondering why Samuel had left without bidding her farewell after the Twelfth Night ball. He had nearly kissed her under the kissing bough, and she had hoped he would save her from Lord Redditch, but instead, he had left.

“Begin with the day I left Whitemore,” Samuel said as if he had read her mind. He met her gaze, his eyes more serious now.

Hannah bit down on the question she was desperate to ask. Why had he run away so quickly? She couldn’t ask him yet—it would reveal too much of her own feelings. “Lord Redditch proposed to me that day,” she said. She looked down at her lap, then glanced up at him. How much did he know? Had William told him the entire story? “I accepted his proposal.”

“Yet you are not married.” Samuel raised his eyebrows teasingly.

“No, I am not.” She shook her head, laughing under her breath. “Just a few days before our wedding, at the most inopportune moment, the realization came to me that I did not wish to be married to a man I didn’t love, no matter the consequences. Being alone would be better than pretending for the rest of my life. Disappointing William would be more bearable than disappointing myself.” She crossed her arms. “I am selfish, I know, and—”

“You are not selfish.” Samuel walked toward her, shaking his head. “It never should have been William’s decision to make. You were brave, not selfish.”

His warm brown eyes nearly brought on a bout of tears. She held them back, pressing her lips together. “My reputation suffered from the event, and William was furious, as you might imagine. But I endured my next Season. Everyone knew who I was and who I had been engaged to, so some of our connections were lost. William has yet to forgive me for it.”

“That is his responsibility.” To her surprise, Samuel crouched down in front of her and took her hand, cradling it

gently in his own. His eyes gazed into hers. "If he chooses not to forgive you, then he will be the one who suffers most."

Hannah nodded, swallowing the emotion in her throat. "Was I a fool to give up the opportunity to marry an earl?"

A slight smile tugged on Samuel's lips. He looked down at their hands, gently rubbing a circle over her knuckles with his thumb. Her skin tingled, the sensation spreading up the length of her arm. "I'm glad you did." He paused, his smile growing. "And I think I am the selfish one in this instance."

Her heart hammered as his eyes shifted back to hers, cautious and slow. His smile set her stomach fluttering, and she couldn't help but smile back. During the previous two years, she hadn't allowed herself to hope that Samuel would ever be holding her hand, smiling into her eyes like he was now. It hardly felt real, and time seemed to have paused, letting the moment and the sensation linger.

She hardly knew what to say. Her cheeks were warm, her pulse pounding in her neck. All she wanted to do was tell him how she had really spent the last year. She had spent it, and almost every year she could remember, loving him. She wanted to kiss his grinning lips and never stop. She wanted him to know, without a doubt, that she was not leaving Cranfield that year without him, and that if he didn't marry her, she would never marry at all.

But instead, she looked down at their hands, overcome with shyness. "Shall we work on the horse?" she whispered, looking up at him from under her lashes.

His eyes were still locked on hers, a smile still spreading across his cheeks. "I suppose."

She stood, turning her back to him for long enough to gather her composure. She walked toward the rocking horse, taking a deep breath before turning around again. "What may I help with? Will you teach me how to carve? Though, I cannot promise I won't ruin it."

Samuel laughed. "You'll likely be better at carving than I am."

“That is doubtful.” She picked up a long metal tool with a flat edge. “I haven’t the slightest idea of how to use this.”

“I’ll teach you.” Samuel pulled a chair closer for Hannah to sit on and began teaching her all the fundamental skills of wood carving. It certainly wasn’t a conventional lady’s pastime, but she was not there for the wood carving. Samuel could have been talking about dirt and she would have been fully engaged. The morning passed far too quickly, and soon it was time for her to leave.

“I’ll see you in the breakfast room,” she said as she walked away from the rocking horse.

Samuel walked with her, placing a hand on the back of her waist as he guided her toward the door. He had certainly never done that before. She recalled the day, two years before, that he had taught her about the most proper form of flirting she could employ. All these brief touches, innocent as they were, seemed meant to convey a different message than friendship. Her heart soared with her newfound hope, and for the first time in years, she didn’t suppress it.

She turned around slowly, meeting his gaze with a smile.

“I’ll see you in the breakfast room,” he said.

# Chapter 15

HANNAH HAD DECIDED WILLIAM WAS quite possibly the daftest man in all of England. It didn't seem possible that he had missed all the whispered conversations and smiles Hannah had shared with Samuel over the last five days, but he seemed completely oblivious to it. Or perhaps he simply thought they were behaving as friends.

On Christmas Eve, in the drawing room, Hannah sat on the sofa beside Samuel, as she had for the last several days. He hadn't said or done anything overly flirtatious, with or without William nearby, so perhaps it was reasonable that William hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary. Or, the more likely reason, the idea of his sister and his best friend falling in love hadn't even crossed his mind.

Samuel lifted the book in his lap higher, leaning toward Hannah. "We still have to paint the final details of the horse before tomorrow."

"I know." She had been anxious about it all day. She couldn't allow another year to pass without sweet little Henry receiving his horse. He was only four years old the last time she had seen him, and now he would be six. Soon enough he would no longer have any interest in a rocking horse, no matter how large and beautifully detailed it was. "When shall we find the time?"

Samuel flipped a page of the book, but he wasn't reading. His dark lashes cast a shadow on his cheeks as his eyes shifted to her. "Tonight?"

Her stomach fluttered. The idea of sneaking out of the house at night to work on the horse with Samuel was already making her nervous. But it also sent a thrill of excitement over her spine. She had no choice, really. The horse needed to be finished, and she couldn't allow Samuel to paint the last of the details on his own.

"After we retire for the evening, wait an hour, and then

come to the hut.” A slight smile tugged on his lips. “We have to do it. For Henry.”

She grinned, giving a resolute nod. “Yes. For Henry.”

Samuel turned back to his book, nudging her with his elbow and tossing her one more smile.

Mama was reading her own book, and William was staring at the fire, completely unaware of Hannah and Samuel. “I wish Whitemore had a larger hearth,” he said. “It seems that Cranfield’s is larger by at least three inches.”

“Good. Now I have at least one thing I can boast of around you,” Samuel said. “My hearth is larger than yours.”

William groaned. “I suppose I can give you this one victory, but you will never be called *Lord*.” He smirked.

Samuel laughed, taking the setdown well, as always, but there was something in his posture that was different than usual. William jested about Samuel’s lack of a title often, but he didn’t know just how hindered Samuel was by that fact. If he had been born to an earl or a viscount or a baron, even, William might have been trying to marry Hannah off to Samuel all these years.

Hannah folded her hands in her lap. “And I shall never be called *Lady*.”

William raised his eyebrows. “Well, that is not certain. I haven’t given up on you yet.” His smirk intensified. “In fact, I would rather have you called *Duchess*.”

“How on earth do you plan to accomplish that?” Hannah asked.

“The Duke of Midhurst is coming to London for the first time in years this Season, and if the papers are to be believed, he is ready to find a wife. Perhaps it is best that you are still unattached.” He chuckled. “You have been saving yourself for a duke.”

Samuel stiffened beside her, the book lowering in his hands.

Hannah swallowed. “You must know how unlikely that is. Besides, I have no interest in a duke.”

William's eyes flashed with frustration. "Would you not even try?" he snapped.

"William," Mama said in a soothing voice. "It is Christmas. Do not raise your voice."

He raked a hand over his hair, angling in his chair so he wouldn't have to look at Hannah. "I don't understand." He bit the inside of his cheek, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. "After all I've done for you."

"William." Mama leaned forward, her voice sterner than before.

Hannah held her breath, fighting the guilt that pricked her skin. Samuel was quiet, looking down at the floor.

If William knew the true reason she had been rejecting all the men he'd intended for her, he might be even more furious than he already was.

She watched the furrows in William's brow deepen as the night carried on. Eventually, they faded, however, and his breathing deepened. His eyes closed.

Mama retired first, leaving Hannah and Samuel alone with William. Hannah didn't know whether to wake him or leave him to sleep in his chair, but considering his anger toward her, she didn't think it wise to interrupt him.

"Will I see you soon?" Samuel whispered as he stood. After William's behavior, Samuel seemed a little uncertain, his eyes hesitant.

Hannah nodded, following him out the door, where they parted ways in the corridor. She didn't care what William thought, but her stomach still twisted with anxiety.

What if Samuel did?

\*\*\*

Wrapping her cloak tightly around herself, Hannah hurried across the frosted grass toward the wood-carving hut. Based on the light flickering in the windows, she expected Samuel was already inside. Her heart thudded a shallow rhythm in her chest, picking up speed as she approached the door. She knew

he was an honorable man with honorable intentions for their late tête-à-tête, but it was still the most improper thing she had ever done, sneaking out of her room late at night to meet a man. The purpose of their meeting was as innocent as it could possibly be, making a Christmas gift for a poor boy, yet she still felt a bit rebellious. And nervous.

She knocked lightly on the door, and Samuel opened it within seconds. She walked inside without wasting a moment. The warmth of the fire matched the warmth in his gaze. “Not to worry.” He raised his hands in defense. “I didn’t start without you.”

She gave him a half smile, removing the hood of her cloak as she walked toward the paints on the table. The rocking horse was primarily brown, with colorful accents on its saddle and face. Only one of the legs remained to be painted, and she imagined they could finish within twenty minutes, perhaps even less. Fear gripped her muscles. What would happen when they were done? What excuse would they have to sneak away and spend time together then?

She picked up a brush, sitting down in front of the rocking horse and preparing the paints. Samuel joined her on another chair, and they began working in silence. The air was heavy between them, taut with emotion that was almost tangible. Was he thinking what she feared he was? Did he think that the most honorable thing to do would be to walk away, as he had the year before? Would they both sacrifice their hearts a third time only to please William? Hannah didn’t want to. Her heart stung at the very idea of it.

The painting was completed just as quickly as she had expected. They set their brushes down, examining their work.

“I think he will love it.” Samuel leaned forward in his chair, angling toward Hannah.

“Will the paint be dry by morning?” she asked.

“It should be.”

The fire in the hearth crackled, interrupting the silence that fell between them. Hannah didn’t want to leave.



“Are you all right?” Samuel asked in a gentle voice.

She looked up, casting him a curious glance. “Yes.”

He hesitated, seemingly choosing his next words with great care. “I wondered how William’s behavior in the drawing room affected you.” Samuel leaned closer, the concern in his features undoing her emotions, as it always did.

“I am accustomed to it.” She set her jaw. “He may want me to marry the duke, but I will not.”

Samuel was silent for a long moment. “Why?”

She twisted her hands in her lap. “Well, I already explained it to you. I no longer want William to make my decisions for me.”

He drew a heavy breath, staring down at the floor as he seemed to gather his thoughts. When his eyes met hers again, they were more intense than before. “When you broke off your engagement to Lord Redditch . . . was that your only reason? To defy William?”

A shiver ran over her spine. “Yes.” The word was hesitant, fearful. Why couldn’t she tell him the truth?

He nodded, tightening his jaw. “Hannah—when you asked me how I spent the last year, I was not entirely honest. If I were to describe the last year and what I have felt, it would be full of sorrow. Grief. Agony.” His voice was hoarse. “I thought you were married to Lord Redditch, and I didn’t like that. Not one bit.” He let out a long sigh. “I regretted not asking you to marry me instead.”

She could hardly breathe. The intensity in his eyes stoked a fire in her chest, and her emotions were fuel to the flames. “Why did you leave?” she whispered. “I wanted you to ask me.”

“I didn’t know you wanted me to,” Samuel said, sliding to the edge of his chair. He took her hands, holding them firmly in his own. “You seemed determined to marry the earl, and I was standing in your way.”

She shook her head. “It was not easy for me, either,

Samuel.” She scowled at him. “Two years ago, I thought you were married to Miss Merchant. That is the only reason I encouraged Lord Redditch at all. When it came time to marry him, I couldn’t do it.” She sniffed, wiping at the unexpected tears on her cheek. “I wanted to wait until Christmas, when I could see you again. I hoped that maybe this year, this time, you might—”

She didn’t have a chance to finish. Samuel took her face in his hands, stopping her words with his lips. His first kiss was firm, followed by three soft brushes of his lips, each one lingering longer than the last. The shock she felt lasted the length of the entire kiss, and it was over far too soon. Her heart pounded hard, her stomach dipping and soaring like a bird above the clouds. He cradled her head with his fingers. When he pulled away to look in her eyes, they were filled with tears. “I love you, Hannah.”

She could hardly believe what he was saying, that he had just kissed her. Her lips tingled, begging for more. “I love you too,” she choked.

Samuel gave a smile of disbelief, stroking her cheek with the back of his finger before pressing a kiss to it. His lips were soft as they trailed over her face, slow and deliberate. They brushed over her cheek, the corner of her jaw, and feathered all along it. She closed her eyes, nearly laughing at the exhilaration that coursed through her. The anticipation for his kiss to return to her mouth was almost impossible to endure. Just when she was tempted to take his face between her hands and kiss him properly, he pressed one gentle kiss to her lips, then took her by the waist and gave her another. She had been taken by surprise by his first kiss, but now that she understood what was happening, she could feel the restraint in Samuel’s kisses and in the way she was receiving them. After all the restraint, the misunderstandings of the last two years, why should she kiss him now with anything but abandon?

Her heart pounded and her lungs were breathless as she reached for the front of his jacket, tugging him closer. His arms wrapped more tightly around her waist, and he kissed her harder, with more intensity than before. He held her against his

chest, burying the fingers of one hand in her hair, when they both nearly toppled off their chairs.

Hannah let out a breathless laugh at the same moment Samuel did, and she lowered quickly into her own chair. He cupped her face with both hands, shaking his head. "Perhaps this meeting wasn't wise. You should return to your room." His smile persisted as he rested his forehead against hers. She could see the restraint in his eyes. His breath came as quickly as hers.

"Are you afraid of what William will do?" Hannah asked. "How he will react?"

"I will speak with him tomorrow and explain what's in my heart," Samuel said, running his fingers over her hair. "Whether he approves or not, I cannot bid you another farewell. Not this time. If you'll have me, I intend to marry you." He pressed another lingering kiss to her lips, anchoring his thumb behind her ear.

Hannah pulled away, unable to contain her smile. She gave a breathless laugh. "There is nothing I want more." It took all her strength to stand and not kiss him again, but she managed to make her way to the door. Samuel opened it, leading her out into the cold. "I will walk with you."

But before Hannah could advise him against it, she caught sight of a figure standing just a few feet away from the door. The light from the windows was enough to illuminate his face.

William.

# Chapter 16

SAMUEL REACHED FOR HANNAH'S ARM, a surge of protectiveness overcoming him as William strode forward. His furrowed brow indicated confusion, his eyes round as they darted between Hannah and Samuel. "What are you doing out here?"

"I was helping Samuel finish a project," Hannah said in a quick voice. "We have been making a rocking horse for the child of one of his tenants."

William's eyes flashed in Samuel's direction, heavy with skepticism. "This late at night?" His voice was wild, higher in pitch than usual.

"Tomorrow is Christmas," Hannah said before Samuel could reply. "We had to finish."

"No, no, I think there is something more that you are not telling me." William's nostrils flared. "I heard you in the drawing room when you thought I was asleep." He turned to Samuel, anger burning in his gaze. "I knew the two of you were planning to meet, but I didn't know where. I'm glad I found you when I did." He marched forward. "Before you could compromise *my sister*."

Samuel's heart pounded as he pulled Hannah behind him. If William wanted a fight over this, Samuel would take all the blame, not Hannah.

"Are you the reason she decided not to marry the earl?" William asked, eyes blazing.

"I love her," Samuel said, keeping his voice calm.

William stopped just a few inches in front of him. "Who are you to aspire to marry a viscount's daughter?" His eyes flashed. "You may have this estate now, but you're still a tradesman's son."

"William!" Hannah marched forward, fists clenched.

William caught her by the arm, tugging her away from

Samuel's side. "You will not see her again," he snarled at Samuel as he pulled her in the direction of the house.

Hannah went reluctantly, jerking her arm away from his grip but still following him. She couldn't stay now. William would have to be reasoned with, and that would be no small task.

Samuel's heart sank, taking all the hope and joy he had just felt along with it. William's reaction never would have been perfect, but it could have been much better if Samuel had simply approached him in a formal setting and asked for permission to marry Hannah. Instead, William had seen them sneaking around and now felt betrayed.

Samuel watched Hannah go, crossing his arms over his chest. What would he do if William refused to allow the match? Hannah wasn't yet old enough to marry without permission from her guardian. If William couldn't be convinced, then this Christmas would end just as the last two had.

With heartbreak.

\*\*\*

"I cannot believe that all this time, you've been in love with Samuel. *Samuel*. My friend." William turned around as the back door to Cranfield closed behind them.

"He is my friend too," Hannah said, her voice weak.

William's voice echoed in the corridor. "How long have you loved him? How long have you been hoping to marry him?"

"For as long as I can remember." Hannah tried to keep her words calm, but William's anger was unnerving. She started toward the staircase, where he would have to speak more quietly so as to not awaken their mother. He followed her, his footfalls heavy and quick across the marble floor.

"Is this why he invited us for Christmas? To court you in secret? How long have you been sneaking to see him without a chaperone?"

Hannah sighed, planting her hands on her hips. "Two years ago, we began making the rocking horse I mentioned. I found

his wood-carving hut early one morning, and he invited me inside. That was the year he was intended for Miss Merchant. We were only friends.” She drew a deep breath. “I thought he was married, and that is why I agreed to court Lord Redditch. When you invited Samuel to your house party last year and he was unattached, my heart longed for him again. I couldn’t forget him, William. And I never will.”

The anger in his eyes persisted, mingled with disbelief. “How did I not see it?”

“You were rather blind,” Hannah said in a blunt voice. “But then, so were we.” She walked forward. “Please, William. I want to marry him. Nothing could make me happier. Do not blame Samuel. He did what he thought was the honorable thing last year, leaving to spend Christmas with his family so he would not come between me and Lord Redditch. It was *my* choice, and mine alone, not to marry the earl.”

William looked down at the floor, his expression unreadable.

“Samuel has always had you and your dreams in mind,” Hannah continued, “and he has been far from selfish. You *know* his character, and you know he is too kind and good to be friends with you or me. We don’t deserve him.” She blinked back a sudden tear. “I don’t know why he loves me, but I am so very grateful that he does. I assure you, if you allow me to marry him, our lives will be filled with even more fortune than if I married a duke.” Her words echoed in the vast corridor, but William offered no response. He dug the toe of his boot into the floor.

When his silence persisted, Hannah lifted her chin. “I invite you to think on what I said. I am going to sleep.” As she passed him on her way to the staircase, she gave the last and possibly most effective piece of her argument. “I know you only want what is best for me and our family. You have always worked so hard.” She took her first step up the stairs before offering a soft, “Happy Christmas.”

She felt William’s gaze on her back as she walked away, and though she had every reason not to, she still felt hopeful. Even

William was not made of stone. Perhaps now that he understood her, he might have a little mercy.

Or perhaps only a Christmas miracle could save them.

\*\*\*

Samuel stood by the door of his bedchamber the next morning, staring at the grain of the wood. He wanted to see Hannah, to ensure she was all right, before facing William. He raked a hand over his hair, letting out a slow exhale as his nerves wrapped around him like a chain.

William had far too much control over Samuel's future. He could prevent him from marrying Hannah if he wished to, and after his reaction the night before, Samuel was not optimistic. Staying in his room would accomplish nothing, however, so despite the awkwardness the morning was sure to entail, he opened the door and stepped into the corridor. He didn't want to add to William's anger by being caught near Hannah's bedchamber, so he started toward the stairs. He hoped to find her in the breakfast room.

His head spun and his heart weighed heavy in his chest. He didn't want to lose his friendship with William, but there was nothing he wouldn't give up to marry Hannah. He had realized that over the last two years, and he no longer had any doubt.

With new confidence, he started down the stairs. He stopped when he caught sight of William standing at the base of them.

Samuel stared down at his friend as awkwardness hung in the air between them with more potency than a fresh cinnamon pomander. He swallowed, debating whether he should continue down the stairs or allow William to meet him at the top. Deciding that confidence was the better option, he walked down the stairs, keeping his head held high. William didn't move an inch, watching Samuel's descent with one eyebrow arched slightly.

Samuel stopped beside William, turning to face him. He opened his mouth to speak, searching for anything to say, but William seemed to already have his words planned. His voice cracked through the air. "You could have told me, you know."

Samuel crossed his arms, letting out a puff of air. “How does a man tell his best friend that he’s in love with his sister?”

A hint of a smile pulled on the edges of William’s mouth. “I suppose that is a difficult subject to broach.”

Samuel took William’s smile as permission to laugh, and some of the awkwardness was dispelled.

“She’s in the breakfast room, alone,” William said in a flippant voice. “Go propose to her before I change my mind.”

A rush of faintness flooded Samuel’s head, his heart galloping. “Truly?”

William gave a mocking smile. “Yes, you lovestruck fool.”

Samuel nearly embraced the man but decided such impulses would be better spent on Hannah. He gripped William’s shoulder instead. “Thank you.”

William sighed. “Take proper care of her. If you don’t, I’ll duel you.”

Samuel laughed. “You can depend on me, I assure you.”

William’s haughty features softened at the corners, and he took a humble glance at his feet. “I’m sorry for what I said yesterday. I was shocked. I was angry.” He shook his head. “You are worthy of marrying a viscount’s daughter because of your character. Hannah—viscount’s daughter or not—deserves only such an honorable man.”

Samuel had never seen William anything close to apologetic, so it took him a moment to absorb his words. “Do you mean it?”

William looked up with a groan, though his lips were smiling. “Please don’t make me repeat myself.”

Samuel laughed again as William pushed past him on the staircase, leaving the pathway clear. He rushed toward the breakfast room, unable to stop the smile on his face as he hurried to the door.

It was halfway open, and he could see her inside, sitting rigid on a chair in front of a full plate. Without wasting a



second, he pushed the door fully open and closed it promptly behind him.

Hannah looked up, her eyes wide. “Samuel.” She pushed her chair out and stood, walking toward him. “William will be here any minute. Perhaps—”

“I just saw him,” Samuel said, taking the liberty to scoop her hands into his own. “He told me to come here and propose to you.” He gave a laugh of disbelief. “He approves. No matter how reluctantly, he does approve.”

To his surprise, Hannah’s eyes flooded with tears, and she tugged her hands free from his and wrapped her arms around him. He held her against his chest, pressing a kiss into her hair. When she pulled back, the tears in her eyes had fallen onto her cheeks. A broad smile stretched across her soft, pink lips.

Samuel wiped the tears away with his fingertips, tracing the endearing trail of freckles on her cheekbones. “I have a proposal for you.”

She laughed. “You needn’t even ask. You know my answer.”

He shrugged. “William told me to.”

“When have we ever listened to William?” Hannah asked, arching an eyebrow.

Samuel chuckled, cupping her face in his hands. “I think you’ll wish to hear my proposal.”

She leaned closer, her eyes hooded by her lashes as she gazed up at him. “Very well.”

He cleared his throat. “My dear, leave behind all your pride; Forget that I smell like a cow . . .”

She shook with laughter, an astonished grin on her lips.

His own laughter prevented him from speaking clearly, but he managed to finish. “Say you’ll marry me, be my bride, And find me at the kissing bough.” He paused to press a soft kiss to her lips. “For our time is short this Yuletide.”

“How on earth did you remember that?” she asked in a breathless voice, eyes still fixed on his mouth. He hadn’t

pulled away more than an inch, and their kiss had been too brief.

“I wrote it for you, even then.”

“Well, my answer was yes, even then,” she said, her breath rustling against his skin. “But I must clarify that you do not smell like a cow.”

He laughed, tugging her closer and kissing her with all the fervor he had always wanted to, even then.

# About the Author



ASHTYN NEWBOLD GREW UP WITH a love of stories. When she discovered Jane Austen books in high school, she learned she was a sucker for romantic ones. When not indulging in sweet romantic comedies and Regency novels (and cookies), she writes romantic stories of her own across several genres. Ashtyn also enjoys baking, songwriting, singing, and anything that involves creativity and imagination.

Learn more about Ashtyn at [ashtynnewbold.com](http://ashtynnewbold.com), and follow her on social media.

Facebook: [Author Ashtyn Newbold](#)

Instagram: [@ashtyn\\_newbold\\_author](#)

# Other Books by Ashtyn Newbold

## LARKHALL LETTERS SERIES

*The Ace of Hearts*  
*The Captain's Confidant*  
*With Love, Louisa*  
*The Matchmaker's Request*  
*Lord Blackwell's Promise*  
*A Prior Engagement*

## BRIDES OF BRIGHTON SERIES

*A Convenient Engagement*  
*Marrying Miss Milton*  
*Romancing Lord Ramsbury*  
*Miss Weston's Wager*  
*An Unexpected Bride*

## NOBLE CHARADES SERIES

*The Earl Next Door*  
*The Duke's Diary*

## STANDALONES

*The Last Eligible Bachelor*

*An Unwelcome Suitor*

*To Marry Is Madness*

*In Pursuit of the Painter*

*At First Sight*

*Mischief and Manors*

*Lies and Letters*

*Road to Rosewood*

*The Earl's Mistletoe Match*

*Her Silent Knight*

*The Midnight Heiress*

*A Heart to Keep*

# **A Thrill of Hope**

**KAREN THORNELL**

*to the people who play Christmas music early  
and don't mind a little pre-December decorating*

# Acknowledgments

I LOVE WRITING ACKNOWLEDGMENTS BECAUSE it is a small way I can thank those who've helped me in a big way. So thank you, first and foremost, to my Heavenly Father. And to my family.

Thank you to my critique group for helping me start this novella on the right foot and to Cindy, especially, for reading it in its entirety and loving my characters as I do.

Thank you to Rachel and Jill for early, invaluable feedback.

A big thanks for last-minute beta reads from Marilee, Jessica, Megan, Tasha, Ashlee, and Mandy. Truly, your help on this story and your support mean the world.

Thank you to the team at Covenant for their amazing skill and support.

And lastly, thank you, reader, for picking up this story.



# Chapter 1

*Yorkshire County*

*December 18, 1814*

ANYONE VIEWING ISABEL REID, WITH the discarded novel in her lap and her eyes so often darting to the snowy window, would think she was eager for something.

But she was not. She was *dreading* something. It was a far different sentiment.

Absent-mindedly, she pulled the locket from beneath the neckline of her traveling dress, feeling the comforting weight of metal for a moment before she tucked it from view once more. She may not have her father on this ill-fated journey, but with the locket, at least she would have her mother nearby. Mama had been on her mind even more often as of late, and it did not take a great deal of thinking to discover why. Papa had remarried this past month.

Isabel's maid sat quietly, working on a piece of mending in the corner, awaiting the start of their journey with a great deal less anxiety than Isabel. It would be rude to interrupt her. But Isabel's mind kept slipping back to the melancholy of spending Mama's favorite holiday in the one place Isabel had not visited since her mother's death. And she did not want to ruminate on melancholy. So she sighed—just a small thing—to gain Anne's attention.

Her maid continued pulling her needle through the cloth.

Isabel sighed again, a smile pulling at her lips that she pushed away, lest her maid look up and spot it.

There was no change.

Isabel sighed *loudly*.

With a pleasant expression that showed none of the frustration another individual might experience being on the receiving end of Isabel's current anxiety, Anne looked up. "Is

everything well, miss?”

Isabel shifted forward in her chair. All this waiting was making the prospect of the journey even more difficult to swallow. “Perhaps we should go alone. I do not see why we need an escort. It is hardly a day’s journey to my aunt’s house.”

Her maid gave a small, empathetic smile. “I am not certain Mr. Reid would be happy to hear of that.”

Isabel huffed, physically brushing aside Anne’s remark with a wave of her hand. Her father had left for London two days past and would not return until the New Year. “More to the point, I do not see why I must go at all. Just because I have been abandoned for the holidays does not mean I wish it any other way.” Isabel could not fathom spending Christmas at the Andersons’ home without her mother, father, or even her long-passed uncle Phillip. It was sure to be even more depressing than this time of year usually was.

Again Anne smiled that small smile.

“Do you not agree?” Isabel prodded—anything to keep from looking out that dratted window again.

“Yes, miss. Of course, miss.”

“Oh, Anne, do you never wish to throw your civility aside? Perhaps out the window of the east-wing tower?”

“If I were to do that, it would land on your favorite rosebushes.” An amused look tugged Anne’s lips upward, and that was success enough for Isabel to leave the poor girl alone.

Unfortunately, that meant Isabel looked out the window again. “Oh!” She sat forward. “A traveling coach! He is here, Anne!”

One would think excitement colored Isabel’s voice, but it was simply relief that she could begin this journey at last—if an hour late. She had not seen Mr. Collingham in a year, but the older gentleman had always taken his time about things. Perhaps it was because when he was here in the outskirts of the northern town of Leyburn, it was to visit his hunting lodge. Apparently, men found *respite* in such dismal holidays.

She heard the front door open, the butler usher Mr. Collingham in, and footsteps walk to the sitting room she was languishing away in. But what she saw when the door opened did not fit with expectations.

“You are not Mr. Collingham.” Isabel did not even curtsy, so great was her surprise. She simply narrowed her eyes at the *young* man before her. With his dark hair, somber expression, and black clothing, he seemed the epitome of her current feelings. And yet there was something in the set of his brow—or perhaps it was his strong jaw—that rang familiar to her.

“I apologize, Miss Reid, but my father took ill this morning. He requested I undertake the task of delivering you to your aunt safely.”

Isabel stared. *This* was Mr. Collingham’s son? But she had met him several times in their youth . . . and he had not looked like *that*.

“I see.” She did not see at all. She was fairly certain her eyes had failed her and any moment, the gangly, boyish child of her acquaintance would appear before her. Had Mr. Collingham traded in his son for a handsomer version? That was not very fatherly.

He nodded. “Shall we depart, then?” His manner was all briskness as he stepped back to the door he had only just entered through.

“I suppose we ought to.” For no reason beyond the fact that he had called escorting her a task, she was rankled.

She swept past him and into the entry hall. As she put on her bonnet and traveling cloak, she heard the butler, Bingham, relaying further information to Mr. Collingham’s son, who she supposed *was* also Mr. Collingham. She awaited the end of their conversation before arresting Bingham’s attention.

“You have informed the staff of my wishes while I am gone?”

The grandfatherly butler nodded. “They have many arguments.”

That nearly made Isabel smile. Of course they would argue.

She had told them to take a holiday without a change in wages. There was no need to spend all day cleaning and keeping house when the residents were not in residence.

“You will see that they do as told regardless?”

Bingham nodded sharply. “You can count on me, miss.”

“Very good.” Straightening her shoulders, she strode to the door.

She did not like the idea of spending a day in a carriage with Mr. Collingham. Now not only was she expected to pass the holiday at Aunt Charlotte’s but she also had to impose upon a gentleman of her barest acquaintance to do so? She may actually be keen to reach her aunt’s house despite what would greet her there.

“Shall we?” He was suddenly at her elbow.

Attempting to appear unaffected by this turn of events, she nodded regally. A footman opened the door for them, and another was strapping her trunk to the traveling carriage that stood out starkly against the white snow. A gust of air hit her with a frigidness that had her shivering even beneath her fur-lined cloak. Good heavens, she detested winter.

A touch at her hand made her start. But it was only a footman assisting her and Anne into the carriage. Mr. Collingham followed them, taking the rear-facing seat. Perplexity filled her. This truly could not be the boy who had shared her nursery when their families used to come together once a year. That boy had been wiry with large ears, his height shorter than hers for a time, and he had squirmed at the idea of spending meals with a *girl*. He had also hidden a mouse in her bed once. *This* man was none of those things. Well, she supposed she did not know his thoughts on spending dinner with a girl. And she hoped he’d grown out of the smuggling of small animals. He’d certainly grown into his ears.

She averted her gaze, choosing instead to watch out the window. How thrilling, to be able to spend several *more* hours staring out a window at stark nothingness.

The door closed, and the carriage jerked forward.

A rustle of paper brought Isabel's eyes to Mr. Collingham. He was paying her no mind and shaking out his newspaper. Splendid. Several *quiet* hours.

Isabel ought to be used to the quiet by now. In fact, it was her dearest companion, aside from the servants or Papa. They were far from London and entertained only families from the village every few weeks. Most days Isabel spent with a book, some embroidery, or helping Cook in the kitchen, occasionally indulging in a game with Papa. But when she wished her mind distracted, as she did now, quiet was unwelcome in the extreme.

"Anne, how do your sisters fare?" Isabel turned on her maid, who enjoyed quiet a bit too much. Especially after being raised in a home with seven daughters.

What would it have been like to have sisters?

But, ever proper and never showing frustration over having her solitude interrupted, Anne folded her hands in her lap atop one of the carriage blankets. "As per my mother's latest letter, Martha has acquired a beau. And Deborah has had her second child. Helen works in the next town over, you know, and has recently been elevated to parlor maid."

That was all the news to be shared, it would seem, as Anne picked up her sewing and set to work after watching Isabel for permission.

Their escort broke the silence. "We will be fortunate if we are not delayed by this storm."

Isabel met Mr. Collingham's eyes for a brief moment as he looked over his paper. They were as dark as his hair and clothing. Then she peered out the window. Indeed, snow had begun falling. The sky had not indicated a storm when they had left. "*Further* delayed, I believe you mean."

Her father would have been dismayed at her lack of decorum, no matter his knowledge of her blunt nature. But, as he'd recently remarried, it was not for him to ruminate on her perpetual state of bitterness. She had fought it for the first few weeks but finally given in when she'd learned of Father's plan

to send her off to Aunt's house for Christmas. Still, some of her civility returned in time for her to add, "It is not coming down particularly hard."

"Not yet." And then he flicked out his newspaper and settled back into his seat.

Anne remained tucked into her corner with her mending.

And Isabel was left with only the snow to watch.

Which was why she could not be held accountable for allowing her gaze to stray to her male companion again. He had to have grown a foot since last they'd met. They had not had a relationship beyond childhood, but their fathers had met yearly for the hunt. The Collinghams' primary residence was closer to London, but they had a hunting box that bordered the Reid estate, which had led to the friendship between the families. After Mrs. Collingham's death some years before, the hunting parties had lessened to just the two gentlemen. And when Isabel's mother had passed . . . well, Isabel did not recall much merriment after that.

When had she last seen the younger Mr. Collingham, then? It had to be seven years, at least. Perhaps eight. He had stopped coming to his father's hunting lodge when she was nearing fifteen years of age. She had not cared at the time, but she found herself interested now.

"Do you need something, Miss Reid?"

A blush flared in her cheeks as he spoke without even glancing up from his paper. How long had he been aware of her perusal?

"Yes." Heaven help her if she was going to allow him to believe she was simply curious about his person. Besides, even with their estrangement, they'd known each other long enough that this formal rigidity seemed ridiculous.

He folded his paper neatly before meeting her eyes with a raised brow.

Isabel smoothed a wrinkle from her glove, her mind racing for a topic that would extract her from this embarrassment.

"What ails your father?"

“Simply a malady of the lungs. He will be well-recovered within the week.”

Isabel nodded slowly. “I am happy to hear it is not serious.”

“As am I.”

And when she said nothing more, he picked up his paper again.

Which left Isabel with only the snow yet again.

The rate at which the cold clusters of dismay were falling outside did seem to be picking up pace. But that was likely her imagination. Regardless, a storm could not become so bad that she would be unable to arrive safely at her aunt’s home. At the very worst, they might be held up at an inn for a night, but that would be all.

She watched the wind blow a gust of snow against the window and shivered as the carriage swayed. She would like to be tossed into a snowbank even less than she wished to reach her aunt’s home. Even if it meant celebrating Christmas for the first time in years.

## Chapter 2

ROBERT SCANNED THE WORDS ON the page without seeing them. He turned the page without even being able to recall a single story from the one before. Or any of those before that.

He was unable to prove it, but he was fairly certain his father had faked his illness that morning. The old man had seemed far too eager to suggest Robert take Miss Reid on her trip, despite him having arrived at the hunting box only a week before. *“You recall Miss Reid? Her father has remarried and taken his new wife to London, arranging to have his daughter spend the holidays with her mother’s sister, a Lady Anderson. It is hardly a day’s journey, and it might be enjoyable for you to . . . renew your acquaintance with Miss Reid.”* Then he had coughed quite unconvincingly and laid back in his bed.

Robert narrowed his eyes at the recollection. The last thing he needed was for his father to suddenly decide he wished to be a matchmaker. The man needed some sort of interest. In something not involving Robert.

But even with his cynical thoughts, the reason his father had been so eager was clear. Miss Reid had grown up over the last few years, and not just in height, though she could not be more than two inches short of his nearly six feet. She was quite beautiful, with her golden hair, pert nose, and full lips. She likely had any number of men clamoring for her attention.

But Robert had no intention of joining them. He’d learned the truth of beautiful women, and *if* he were to find a wife, he planned to choose the mousiest wallflower he could find. Besides, did the men know Miss Reid was prone to temper tantrums? Or, at least, the Miss Reid of age twelve or thirteen had been. Though, in all honesty, some of her tantruming might have been because of something he’d done. He seemed to recall something having to do with a small rodent.

The time passed, if not pleasantly, then at least quietly, until they were only—by his calculations—an hour or so from Miss



Reid's aunt's house. Besides the one stop they had taken at an inn to refresh and feed themselves, he had scanned his paper twice, listened to the growing wind for quite some time, and avoided Miss Reid's gaze continually. But now that they were nearing their destination, he came to a realization.

When he returned home, his matchmaking father was bound to ask for details of the journey—and if all Robert could say was that he'd read the paper and watched the snow, it was likely he'd be required to fetch Miss Reid back in a month as well.

“Are you close with your aunt?” he asked.

Unfortunately, before allowing the words to spill from his mouth, he had not even looked at their recipient, and now the latter was jolting upright from where she'd been dozing against the carriage wall.

“I do apologize,” he said. “I was not aware you were resting.”

“No, no, it is all right.” She was flustered, patting her somewhat deflated coiffeur and blinking rapidly. For the first time since he had arrived at her home some six hours before, she was not so poised.

He did not particularly like seeing her with her guard down. Somehow, it made her nearly enchanting. He pressed his eyes closed and willed his mind to remove words such as *enchanting* from his vocabulary.

“Though, perhaps it is you who ought to be resting,” she suggested.

His eyes snapped open, meeting hers. Her head was tilted to the side, and that regal look was back upon her brow. Good.

“I do not believe I could rest with the weather as it is. I am far too worried for our safety.”

A look of guilt entered her expression, and too late he realized he had just snubbed her for taking a moment to nap. Heaven help him. For a man whose primary residence was London, he was woefully inept at speaking with women. It was no wonder Cecilia had refused his proposal.

“Do you think it is so bad?” She peered out the window, seeing the swirling snow falling so heavily that visibility was far diminished.

He could not very well lie to her. “I am surprised my coachman has not insisted we stop. Though, that may be because we passed the last inn half an hour ago.”

She bit her lip. He studiously trained his gaze to her eyes. “I do hope he is keeping warm,” she said.

“I doubt it.”

Again guilt entered her expression, and Robert could have hit himself. Perhaps a lie might have done better in that instance. But then, gentlemen did not lie. Which was ironic, as his very status as a gentleman was, in essence, a lie.

She sighed. “I do not know why my father insisted on this trip. I could just as well have remained at home while he and my new stepmother enjoyed their time in London.”

Robert refocused his attention on the conversation. “You would willingly spend the holidays alone?”

“Happily.” She met his gaze squarely, her chin lifted as if challenging him to disagree with her.

He did not. “On that count, we are of the same mind.”

Her brows rose. “Oh?”

He nodded. There was no need to go into the sordid details of his upbringing.

“I see.” She glanced out the window again. “I am uncertain whether you will be able to return home in this storm.”

“I will wait out the worst of it at an inn and return when it is safer.”

“I apologize to have inconvenienced you so.”

“It is nothing.” Why was it that societal niceties required him to say such a thing in order to placate another? It was very nearly a lie, and he’d only just been thinking of how gentlemen did not engage in falsehood. Truly, he had planned a quiet holiday recuperating from the latest pitiful event of his

life. But, of course, his father could not allow such a thing to occur during his first visit to the lodge in half a decade.

“It is hardly nothing.” She scoffed. It would seem she was not one for those societal niceties. “Thanks to this storm, it is several days of travel, forcing your coachman to endure terrible conditions, and potentially causing you to stay in an inn for who knows how long. I hope you will let me fund your stay, if nothing else.”

The idea was preposterous, and his widened eyes must have shown that.

She shook her head. “Oh, do not stand on ceremony with me, Mr. Collingham. I feel it is in my purview to offer up my father’s coffers to cover your expenses when you are doing our family a favor. Besides”—a strange light entered her eyes—“you forget I’ve seen you sneak frogs into the kitchen. We need not be so stiff now.” Again she met his eyes as if to challenge him to disagree. Which he did. Heartily. Did the woman see no difference between their current stations and their time as children?

“The antics of children hardly play a role in our current circumstance.” He shifted in his seat.

A pause, and when he looked at her, he saw a flush rising in her cheeks. “Ah, very well then. I will leave you to your thoughts.”

Once again, he had inadvertently insulted her. Much as her beauty unnerved him, and frustrated though he was that his father had concocted a hare-brained scheme to push them together just weeks after Robert had been nearly engaged to another, he was still a gentleman. He *had* to be a gentleman. And something in his gut twisted as he realized the extent of his rudeness. “You have still not answered my question. Are you close with your aunt?”

“I was, at one time.”

“But not now?”

“I have not seen her in many years.”

He tapped his forefinger against his knee. Was that enough

conversation to make up for his unkindness before? Likely not. “Why did you not join your father in London?”

“I’ve no great love of that city. And I am not so childish to think my father would wish me to accompany him and his wife so soon after his marriage. The couple deserves some time together.”

Childish. Was that a dig at his previous words about the antics of children?

“That is very thoughtful of you.”

A tight smile. “Hardly. Any woman would do such a thing for her father.”

No. Not any woman. He could not see Cecilia as one to forgo a trip to Town for the sake of anyone else.

Surely that was enough conversation now. He nodded to himself—yes, yes it was. Particularly as she was doing nothing to further it.

He’d thought the words too soon, as she opened her mouth. “What brings you to your hunting lodge after so—”

The carriage tipped dangerously to the side, throwing Miss Reid against the window. Her maid jolted awake as she, too, slid across the seat, knocking into Miss Reid. Only Robert’s sudden grip on his seat kept him in place. The carriage righted itself, and the ladies pulled themselves from the side.

“Are you well?” he asked, giving each young lady a once-over.

Miss Reid was rubbing her shoulder but stopped. “Yes. Anne, how do you fare?”

“Well, miss.”

Miss Reid nodded, as if that settled it. But he saw her roll her shoulder back with a grimace.

The door to the carriage opened, bringing in a gust of wind.

“My ’pologies.” Robert’s coachman, Stephen, nodded at the women, then turned to Robert. “The storm’s blowing mighty hard, sir. I’m afeared if we keep going like this, we will break

a wheel or become mired in the snow.”

Robert clenched his jaw. “How far have we to go?”

“Only half a mile, sir. But it ain’t through a well-traveled road.”

It wasn’t as if they had many options though. “We continue.”

“That sounds foolhardy, Mr. Collingham.” Miss Reid offered her not particularly appreciated thought after Stephen had closed the door with a sharp nod.

Robert struggled to keep his voice even. The frustrations of this journey, added to the stress of this storm, were causing him severe irritation. Why could Mr. Reid not have taken his daughter himself? Never mind that the journey was in the opposite direction of London. “We are no longer on a main road, which means we have not another option to stop somewhere. I would much prefer to break a wheel and be—hopefully—within walking distance of your aunt’s home than become stuck in the snow attempting to find the nearest town in this mess. Or, even worse, be stuck *here*, slowly freezing to death.”

Her lips formed an *o*. But she snapped them shut and nodded, turning to watch out the window with anxiety written across her face.

Again Robert had been rude. But this time, he could not bring himself to care overmuch. His discomposure was too great and his fear for this ill-fated journey too potent.

# Chapter 3

ANY SORT OF CURIOSITY ISABEL *might* have felt toward Mr. Collingham had disappeared faster than the road had vanished under the snow.

The man had grown up to be a bear. A rude, gruff bear, and she could not wait until they were parted. Thank goodness her father intended to fetch her back after his trip. If the past served as an example, she would not have to see this man again for several years.

She chewed her lip, looking out the window. If they did break a wheel or become stuck . . . would Mr. Collingham expect her to walk? It wasn't as if she was against walking—indeed, it was fine exercise. Her very favorite. In good weather. Not when she was sure to soak her shoes through and catch her death of cold.

Yet something told her Mr. Collingham would have no scruples sending her on a trek in the snow. He would likely enjoy watching her struggle.

She exchanged a glance with Anne, then moved closer to the window. She could see nothing now. How was the coachman even able to navigate the coach? What if he were taking them off the road entirely? Were there hills nearby to fall from? A stream to become stuck in? She fisted her dress in her hands, but even that small movement caused her shoulder to ache. It had collided with the wall so hard, she was certain it would bruise, and she could only hope the damage was not more than that. But, as she subtly rolled it back, and sharp pain lanced through her, she was worried it might be.

Even still, she had no intention of showing weakness in front of Mr. Collingham.

The carriage rocked, and she gripped the seat with her good hand. Then it slowed to a near stop, and she swallowed back her worry that they were stuck. But then, with an almighty jerk, it continued on. If they could simply get within sight of

the house, then perhaps her aunt would send help. Additional horses or a sleigh to take them up.

The blanket across her lap was hardly providing warmth at this point, and the warming stones had long since grown cold. As Isabel looked to her maid, she saw a shiver rack her thin shoulders. “Come here, Anne,” she murmured, holding out her arm. Mr. Collingham did not acknowledge the words, but Anne hesitated. “Forget your propriety a moment, and come share warmth.”

After another moment’s hesitation, Anne slid across the seat, tucking herself up against Isabel, who proceeded to gather the blankets about them. Much as Isabel’s intention had been to warm her maid, it had the added benefit of warming *her* as well. At least, on one side. If Mr. Collingham were to sit on the other—

Where had that thought come from? She had no wish to be any nearer Mr. Collingham at the moment, even if it would add much-desired warmth.

“I believe I see the house. We may arrive intact after all.” Mr. Collingham did not look away from the window as he spoke. Isabel could not see *anything* outside, but she would cling to the hope that he was in possession of more acute eyes.

He had spoken too soon, however, for at that moment the carriage jerked again and the coachman let out a yell.

Immediately, though the carriage still shuffled slowly forward, Mr. Collingham jumped to his feet, grabbed his hat, and jumped out the door. It slammed shut in his wake, and Isabel could only stare after him. What had just happened?

With wide eyes, she turned to Anne, but before even a word slipped from her lips, the door was wrenched open again.

Mr. Collingham was soaked. His hat was gone, his dark hair nearly black with moisture as it clung around his eyes, and snow battered him from seemingly every side, slipping past him to fling several gusts into the carriage. But most notably, he was supporting the coachman, who appeared nearly unconscious.

“Help me get him in,” he grunted, shifting the man’s body to the door. Anne gasped at the sight, but Isabel moved into action, grasping the servant’s other arm and tugging him forward. The man was heavy—several inches taller than her and more than several wider—and therefore she did not feel she was much help. But soon Anne joined her, and with an almighty pull, the three of them managed to get the man into the carriage, though not onto a seat. Isabel’s shoulder throbbed painfully at the exertion.

Without a word, Mr. Collingham retreated a step backward.

“What are you doing? What is wrong with him? What happened?” Several questions tumbled from Isabel’s mouth, and she was helpless to stop them.

“He fell and is nearly frozen,” Mr. Collingham said. “I am going to drive us to your aunt’s.”

“You?” Her voice was incredulous. “But you—”

“Are the only option we have just now. So if you’ll excuse me, I would like to climb up and begin. Unless you wish *me* to freeze to death, necessitating *your* driving of the carriage.”

“Of course—”

But he’d already closed the door.

Nostrils flaring more at her embarrassment than his rudeness—because, truly, she did realize how dire the situation was and that there was not much time to waste—she took a deep breath. “Anne, help me warm him if we can.” She pulled her blanket from the floor where it had landed at the same moment the carriage jerked forward, knocking her back into her seat.

Her shoulder pulsed with pain at the collision. But she bit back a moan and sat back up. The moment the blanket was on the incoherently mumbling man, his eyes closed against pain, it began to seep through with moisture.

“He is too wet for the blanket. At this point, it will do him no good. We need to try to dry him. Then perhaps we can try your blanket.”

“Begging your pardon, but *how* are we to dry him?” Anne



was flustered beyond what Isabel had ever seen. Her hair was coming out of its tight bun, her cheeks were flushed with exertion, and her nose was red from the cold. And she didn't seem capable of stilling her hands.

Isabel wrung her own hands. Could they make do with the blankets for now? Mr. Collingham had said the house was within sight, but . . . She glanced out the window and saw nothing but the storm. Heaven help them if they were to become stuck and this man who had risked his life to deliver her to her aunt froze faster than them all, soaked to the bone as he was. She nodded once to herself, decided. "My dress."

"The one you've got on?" Anne's eyes pulled wide.

"I haven't another inside the carriage. And I believe we will need my cloak to warm him once he's less wet." He was a rather large man. The small carriage blankets were like handkerchiefs next to him. But still, they must try. She shuffled closer, grabbing her skirts to use as a sort of mop. And she sent up a prayer that they would *not* become stuck and she would *not* have to walk through the snow in a half-drenched dress.

"Stop! Use mine instead, miss!"

Isabel eyed her, then the coachman. "I believe we will need them both. Come down beside me. We can use our skirts to mop up the moisture, and then we'll use our cloaks and the blankets." The carriage tilted back and forth, moving at a stuttering pace. Isabel braced herself against the side before leaning down again and grasping the edge of her skirt.

Until that moment, she had not realized how very loud it was in the carriage. Snow and wind beat a thundering symphony against the walls around them. The wheels squealed out in protest, and Isabel and Anne had been near-shouting to one another. But as they fell quiet to work, the noises seemed to close in on them. Isabel cringed as the fabric became soaked and dirty. It was only a traveling dress. But it was such a beautiful green and would certainly stain.

Still, it was less valuable than this man's life. And with how short his breathing was and how he had barely opened his eyes

when they'd set him on the floor—and not a single time since—she was worried his life was indeed in danger. Would they find blood when they dried him? She shuddered against the thought.

The carriage tipped as she pressed the fabric to his forehead, and she fell into him, causing him to emit a low groan. “I am sorry. So sorry.” She righted herself. At least now she knew she never wished to be on a boat. This constant movement beneath her was horrendous, and she would happily remain in her father's home for the rest of her days if it meant avoiding another journey like this one. She would simply focus on that thought—how very like being on a boat this must be—rather than on the fact that everything around her seemed to be falling apart. Her ruined dress was symbolic of that.

Anne knelt beside her, hand grasping the fabric from her own dress and hovering just above the coachman's chest. “This feels terribly inappropriate, miss.”

“Indeed it does, Anne.” But Isabel had moved to his neck and was now removing the extra moisture there. Hesitantly, Anne joined her.

It took several minutes, and by silent agreement, they left the clothing as it was on his upper legs. But soon enough, he was not sopping wet, and they were able to pile their cloaks and blankets on top of him.

“If nothing else, the exertion has warmed *us* up, yes?” Isabel offered a wan smile to Anne as they sat back on their seat. But then her smile fell as she looked at the coachman. She did not even know the man's name. He was not one of her father's servants, but he was in this state of distress because of *her* and this trip to her aunt's home. She should have agreed to go to London with her father or fought his planning of this holiday with her aunt. “I hope he recovers,” she whispered just as their forward momentum stopped with abruptness and the carriage rocked to the side.

“Oh no, do you think we are stuck?” Anne asked, fear lacing her words.

The door pulled open, and Mr. Collingham—far wetter than

even before—filled the doorway. He froze in the act of pushing sodden tendrils of hair back from his eyes, his gaze flitting down her soaked dress and then back up. His eyebrows rose marginally, though, she thought, less from distaste than from shock. Perhaps even concern. She tugged at the wet clothing, ensuring it covered her legs entirely.

“We are here.” His voice was gruffer than before, and his eyes did not leave hers. They hardly even blinked. “Wait and I will bring servants to you.”

Isabel could only nod. He closed the door again—without his standard slam—and a feeling of pure exhaustion swept through her, and with it the fear and helplessness she’d barely held at bay. She leaned back, keeping a discerning eye on the coachman, watching his every breath. It was as if her body had determined it no longer needed to function now that the danger was passed. Which was absurd because the danger was now *gone*, and yet *now* she was feeling as she ought to have amidst the danger. Helpless and overwhelmed. Any and all apprehension over seeing her aunt and spending the holiday season with her fled at the sheer relief Isabel felt to have arrived at their destination. To no longer be nearly alone or in danger.

Again the door opened, but it was not Mr. Collingham. And Isabel did not examine the twinge of disappointment she felt at that. Several footmen stood outside. Isabel insisted they take the coachman in first, then assist Anne from the carriage, and then herself.

Her feet had barely crossed the threshold of the grand home when she was suddenly and very firmly pulled into a soft, warm embrace. Her shoulder twinged at the contact.

“Oh, my dear, you have scared twenty years off my life. I have been watching for you for hours now, as the storm worsened and worsened. I had feared you were caught in it!” Still holding her close, her aunt whispered, “And then that handsome man of yours came striding into the hall, pooling water everywhere and ordering my servants about and saying you’d hurt your shoulder—oh, good heavens, I am just so grateful you are here and you are safe and—gracious, what

happened to your dress?" Aunt Charlotte pulled back, and the full force of her appearance, so very like Isabel's mother's, slammed into Isabel.

The light hair piled atop her head, her high cheekbones, and her full lips just showing wrinkles about the corners should have been comforting. Even her short, ample form mimicked Isabel's mother's. And it was all a reminder of all she had lost. This was precisely why Isabel had dreaded coming. The reminders of her mother and the many Christmases spent in this house as a complete, unbroken family were already closing in on her.

Isabel swallowed, trying valiantly to keep her dismay from her face. "I, well, the coachman was so wet, and . . . ah, would you mind if I . . . changed?"

"Yes! Yes, of course! Come, come—Hawks, send up Isabel's trunks, will you?" She looped an arm around Isabel's shoulders—again Isabel's shoulder protested—and squinted at her. "And, oh yes, Martha—will you ensure the fire is hot and a bath is drawn?" As Aunt spoke, she guided Isabel to the stairs, urging her up. A small part of Isabel wished to lean in to the embrace, but she held herself stiffly until she was shown the room she would stay in—the same room she had stayed in when she'd last visited, four years before.

"I will leave you to warm up, darling, and do not bother coming down for dinner. I shall bring you a tray."

"You need not—"

Aunt placed light hands on her arms, looking up at Isabel, who had inherited her height from her father's side. "I do. Oh, child, I am so grateful you are safe. For a moment—well, never mind that." Her smile was pained as she patted Isabel lightly before releasing her. "I will return with your dinner." She closed the door softly as she left, and Isabel stared at the place she had been just a moment before.

Swallowing, Isabel rubbed her hands up her cold arms to where she could still feel her aunt's feather-light touch. When had she last been touched by someone in such a maternal way? Even her father, though kind, was not affectionate. He always

patted her arm when taking his leave, and he allowed Isabel to fix his cravat when it was so often askew. But beyond those occasional touches or the ministrations of her maid, Isabel could not recall the last time. She rather wished she could go back to not knowing such a touch. For now that she did, she was aware of the lack. And that felt . . . empty.

She released a shuddering breath, walked to the fire, and held out her hands. This day had not gone at all as planned, and a nervous energy tingled through her chest as she tried to reconcile all that had gone wrong. Another deep breath in, then another out, and then several more, until she was finally able to uncoil the tense feeling holding her lungs captive.

And only then did she realize she had no idea what had happened to Mr. Collingham.

# Chapter 4

*Copley*

*December 19, 1814*

THE NEXT MORNING ROBERT PACED at the foot of his bed, weighing his options. The light filtering through his window did not appear to be the morning sun, but it was. It was simply so clouded by the unceasing storm that hardly any light could be found.

He needed to return to the hunting lodge. *Wanted* to. But it would be impossible. It had nearly been impossible to get here, and the snow had not been piled several feet high when they'd first set out. Yet he could not impose on Lady Anderson. Nor did he wish to.

He stopped his pacing, pressing a fist to his mouth. If his fool of a father had not insisted Robert come, then he would not be in this confounded situation. But then, of course, his father would be in Robert's place. And though his father would never agree, he was far too old to have managed to handle the carriage in such conditions. He may have caught his death of cold if he had tried.

The coachman, Stephen, nearly had. Not his death, of course—though with the fall the man had taken from the carriage, he was lucky. Rather, he had caught a cold.

Yet another reason Robert could not leave. He could not abandon his servant in another's home.

He pushed out a tense breath. There was nothing for it. He would have to impose on Lady Anderson's hospitality for a day. Two at most.

He looked out the window and grimaced. Two was possibly a bit optimistic.

And now, awkward though it may be, he needed to ask Lady Anderson if he might remain longer. At least he had packed a small bag in the event of needing to remain overnight at an

inn.

A firm knock sounded at the door.

Apparently, his imposing of Lady Anderson would have to be delayed.

He swung the door open to find the very object of his thoughts standing there.

“Mr. Collingham, I did not wish to disturb you last night when you must surely have been weary to the bone, but I needed to thank you most profusely for delivering my niece to me safely. I have heard the whole of it from your coachman and Isabel, and I am certain no one else could have ensured her protection as you did.” She reached forward, grasping his hand warmly in both of hers.

Lady Anderson was all wide smiles, but Robert could only stare.

“However, now I must discuss something rather urgent.”

Robert tensed.

“You *must* stay here. I am certain this is not how you wished to spend your holiday, but I absolutely insist. I will not have my niece’s savior returning home in this weather. No, I am quite decided. You will stay until the roads are passable and safe.”

“I am no savior,” Robert said gravely.

“Yes, yes, of course. I have been told a time or two that I lean toward the dramatic.” Her round cheeks lifted in a smile, but her eyes were discerning and far more serious. He could not help wondering what they saw as they roamed his face. His wish to be anywhere but here?

Well, perhaps not anywhere. He had, after all, left London for a reason.

“Now that that is settled, I hope you will join us for luncheon this afternoon. I look forward to getting to know you a bit more, and your . . . intentions with my niece.” Her eyebrows lifted nearly imperceptibly, but then she stepped back, released his hand, and smiled. “I shall see you then.”

She had been gone a full twenty seconds before Robert realized he had just had an entire conversation in which he'd agreed to stay through the duration of the bad weather *and* join the ladies for lunch. All without saying more than four words.

And Lady Anderson believed he had *intentions* toward her niece? He scoffed, closing the door. Of that belief, he would disavow her immediately. Robert had no designs on anyone, least of all Miss Reid, who had appeared unhappy to see him from the moment he'd entered her home.

\*\*\*

"I have several activities arranged for Isabel and myself, Mr. Collingham, and they will be made all the merrier by your joining us!" Lady Anderson smiled across the table at him.

Robert had chosen to seclude himself in his father's hunting lodge so that he need not participate in any social activities. Yet what could he say when he was a guest in this home? He managed a smile in return. "I am gratified to hear it."

Lady Anderson's smile broadened before she turned to Miss Reid. Robert relaxed.

"What plans I have! It will be like the Christmases of your youth. All your favorite games, food, and festivities! I am only sad that Olivia—my daughter, Mr. Collingham—could not join us. Nor your father, Isabel. But the both of them have rather understandable excuses, do you not think?"

Miss Reid's shoulders seemed as if they might snap at any moment, she was holding them back so tightly, yet Lady Anderson did not seem to notice. Still, Miss Reid responded tolerably well. "Perfectly valid reasons, to be sure, what with Olivia's newly arriving baby and Father's marriage. I can think of no better reasons not to have them here. But, please, Aunt, you need not exert yourself on my behalf. We can enjoy a quiet holiday. We need . . . hardly celebrate at all." She said the words casually, but the way she was unable to meet her aunt's eye as she spoke was curious.

She'd mentioned in the carriage something about her wish to be alone during the holiday, had she not? Robert's mind had



been so preoccupied with not bending to his father's matchmaking and not letting their carriage lodge itself in the snow, that he hardly remembered anything else at all.

Though, he did remember the conclusion. His neck grew hot at the memory of Miss Reid in a wet dress and disheveled hair, and he stared intently at his plate for several moments.

He'd been nearly engaged and he'd never seen a woman in that state of disarray. It was . . . disconcerting.

"Oh, my dear, it is no exertion at all. You know how I love the holidays."

Robert looked up in time to see Miss Reid give her aunt a strained smile.

"Now, however, I fear I must rest. I am getting rather on in years, and I find it takes quite the toll on me, particularly in the afternoons." Lady Anderson stood, and Robert came to his feet to assist her in pushing back her chair.

"Are you well, Aunt?" Miss Reid had stood as well.

"Yes, yes, perfectly well. Simply the effects of age." She reached over and patted her niece on the cheek, then looked squarely at Robert. He straightened under the attention.

"You will keep my niece company? I cannot bear the idea of her first afternoon in my home being spent alone."

Robert met Isabel's startled gaze. But again he was dependent on this woman's hospitality and could not very well say no, even if her niece seemed to wish he would.

"Of course." He nodded on a bow.

"Wonderful. I knew I could count on you! The view from the parlor is particularly lovely this time of year. And the library is well-furnished. Oh! I am certain the servants would provide some brandy and a bowl if you wish a game of snapdragon!" She moved away from the table with a broad grin and a spring in her step that did not seem to befit a woman on her way for a much-needed respite. Then she stopped at the door, looking back at them. "And be wary of mistletoe. The servants have had quite the fun finding nooks

and doorways to hang it in!”

With those words, she swept out the door, leaving Robert and Miss Reid frozen in her wake.

Miss Reid recovered first. “You need not keep me company. There must be many things you would rather be doing.”

“I gave your aunt my word.”

She gave him the same smile she had given Lady Anderson. Frozen. Strained. Somehow, that made him sad to see.

“Well then, I haven’t a desire to play snapdragon. Shall we admire the view in the parlor?”

“Certainly.” He gestured for her to go ahead of him, as he hadn’t a clue where the parlor was.

She led him to the room in question, with her hands held tightly behind her back and several feet of space between them the entire way. Clearly, she was aware of the matchmaking going on by her aunt and wished for it to be successful as much as he did.

Something tightened in his gut at the thought. But he did not want her to have any designs on him . . . why should he be disappointed that she did not? No, certainly he was not disappointed. At the very most, his pride was bruised by the knowledge that another lady disliked him so greatly.

“It would seem my aunt was not exaggerating. That has to be the third bunch I have seen in our walk to this room.”

“What?”

Miss Reid looked up pointedly as she stepped through the doorway. A kissing bough was hanging from the doorframe. He nearly tripped over his own feet.

“Have a care, Mr. Collingham,” Miss Reid said as she backed away from his stumbling person. “You would not wish to be caught under it with me.”

He could not decipher her expression, nor the tone of her voice. Were they teasing? Haughty? Disgusted? He had known her for years without ever truly knowing her and therefore

hadn't much understanding of her mannerisms.

"Here we are, the infamous view." She stepped in front of a bank of windows, gesturing out.

Robert appreciated the change of subject and joined her at the window if only to allow the heat to recede from his cheeks. He'd been told his mother had been in possession of red hair. He may not have inherited that, but he was certain that was where his propensity for blushing had come from.

With a steadying breath, he took in the view. It was indeed beautiful. Even with the still swirling flurries, they could just see hills covered in snow that glistened in the slight sun. But how were they supposed to entertain themselves throughout Lady Anderson's rest by staring out this window? Surely Miss Reid's legs would hurt after a time.

Which brought to mind the image of her wet dress against her legs after her selfless act to help his coachman. That act had most likely saved the man's extremities from frostbite. Robert pressed his eyes tightly shut to remove the image from his mind. If only he could sweep it away as easily as the wind swept the snowflakes.

"Do you dislike looking out windows, Mr. Collingham?"

Robert startled. "Not at all."

She leveled a disbelieving look his way. "Your eyes were closed."

"The sun . . . was hurting them."

Miss Reid blinked several times, then spoke slowly. "Summer must be quite a dismal time for you if you dislike sun even this weak."

Perhaps that was not the quickest thinking he'd ever shown. He braced his hands behind his back, turning from the window at the exact moment Miss Reid moved to sit.

"We cannot very well spend the afternoon staring out that window." He found it eerie that her words echoed his sentiment from before. After a full Season with Cecelia—or he supposed it was Miss Branford now—he'd never presumed to

know what she was thinking. And it had never been the same as what he'd been ruminating on. He had not cared overmuch though.

"No indeed." He settled on the couch across from Miss Reid. Robert glimpsed her maid entering the room behind Miss Reid and settling in a chair in the corner. Robert breathed a little easier, knowing they now had a chaperone.

"What has kept you from your father's hunting lodge all these years?" She was, apparently, not going to stick to polite, cordial conversation. That was simultaneously relieving and disconcerting.

"I do not particularly like hunting."

She nodded. "But you came this time?"

He rubbed his palm against his opposite knuckles. "I do not particularly like London just now."

Again she nodded. "I see."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You see that I do not like London?"

"No, I see that you do not like something—or, more likely, *someone*—in London."

"Well, that is—" He cut himself off. He hadn't a rejoinder or anything to say that would be truthful but also move her thoughts from their current path.

"True? Yes. As I said, I see. I assume it was a woman?"

Robert took a deep breath. "I never said it was anyone in London."

She cocked her head, an annoyingly superior expression on her face. It made her appear juvenile, but he was fairly certain she was only a year or two junior to his three and twenty years. Which begged a question . . .

"Have you ever been to London?"

"Once."

"You were not successful in your . . . goals for visiting,

then?" he asked.

"You mean, of course, my capturing of a rich, handsome husband?"

He declined to admit meaning any such thing.

"No, I did not find a husband. I had my come-out at seventeen. My mother died that winter. I suppose gaining a rich, handsome husband fell by the wayside then." Her words were flat, nearly dry. But there was pain lancing through them.

Robert recalled her mother. Not well, but he seemed to remember she had hair the color of Miss Reid's. And she was a kind, hospitable woman. Not unlike her sister in whose home they now resided.

"I apologize. I did not mean to pry."

"No, you simply meant to take the conversation away from you and your own tragic London Season. Which only has me more curious. Was she a great beauty?"

How had this conversation grown so familiar? And how could he take it back to benign topics? Like the weather?

"I see you will not share so easily. Very well. I will guess, then." She shook her shoulders back, a determined look entering her eye. This woman was terrifying. "I have already learned it is a woman from whom you've escaped to your hunting box."

"No, you have not."

She ignored him. "I assume a crotchety family member would not send you running for the country, and I do not take you to be the gambling sort, so I can only assume it was a failed love match. And not something new or frivolous. Something long-standing. An engagement, perhaps? Or"—she watched him—"a near-engagement?"

He resisted the urge to pull at his cravat, instead meeting her gaze with one of his own. Her eyes were a blue so dark they nearly looked black. But with the way the candlelight and faint sun were illuminating them, he could see the blue even from his seat two feet away.

She sat back, a self-satisfied expression climbing across her face. “Now, do you think I could be so impressive as to guess her very name?”

“Cecilia Branford,” Robert said, if only to stop this ridiculous conversation. “Are you happy now?” His optimism may have had him hoping to quit this house within two days, but he’d rather walk home in the snow at the moment.

Her satisfaction faded, and something akin to pity replaced it. As if this conversation could not become any worse. “Not at all. I know heartache well, Mr. Collingham. I would not wish it on any person.”

Her sincerity stilled him. At long last, he inclined his head. “Thank you.”

And did she mean the heartache of losing her mother? Or had she experienced a different type of heartache? Disappointed love, perhaps?

He cleared his throat when she did not again speak. “It was not, however, a love match, as you believe.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “No?”

“No. It was a beneficial arrangement for the both of us. And we suited well enough, I suppose. But she . . . decided against the engagement in the end.” Robert’s jaw tensed at the recollection. There was far more to the story, but it was not as if he were about to spill his entire gullet to Miss Reid. He was unsure why he’d even told her this much.

She was quiet for a moment. “I am still sorry it did not end as you wished.”

“As am I.”

“Was she at least a fair horsewoman? I seem to recall a conversation when you were, oh, thirteen, perhaps? You blushed rather red when you told me you planned to marry a fine horsewoman.”

Robert was surprised she remembered such a small thing. In truth, he hardly recalled such a conversation himself. “I am unsure, to own the truth. I imagine she had skill enough.”

An awkward silence fell, but Miss Reid did not seem to like silence. "I believe there is a deck of cards in here." She stood, looking around. He came to his feet as well.

She found the deck in the drawer of a decorative table against the wall and turned, holding it up with a triumphant smile. "Perhaps we can leave the personal confessions behind for a moment and amuse ourselves with a game."

Robert was too stunned by that broad smile to do more than nod.

But she was only a pretty face. Even if she had not come across quite as high and mighty in the end of this conversation as she had when he'd first arrived at her home, she was still a pretty woman who knew how to catch a man if she wished it. And he was determined not to be caught.

# Chapter 5

ISABEL EYED MR. COLLINGHAM FROM her spot on the sofa later that evening. She had a book but was not particularly focused on it. Papa said she did that often—used a book to keep others from speaking with her but without much interest in the story inside. She always laughed when he caught her eye overtop her book after a particularly trying dinner with company.

Mr. Collingham looked up then, and she looked down.

At least Aunt had not abandoned them this time. She was sitting on the cushion beside Isabel, though Isabel had a sneaking suspicion she was drifting off to sleep. And Isabel did not want to be left alone with Mr. Collingham again, so she set down her book and nudged her aunt softly.

The woman startled. “Oh dear, I do believe I was inattentive there for a moment. Forgive me.” She blinked rapidly and rolled her shoulders back.

“You must not have had a very restful afternoon after all.” Isabel watched her aunt. She had disappeared for three hours, leaving Isabel and Mr. Collingham to themselves, all for the sake of a rest.

Her aunt colored, and Isabel’s conscience twinged at the sight. She hadn’t meant to embarrass her.

But then Aunt Charlotte laughed and said, “You have caught me. I attempted to rest but fell into writing letters to friends instead.”

“One cannot blame you for wanting to keep up a correspondence with your friends.” Mr. Collingham entered the conversation, and his comment sounded like a rebuke of Isabel. A tactful one, but still. And here she’d thought they had reached a truce of sorts. Their afternoon had not been unpleasant. She had decided it was rather nice to have someone else here to take the attention off her. Elsewise, she might end up having to spend more time with her aunt than she could handle. Or more time undertaking Christmas



activities. Neither of those would bode well for her heart that seemed increasingly fragile regarding anything to do with her mother.

“Thank you, Mr. Collingham,” Aunt said. “But my niece is correct; I ought to have been utilizing my time for what it was intended.”

“I was not trying to say that at all, Aunt. I was . . . I was simply making an observation.” Heat entered her cheeks. Neither her aunt nor Mr. Collingham believed a word she was saying. Isabel did not believe it herself.

It was more than embarrassing; it was enlightening. She had been upset for so many weeks now—ever since her life had undergone the upheaval of Papa’s marriage—that it seemed to be reaching a point of overriding her kindness and good judgment. And that was not a pleasant feeling.

“Be that as it may, I still ought to have been resting. But I am afraid I did not, and now I am quite tuckered. I shall head to bed.” She stood, raising her hand to keep Mr. Collingham from standing as well. “But please do not cut your evening short on my account. You young folk ought to take advantage of each other’s company while you can.”

And then she was leaving. *Again.* Isabel’s heart picked up its pace. “Can I escort you to your room, Aunt?”

“No, no, child, you stay put. I will send a maid in with tea.” Her eyes fairly twinkled as she left the room.

Isabel watched the door close and bit her lips together. Could she leave Mr. Collingham to take tea on his own?

“You are welcome to go back to pretending you are reading that book if you would like, Miss Reid.”

She turned around, spluttering. How did he do that? “Pretending? Hardly.”

He inclined his head in acceptance, which was somehow even more frustrating than if he’d forced her to prove it or argued that she was wrong. She pinched her lips. “*You* are welcome to retire if you have grown tired of my presence.”

“Your aunt is my hostess. I cannot offend her or take her hospitality for granted.” He crossed to the window, peering into the dark beyond.

She watched him, and with his back to her, she no longer needed to hide behind her book. It seemed they would be spending many hours together in just this manner if her aunt were to have her way. As Isabel had thought before, it was rather nice to have something to keep Aunt Charlotte from focusing too heavily on her . . . but was there something else there that Isabel could latch on to? Some way to make her aunt’s matchmaking not quite so . . . awkward?

“I do believe you need a new book. Your current one seems incapable of keeping your attention.”

Startled, Isabel jerked her gaze to where Mr. Collingham was watching her *in* the dark reflection of the window.

She set her book down. “I was simply thinking.”

He turned, a benign expression of potential interest. Benign. Grave, almost. Only occasionally had she seen a glimpse of the boy beneath the facade. And she would rather spend her holiday with the boy than the boring man.

That was it.

“It is clear my aunt is enjoying a bit of matchmaking with us. I think it best if we play along.”

“You wish to play along . . . to what end?” His tone was guarded.

“She is set in her ways. If we do not seem against it, I imagine she will not push overly hard. She may even lose interest.”

He nodded slowly, but he appeared to be mulling it over as he came closer. “We could endure the attention. And then, when I leave in a day or two, we need not see each other again.”

Well, that was blunt. It irked her that Mr. Collingham could come to such a conclusion. That they could *endure* for a day or two until he could escape.

She hadn't been in London long, and she was several years older now than when she'd had her Season, but no man had hinted that her company needed enduring then.

"Can you manage?" she said dryly.

He nodded, appearing entirely serious when he said again, as he sat in the chair beside her place on the sofa, "For a day or two."

She nearly scoffed. This man was ridiculous. Did he really think she would be clamoring for more days with him when it came time for him to leave? Forget Aunt's attentions—Isabel wished him gone now. "How lucky we are that it is not longer."

His eyebrows raised. Only marginally, but it was a change in his expression. The first she had seen in some time.

And that was part of her reasoning for this plan of hers—an idea had formed in her mind. Perhaps if her aunt was playing her games, Isabel could concoct one of her own: unsettling Mr. Collingham. Heaven knew the man needed someone to make him react in *some* way. What a boring existence, to meet everything in your life with such apathy. He even seemed to have approached his own engagement that way.

So yes, she would spend the next few days in his company, as she had suggested. But what she would truly be doing was teasing, coaxing, and downright annoying the man. It would be fun.

And, besides, it would prove a welcome distraction.

She glanced up at the ceiling then, and her lips fought to curve into a smile. "You may wish to return to your previous seat, Mr. Collingham."

"Why? Because it is easier for you to pretend to read your book when I am not so nearby?"

She nearly missed his slight jest, so focused was she on her own. "Oh no." She languidly picked up her book and flipped a page before pointing above their heads. "Because if you remain here, you may have to kiss me."

His gaze shot upward to the large bunch of mistletoe, and he scrambled to his feet.

She barely withheld a laugh at the mixture of horror and red-hot embarrassment on his face. It would seem the man could blush. Rather easily.

This was going to be fun indeed.

\*\*\*

Isabel sat in front of the drawing room fire, with a heavy shawl wrapped around her, and she was *still* frozen solid. That morning her aunt had coaxed her out of doors and into the garden to admire the “beautifully laden landscape,” and while she had not uttered a word of complaint, Isabel’s mind had been full of them. She absolutely detested the cold. It was yet another mark against the winter season.

“Your aunt sent me in to you.”

Isabel’s head turned sharply to the doorway, the residual pain in her shoulder flaring with the movement. Mr. Collingham stood there, back straight as the boards the maids used for scrubbing laundry. Her mind perked up, and she sighed loudly—dramatically. “Perhaps she intends *you* to warm me.” She cocked a brow and was gratified to see Mr. Collingham’s eyes widen, then dart away from her own. The sudden break in decorum on both their parts was oddly enlivening. Even if it was out of character for her to be so brazen. “I am jesting, Mr. Collingham. Did my aunt need something?”

“Only to know that her poor niece was not being left to fend for herself.” He glanced about the room, but it was only Isabel there.

“Ah. Well, do come in, then.”

He walked with measured steps. The boy she had known in childhood had always been reserved, but never so staid. Was it his failed engagement that had made him so? If that were the case, she rather wished they could have met a month or two before. A curiosity was growing within her to learn who he truly was beneath that gruff exterior.

“What have you been doing all morning to avoid her matchmaking until now?” she asked once he had sat.

“I was speaking with my coachman.”

“Is he well?”

“He is improving, but it seems he may have broken his ankle in his fall.”

Chagrin filled Isabel. Not once since they had arrived had she thought of how the man was doing. Instead she had been full of thoughts of herself and her comfort. It was embarrassing to admit, even to herself. She was not usually so sour—she could only blame the upcoming Christmas festivities and the recent events of her father’s marriage for her poor mood. During this time of year, she and Papa usually spent the time quietly tucked away—and alone. The only traditions they followed were those that helped their tenants. She could barely recall the last time they’d even lit a Yule log. They had tried the year after Mama had left them, as a sort of tribute to her. But even that small tradition had been painful.

Why, then, had Papa gotten married just before the holiday? Had he forgotten? Had he left Mama behind so fully?

Isabel both envied and resented him for it. Her new stepmother was a lovely woman. Isabel held nothing against her—except that together her stepmother and Papa had taken their fractured family and altered it forever. In doing so, it was as if Isabel were losing her mother all over again. Her hand moved absently to her throat, where Mama’s locket lay tucked beneath her bodice.

“It seems I’ve lost you to your thoughts.”

Isabel blinked. “Oh, I do apologize.”

He was silent, and she could feel his gaze on her face.

“Might I ask what you were thinking on?”

Isabel glanced his way, then back. She felt discomposed. Vulnerable. She did not like to be seen this way, and it made her throat close up to think of speaking her thoughts, so she shook her head. “Tomorrow is St. Thomas’s Day.”

His face seemed carved of stone. Would that she could hide her feelings so entirely. “Indeed it is.”

“My aunt has the kitchen staff cooking wheat for the widows.”

“Your father married a widow, did he not?”

Isabel nodded, with only a small hitch to the movement. “The widow Stapleton, yes.”

“Do you like her?” Why did his interest have to be piqued now?

“Very much.”

“If you say that again with an ounce of feeling, I may believe you.”

Isabel’s lips twitched, the teasing remark catching her off guard. “I am sorry. I would not wish anyone to think I thought ill of her. I do quite like her. She is very kind and very good to my father and myself.”

Again he watched her. “But?”

Isabel shook her head. “But nothing. That is all.” Except that was not all. Her new stepmother had only one flaw, and it was not her quiet way of speaking or her permanently affixed smile. It was that she was not Mama. And Isabel hated that she could not welcome the woman to the family without that underlying confusion and resentment about what the woman’s presence would do to Isabel’s and Papa’s barely repaired existence.

Mr. Collingham made a sound of pondering but did not force the subject.

“Tell me more of your near-betrothal.” She peeked over at him, anxious to see his expression.

He surprised her by groaning loudly and looking toward the ceiling. “I left London so I would *not* have to speak of that any longer.”

She was shocked by the display of frustration. And a bit pleased she had managed to break his outer shell, even if just

for a moment. Plus, she'd turned the conversation from herself. "But, surely, speaking to an uninterested party is not the same as speaking to some gossipmonger who only wishes to glean some information to share."

"Do you mean to tell me you are not one to gossip?"

Isabel laughed outright. "How could I? I hardly socialize with anyone beyond a few neighbors and our vicar. And, I can assure you, he looks down quite severely on gossiping. I would not wish to be the subject of his next sermon, so I would never share your personal misfortunes with him." She widened her eyes with pretended fear, and it had the desired effect: Mr. Collingham nearly smiled. Nearly.

"Even so, this is the last thing I wish to speak of. And, clearly, your father's marriage is a topic you do not enjoy. So might we call a truce? I will not pry for information if you do not pester me about my engagement."

"Why is it that you would 'pry' whilst I would 'pester'? That would indicate you find me what? Annoying? How very rude." The shawl slipped from her shoulders, but she did not pull it back up. She was not particularly cold any longer.

"You are impossible, Miss Reid."

"Why, thank you."

"It was not a compliment."

"Neither was calling me annoying. I imagine eventually your conscience will catch up and you will feel so terrible for all your little insults that you will have to pay me an incredibly large compliment. I am thanking you in advance. That way, I can simply bask in the adoration you will bestow on me when the time comes." She saucily lifted her shoulder, with a smile playing across her lips.

A chuckle escaped Mr. Collingham. *A chuckle!* "Were you always so outrageous, or is this a new development?"

Isabel tapped her chin with a finger. "You know, I am not entirely certain."

He shook his head. "Now that I think on it, I do recall you

throwing the most incredible tantrums in the nursery when you were not allowed to join the adults for dinner.”

She gaped at him. He recalled that?

“But your mother would always come up and bring you a particular plate and eat her supper with you when you did, so I suppose you were effective even if you were not subtle. I considered attempting such a display, but somehow, I am not sure my parents would be as pliable.”

Tears sprang unexpectedly to her eyes at the casual remembrance of her mother and all the memories that came with it. Her mother would do that often—join her for supper in the nursery. She’d said often that children were far more enjoyable to be around than adults. When they’d stayed here at Aunt Charlotte’s house for the holidays, the family had *always* had dinner in the nursery, each of them sitting on short seats too small for their adult bodies. Isabel could even remember Uncle Phillip’s deep chuckle, Mama’s and Aunt Charlotte’s near-identical peals of entertainment, and Papa’s broad grin.

Did Papa grin like that any longer? If she were honest, he did seem to lately. He was happy with the widow Stapleton.

But perhaps Isabel appeared happy as well, when in truth she sometimes feared she’d never be happy again.

“I am sorry. Was it something I said?” Genuine fear laced Mr. Collingham’s words, but Isabel could not even bring herself to look at him to see if she’d elicited a new expression from him.

“No, no, I had simply . . . forgotten that memory.” She swiped at her eyes, praying her nose was not red now and she could sweep aside any evidence of the tears altogether.

It was quiet for several long moments, and she stared into the fire until she felt composed enough to look at Mr. Collingham. His face was unreadable yet again, but then he leaned his elbows on his knees and grasped his fist with his other hand, looking down and then back at her. “Occasionally, a memory of my mother will surface and surprise me too,” he said.



Isabel nodded—a small action, but she knew he saw it.

“People say time heals all wounds, but I do not believe that is true. I think time strengthens us to be able to bear the wounds better.”

Oh dear, now the tears were resurfacing. She searched her mind for something to say and could only default to teasing, if only to stop those tears from managing to escape. “Is that how you feel about your engagement?”

He tilted his forehead just a touch, spearing her with a dry look. “Well, that is the last time I attempt to make you feel better.”

She ducked her head. “I apologize.”

“Don’t. I understand better than most how you feel.”

Her heart twisted oddly at his words. Was this the first time someone had shared such a sentiment? It made her feel less alone. Less . . . lost.

“Thank you.”

He nodded that staid nod of his before coming to his feet, but a small smile seemed to haunt the corners of his lips. “Now I shall leave you be; I believe your aunt will be happy with the half hour we have passed.”

Isabel looked to the clock. Had it been that long? It had felt as if it were only a handful of minutes. She shook her head slightly, then met Mr. Collingham’s gaze. He was waiting for her to respond, so she smiled. “Certainly she will be. Enjoy your afternoon, Mr. Collingham. And tell your coachman I am hoping for a speedy recovery.”

With a small bow, Mr. Collingham left the room.

Isabel pulled the shawl back over her shoulders, watching the fire wave and crackle in the grate. The room seemed to grow a bit darker in her solitude, which was odd because solitude was what she enjoyed. What was comfortable.

Was it not?

# Chapter 6

AS IT HAD BEEN THE day before, and the day before that, Robert's first action when he awoke was to stride to the window and survey the snow.

It was unchanged. If anything, it seemed to have grown icier with the lower temperature of the night. He ground his teeth. Was there any way he could return in this weather? The carriage could not traverse the snow, but perhaps his horse could. It would be cold, yes, and potentially too far for him to ride exposed to the elements. Plus, he would be leaving Stephen.

He pushed out a frustrated breath. For the time being, he would accept his fate.

So he dressed and made for the breakfast room. Perhaps he would run into Lady Anderson and be encouraged to find Miss Reid.

His step faltered. Did he actually wish to be encouraged to do that? If he did, then certainly it was only for the sake of another's company to pass the time.

A door opened farther down the corridor just as he was about to descend the steps. His gaze met Miss Reid's. Did he imagine it, or had her expression brightened at seeing him?

And why did that possibility make his lungs trip over a breath?

"Oh, Mr. Collingham. How do you fare this morning?" That was a far different greeting from the one she'd given him only a few days before, when he'd arrived at her house.

"I am well, thank you. You are up rather early."

"I had hoped to help with the preparations for St. Thomas's Day. My aunt does not think the widows will be able to travel in this weather, so she is sending the servants out with hand sleds to deliver the goods." A small smile appeared on her face as she came closer. "She has promised them hot wassail and a

feast belowstairs for their efforts.”

“Yes, the snow is still quite high. And it appears rather icy.” By silent consent, they began walking together down the stairs.

“Ah, you have already seen the weather conditions . . . I imagine you were checking to see if you could escape today. If you are truly anxious, I am certain my aunt will lend you her sleigh and mules.”

The thought had crossed his mind, but he was finding he was content waiting for better weather. “If she does not mind, I may utilize them to get a letter to my father through the closest town, but it would be better to wait until I can return home with my coachman.”

“Dare I hope it is because you actually may enjoy our company?”

“Certainly not.” But against his will, his lips tugged upward.

“You are right; I should not even hope. How preposterous of me.”

They had reached the entrance hall, and things were all abustle. Miss Reid grabbed Lady Anderson’s arm as she passed by them at a quick pace. “Aunt, how long have you been at this? Here I thought I’d gotten up early enough to help, yet you seem almost done.”

“Oh, Isabel, Mr. Collingham! Come, come, you can help bundle these to the hand sleds.”

Miss Reid fastened on her heavy cloak, took the provisions from her aunt, and exited through the front door. For a woman who seemed to hate being forced out of doors, he was shocked to see the ease—the near excitement, even—that she exuded as she hurried outside.

“Thank you for your help, Mr. Collingham. I am certain when you set out to bring my niece to me, you did not anticipate such a stay.”

Robert pulled his eyes from the door to meet the gaze of Lady Anderson. He thought he saw a twinkle in her eye. “I do

not mind in the least.”

She smiled, then handed him a bundle to take outside.

The brisk wind met his face the moment he stepped out. All around him was white, save for the dozen servants bustling about with likely a dozen sleighs. His eyes widened at the sight. The bundles were large—far more extravagant offerings than he usually saw the upper classes give. It nearly made him rethink his beliefs about Society as a whole. Or, it might have, if his beliefs were not so deeply rooted and so deeply strengthened by his own experience.

Still, he could not help stopping to watch the chaos of preparation. These gifts would do a great deal for the widows. Even one such offering would have done a great deal for him as a child. Before the Collinghams had entered his life.

“Mr. Collingham, you seem quite stunned. It is not an emotion I expected you to indulge in.” Miss Reid’s voice was colored with humor as she pulled his bundle away, and he followed her to the closest sled. She set the bundle down and helped a servant tie it to the back. He shifted, rubbing his hands together and feeling out of place and ungentlemanly as he watched the young woman work.

So he returned to the house and collected another bundle from Lady Anderson before returning to Miss Reid’s side. She was just straightening up and waving goodbye to the servant who was delivering that sled.

“Is your aunt usually this generous?” He handed his box of goods to another servant as he spoke. He was truly quite helpful this morning.

Miss Reid cocked her head as she looked at him. “What good is wealth if you cannot help others with it? You ought to see the offerings that go out on Boxing Day.”

Robert couldn’t keep the surprise from his face. “Do you and your father participate similarly?”

“Our estate is not so grand, but we try to be generous with those under our care. Though, I should say that generosity should not be limited to holidays. As I said, what good is

wealth if you cannot help others with it? No good at all. And not deserved.”

She spoke plainly, honestly. And Robert felt the force of her words as if they were tightly packed balls of snow thrown directly at his heart. Never, *never* had he had such a conversation with a member of Society. Not even with the woman who was meant to be his wife. Come to think of it, he had never seen Cecilia do more than lift her nose whenever they passed a street urchin or beggar. Had she been so uncaring, and he’d not realized? He had been too focused on finding a suitable wife to solidify his place in Society.

Yes, he supposed she was selfish and overly invested in the superficial. After all, she’d snubbed him the moment she’d learned of his origins.

Sometime during his inner musings, Miss Reid had moved on to another sleigh. He caught up to her and bent down to help her tie down the box of food and clothing. “You are quite unlike the ladies in London, Miss Reid.”

She spared him only a glance. “Because I am not so refined as to refrain from tying knots in the snow?”

“Well, yes, perhaps that too.”

She shot him an annoyed look, and he allowed a brief chuckle. “But really because you are far kinder than they.”

Her hands stilled. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

She straightened, brushing snow off her gloves and onto her cloak. “I believe that was the last of them.”

Robert turned, surprised to see only a couple of sleds left, with bundles already attached, and a few servants preparing for the cold errand of delivering them. Lady Anderson was waving at them from the front door. They moved in her direction.

“Isabel, Mr. Collingham, I wonder if I might impose horribly on the both of you?”

They exchanged a glance, and Miss Reid spoke first. “Of

course, Aunt. What do you need?"

"Poor Tommy took sick this morning, and I was counting on him delivering the last of the sleds. It is to Mrs. Harrows—do you recall her? She knits the most beautiful baby blankets. I believe you may even have one from your youth." Miss Reid nodded, so her aunt continued. "Would you two be so kind as to deliver her goods? It should not take you long. Her home is the closest of them." There was true concern in her voice, as if she hated to put them out, but beneath it, there seemed to be a small amount of glee. This was another matchmaking mission, to be sure.

But they had agreed to no longer fight Lady Anderson, so it was not surprising when, after a quick glance his direction, Miss Reid nodded again. "Let me change my shoes and grab my muff. I shall be ready in but a moment." Then she made for the house.

"She truly is such a dear," Lady Anderson said, watching Miss Reid with fondness as she disappeared.

Robert had worn his heavy coat—the only one he'd brought—and did not need to change. So he only nodded.

"You two grew up together, did you not?" Now Lady Anderson had turned on him.

"Not exactly, no. My family has a hunting box bordering her father's estate. We came together yearly for a visit surrounding the hunt."

Lady Anderson nodded. "Yes, I recall my sister mentioning such visits. She always loved the remote location of her home, though I never could convince her that coming *here*, even farther from Society, was far more enjoyable." Her eyes twinkled with a memory.

Robert nodded, unsure what he might say.

And then Miss Reid returned, and they busied themselves ensuring the goods were tied to the sled. Once finished, Robert took hold of it, Miss Reid beside him, and they began their trek through the snow.

"Do you know the way?" he asked.

Miss Reid nodded. "Mrs. Harrows's cottage is not far. Just beyond that hill. Aunt preferred the widows' cottages to be nearby so she might visit them frequently. They are not actually her tenants but her nephew's, who inherited my uncle's title. This was Aunt Charlotte's favorite of the title's estates, so he gave it to her for her use so long as she wishes it. If my father is to be believed, though, she may move to her daughter's soon. One can take solitude for only so long." Guilt seemed to lace her words, and Robert looked sideways at her. But then she pointed ahead. "We take a right at that copse of trees. Then there is a hill. Her cottage is just beyond that."

He followed the directions, slowing his pace to keep with hers until they reached the top of the hill.

"You know . . ." Some amount of mischief had entered Miss Reid's voice. "This hill would be perfect for a bit of sledding. And we happen to have a sled."

He cocked his head at her in disbelief. "I cannot say I have ever sat upon a hand sled in my life."

"I imagine not. Most of England's climate is milder than we receive here in the far north. But that is even more reason to try." A shiver racked her shoulders, but she ignored it. "Come. It will be fun!"

And faster. And she seemed truly cold.

"Besides," she added, "if my aunt is looking from a window, she may see us sit upon the sled together, and then all her matchmaking dreams would be realized." She laughed, and the pure noise carried in the crisp, frozen air.

Robert sighed but did not do a great job of infusing it with much feeling. He was actually looking forward to the short sled ride, though he'd never admit it. "Very well. Is your shoulder recovered enough for the exertion?"

Her eyes claimed his, a note of surprise in her expression. "Yes, thank you. It is much improved."

He nodded and then, her visage losing the curious look, she grasped her dress enough to perch on the front of the sled, just behind the goods strapped into place.

It was not until Robert began lowering himself behind her that he realized the intimacy of the action. It was ungentlemanlike in the extreme. But then he had settled himself into place, and it was too late, with Miss Reid yelling, "Ready! And . . . go!"

Together they pushed off with a jerk. Without thinking, Robert slipped an arm around her waist to keep both of them from tumbling off the sled altogether.

Much good it did. The hill was not particularly high, but it was high enough for them to gain a speed that sent them straight into a snowbank and falling from the sled in a pile of coats, limbs, and laughter. Robert made it to his feet first, reaching down to help Miss Reid, who must now be far colder than before. But she was smiling that wide smile, and combined with her red nose and cheeks, it was altogether enchanting.

And he did not even wish the word from his vocabulary this time. It was the only one that fit.

"Come," she said on a laugh. "Let us take Mrs. Harrows's things to her before they freeze in the snow!"

The widow welcomed them warmly, her face creasing with wrinkles as she smiled broadly at the sight of them, ushered them to her fireside, and insisted they stay till they were dry. But they stayed even longer still when Miss Reid suggested they play a game of cards, and Robert noticed the lack of firewood available to Mrs. Harrows and went outside to cut some.

They both left with hand-knitted scarves.

And Robert, at least, left with far more admiration for Miss Reid than before, which was altogether more dangerous than their flight down the hill had been.

Another shiver racked Miss Reid's shoulders as they made their way up the front stairs of her aunt's house. Without a thought, Robert offered his arm. "You are cold; let us return you to a fireside."

Lady Anderson was nowhere to be seen, and the sun, though



still well in the sky, was on the afternoon's side rather than the morning's.

She nodded. "I cannot disagree with that. I quite detest winter's weather."

"I have noticed."

A small laugh escaped her.

"And yet you came out to help the widows," he said.

"Of course. Some things are worth neglecting one's own comfort for."

He stared down at her. How had he ever found her aggravating?

They entered the front door, and she pulled her hand from his arm, undoing her cloak. Then she turned that mischievous smile on him. "You seem unaffected by the weather. Did your almost-betrothed enjoy the cold as well?"

And just like that, he found her aggravating again.

A scowl must have shown on his face, for Miss Reid laughed lightly. "I think I am coming to understand your expressions, Mr. Collingham. Are you vexed with me?"

"Oh no. I quite enjoy young ladies digging into my personal affairs."

Like butter melting across a warm roll, Miss Reid's smile grew. "You must forgive me. It is only that your affairs are far more interesting than my own."

He saw the opportunity to turn the conversation on her and grasped it. "You never had your own almost-engagement, then?" For some reason, asking that question made his stomach tighten.

"Actually, I did."

His midsection grew even more tense. "Really?"

She nodded as she walked farther into the house. Apparently, they were going somewhere.

"Is that all the information I am to receive?"

She looked over her shoulder at him. “Because you shared so willingly?”

Thankfully, she was again facing forward when the smile crept upon his face. He tamped it down. Gentlemen did not show an excess of entertainment. “I at least told you her name.”

“Under great duress.”

“Very well.”

Stopping in front of the closed doors to the parlor, she quirked her eyebrow at him. “His name, if you must know, was Jeremy Bennet.”

Despite himself, Robert racked his brain for a face to go with that name. He came up empty.

Miss Reid sighed heavily. “It was quite the affair.”

Jeremy Bennet sounded like a horrible individual. “Oh?” Why did that single word sound so strangled?

“I believed myself truly in love with him. We were set to run away.” Instead of opening the parlor doors, she leaned against them, a faraway look in her eyes.

This time he could come up with no response. He could hardly come up with a reason for why he felt so unnaturally upset at that moment.

“But a maid caught me packing a bag and told my mother. Together they convinced me to wait until I was at least ten years of age before deciding just whom I was in love with.” She sighed again, lifting her shoulders in an almost regretful manner, and pushed into the room.

“Wait.” Robert followed her, leaning forward an inch or two. “You were not even ten?”

She sat, aiming her wide smile his way and speaking in a conspiratorial whisper. “I was not even *eight*.”

He narrowed his eyes, not sitting. “And who was this Jeremy?”

“Our steward’s son.”

“Your . . .” Robert pressed his eyes closed. This woman would be the death of him.

“Steward’s son,” she provided. Then a small laugh escaped her. “You ought to have seen your face. You were *aghast*.”

He opened his eyes. “I was concerned for your reputation.”

“Of course.”

He crossed his arms. “I was.”

“I said I believe you, did I not?” But her tone said anything but.

He was about to groan most heavily—for that was the only response he could think of—when Miss Reid shivered again and pulled a blanket over her lap. The fire in the grate was unlit, and for the first time, he realized how chilly the room was.

“I will ring for a servant to light the fire.”

Her lashes lifted. “You are much too kind to me, Mr. Collingham, even when I vex you.” He opened his mouth to make a retort, but she cut him off. “And, yes, I know that I vex you. But that is neither here nor there. The servants have been busy long before the sun today—it would be cruel to give them more work. I can manage.”

But even as she spoke in that flippant way, she shivered again.

“Then, let us find another room.”

Her eyes widened dramatically. “But the *view*, Mr. Collingham.”

Rather than fight her and her dramatics, he turned to the fire. “Very well, then. I shall light it myself.”

“Do you know how to light a fire?”

“Well enough.” He shrugged out of his coat, ignoring the loud portions of his mind that were yelling at him about how ungentlemanly the action was, and laid it across the back of a chair. Then he rolled up his shirtsleeves. He did not have a valet here and did not wish to inconvenience the household

even more by requiring extra care be taken with soot stains.

“What would *this* do to my reputation, Mr. Collingham?” The teasing tone in her voice made his lips quirk, but he did not release the smile. Largely because he was coming to believe that she was *trying* to vex him.

He knelt before the hearth after locating the tinderbox and pulled out the flint and steel. It took several strikes before he lit the tinder on fire, then several moments of blowing on the spark to create a small flame. He grabbed for a spunk, caught it on fire, and lit the tinder in the grate before placing the damper back on the tinder in the box. Then he sat back on his heels until he was sure the fire had caught.

“Well done, Mr. Collingham! What other tricks do you possess?” Miss Reid had come to stand by the fire, smiling down at him. Smiling. Not judging him for performing a menial task. Not laughing at his ability to even manage such a thing.

His brow creased.

“Are you not happy with your efforts?”

He shook his head. “I hope it will warm you quickly.” He rocked backward to propel himself to his feet. “I ought to find your aunt and see if there is anything I can assist her with.” Unable to meet Miss Reid’s eyes, he nodded in her direction, pulled his shirtsleeves down, and grabbed his jacket as he made his escape.

He had let his guard down too far. Had acted without thought. Had shown Miss Reid a glimpse into his former life. And that was unsettling.

Yet somehow even more unsettling was the fact that she had thought nothing of it. She had even praised him. And that only confused him even more.

# Chapter 7

ISABEL WOKE WITH A HEAD cold. It hurt terribly and made the light shining off the freshly fallen snow outside her window particularly potent. She pressed her eyes shut as her maid went for the housekeeper and a remedy or two.

Sickness was a miserable malady. Particularly a sickness that came with an aching head, because then whenever one sneezed, one's head hurt even more.

"Isabel? I hear you are unwell." Aunt's voice pierced her fog of pain.

Without opening her eyes, Isabel offered a wan smile. "Nothing one of your housekeeper's tisanes cannot help, I am sure."

Soft footsteps padded across the carpet toward the bed. "It is my fault, certainly, for allowing you to stay out in the cold so very long yesterday."

Isabel managed to peek one eye open. "Not in the least. I was hardly out long, and I would have insisted on helping one way or another. It is likely just our tumultuous journey here catching up to me. I will be well in a day or two."

Aunt made a sound of distress, pulling a chair up to Isabel's bedside. "Then it is still my doing. After all, I insisted on your visit." She clasped Isabel's hand in both of hers.

"I wanted to come, Aunt. Do not worry yourself over me." She stumbled over the words a bit, particularly over the falsehood that she had wanted to come. She had not. She had wished to spend the season at home, sequestered away from all parties and all festivities, as she had since the Christmas her mother had passed. Being with her aunt, as their family had always spent the holidays with her mother's sister, was sure to bring memories and pain and nothing but sorrow.

Yet, over the course of the last couple of days, Isabel had begun to feel comfortable. Mostly, at least. And therefore the

words were not a complete falsehood, even if she could not look directly at Aunt Charlotte while saying them.

Before closing her eyes again, Isabel saw a fleeting smile touch her aunt's expression. "I shall leave you to rest, then, my dear."

There was a pause, and then a light kiss was pressed to Isabel's forehead, followed by retreating steps.

For absolutely no discernible reason, tears pricked her eyes. She pressed the palms of her hands into her eyes and swallowed back the emotion.

\*\*\*

After a full day of rest, Isabel was feeling much improved, though still not particularly strong, so she was encouraged to remain abed for another day. Yet with her headache mostly gone, she was growing restless of being made to endure so much *rest*.

"Anne?"

Her maid looked up from her place beside the bed, where she was repurposing Isabel's stained travel dress into something else that would be useful.

"Would you be so kind as to find me a novel or two from the library?"

Anne nodded, stood, and quit the room.

Left alone with only her thoughts, Isabel gazed out the window. Snow was falling, as it had been for the last two nights. Another storm had come through, and though not as heavy as the one they'd traveled through, it was enough to further cover the roads.

That meant Mr. Collingham could not have left.

She touched her cheek. Why was she smiling?

The door to her chamber opened, but instead of Anne, her aunt peered around the corner. "You are looking much improved even from when I saw you this morning, Isabel!"

"Ah, does this mean I can traipse about the house again?"

Aunt pursed her lips, still hovering beside the opened door. “Of course not. I would not be able to forgive myself if exertion hindered your healing. But I did hear you were seeking out some entertainment.”

“Anne has gone to find me a novel.”

Aunt pressed her hands together with excitement. “I’ve brought you something far better, I think.” Then she stepped aside, revealing a very uncomfortable-looking Mr. Collingham.

Isabel’s eyebrows rose. Thank heavens she was clothed for the day, even if she was still abed.

“No novel can be better than good conversation.” Aunt was beaming between the two of them. Mr. Collingham seemed to be trying to remain unaffected. He was not succeeding—red tinged his cheeks. And Isabel was simply staring at him abashedly, her mind choosing that moment to recount the way he had looked in only his shirtsleeves as he built a fire for her. Heat worked its way into her cheeks.

“I’ve brought Anne back to be a sort of chaperone. I would stay myself, but I’ve much to do to prepare for the rest of our celebrations!”

Then Aunt disappeared, replaced by Anne, who slipped into the room with an amused look Isabel’s way.

Isabel *could* apologize to Mr. Collingham for the horribly embarrassing situation her aunt had put them in, but the opportunity to tease him a bit was far more tempting. She sat up straighter. Perhaps her aunt was correct—this may prove more interesting than a novel.

“Good heavens, Mr. Collingham, this is hardly decent.” That was quite well done. She nearly felt like patting herself on the back. The words had the perfect balance of reprimand and scandalized fear.

“I am well aware. I must—” He finally met her eyes, then paused. “Ah. You are teasing me.”

“Not in the least, I assure you. I am entirely appalled at the impropriety.”

“I assure *you* that I am beginning to understand how greatly you delight in teasing.”

“Now, that is not true.” She affected a pout.

“Lying does not befit you.” He crossed a few steps into the room, leaving the door ajar.

“It is no lie! At least, not entirely. I do not delight in teasing generally. It seems you bring it out in me.”

He cocked his head. “Truly? I wonder why that is.”

She blew out a breath. “I do not. It is clearly because you could benefit from a bit of gaiety. Did Miss . . . ?” She had grown used to bringing his near-betrothed up in almost every one of their conversations. It seemed the best way to get under his skin. And yet this time, speaking the lady’s name left a bitter taste in her mouth that caused her to cut off before finishing the question.

But Mr. Collingham clearly knew what she was about to say. “Go on,” he said. “Ask your question.”

Isabel hesitated, but she shook the bitter taste aside. “I was only going to ask if Miss Branford is the reason you are so lacking in merriment.”

“I was a gentleman even before meeting Miss Branford.”

“I am quite grateful I was born a lady, then. Being a gentleman seems quite the bore.”

Right there, at the corner of his mouth, a muscle moved. A smile, perhaps?

“It seems you did not need my conversation to entertain you, Miss Reid. You simply needed my presence to do so.”

“I do not know . . . you could always remove your coat and stoke the fire if you feel I am in need of further entertainment.” Isabel did not miss Anne’s wide-eyed look, but she ignored it. Heavens, perhaps her mouth was getting away from her just a tad.

Mr. Collingham stiffened, his hands pulling behind his back. “I wish to speak with you about that, in fact. I ought not to



have broken propriety in such a manner. You must forgive me.”

She answered without thought to teasing or vexing him. “Not at all. I will not forgive you. If I were to do so, it would mean I was sorry to have someone bestow such a kindness on me. I apologize for mocking you regarding what was truly a wonderful action.” The sincerity in her voice surprised her. Had all her years left to her own devices with only servants, a handful of village women, and her father to converse with left her so . . . honest?

Mr. Collingham said nothing, and yet again Isabel could not discern his expression. Instead he took up the chair by her bed—the one Anne had occupied before his arrival—and sat like a board. *After* moving it away a foot or two.

“Was that too forward?” she could not keep herself from asking.

He shook his head but did not look at her. Instead he ran his hands down his trouser legs to his knees. “Not at all. I . . . might I be frank with you, Miss Reid?”

“Certainly. I have been nothing but.”

Their eyes met. “Exactly. I find you refreshing.”

“Oh. Thank you?”

He nodded. That was all. It seemed that was the only frankness he’d intended to display. She smoothed out a wrinkle on her bed, her brows pulled together.

“Why does all of Society adhere to . . . to . . . simplistic, rote conversations that tell nothing of the person?”

She looked up in surprise at his harried words. He was watching her intently. It made a sort of warmth slip down her chest into her stomach. “Because that is the way of polite Society, I suppose.”

“But there is nothing polite about it. It sets acquaintances up to be nothing but acquaintances. It brings censure down on the only individuals who live without guile. It brings couples together, forms alliances, on the basis of *nothing*. How can

that be polite? How can that be good?"

Was her mouth ajar? She felt it was. It had to be, so stunned was she at the words tumbling from this man's mouth. Even his tone of voice was rougher, more unpracticed.

More attractive.

No, not that. Where had that thought come from?

"I apologize. I do not know what I am saying."

On impulse, she reached out a hand and laid it on his, though she had to reach awkwardly far to manage it. "Please do not apologize. That only makes us more like them." His look was questioning. "You know," she said, "like those horrid *polite* individuals." She shuddered.

And he smiled. Broadly, causing faint dimples to appear on his cheeks. She became rather fixated on those dimples.

That is, until Anne shifted loudly in her chair, causing it to creak and making Isabel pull back her hand hastily.

Mr. Collingham's smile dimmed but did not disappear. "Very well. We shall be impolite, then."

"Sounds scandalous."

A hint of his previous facade returned. "I mean nothing of the sort from it."

"Come now, Mr. Collingham, I thought you knew when I was teasing."

"I still have to ensure you know I mean nothing uncouth."

"Believe me, I am well aware. You are the picture of propriety."

"But not politeness, I hope."

"Oh, never that."

He returned her crooked smile with one of his own. Then he clapped his hands on his knees. "What do we do now? We cannot discuss the weather."

Isabel looked over her shoulder at the still-falling snow. "Even though the snow is the only reason you are here?"

He dipped his head solemnly. “Even so.”

“Very well. Hmm. I suppose we could . . .” She combed through her mind, her eyes lighting as she thought of the perfect pastime.

“I am rather terrified of that look right now.”

“Do not be!” she said. “I have simply decided what we ought to do to pass the time.”

He seemed like a man waiting to be hit, by the way he leaned back and squinted his eyes a bit. “And what is that?”

“Conkers!”

His shoulders slackened. “That old game children play?”

“I think, in this case, we could call it a childhood game impolite *adults* play.” She beamed at him, awaiting his response. He would likely disapprove. Perhaps he would scoff at her. The gentleman who had occupied her carriage on their journey here might even have tactfully insulted her.

But she never would have anticipated the response he *did* give.

He sprang to his feet.

“I have scared you that badly?” She lifted her chin to maintain their gaze.

“No, I simply assume I will be sent to find a conker. Would your aunt even have any? It is not as if horse chestnuts are in season.”

Isabel leaned toward him, pulling her legs up and resting her chin upon her blanketed knees. “She must have a few old ones stashed away. Those are better for playing anyway.”

“That is true. I shall find her and ask.”

Isabel stared at the door after he’d left. It would seem she had managed to break through the hard shell surrounding Mr. Collingham.

“You’ll excuse me for saying, miss, but I do not believe I have ever seen two adults so excited to play a children’s

game.”

Isabel could not keep back her grin as she looked at Anne.  
“I know. It is wonderful, isn’t it?”

# Chapter 8

ROBERT STRODE WITH PURPOSE BACK to Miss Reid's room.

Her room.

He swallowed heavily. This entire holiday was proving entirely different from what he'd anticipated. And he was not certain he was upset about that. But now he had to put the mental picture of her abed beside the one of her in her wet dress and lock both away far, *far* in the recesses of his mind.

Reaching her door, he knocked twice, awaiting the invitation to enter. When he received it, he left a wide gap between the door and frame. He had not been lying when he'd told Miss Reid he intended to remain proper.

"That was rather quick, Mr. Collingham." Miss Reid was smiling, sitting now on a chair by her window. She gestured to the chair beside her. He settled himself into it, grateful not to be at her bedside any longer. The intimacy of that was . . . suffocating.

"You were correct that your aunt had several set aside. I cannot imagine what for, but she was able to find me those and string with haste. I think she may be jealous of our little game, even."

"My aunt has always had a playfulness about her."

"Was your mother that way as well?" He asked the question hesitantly. The last time he'd brought up her mother, he'd nearly reduced her to tears.

But this time it was as if a candle had been lit behind her eyes. "Oh yes. My mother was a veritable child, but only in the ways that are good, of course. I did not even have a nurse growing up—she wished to spend all her time with me. They wanted more children too. I believe her wish would have been to fill an entire household with small voices and laughter. But they were not blessed with such." The light in her eyes dimmed, and a sad smile twisted her lips. "She would have

had me married off and giving her grandbabies by now, I am certain.”

He needed to wipe that forlorn look from her face. Awkwardly, as he hadn't much practice in teasing or foolery, he said, “And yet you have not attempted marriage to anyone but the steward's son.”

Curls bounced like feathers against her cheeks as she shook her head, a smile tugging gently at her lips. “No. I have not.”

“A pity.”

“To my mother, I suppose.” The small smile grew, and he matched it with one of his own, ignoring that habitual voice in his head that told him to tread cautiously, to act perfectly.

He did not want to be perfect with Miss Reid. He was content just being with her.

And he was content not delving into the feelings behind that sentiment.

“Would you like to go first?” she asked, having already strung her string through one of the horse chestnuts. The conkers had already been in possession of holes, as if just waiting for a pair of children—or, in their case, a pair of impolite adults—to play with them.

“Why don't you? You may have played more recently than I, and watching you may give me a few pointers in how to succeed.”

She nodded vigorously, eyes narrowing as she surveyed the chestnut he held up in front of him. It dangled from a string, and he did his best to keep it still. Slowly, Miss Reid wrapped her string about her finger, taking aim. Then, with a flick, she let it go.

The point of the game of conkers was to break one's opponent's horse chestnut by striking it with one's own.

Miss Reid was not bound to win with that sort of sportsmanship.

“Were you aware that my chestnut is *here*, Miss Reid?” He gave his string a little wiggle, and she scowled at him.

“Yes. I simply wanted to see how it looked . . . over there.” She gestured in the other direction, toward the window, where her conker had flown before being pulled back to her person by its string.

“It was wonderful lighting, I am sure.”

“Indeed.” There appeared to be barely withheld amusement in her voice even while her eyes focused seriously on his chestnut again.

She let loose her conker, and again it flew wide.

Her scowl was aimed at the chestnut this time.

“Have no fear, Miss Reid, you have one more turn.”

“One! We have always played that each has five turns, not three!”

“Yes, well, that was before I saw how dismal you are and came to the realization that you need more time watching me than I need watching you.”

“You are horrid!”

“Perhaps in person but not at this game. That title, my dear, belongs to you.” He froze, the smile that had begun creeping up his cheeks freezing in place as well. *My dear?* Had he just used a term of endearment for her? Out loud, even?

Miss Reid seemed to notice as well, if the slight pinkening of her cheeks was any indication. But she waved his words off. “Very well. I shall take my last turn with dignity, if only so I can watch you perform just as poorly as I have.”

She smiled over at him, but it seemed less confident than before. Not exactly *lacking* in confidence . . . but with a measure of shyness he’d not seen in her in the several days they’d been in one another’s company. Unfortunately, it only endeared her to him even further.

With extreme poise, Miss Reid took her final shot. She brought her hand with the string wrapped about her finger up to eye level, squinting at her intended target.

Then she freed the string.

As he was not watching to see if her chestnut met its mark but was watching her face, he saw the entire thing. The string unwrapped from her finger, spun in a circle, and landed between Miss Reid's eyes. She flinched backward, her face scrunching up at the impact. The conker fell uselessly into her lap, string and all.

Robert sat forward, reaching for her before he could think of the brilliance of that action. His hand reached out, his thumb grazing the side of her face while he looked for any apparent injury. Only, the moment his skin touched hers, all his thoughts seemed to focus on that one small point of contact. Tendrils of warmth snaked around his wrist, working their way to his chest. What was this? He stared at his hand with wide eyes. *What is this?*

“Mr. Collingham, I assure you, I have only bruised my pride. You need not look so concerned.”

As if touched with a branding iron, he recoiled backward. He ran his hand down his trouser leg—perhaps that would remove the burning sensation he still felt. “Ah yes, I . . . I am glad to hear it.”

She cocked her head to the side, and he was certain she was about to let loose some teasing remark. He needed it just then. Some normalcy to this very abnormal situation he'd found himself in.

But she did not. In fact, she let out a low, breathy sort of laugh. It made a shiver run down his spine even as awkwardness enveloped them.

He cleared his throat, but no words came.

She brushed her curls from her eyes but did not look at him.

“Here you are, sir.”

Robert nearly jumped from his seat at the voice. Miss Reid's maid stood at his shoulder, holding out his horse chestnut. He blinked at it.

“It rolled away when you dropped it, sir.” She held it stoically, but he was certain he saw her eyes flit between himself and Miss Reid.



“Ah, thank you.” He took the conker.

The maid curtsied.

And Miss Reid sat up in her chair, recollecting her own chestnut. He was not looking at her, but all his senses seemed to have attuned themselves to her every movement in the last several minutes.

“Well, it is clear I need a bit more . . . practice.” Besides an awkward giggle, she sounded nearly like her normal self. Confident and teasing. “I will allow you to show me just how dismal my performance was.” She gestured at his conker, and he had finally reached a slow enough heart rate and clear enough mind to follow her words immediately.

“Yes, of course.” He straightened his shoulders. Gentlemen did not lose their minds over a simple touch. Surely it had been nothing but the heat of the fire or the intimacy of the situation that had him reacting in such a manner.

“Go on, then.” She held her conker out carefully, and he focused all his attention on it. With a well-practiced whip of his hand, he sent his chestnut straight into hers. It did not break, but it had clearly hit the mark. Beaming with pride, he met her eyes. They were astonished.

“A lucky hit, to be sure.”

He tipped his head, raising his eyebrows in dissent. “Very well, then. I shall take another hit.”

She lifted her chestnut, and again the two collided with his hit. He could not help the grin he gave her when she looked at him in disbelief. For some reason, he felt an inordinate amount of pressure to hit his mark once again. Perhaps to show that he was not as affected by their touch as he had felt. Or simply because he wanted to impress Miss Reid.

With a children’s game.

“You could not at least *pretend* to throw it wayward for the sake of my pride?”

“Would you do so for me?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you have your answer.”

A wry grin touched her lips. “You have one more hit.”

“I shall make the most of it.” The seconds stretched as they took their places yet again.

Flicking his string, he sent the chestnut flying. This time, not only did it meet its mark, but it also cracked the chestnut open, sending it tumbling toward Miss Reid. The fragments collided with her neckline, and she stared down at them as they landed in her lap.

And then she clapped. “You’ve another hidden talent, Mr. Collingham! First driving coaches, then building fires, and now conkers champion—I do believe you are not what you say you are!” She laughed through her words, but Robert felt them deeply.

He was *not* who he said he was. Not in the least.

What would Miss Reid think of *that*?

“However did you keep up that skill?” She was gathering up the chestnut pieces, which he could not help her with due to the nature of their location, but she looked up at him questioningly.

“I admit to playing more regularly than most.”

She stopped her gathering. “Truly?”

He only nodded.

“With whom?”

“Children, of course.”

She cracked a smile. “Oh, you mean you do not know many impolite adults willing to play the game with you?”

“I am afraid I have only one of those.”

“I knew I would come to hold a special place in your heart.” She went back to collecting the chestnuts, tucking them into a handkerchief and handing them to her maid, who then left the room with the small bundle, leaving the door wide open in her wake.

“What children?” Miss Reid resumed her questioning. “You haven’t any nieces or nephews.”

A prickle of discomfort touched his shoulders, causing them to tighten. “No, I haven’t. I . . .” How much should he divulge? Before this week, the answer would have been a simple and ready *none*, but Miss Reid was unlike anyone of his acquaintance. And something loosened his tongue. “I spend time at the foundling hospital in London. Conkers is a favorite there. I have to keep up the reputation I’ve gathered, of being undefeatable.”

What was that look in her eye? Was she staring at him with pity or disgust? Even just curiosity might have been too much for him just then.

“I have tried to convince my father to fund a foundling home of sorts in the village, but he does not believe the need is great enough. He has plans for a school though. And a charity fund to help any who cannot help themselves.”

Robert watched her warily. That was all? No questions as to why a man of his standing would choose to frequent a hospital for unwanted or unclaimed children?

“There is always a need,” Robert said.

Miss Reid nodded slowly, her expression contemplative. “Would you be willing to talk with him if you are still in the neighborhood when we return after Christmas? I am sure he would appreciate any insight you can give.”

Why had Robert not even thought of the future? Even a few weeks into the future? At some point, perhaps that very hour, he’d begun to think of his time with Miss Reid as a guarantee. He hadn’t thought there would come an instance in which he would, perhaps, not be in the same home as her. Not even the same neighborhood.

How had he let that happen?

“Certainly.” He hoped none of his internal disorder showed through his voice. It did not seem to, at any rate.

Miss Reid’s maid returned, this time with a tray of tea. “Lady Anderson requested I bring this to you both.”

Robert stood and pulled a table near them so the maid could lay the service. His eyes lit on something at the same moment Miss Reid laughed.

“Hidden amongst the tea? Come, Anne, was this my aunt’s doing?”

The maid stopped mid-preparation to send her mistress a questioning look. Miss Reid leaned forward, plucking the bit of greenery from beside the pot of tea. As she held it forward, Robert’s initial thoughts were confirmed.

“It is not enough to have mistletoe hidden in every doorway, window, and corridor, but now it must be in our tea as well?”

“I apologize, miss. I did not see it there.” The maid—Anne—had a measure of surprise in her voice.

With a teasing glint in her eye, Miss Reid turned toward Robert, brandishing the mistletoe. “Mr. Collingham, I find myself feeling festive. Do you think we ought to hang this in my room?”

Robert stood. “I think that means it is time for me to leave you to your own devices.”

Her smile was near-blinding, her chin tipped up to keep his gaze. “You are no fun.”

He bowed, already moving backward toward the door. “I am quite fun. I am simply impolite and no longer feel a need to remain somewhere I do not wish to be.”

She leaned forward, somehow keeping him from slipping through the door with that magnetic pull of hers. “You do not wish to spend time with me, Mr. Collingham? And here I thought I was beginning to endear myself to you.”

Far too much, and that was the problem.

“Good afternoon, Miss Reid. I hope you will recover your full strength soon.”

And he escaped none too quickly.

# Chapter 9

ISABEL HAD MADE IT ALL the way to the breakfast room before noticing the greenery. Somehow, amidst her head cold and her time in bed—and, she had to admit, her delightful afternoon spent with Mr. Collingham—she had lost track of her days. So the day before Christmas had snuck up on her.

“Isabel!” Aunt stood from the breakfast table to enfold her in an embrace, and though Isabel stiffened, she did not find the contact as shocking as it had been that first day. Nor the smile Aunt Charlotte bestowed on her too similar to her mother’s.

When her aunt drew back, Isabel could see beyond her ample form to the table beyond. Mr. Collingham stood rigidly beside his chair, a half-empty plate in front of him. He smiled at her, his shoulders relaxing.

Had someone asked her a week before, she would not have believed the man’s face capable of contorting into such an expression. Lowering herself into the chair between him and her aunt, she made a show of checking the ceiling for mistletoe above them. When her aunt had taken to perusing her mail, Isabel leaned over. “It seems you are safe this morning.”

“And a good thing that is,” he whispered back, half his mouth tilting into a smile. “I should hate to miss breakfast. You know, I never did get any tea yesterday.”

She widened her eyes. “How you must have languished away.”

“You will never know the extent of my discomfort.”

She smiled, the teasing exchange made even better by the fact that it came from *him*, of all people. Straightening back to her own seat, she took a sip of her drink. But when she looked in his direction again, he was still watching her, mouth still lifted in that half smile. Her heart tripped over itself, causing a new and not entirely unpleasant sensation to spread across her chest.

“I have asked Mr. Collingham to aid in finding a Yule log this year, my dear.” It would seem her aunt had finished reading her correspondence. “Perhaps you and I could help the servants hang greenery. I should hate to send you out of doors so soon after your sickness.”

“I do not mind.” The words tumbled from Isabel’s mouth, and she was helpless to stop them. “I can help Mr. Collingham. He does not know our woods so well.” More surprise flitted across her mind as she realized she had referred to Aunt Charlotte’s grounds—grounds she had not visited in years—as she might have referred to them when they had spent several months of every year here when her mother was alive. As her own.

Aunt smiled cheerily at the two of them. “You are correct. I believe Mr. Collingham will benefit far more from your company than going alone.”

Isabel avoided looking in his direction, certain her ears were turning pink as she realized how very brazen she had been. For the first time since they had arrived, Aunt was not throwing the two of them together in some matchmaking scheme. So, of course, *Isabel* had had to go and throw them together. Perfectly sensible.

“Well, I suppose I ought to change into something warmer, then.” She stood, rattling the dishes on the table and adding to her embarrassment.

“You’ve hardly touched your breakfast,” Aunt remarked.

Isabel grabbed a roll from her plate. “I find I am not particularly hungry this morning.” And avoiding either of their gazes, she walked from the room.

Once she’d had Anne set out a warmer dress, she would ask the maid to pilfer—or, rather, delicately remove—some pastries from the kitchen. And perhaps a hot cup of chocolate.

If only it were so easy to pilfer a bit of understanding regarding her mind’s current state. And, in addition to that, her heart’s, because both seemed to be acting of their own accord, and both seemed more than a little keen to spend more time in

Mr. Collingham's company.

\*\*\*

Isabel truly disliked the cold. But she was finding that she detested embarrassment even more. It was a new emotion, and she was ready for it to go back to being an emotion she did not much understand.

"I am happy to hear you enjoy my company enough to brave the cold," Mr. Collingham said with that new half smile of his. It made him horridly attractive. Emphasis on the *horrid*.

"For someone who does not participate in teasing often, you seem to be enjoying it a great deal as of late."

"I was under the impression that was your intention with all of *your* teasing."

She scowled at him.

He ignored her, stepping carefully through the snow and not appearing at all like he was about to be quite literally shaken apart by shivers as Isabel was.

"For fear of overindulging your pride, I must tell you that my being here has nothing to do with you," she said.

His eyebrows lifted, only barely, but she took it to mean he was interested in what she was about to divulge. Was it possible she had truly broken through his proper facade to get him to begin showing emotion? Or had she just come to know him well enough to understand what each of those minuscule movements meant?

How could that be possible, after only a week to renew their acquaintance?

"What is the true reason, then, if I may be so forward?"

"I have never spent a Christmas with my aunt and not gotten the Yule log."

His steps slowed as he looked over at her. "I thought you had not been here in a long while."

"It has been five years, yes."

A look of contemplation crossed his brow. “Since your mother passed?”

The question took her off guard, and she inhaled sharply, cold air overwhelming her throat for a moment. “Yes.”

He nodded, but his eyes held a question.

“We used to spend each Christmas here. My . . . my mother adored Christmas. Possibly more than my aunt.”

He nodded again. “I see.”

Attempting a nonchalant air, she pierced him with a reprimanding look. “That is my phrase, thank you.”

A smile touched his lips but disappeared as quickly. “Is that why you wished to spend the holiday alone?”

Emotion pricked her eyes. Years. For years she had not spoken of her mother. It was not for a lack of love, but for an overabundance of it. Her loss had done more than leave a hole in Isabel’s heart; it had taken her heart. It had felt as if the roof of her life were suddenly torn back, and no amount of carpentry could fix it. She simply had to live, exposed to the elements, with no control over the sunny days or the rainy ones.

The *only* hold she had, the only umbrella she could keep above her head, pretending it was a roof, was that she did not speak of her mother. Not even with Papa.

But Mr. Collingham’s presence in her life had changed that, and she found herself nodding. “Yes.” The single word did not break as she spoke; it was broken before it had left her mouth.

Mr. Collingham stopped his forward motion just steps from the forested area of her aunt’s grounds. He turned to her, his broad shoulders speckled with flecks of snow and his jaw tense. He opened his mouth, then closed it. When he finally spoke, his words were slow. Meaningful. “I had no idea, Miss Reid.”

“I do not walk around with an advertisement of my broken heart.” Her attempt at lightness fell flat this time.

A slow nod. “One never truly knows what darkness others



go through, do they? Even those under the same roof as themselves?”

“No, I do not suppose they do.”

His eyes pierced hers as he took a step closer. Were she to reach out, she would have been able to touch him, and his dark coat, dark eyes, and dark hat seemed to cloud her entire vision. “This trip must be incredibly trying for you,” he said.

Her shoulders sagged. The cold numbing her fingers and toes was forgotten as a particular sensation swept through her.

Understanding. She felt understood. In such a simple way.

Why did that make such an impact on her heart?

“I wish it were not. My aunt does not deserve the unfamiliarity I’ve treated her with.”

“I imagine she understands.”

Isabel lifted one shoulder.

“I apologize for any . . . judgment I laid at your feet when first we met.”

“You? Casting judgment? I felt not a moment of censure.”

His eyes crinkled with amusement.

Eager to leave some of the heavier parts of their conversation behind, Isabel cast a sly look at him. “I suppose I cannot blame you, regardless. You were, after all, suffering from a broken heart yourself. One cannot show to their best advantage in such a state.”

“Miss Branford may have bruised my pride, but she came nowhere near breaking my heart.” His decisive tone brooked no argument and rang true.

And it sent a splash of warmth through her chest.

Here she’d been under the impression that it was cold outdoors today.

They passed under the first of the canopy of trees, eyes seeking the best option for a Yule log.

“How, I wonder, does one become nearly engaged to

someone who does not even hold the slightest part of their heart?” Isabel asked, inanely curious, which brought out her more, as Mr. Collingham had called it, *pestering* side.

He scowled at her. “Not everyone has the luxury of marrying for affection, Miss Reid.”

“But I do not understand. You are wealthy, well-established in Society, and not unfortunate to gaze upon. You must have been capable of finding a woman who appealed to your emotions. What did Miss Branford have that drew you to her?”

His shoulders stiffened, and his more open expression closed off with a sharp slam. But she did not take note. She was so internally flustered at having shared so intimately of her past that she wished the same from him.

“My near-engagement with Miss Branford is now in the past. I should like to leave it there.” He walked briskly ahead, stopping in front of a tree.

“Was she very wealthy? Or very beautiful?” Isabel pressed. A feeling very close to—but certainly *not*—jealousy flared within her. What had drawn Mr. Collingham to Miss Branford? Did Isabel fall short in comparison to her?

Very well, perhaps there was a bit of jealousy involved in her questioning.

He ignored her words. “I believe this will do. Do you agree? I think I shall find the footmen to cut and haul it for us.”

He did not meet her eye, and finally, Isabel became aware of how rude she had been. Slowly, though he could not see it, she nodded her agreement. She had far overstepped, and for that, all her gentle teasing and prodding of the days past that had caused their relationship to become more comfortable was now for naught. He was as rigid and unyielding as he’d been that first day in her sitting room.

It felt as if a tight fist had taken hold of her lungs. “Yes, of course, this is a fine choice.”

He nodded sharply, setting off the way they’d come from, toward the back of the house, anticipating she would follow. She did, slowly.

After a time in which only the sharp, cold whistle of wind could be heard in the gap that had formed between them, he looked over his shoulder. She smiled weakly at him, unable to summon even a teasing grin. She felt horrid. It was clear that Mr. Collingham did not become close with anyone, and just as he had begun to do so with her—when he'd been so very kind and understanding to her—she had pushed too far. It was mortifying.

He seemed about to say something, but then the servants came into view, so instead he just slowed his stride, giving her time to catch up. It was a painfully slow walk—her feet had grown quite frozen, and if she was not mistaken, she was in need of a new pair of shoes. These seemed to be all too welcoming to the cold wetness of the ground, allowing it to seep in and freeze her toes even more.

They reached the first footman, and after a quick nod to Isabel, Mr. Collingham said, “I will escort you back to the house when I return,” his jaw tight.

“I will begin that way now.”

And they parted as he went to show the men where to find their chosen tree.

The house was not far, but still, likely due to her near-hobbling, he caught up to her before she had even reached the outer hedge of the garden.

They walked in silence for a time, and then Mr. Collingham let out a low sigh. “You, Miss Reid, are maddening.”

She winced. “I do apologize for my prying. I am afraid I may have spent so much time out of proper Society that I have lost my social graces. I went far beyond impolite and firmly into rude.”

With a huff, he shook his head. But the action seemed to be more at himself than her. Anxious, she peered sideways at him, trying to ignore the general iciness of her person. What had possessed her to come out of doors?

“Miss Branford, though it is horribly unkind of me to say, was not particularly beautiful nor particularly wealthy. That is,

I am sure many found her handsome, but I find my tastes lean . . . differently.” He eyed her briefly before looking stoically forward again. “But she was well-respected and the daughter of a baron, and we got on well enough.”

Questions upon questions bombarded the inside of Isabel’s mind, but she was a successful gatekeeper. “Many a person marries for connections or social standing” was all she said instead.

He raised his eyebrows. “Tell me, Miss Reid. Would *you* marry for connections?”

She barked a laugh and covered her mouth at the unladylike outburst. She honestly had been out of Society for too long. “Hardly. I was about to run away with my steward’s son, you’ll recall.” She could not help the teasing smile she sent him.

And he returned it.

How quickly animosity thawed between friends.

*Friends.* What a . . . strange word to use in describing her and Mr. Collingham. Were they friends?

“Yes, but that was over a decade ago,” Mr. Collingham said.

“I w-w-would appreciate it if you did n-n-not make clear my age, Mr. Collingham. I am well on the shelf, but I would hope the steward’s son would still see some blush of youth in me, were I to ask.” Her teeth clacked embarrassingly, the cold taking control.

His eyes swept over her, then looked at the house still some several hundred paces away. “I am sorry I have not a blanket or something to warm you.”

She shook her head. “It-t-t is n-n-nothing.”

He watched her as they walked. “Would you take my coat?”

“Then you would freeze.”

“I am of a heartier disposition than you.”

“And there you go with your insults. First my age, now my disposition?”

He chuckled and attempted to increase their speed but had to abandon that when she was incapable of keeping up. “What is coldest?”

“M-my feet. I believe my shoes are on their last leg.” She smiled at the unintentional turn of words.

He nodded once, looking at her feet. Then he met her eyes. “I am going to carry you.”

She stumbled, but he did not give her time to respond. It seemed that had not been a question or request—simply a notification of his intent. Hardly missing a step, he moved closer and swept her into his arms.

At the same time as her person experienced the feeling of weightlessness, her heart itself seemed to swoop up into the frigid air. It caused her breath to falter. It caused a blush to creep up into her cheeks.

In essence, it caused her to lose her head.

And then he said, in a voice low and close enough to her face to cause a shiver to run down her spine, “You have not lost the blush of youth, nor do I think your disposition lacking, Miss Reid.”

A nervous laugh escaped her. “But what, I wonder, does the steward’s son think of me?” *Why* was she still bringing that up?

A rumble of laughter responded in his chest. “I can assure you he agrees with me. I imagine he wishes he had run off with you after all.”

“Why, Mr. Collingham, are you flirting with me?” She had lost all control of her words. And her cheeks burned as they escaped her.

He met her eyes for a brief second. Perhaps not even that long. Then he looked forward, long strides shortening as they came nearer the house. “I do believe I am.”

Her cheeks burned even more. Any moment now, her hair would catch fire.

“Is that . . . agreeable to you, Miss Reid?”

“Mm-hmm.” She ducked her head.

“I am sorry, what was that?”

Gathering her courage, she glanced up at him. He was already watching her, his movement so slow he was hardly making any forward progress at all.

“Yes, that is quite all right with me.”

“Good.” His brow furrowed as he nodded, as if he was not so sure it was a good thing.

And Isabel suddenly had a new goal. Instead of teasing and bothering Mr. Collingham, she would convince him that flirting was indeed a good thing. So long as it was with her.

“Botheration,” Mr. Collingham grunted.

Isabel’s attention snapped to his face, but his was trained on the back doorway ahead of them. In which a certain plant hung from the frame.

“We could take another door,” Isabel said, hardly keeping the amusement from her voice.

“Or I could set you down and we could walk in separately.” There was some humor there, laced between his drily spoken words.

“But my feet are so cold,” she demurred.

“We will simply move quickly and hope not to be seen.”

She nodded. “Yes. A brave and valiant plan.”

He leaned forward, jostling the handle, then nudged the door with his foot, jumping over the threshold with a lopsided hop but successfully avoiding the kissing bough hanging prominently in the doorway.

“That was a close-run thing.” She laughed as he set her down just inside the servants’ entrance.

“At least we made it through with our lives intact,” Mr. Collingham said gravely.

And then she realized they were standing there, staring at each other with lovestruck smiles. Which was strange, as

neither was lovestruck. They could not possibly be. Not so soon. Not with each other.

# Chapter 10

“AH! THERE YOU TWO ARE.” Lady Anderson appeared in the doorway of the drawing room. After Miss Reid had changed into something warmer—and Robert had taken several bracing laps around the room in question—they had settled together beside the fire.

He’d intended to ask more about her family. And herself. And her wishes and goals in life, along with whether she would consider marrying in the future.

And would she, perhaps, consider a man of questionable origins who had recently become *not* nearly engaged?

It was rather a good thing Lady Anderson had found them.

Miss Reid turned a smile on her aunt that to Robert appeared less burdened than before. How had he ever found her selfish, haughty, and frustrating? Now he only found her to be the latter. But not for entirely the same reasons as he had before.

“We have found our Yule log, Aunt,” Miss Reid said, shifting in her seat, her blanket falling a bit from her lap before she snatched it up.

“Oh, very good! The servants are bringing in the greenery even now. Once you have warmed yourself enough, perhaps you two will be willing to help?”

“I am happy to lend my services to whatever you need, Lady Anderson.”

“Thank you, Mr. Collingham. You are too kind.” She patted him on the shoulder, but her gaze strayed back to her niece, who nodded her agreement.

Now that Robert knew the history between these ladies, so much of the holiday made sense to him. The women’s relationship had seemed to contain a level of hesitancy. When not undertaking her matchmaking schemes, Lady Anderson watched her niece warily. And until this moment, Miss Reid’s



smile had seemed false and her interactions with her aunt stiff.

It was no surprise if this was their first holiday together following Mrs. Reid's death.

"For the time being, if you would continue to keep Isabel company as she warms, that would be helpful indeed."

"I am warm enough, Aunt." Miss Reid began to stand, but Lady Anderson stopped her with a warm smile.

"No, dear, stay for a moment. It is dreadfully cold out there, and I know you do not have a fondness for the weather. I will collect you once the rest of the greenery is gathered."

Miss Reid settled back in her seat, eliciting a smile from her aunt. "There, perfect. What a picture you two make."

With only those startling words in parting, Lady Anderson swept from the room.

Robert turned wide eyes on Miss Reid, whose shoulders were shaking with silent laughter.

"I do not believe she is growing any less effusive in her matchmaking," Miss Reid said. "She may expect a proposal from you before you are gone, Mr. Collingham."

His mouth pulled into a smile—wholly unfamiliar until late. When had he stopped smiling?

"I will admit, I did not think you were capable of such expressions when you showed up at my home, so dour and aggravating."

He shook his head absently. "I should take offense, but in all honesty, your words mimic my very thoughts."

Her chin tilted to the side as she considered him. That look meant her next words would not be teasing but serious in nature. "Why did you give up smiling, Mr. Collingham? It seems a certain way of creating gloom in one's life."

With a heavy breath, he focused on the fire in the grate. "I think I have been so preoccupied with appearing . . . as if I belong in Society that I had forgotten how to enjoy myself."

Her brows furrowed. "That makes no sense at all. Of course

you belong in Society.”

Except he didn't. And the last person he had trusted with his reasons for it had snubbed him so totally. But Miss Reid was nothing like Cecilia. Nothing at all.

He cleared his throat, shaking back his shoulders. “In fact, I do not.” Let her judge him. Better he know now than when waiting for her to accept or refuse his proposal.

Not that he intended to propose. Yet.

“Mr. Collingham, I pride myself on being an intelligent woman, and you are making me feel a fool.”

He met her eyes squarely. He needed to see her reaction. With Miss Branford, he'd expected their relationship to be enough to have his origins mean little. How wrong he had been. He would not be wrong with Miss Reid.

“I was abandoned by my mother at birth to a foundling home. I have no notion of who my father may be. Indeed, I am not actually Mr. Collingham. It is only an adopted name, shared with me by my parents, whose hearts were large enough to take me in as their own.”

A shocked silence filled the room, the wind whistling against the window and the fire crackling in the hearth. But across from him came no sound. Miss Reid's eyes only widened, then returned to their usual size. Her gaze darted over his shoulder, then came back to his own.

He awaited the snub. The scoff. The laugh of derision. Certainly it was coming.

“You look as if you expect me to bite off your head, Mr. Collingham,” Miss Reid whispered, but she may as well have yelled it, so different was it from what he'd expected.

He could only stare.

“I do not intend that, if that puts you at ease.”

His eyes narrowed. Was she teasing him? Did she not realize what he'd just revealed? “Miss Reid, did you hear a thing I just said?”

Her head bobbed up and down. “Of course. I am simply trying to determine how you expect me to respond. I would hate to disappoint you.”

He huffed in anger. “This is no jesting matter.”

A sharpness entered her eyes and she sat forward. “No, indeed, it is not. But you, sir, seem to believe I will send you to the guillotine for the confidence you have shared. And, not to appear self-centered or vain, but I take great offense to that. As if I would toss aside a friend because their past is marginally different than I believed. Let me make it abundantly clear, Mr. Collingham. I care not one whit for your origins nor anyone else’s. Why should we dwell on the past, except for how it has shaped our present? And presently I am very pleased with the man before me. Though, I suppose that is a falsehood, as I am actually quite miffed with you just now.”

It was his turn to widen his eyes. “You . . . do not care?”

She grimaced. “I suppose that was a bit harsh. I *do* care, Mr. Collingham. Simply not in the way you believe I do.”

What did that even mean? Could women never speak in a straightforward way? Why must he be obliged to hire a translator just to understand their meaning?

A soft, warm hand landed upon his tightly enclosed ones, and he jolted back. Miss Reid gave him an exasperated look, then replaced her hand on his.

Neither of them was wearing gloves. And he rather wished he did not have a cravat at the moment, as it seemed to be attempting to take his life.

“Might I call you Robert?”

*Good heavens, stake a man in the heart, would you?* He nodded. It may have been more of a jerk of the chin, but she seemed to accept it.

“Good. Robert, that is awful. But not for me. It is awful that you had to endure such hardship at such a young age. Awful that we live in a society that has so stifled your view of yourself to the point that you see *only* where you came from.

Awful that . . . that you seem to think me as awful as they are. But you forget, I am *impolite*, *pestering*, and whatever other unkind adjectives you've fashioned for me in your head. So know without a doubt that, to me, you are nothing but Robert Collingham, man of nondescript origin who ought to smile more."

A startled laugh burst from him.

"There. That will do for now." She withdrew her hand, and he felt the lack immediately.

"Thank you, Miss Reid."

"Oh, pish, call me Isabel. Heaven knows it will please my aunt."

But would it please her?

"I am not certain I can. It is beyond the strictures of—"

"If you say *propriety*, I will throw my blanket at you."

"You cannot believe that to be an impressive threat."

She drew herself up. "Excuse me?"

He coughed. "I meant, of course, that . . ." He was at a loss for words.

"Yes?"

"I . . . um . . . very well, I shall call you Isabel." Had his voice squeaked on her name? *Please say it was only in my head.*

But judging from her tamped-down smile, it was not only in his head. "Very good."

"Shall we find your aunt?" He placed his hands on the arms of his chair, readying to stand. This conversation was pulling him in two directions. One wished to move to the couch beside Miss—Isabel. The other wished to run for the hills.

He was a rather fast runner.

Mi—Isabel did not move. "She said she would come for us."

"But if she does not?"

“All the more time to become reacquainted. It would seem neither of us knows the other all that well, if today’s confessions are any indication.”

He nearly protested. He knew Isabel—it still sounded squeaky, even in his thoughts—was teasing and aggravating but that deep down she was incredibly caring and selfless. He knew that when she cocked her head, she was preparing an incredibly wise comment and that when her lips twitched, she had already made herself laugh over whatever thing she was about to say. He knew her mother’s death still haunted her. That her father’s remarriage brought both happiness and pain. And that she blushed adorably when he managed to flirt with her.

He knew her very well indeed.

“Tell me more, if you will,” she pressed. “How old were you when the Collinghams adopted you? I cannot recall a hunting season before I was . . . five or six? But I seem to recall you taking up precious playing space in my nursery by the time I was at least that age.”

He settled back in his chair. For the first time in years, it did not feel as if his shoulders were pinched backward. “Seven. I was seven when they adopted me. Mrs. Collingham—my mother, really—had been doing charity work at the foundling home. That is how we met.”

Isabel nodded, and the light in her eyes and the way she leaned toward him said she was truly interested. “And Mr. Collingham? Did she convince him you were meant to join their family, or was it a mutually understood feeling from the start?”

“To tell the truth, I am unsure. We have not spoken of it much as of late.”

“Why not? I imagine I would be bursting with questions for the both of them.”

He chuckled. “Yes, I imagine you would be.”

Her responding scowl was more adorable than fearsome. But then her features softened. “Did it hurt abominably . . .

when your mother passed?”

He couldn't put it into words, but the fact that she had not said, “adopted mother” warmed him from the inside. He nodded. “Yes. To own the truth . . . it hurt far more than I expected. I am unsure I have ever faced the pain full-on.” Even now the thought of it seemed to be closing his throat up.

“I can imagine.” And they fell silent. A companionable silence in which each was lost in their own thoughts. But he could guess what—or who—she was thinking about. Her mother.

The door opened and Robert straightened. When had he leaned toward Isabel?

“The servants are ready for us!” Lady Anderson clapped her hands together, her keen eyes swinging between the two of them.

The sheer amount of greenery they found awaiting them in the parlor was enough to cover every surface in the home, not simply decorate it.

“Anne, Sarah, you two begin in the servants' quarters. I want no cheer spared! Tyler, you take a few other footmen and handle the library and drawing room. Isabel, would you and Mr. Collingham decorate the banisters?”

Isabel nodded, reaching for a bunch of evergreen boughs. Robert came up beside her for the same, their shoulders grazing.

She looked his way and caught his eye, smiling. That smile seemed to brighten the air around her.

She had not snubbed him. She had not pitied him. In fact, it almost seemed his confession had . . . brought them even closer?

Dare he hope?

Only, as he took his bunch of boughs, he had to question himself. When had his thoughts become so entangled with Isabel? Certainly, they had known each other for years. But this week spent with her had gone beyond every hunting party

they'd met during. It was almost as if . . .

He swallowed, trailing after her to the staircase, eyes averted from the way her dress swayed as she walked.

It was almost as if his very heart were becoming involved.

“Do you think we ought to drape them or wrap them?” Isabel had unburdened herself of her pile of greenery and was surveying the stairs with her hands on her hips.

He was *not* looking at her hips. “Wrapped, I think. They will stay better that way.”

She nodded, still staring at the stairs. “Yes, I think you are right. Would you like to start at the bottom or the top? We can meet in the middle.”

“I will begin at the top.” The exercise would do him a world of good.

Except, even when he was nearly out of sight from her, she called out questions and comments to him, making it *very* difficult to push thoughts of her from his mind. He stabbed his smallest finger on a particularly sharp needle. “Ouch.”

“Goodness, I do not recall greenery being quite so . . . dangerous.”

Her observation made him laugh. “Do you not decorate your father’s home?” Her words had not required a response, but he felt he ought to give one.

“No. As I said, we do not particularly celebrate the season . . . though, my new stepmother may wish to, so I suppose that may change.”

“If it is too much for you to handle, you are welcome to spend your holiday with me at the lodge. I promise not to decorate an inch of the place.” That painted quite the cozy scene. Him and her taking warmth together in front of the fire. No aunt to interrupt them or—

Gads, he was losing control of his senses.

“I may very well take you up on that. Do you intend to be in residence more now than you have in the past?”

“Yes.” He did not need to think on that response.

No answer came, and he stepped away from the banister to better see her around the curve of the stairs.

She was biting her lip, but even from here he could see a smile forming.

Quickly he stepped back to his spot, so as not to be caught staring.

After some time, her voice came again. “In the carriage you did not appear too thrilled with the holiday season either. Was that to do with your failed engagement . . . or something else?”

He had wrapped enough greenery around the banister that he had made it to the curve. A glance her way had him noticing she was only six or seven steps below him now. “We nearly went an entire hour without you mentioning my engagement, Miss Reid. It must be a miracle.”

Her eyes crinkled. “Isabel.”

Oh yes. But could he say it out loud without that strange change in octave? Instead he answered her question. “Christmas in the foundling home was never particularly festive. I do not remember it well, but I have some recollections. And when I was no longer in the home, I found myself fairly disgusted with the extreme . . . excess in which people of my new station lived. My parents, of course, were very charitable. Much like you and your aunt, I think. But the large majority of polite Society ate and drank themselves into a stupor, danced the night away, and burned candles at an alarming rate, all without thought to those who were nearly freezing in their beds at that exact moment. The holiday became twisted for me, I think. It was painful to be aware of the dichotomy in stations but expected to participate in frivolity all the same.”

She had stopped her wrapping, her bunch of boughs decimated to only a few small branches and twigs. And a great pile of green needles.

Her entire focus was on him.

He laughed awkwardly. “I know that is a particularly bitter



thought.”

She shook her head. “No . . . I was simply thinking on how right you are. It is a horrid dichotomy. I cannot imagine the Christ child wished His birth to be celebrated in that way. He was, after all, born in the humblest of circumstances as well.”

Surprised, Robert dipped his chin. He’d never thought of that link he had with Christ. Never thought of how much like his own birth Christ’s was. Lowly, ignored by all but a few.

Gads, but that was a humbling thought.

“I am glad we are not having a ball or a major feast.” She gasped, hand covering her mouth. “I do not know if we are having a feast. I could ask Aunt Charlotte to stop that. Or . . . no, even better—give me a moment!” And then she ran down the stairs, hand gripping her skirt and holding it up. Far higher than he should have witnessed.

Perplexed and marginally amused, he finished the banister. There were a few boughs left when he’d completed his job, so he carried them back to the parlor, where—after peering up at the mistletoe hung in the doorway—he found Isabel speaking with her aunt.

Lady Anderson looked up at his entrance, eyes sparkling. Whatever the two women had concocted, Robert was not sure he wanted to be taken into their confidence.

But it seemed he was not meant to be.

“Here, Mr. Collingham, you can set these just there. Yes, perfect. Now, would you two take some of this holly to the library for the footmen? Then I can release you until sundown, where we will gather for festivities in the dining room. I would join you, but . . .” She glanced at her niece. “I have a few things to see to.”

“Of course, Aunt. Thank you.” And seemingly without thinking, Isabel leaned over, kissed her aunt on the cheek, and grabbed the bundle of holly from a small table near the door. She did not see the look of shock on Lady Anderson’s face as her hand lifted to cover her cheek. But Robert did before he followed Isabel.

Together they crossed the house to the library, where they helped the footmen there add the holly to the other decorations of the room. He could not help thinking how different this Christmas was meant to have been. He would have been at Miss Branford's country estate, either helping her family decorate or, more likely, dressing for the festivities of the evening. For some reason, Robert could not imagine Miss Branford dirtying her hands on the evergreen, holly, or any other greenery.

How grateful he was that she had spurned him.

"I suppose we must leave the decorating to dress for dinner," Isabel said, stepping to the door. "And, according to my aunt and tradition, we must each bring an item of importance to the meal."

"Or we could risk Society's censure and put off the necessity of preparing so early for dinner." He did not know what had possessed him to suggest it, only that he felt as if Isabel had become a certain fire to him. Her warmth drew him in, and he wished to stay within the circle of her glow.

"Oh?" Excitement laced her tone. "And what would we do instead?"

"Hmm . . ." He dug into the dark corners of his mind, brushing aside cobwebs. It had been years since he had needed to seek out entertainment beyond the norm, and the challenge of finding something that would entertain—and perhaps surprise—Isabel filled him with a nervous excitement.

"Paper folding," he said at last.

Her brow furrowed. "Paper folding?"

"Yes, like . . . napkin folding."

"Napkin folding?"

He leveled a look her way, attempting to keep the embarrassment of how his idea was being received at bay. "For someone who claims exorbitant intelligence, you are spending a great deal of time repeating me."

"Not repeating, clarifying."

“Oh, certainly.”

“But . . . paper folding, you say? I cannot say that is a game I have enjoyed often. If at all.”

“You have never heard of folding paper boats . . . or puzzle purses?” He regretted the words immediately.

Her eyes lit. “I have, in fact, heard of puzzle purses. But I am curious how you came to know of them.”

He avoided her look. “I was simply using them as an example to show you my idea for passing the time is not so far-fetched.” Thankfully, the footmen were busy at the other end of the library and hopefully not listening to their conversation just then.

“But if you *were* to make a puzzle purse . . .”

“I would not.” Gracious, was he blushing? He tried to push the heat back down his neck. Simply because he had heard of the tradition of sweethearts exchanging letters in such a way—the paper folded, numbered, and riddled with poems or other mawkish lines—did not mean he had partaken in it.

“Not even for someone whom you hold in high regard?”

He forced his gaze back to hers, swallowing back his discomfort. “She would have to be remarkable indeed.”

Her eyes flicked between each of his, and he felt a wave of *something* pass in the air between them. Uninvited, the idea of receiving such a note from *her* sent the heat rushing back to his face.

“Very well, I will agree to your . . . paper folding. Shall we return to the drawing room? I will ask a servant to locate some paper for us. Perhaps we can create some paper boats for the village children.”

He grasped at that idea. “My thoughts exactly!” That sounded too exuberant, didn’t it? If only one could scratch out words in the air as they did words on a sheet.

They settled themselves in the drawing room about the same time a servant came in with tea and a small stack of paper. Another maid cleaned at the far side of the room, and a third

was polishing silver in the corner. The whole house was working to prepare for Christmas Day.

Isabel poured for them both, somehow knowing he liked cream but not sugar. “I seem to recall boat races in our youth. I was never very good at them.” She picked up a piece of paper, eyeing it. “We shall see if I have improved with time.” She set to work folding. “How is your coachman faring, by the way?”

Robert began several seconds after her, first having to tear his eyes from her slim fingers. He took up his sheet of paper. “Stephen is well on the mend. Your aunt’s housekeeper is an adept healer.” First, he fashioned a boat. It was not as symmetrical as he would have liked, but when he looked up, he forgot all about the minor lopsidedness. Instead he found himself pressing a fist to his mouth to stop his laughter. “I did not realize you had decided to fold a bird instead of a boat,” he observed, squinting at her mess of paper folds.

Agonized eyes met his. “A bird, you say? Oh. Well . . . that is . . . something.”

“It is not meant to be a bird, is it?”

She shook her head sadly.

“That is good,” he said, “as it doesn’t look much like a bird either.”

She scooped up her failed paper boat and tossed it at him. He leaned to the side easily, sending the crumpled mess over his shoulder.

“No matter,” she said as if she had not just resorted to throwing things at him. “I shall simply try again.”

Only, by the time he had moved on to trying to fashion his own bird and then a flower out of the paper, she had only a pile of wadded-up paper to show for her efforts.

“That last one looked a great deal like a tiger, I should say,” Robert offered consolingly.

“You are kind. But I’ve never known you to lie to me.”

He barked a laugh. “I am simply hoping to lift your spirits. I feel rather bad for suggesting an activity at which you so

clearly do not excel.”

She set down her latest creation and leaned her elbows on the table. “Might I tell you a secret?”

“So long as it is not nefarious in—”

“Do not finish that, Robert.”

He grinned at her.

She narrowed her eyes. “The secret is that I cannot think of a single thing I *do* excel at, and therefore, I have become comfortable in my mediocrity.” There was not an ounce of self-deprecation nor dismay in her tone. She truly believed her words.

“That is far from the truth.”

“Do you claim to know me so well?”

“We have been acquaintances for nearly two decades now.”

“Yes, acquaintances who have not seen hide nor hair of one another for nigh on a decade.”

He waved aside her words, leaning across the table in the same manner she was. “Then it is lucky I am particularly observant. Because that makes me uniquely suited to tell you several things you excel in.” He leaned back, raising his hand. “One, you are the first individual I have found to aggravate me past the point of silence.”

“I am not certain that is something most would wish to excel at.”

He raised his other hand at her, palm out to stop her arguments, then lifted another finger on the first. “Second, you are the most compassionate woman of my acquaintance.”

“Well, that is—”

“*Third*, you have a very observant eye. I have not spotted half the kissing boughs you have.”

“Robert, you need not—”

“If you would be so kind as to stop interrupting me, I am quite determined. Fourth, you are the most beautiful woman of

my acquaintance. If you would give me another moment or two, I am certain I could find several other excellent qualities to add to the list, but those will do for now.”

For once, she did not immediately trample his words with her own. Which may have been because she was currently staring at him, mouth agape. He reviewed his words, spoken in haste and out of a desire to be as witty and quick on his feet as she was—something else he should have added to the list. He had—oh gads.

“Forgive me, Miss Reid. I believe my words got away from me. I meant no—”

She cut him off again. “It is Isabel. Every poet would agree that you cannot praise a woman’s beauty and then *not* call her by her Christian name.”

“Then forgive me, *Isabel*. That was far out of line.” His back straightened.

“Have no fear, Robert. I find you quite handsome to look upon as well.”

Her smile was wide, if a bit unsure. He could not help smiling in return, though he shook his head at the same moment. He should have let her go dress for dinner.

Dinner.

How long had they been ensconced in this room?

He shot to his feet. “I have detained you far too long. We ought to prepare for dinner—I would hate to keep your aunt waiting.”

“Were we to tell my aunt she had to wait for her dinner because we were caught up expressing our mutual affection for one another’s physical appearance, I do believe she would forgive us.”

Heat burned Robert’s neck. “It sounds immensely improper if you phrase it that way.”

“I have already claimed impoliteness. We ought to have known impropriety would not be far behind.”

He stepped away. Partly because *speaking* of impropriety was making him feel improper. But largely because he was not capable of controlling his mind around Isabel any longer. His actual person may not be in his control much longer.

How often had he been left alone with Miss Branford during their courtship? He had courted her well over three months. And still, he was fairly certain he had spent more time alone with Isabel in the last week than in all that time.

Yet, even if he'd had more time with Miss Branford, he was positive she never would have elicited this hot twisting in his gut. Miss Branford could not hold a candle to Isabel. Not even a match.

“Even still,” he managed amidst his mental upheaval, “we should begin our preparations for the meal.”

“Yes, sir.”

He eyed her. She only smiled sweetly, but she did follow him to the door.

“You know, Robert, though we should not give any of them to the village children, I think I have come upon the perfect use for my paper gifts.”

“Oh? And what might that be?”

She looked back into the room, her expression both determined and filled with humor. “Kindling.”

# Chapter 11

ISABEL DRESSED WITH CARE FOR dinner. Her gowns were not in the first line of fashion, nor was Anne skilled in hairstyles beyond the simplest ones, but she wished to look her best.

It was a strange feeling, that—the desire to put one’s best foot forward. Robert had said she excelled at many things . . . was it so wrong to want to excel in appearance for him? For so long, she had lived each day in a comfortable, though monotonous, pattern. Breakfast in Father’s study as he read from the newspaper; lunch in her room, as Father was usually out on estate business; and dinner in the breakfast room, as there was no use lighting the fire in the dining room. Frankly, before coming to visit Aunt Charlotte, she could not remember the last time she had even changed for dinner. Certainly, they’d had families from the village to dine with them. But when the Collinghams were not in residence, the Reids were the premier family in the neighborhood, so there was no need to impress, nor any desire to.

“Anne? What is that hidden smile for?”

Anne deftly tucked her blossoming grin away, and Isabel spun in her chair to face her.

“Come now, you must tell me. Hardly anything brings a smile to your face without me having to coax it.”

Anne ducked her head, and a wave of concern trickled through Isabel. Her time with Robert had taught her many things, one being that at times she pushed too far. “I apologize, Anne. You do not need to tell me if you do not wish to.”

“Oh no, miss, it is not secret in nature . . . it is simply embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing?” Her curiosity was piqued once again.

Anne dipped her chin again, avoiding Isabel’s eyes and pulling a curl from Isabel’s coiffure to frame the right side of her face. “It is only that I have not seen you tap your fingers so



since your London Season. It is silly that I even noticed.”

“Tap my . . . what?”

“Your fingers, miss. You do so when you are anxiously anticipating something. I suppose there has been nothing to anticipate for quite some time. Seeing that little action in you is . . . well, it is pleasant. I am happy to see you happy.”

Isabel stared at her maid. “I . . . have always been happy.”

“Of course, miss.” But still she did not meet Isabel’s eyes, turning instead to lift the dress they had chosen from the back of a chair.

*I am happy.* Isabel’s gaze bored a hole into the back of her maid’s dress, focusing on a small thread that had come unraveled near the waistline. *Aren’t I?*

“Anne, why do you think I am unhappy?”

Her maid stiffened, turning slowly. “I do apologize, miss. I meant no offense.”

“I am not angry with you in the least. I am only surprised.” She met her maid’s eyes, and something in her own must have caused Anne to relent.

She released a slow breath of air. “You do not smile, miss. Or you did not. And if you did . . . it did not touch your eyes. And you were so quiet—yes, I know, you were not as quiet as *I* am, but I think you must have forgotten the chattering you seemed so prone to before Mrs. Reid passed. So long as there was someone to listen, you chattered. I am not convinced you did not chatter on your own as well.”

Isabel leaned in to the side of her chair, recalling that yes, she did use to do that. Her mother used to call her a little bluebird, whistling away to anyone who would listen.

She hadn’t realized that had stopped.

Anne was apologizing again, and again Isabel stopped her. “What else has changed?”

Her maid looked away, brow furrowed. “Besides the finger tapping . . . you would skip. Anytime there was someplace to

be that you wished to get to quickly . . . you skipped.”

Isabel nodded. Her mother had said it was unladylike to run, but she’d always just smiled at her if she saw her skipping. “Anything else?”

“I do not know, miss . . . in the last years it is just as if someone has been placing a large burden on your back each day when you wake. Today, and the last few days, it is as if for the first time that individual has been too busy to give you your burden.”

Tears pricked Isabel’s eyes. Yes. Yes. How had she never seen it—felt it? Was it possible the burden had been placed so slowly she hadn’t noticed?

Or perhaps the heaviness had come all at once the day her mother had died. And she had become so accustomed to it that it had felt . . . disloyal to set it aside. Did she feel disloyal now?

No. Not in the least. When she reached deep inside, she found that half the lightness she was feeling had not come from her. It was as if her mother were reaching down to hug her. To tell her it was *all right*. She would be all right.

“I only wished to tell you how happy I am you have found . . . joy in life again.”

Isabel nodded, swiping under her eyes. “I think . . . I think you are right, Anne.” Impulsively, she came to her feet, grasping her maid’s hands and squeezing them. “Thank you for always being here. You are a wonderful friend.”

Slowly, as if unsure at this shift in their relationship, Anne smiled. Isabel gave another squeeze, then released her and grasped the dress Anne was holding. “Help me get this on, would you? I think I have made myself rather late now.”

“Of course, miss.”

A quarter of an hour later, Isabel descended the stairs, hand gripped tightly around her item of significance for the evening. Aunt Charlotte set much store by tradition. Therefore, that Christmas Eve night, they were to dine, with their significant items, within the circle of the Yule candle’s light.

Though, thankfully, Aunt had been willing—no, thrilled—to bend tradition for Christmas dinner the following day. And Isabel was more than excited for that particular event.

Just inside the drawing room doors, the other two members of the party waited for her. They both turned from the conversation they were having, and their varying expressions stopped Isabel midstep.

Aunt Charlotte started forward, her hands outreached. And across her face, written in every wrinkle and crease of her smile, was an outpouring of love. It had likely always been there, but Isabel had been so tightly shut off to any drop of affection that she had been blind to it.

In the moments before Aunt Charlotte encircled her with her arms, Isabel caught sight of Robert's face. His eyes were widened, his mouth parted, as he swept her person with his eyes. Then his gaze snapped to hers, his mouth snapping closed as well.

But she'd seen it. She'd seen his appreciation, and it made her feel warmer than a fire might have.

"You are just in time, my dear," Aunt Charlotte was saying as she enfolded her in her embrace. "Carson has just informed me dinner is ready for us."

"I apologize for cutting it so close."

"No apologies necessary. If I am not mistaken, more than just *I* have benefited from viewing your entrance." Aunt leaned back with a wink and mischievous smile before turning to face Robert.

And Isabel found herself wishing to return the smile. How strange that she would come to align her wishes with her aunt's matchmaking.

Robert joined their pairing, and Isabel turned to face him, cocking her head, as he spoke. "Miss Reid, you are the . . . picture of perfection."

"And you, Mr. Collingham, are quite handsome to look upon as well." She purposely used the same phrasing she had when they'd been alone together that afternoon . . . and it had

its desired effect. His jaw tightened as a flush entered his cheeks. And suddenly, he was even more handsome to look upon.

They filed into dinner informally, and Isabel was surprised to see that the breakfast table, small and round, had replaced the grand, oblong dinner table.

“I thought, being that it would just be the three of us, we could enjoy a more intimate dinner,” Aunt said as she swept to her seat and gestured to the two across from her. The Yule candle burned in the middle of the table, and several small dishes of meat and vegetables had been placed around it.

Isabel sat at the same moment Robert did.

“Now, as you are both aware, on Christmas Eve we have the pleasure of bringing something of great importance to us to dine. These items will be kept from harm through the new year and will bring us great blessings as they are laid within the light of the candle. I will begin.” She smiled around at them, pulling something from her reticule. “I have brought my daughter’s infant gown. I intend to gift it to her for her new child, who will be born within only a month.” Her smile grew soft as she stared at the small white dress, placing it carefully near the candle. Aunt turned to her. “Isabel?” A question lingered in her eyes, as if she knew this may be a difficult tradition for Isabel. It was, but it was less so than she had imagined.

Caressing the object in her hands to have one more moment with it, Isabel pulled out the oval locket. Aunt took in a sharp breath when she saw it, but Isabel only stared at the piece of jewelry, so small within her fingers. “My mother’s locket.” Then, for Robert’s sake, she added, “She was never without it. For her, jewels and pearls paled in comparison.” Then, before she lost her nerve, she looked up at Aunt Charlotte. “I should like you to have it for a time. I think Mama would have wanted you to have a piece of her.”

“Oh, child,” Aunt whispered.

Isabel gave a small smile, then set the locket on the table. It was harder to relinquish than she’d expected, even just to the

table.

A bubble of quiet engulfed their table for several breaths. Isabel wished to pop it. She had so enjoyed the feeling of happiness earlier that evening; she did not wish to replace it with melancholy.

Thankfully, as if noticing she needed the dinner to continue, Robert cleared his throat. “As you are both aware, I traveled rather lightly to your home.”

The bubble was popped, and Isabel chuckled. Robert could not have been planning to stay more than a night—if he hadn’t simply planned to travel late into the night to return home after delivering her. Did he even have a bag? Certainly he had not a trunk as she did . . . but perhaps a small bag for travel? What had he done for clothing up until now? And how had she never questioned these things before?

“But there is one item I am never without,” he continued, “and I believe it is perfectly suited to tonight’s affair.” He pulled something from within his coat. Something small—smaller even than her mother’s locket. And when he set it on the table, she saw clearly a gold band, unadorned. “My mother’s ring. It is one of the only possessions of hers that I have.” His eyes met Isabel’s, and she knew in that moment it was not Mrs. Collingham’s ring. This had belonged to the mother who had left him at the foundling home.

She reached beneath the table, grateful for its smaller size, and located his hand. She saw him swallow at the contact, but he smiled at her. She smiled back, then released him.

After that, the somber mood lifted entirely as the party fell to discussing Christmases past, memories, and winter mishaps—such as the winter the Collinghams had been in residence and Isabel and Robert had convinced a neighbor girl and boy to join them in a snowball fight. Isabel was certain that was the year her aversion to cold had begun, as she and the neighbor girl had been soundly trounced. Robert was certain she had participated in at least three more snowball fights before declaring a hatred of the weather.

“Speaking of the weather,” Aunt said hesitantly, “my

steward tells me the roads have cleared. He thinks that if there is no more snow tonight, a carriage would be able to pass by tomorrow afternoon.”

Her pronouncement brought silence.

How had Isabel forgotten that this time with Robert was measured? And what about their plans for Christmas dinner? Certainly he would wish to be home with his father for Christmas if he could be.

Her spirits deflated.

“That would be . . . well, that is . . .” Robert faltered, and Isabel convinced herself to look up. He was watching her, brow furrowed. “Thank you, Lady Anderson. I shall think on it.”

For her part, Aunt looked disappointed to have had to share the news. She knew of Isabel’s wishes for Christmas dinner . . . but she could not hold Mr. Collingham longer than needed. She waited a breath before speaking again. “My steward did say that if you do not take advantage of the clear roads, it is possible you will have to wait even longer. We do not know when another storm will pass through. This winter has been far worse than usual.”

“What of Isabel?” Robert did not even seem to notice his use of her Christian name, but Aunt certainly did, as her expression registered both surprise and pleasure. “How long is she intended to remain here? I should not like to leave the two of you, particularly if she is unable to return home.”

“Her father plans to fetch her at the new year . . . and I shall leave then to be with my daughter through her confinement. It is very kind of you to be concerned about us.”

Robert nodded thoughtfully. Isabel wished she knew what he was working out in that brain of his.

“But that is tomorrow’s worry,” Aunt said brightly. “For today, let us have some fun! I have arranged for some Christmas games, beginning with snapdragon! I may be old, but I am not so old I cannot beat the two of you.”

# Chapter 12

ROBERT WOKE AND AVOIDED THE WINDOW.

His life had taken an entirely unexpected turn this past week, and the last thing he wanted to deal with was the decision of whether or not to take advantage of potentially good weather to return home.

His mind was far too occupied with the question of whether or not he was in . . . in . . .

He took a deep breath.

From the moment he was old enough to know what love was, he had been certain it was not for him. Already he'd been blessed with luck beyond what most young men received, and it was then his duty to earn his remarkable blessing of being adopted into a well-to-do family. He'd been given everything—a home, status, wealth, warmth. A future. And it was up to him to ensure that did not fall by the wayside simply because he could not keep his head on straight when it came to a beautiful woman. So he'd chosen his wife. Someone well-respected. Someone who would help elevate his family through his connection to her.

Only, she'd been a horrid woman, and he was grateful to be rid of her.

Then luck had placed him in the path of an entirely different woman.

Luck.

It was clearly on his side. Did that mean he would not be cursed for seeking out just a bit more than he'd already been given?

He certainly hoped not, given that even in the strict confines of his mind, he could not deny the pull he felt to Isabel Reid.

Nor the fact that the pull was far better termed *love*.

A sweat broke out on his forehead. Love. That was the

word. That was the feeling. And he was as ill-prepared to keep it at bay as he'd been at keeping the storm from rampaging their carriage.

What was he to do now? Tell her? Propose? With only just over a week of time for them to have reacquainted themselves? That was insanity.

Perhaps he should ask to court her. That was slower. Safer. Even if he'd far prefer to take his carriage—and her—and ride like the devil was on his heels until they reached Gretna Green.

He dropped to a chair. First things first, he needed to speak with her. And he could not do that if he left.

Which decided it. He was not leaving. He had to stay at least through Christmas Day. Possibly New Year's. He did not wish to leave Isabel during such a difficult time of the year either way. He could always wait until her father arrived to pick her up, and then he could ask the man's permission. And *then* he could return home, and his own father would not blame him. Now that the roads were open, the letter he'd sent into town with his whereabouts was sure to reach him. It would be the sort of surprise the old man would relish. He'd sent his son off on a foolhardy matchmaking quest, and it had *worked*.

Tugging his boots on and shrugging into his coat, Robert paced to the door. The ladies would still be at breakfast at this hour, and if all went as usual, Lady Anderson would force the two of them together. And then he could speak to Isabel.

He pulled his door open and made for the stairs. But as he passed the door he knew led to Isabel's room, he heard . . . humming.

He stopped. Though he'd never heard her hum, he could tell it was Isabel. The music was sweet, unburdened, and faintly familiar.

What was she humming?

He shifted his weight, thinking. Just as the tune came to him, her humming switched to quiet singing.

*"He rules the world with truth and grace,*



*And makes the nations prove  
The glories of His righteousness,  
And wonders of His love,  
And wonders of His love,  
And wonders, wonders, of His love.”*

The sweet notes faded into the silence of morning, and Robert knocked on her door before he could think of the intelligence of such a thing.

It opened, and Isabel stood there, dressed for the day but with her hair down.

He tried not to stare, but her hair was nearly white in the glow of the sun behind her, and it cascaded in waves nearly to her waist.

It was glorious.

He blinked. “I am sorry. I—” He stepped back to leave. This had been a poor idea indeed. How was he expected to say anything of sense with her looking like an angel come to welcome Christmas Day?

She laughed lightly. “It is all right. I am running late this morning but will be down for breakfast soon. I will see you there—or did you come to bid me farewell? Are you returning home?” The smile slipped from her face. And, though it was horrible of him to delight in her unhappiness, it meant that she *wished* him to stay, which was very in line with his own wishes.

He shook his head, his eyes straying back to her hair for the briefest of seconds. “No. I do not think my father would begrudge me another day.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. And I know you do not enjoy Christmastime overmuch . . . I couldn’t leave you to bear it alone.”

“Oh.” This time the single syllable was not so excited.

“Is that wrong?”

She shook her head, which made her hair glint in the light. He ignored it—mostly. “You should not stay out of obligation. I am sure you would prefer to be home with your father for Christmas.”

*Oh.* She thought he saw her as a task. A burden. He almost laughed at the thought. Stepping forward in a show of confidence he was not sure he’d ever managed in his life, he said, “I assure you it is not out of any obligation that I am staying.” She blinked at him, and slowly, because he was attempting to convince his hand it was a poor idea, he lightly grazed her unbound hair with the back of his hand. The contact made his breath hitch. “Not obligation in the least.”

Her mouth twisted in a smile. “Very well, then . . . if you are sure.”

“Certain.”

“Then I will see you at breakfast?”

So long as he could calm his breathing enough to make it there without accident, yes. He nodded.

But she did not move. “Robert . . . I need my hair back if I am to finish getting ready.”

He jolted backward. It would seem he had wrapped his finger in several strands of hair.

The mortification.

But then she was laughing, and he could not help joining her. “I will see you at breakfast,” he said.

“Yes.” And she backed into her room, closing the door and taking the sunshine with her.

\*\*\*

In an action wholly out of character for Lady Anderson . . . she kept her niece quite busy all day, leaving no time for Robert to speak with Isabel alone.

Of course, Lady Anderson expressed her joy over Robert choosing to stay through the day, at least . . . but then she’d whisked Isabel away, calling over her shoulder that the library

was well-stocked and he was welcome to amuse himself in whatever way he wished.

Except for the one way he did wish, which was with Isabel.

Scowling, he went about his day. There was this small, annoying inner voice that occasionally reared its head to suggest that Isabel *wished* to be kept away from him. Perhaps she had guessed his intent and begged her aunt to keep them apart.

Were that the case, more the fool was he.

But the larger part of him was *certain* she felt some regard toward him as well. He had not imagined her blushes, nor her bright smiles at his appearance. He could not be wrong. Still, all the time to himself sent his mind into incredibly impressive tangents.

And so, when it came time for dinner, he was fully prepared to simply propose. Over the roast duck, if needed. Hang the courtship. Hang speaking with her father. He was in love with this woman, and he would have her know.

Only, when he reached the drawing room, where they were to gather before dinner, a soft rumble of conversation from within greeted his ears and pulled him up short.

Were they having a party? He'd not heard anything of it. But perhaps the improved traveling conditions had caused them to plan a gathering at the last moment. That may have been what had kept them so busy that day.

It was disappointing, not only to miss out on an intimate dinner and conversation but also because Isabel knew his feelings on frivolity and parties at Christmastime. Not that he could expect her to change her aunt's plans simply for his sake. But were their roles reversed . . . he would have convinced anyone for her.

Still, he could not just abandon the party entirely, even if he was finding his mood to be suddenly quite sour. So he took a bracing breath and pushed the doors open.

As anticipated, the room was full. But not in the way one would expect. There was not a single fine gown or polished

boot. No jewels glinted. No bright colors assaulted his eyes.

If he had to guess, every single one of the occupants of this room had hardly a penny to their name.

From within the crowd, Robert spotted Isabel weaving toward him. Her smile was wide and her dress only marginally finer than those around her.

“Mr. Collingham, I am happy you could join us! Might I introduce you to the Parsons? Mr. Parson, Mrs. Parson, this is Robert Collingham. He is a guest of my aunt’s.”

The couple was older, though not as old as his own parents, and though their clothing was worn, their smiles were genuine and unburdened.

“How do you do, Mr. Collingham?” Mr. Parson asked.

“Well, and yourself?” Robert did not allow any of his confusion to show. Nor did he when introduced to a widow and her son, another couple with two daughters, and an elderly gentleman with a limp.

Isabel had introduced him to nearly half the room before he pulled her to a window somewhat secluded from the group.

“What is all this?” he asked under his breath, still surveying the crowd.

“Most are tenants of my aunt, but several live in the village. I thought . . . well, when you spoke of large, excessive dinners, I realized we had just such a one planned. So I asked my aunt if she would . . . alter her plans. This group will appreciate our roast venison far more than we could. And then we shall visit them each tomorrow for Boxing Day with more food and clothes, and . . . you look a little pale. Have I done wrong?”

His gaze snapped to hers. Had she done wrong? He could hardly get words out of his mouth. “You . . . you glorious creature.”

“Excuse me?”

“You did this for *me*?”

“Well, not *just* you. For the tenants as well. I am thinking

this should be a regular occurrence in my father's household when I return home. A Christmas ball, not only for those capable of affording new gowns and slippers . . . but for everyone. You are not upset?"

"Upset? I am in awe of you. I am—" He looked around. What a time *not* to have a kissing bough above them, for he very greatly wished to *show* her just how he felt in that moment.

The door to the dining room opened, and Lady Anderson's butler appeared to announce dinner. As the man spoke, Isabel leaned close. "The servants have been invited to join us as well, but understandably, some were uncomfortable with the idea of dining with their mistress. So she has set an equally elaborate feast downstairs for them."

He shook his head in disbelief. Forget proposing. He was going with the Gretna Green plan.

The crowd was slowly dispersing into the dining room, but Robert held Isabel back. "I've something I've been meaning to speak with you about, but now I see why you were so busy today."

She turned to face him, her chin tipped up and her eyes on his. "Yes?"

"This week has been nothing like I had planned. Nothing I *could* have planned, even if I thought to create the best path for myself."

Her gaze was steady, encouraging. His hands slid up her arms to grip her shoulders, to anchor himself, because despite being completely and entirely sure that this was exactly what he wished to do, he was terrified.

"Isabel Reid, I have—"

The butler appeared back in the doorway. The room had cleared except for them, and Robert was prepared to send the man away. They would join the party in a moment. Or several.

But then the butler rushed over to them, appearing nearly frantic. "Sir, an express just arrived for you." He thrust a folded piece of paper at Robert, and startled, Robert took it,

unfolding it to scan its very short contents. It was difficult to read, as the words were slanted and unsteady. But even still, he recognized his father's script.

*Son,*

*I urge you home as soon as you are able. The physician is not optimistic over my mortality, and I wish my son nearby should the worst occur.*

Panic gripped him.

"What is it?" Isabel leaned forward, her words spoken in worried haste.

"My father. He is sick."

"He was sick when you left, was he not? Is he worse?"

"He was—I thought he was jesting! I thought he was simply playing matchmaker and thought to force me to take you and —" He ran an agitated hand through his hair. Had Father been serious? Had he been sick all this time?

"What do you need? To leave? I will have Carson call for your carriage. Is your coachman ready to travel?"

He nodded slowly, his mind not working as quickly as hers. "Yes. Yes, he may not be able to drive the coach, but . . . no, perhaps I should just take a horse. He can follow when he is ready."

Isabel was nodding as she gently grasped his arm, steering him to the door.

"Your dinner," Robert said.

"Will be far less enjoyable with you gone. But you've somewhere you need to be even more."

"You will give my regrets to your aunt?"

"Of course." Isabel called for Carson and gave him instructions to the packing of Robert's things and readying of a horse. "And you? You will be at home when I return?"

He halted abruptly. His confession. He had been so stunned by this news that he had been completely put off finishing it.

“Of course I will.” He grasped her hands. This was no longer the time nor place to declare his love, but was there a perfect time for such a thing? “Isabel, I have a great many things to speak with you about. May I . . . may I call on you when you return?”

Blast him, why had he not just been direct?

“Of course. I would expect nothing less.” A ghost of that teasing smile of hers appeared.

He could not keep from tracing the line it created in her cheek with his thumb. She froze beneath his touch.

A footman appeared in the entry hall with a bag of Robert’s things—there were not a great many, and therefore, it had not taken long for them to be gathered—but Robert did not feel the need to pull back from Isabel, though she watched him curiously. Let the footman gossip. Hopefully whatever thoughts he would conjure up and share about Robert and Isabel would be true before long. After only a few seconds, the man disappeared again, leaving them alone.

Robert’s mind warred with his heart for several agonizing beats. Then he threw caution to the wind. “To be frank, I anticipate calling on you a great many times.”

“I would be amenable to that.” Her faint smile grew.

“Some may even call it courting.”

“Would you?”

“Yes. I would definitely call it that.”

“Then I shall as well.”

“Good.” He backed away before he did something outside the bounds of propriety. “Very good.”

She was smiling broadly now. “Indeed.”

The butler returned. “Your coachman insisted on coming, sir. Your carriage will be but a moment.”

“Thank you.”

Carson disappeared.

“I suppose a carriage is for the best,” Robert said to Isabel. “I think your dislike of the cold has grown on me. I am not certain I would be comfortable on horse for that long a time.”

“I am happy to hear I have made an impact on you, Mr. Collingham.”

“You cannot even fathom, Miss Reid.”

She stepped closer as they heard the rumble of his carriage outside. “Be safe, Robert.” And then, though she appeared surprised at herself, she straightened his cravat and patted his lapel.

Robert stared down at her, the newness of his feelings mixing with the worry he felt for his father. He needed to act, but he felt suspended between two extremes, and the uncertainty of the future held him captive.

Then the carriage arrived, and Robert stole one last glance at Isabel before ducking within.

They had not even gone a quarter mile before he regretted leaving some things unsaid. But she would be at home by the new year, and he would not leave anything unsaid ever again.



# Chapter 13

DINNER HAD BEEN ENJOYABLE.

Mostly.

In all honesty, Isabel hardly recalled any of it. Beyond telling her aunt the reason behind Robert's sudden disappearance and making small talk with the truly lovely guests, her mind had not been fully in the evening. And her heart seemed to have been taken by carriage out into the snow.

Boxing Day had brought the sun. A great deal of sun—so much that the snow had begun to melt, though it was still piled high, and it would be weeks, if not months, before the grass would be seen. Despite her general dislike of the holiday, Isabel had always observed Boxing Day with her father, so putting together the boxes for the servants and tenants had been comfortable.

And had left her far too much time with her thoughts.

No letter had come from Father, though she had not particularly expected one. But something to indicate his exact arrival would not have been remiss. Still, New Year's Eve came with the promise of his arrival.

Except he did not arrive.

Aunt did not seem overly worried, so Isabel tried not to be. With a journey as long as theirs, it was no wonder her father and new stepmother may have been detained a day. Therefore, all Aunt was concerned over was finding a tall, dark gentleman with a high instep to usher in the new year, as tradition required.

Robert might have been perfect.

How was his father faring? Was the illness a serious thing? Well, clearly it was, or he would not have written . . . but Isabel could only pray he would manage and make a full recovery. Her heart ached for Robert at the possibility of anything other than that.

“I wondered where you’d gone off to.”

“I apologize, Aunt. I was . . .” Isabel searched the parlor for some indication of why she had sequestered herself in here. None came willingly.

“Do not worry, child. I understand. May I . . . might I join you?” Aunt came farther into the room, and though Isabel’s natural tendency was to assure her she was content in her solitude, she hesitated before speaking. Her aunt had been nothing but kind to her, and Isabel had hardly given her the time of day the entire time she’d been here. Aside from Christmas Day and preparing for Robert’s dinner, they’d been together in only short intervals.

“Yes, please,” she said instead. She scooted over on the couch, and her aunt wasted no time in joining her.

“I was surprised, you know,” Aunt said after a time, “when your father wrote to me about your coming to visit.”

Isabel nodded. She had been surprised too. She had declined traveling with the newlywed couple, but Father had not even asked her opinion regarding visiting her aunt. He had simply told her of the plans he’d made. She still did not understand why, though her bitterness had faded in her time here.

“But, though I was surprised, I was grateful.”

*Grateful?*

Aunt Charlotte laughed a little. “You think me odd, I am sure. But the holidays have been so very lonely since your mother passed.”

Isabel picked an imagined piece of dust from her skirt, willing away the tears that liked to surge each time her mother was brought up without preamble, though they did not come so fiercely this time. Some of the happiness Anne had seen in her remained, keeping the sadness at bay.

“Your mother hated the cold as you do, you know. And yet every year she took the frigid trek from her estate to mine to visit for Christmas. I think she knew how the holidays hurt without those we love there beside us. And once my Phillip passed . . . well, there was a hole there that even my children

did not fully fill. But your mother helped. She was always that way—knowing how others felt without having to be told. And she felt that loneliness in me and sought to fix it. Even with ten years between us, she was always the more mature in that aspect.”

Isabel stared at her. “We came because of Uncle Phillip’s passing?”

Aunt Charlotte nodded, her eyes taking on a misty, faraway look. “You came every once in a while before, but after . . . she did not miss a year. Not even when she had that horrid cold and spent the entire fortnight sneezing.” Here, she laughed. Isabel recalled that time, vaguely. She had been only twelve, but she recalled how Mama would complain about her sneezing, yet never let her smile droop all the while.

Suddenly, Isabel sat up straighter. “I am so sorry we stopped coming. I did not know. I do not think Papa knew.”

Aunt shook her head. “As if I would blame you, child. Or your father. Far from it. All I am saying is that it has warmed my heart to have you here now. I know it has not been easy on you . . . but you have brightened my Christmas season.” She laid her hand over Isabel’s. “And please know that you are welcome here anytime.”

Isabel swallowed. The fear of vulnerability weighed heavily on her, but the knowledge of how opening herself up to both Robert and Anne had felt spurred her to speak. “I would like that . . . but . . .”

“But you do not know if you can.”

Isabel nodded. “You look so like her.” Her voice broke, and a single tear slipped from her eye.

Without a word, Aunt Charlotte inched closer, wrapping her arm around Isabel’s shoulder. The motion squeezed several more tears from Isabel. “It is a blessing and a curse, I think.” Her aunt shifted, pressing something hard into her palm. Mama’s locket. “Here, dear. I cannot tell you what it means to have kept this in my possession even these past few days, but it belongs in your care.”

“Are you certain?”

Aunt squeezed her tighter. “Yes. If you will but write me every now and then . . . perhaps visit when you are able, then I shall have all I need of my dear sister in the companionship of her equally dear daughter.”

“Thank you.” Isabel’s hand closed over the locket. In the safety of an embrace in which Aunt Charlotte could not see her face, Isabel whispered. “I . . . I do not know what I will do now. Everything has changed.”

“I would offer you a home here while you get your feet under you, but—”

“But Olivia is having her baby.”

“Oh no, that is not what I was going to say. If that were it, I would simply take you with me. It is only that I imagine things may change more for you soon. If Mr. Collingham has a say in the matter.”

Isabel let out a watery laugh. “You were not a very sly matchmaker.”

“What does stealth matter if success comes regardless?” A smile was evident in her voice, and Isabel laughed again.

“You will write to me when he proposes?” she asked.

“Aunt! I haven’t a clue if he will.”

“Oh, he will.”

Isabel shook her head ruefully.

“But I suppose what I should be asking you is . . . do you wish him to?”

Isabel took a stabilizing breath, grateful her face was still hidden. She had asked herself this question many a time. But with someone else asking her, she could not suddenly set her mind on something else entirely. “I have not thought of marriage since that first Season.”

Aunt was silent for a moment. “But are you thinking of it now?”

“I believe I may be.”

Aunt’s arm tightened around her.

“But . . . how can I marry without knowing if my mother approves? How can I marry him without her advice?”

“Darling, I think the good Lord has blessed you by bringing a man your mother knew well back into your life when you were ready to accept him. I cannot imagine she would allow a boy to share a nursery with her daughter if she would not be thrilled to allow that man to later become her son. And as for your other concern . . . you are welcome to come to me with any questions. My marriage was not as long as I would have wished, but your uncle Phillip and I loved each other dearly. And I rather like talking about him.”

Isabel was fighting tears again. But they were not sad tears. She could not exactly pinpoint the emotion that brought them on. There was a mixture of happiness and poignancy, relief and excitement. So instead she said, “Would you? Tell me of him?”

“Why of course! I thought you would never ask,” Aunt teased.

\*\*\*

Not for the first time in the last several days, Isabel found her aunt watching the road outside. “Still no sign of them?” she asked.

Aunt shook her head. “And with Twelfth Night tomorrow . . . I wonder what has kept them.”

Isabel shook back the foreboding that perhaps they’d forgotten her. Or something had happened to them. That could not be the case. Certainly.

“I am sorry I have delayed your departure.”

Aunt waved her hand dismissively. “I will still be to Olivia’s with plenty of time for the birth. Perhaps I will fetch you home, even. It would be a fun journey, I do think.”

“I should hate to impose, but it may come to that.”

They both stared out the window, one lady in one chair, the other in the one beside it. It was not snowing, nor had it since Robert had left.

“Oh!” Aunt came to her feet. “Oh!”

Isabel joined her. “A carriage!”

“Come, come, let us ring for tea. They will wish for it after such a long journey.”

Isabel hurried after her, flinging one more glance to the window. They were well! And they had not forgotten her!

There was a bustle in the entry hall just as Aunt laid out the tea service in the drawing room and had a footman stoke the fire.

Then the door opened, and Carson stepped in, a man at his heels.

“You are not my father,” Isabel stated, though a smile had already begun claiming her lips.

“That sounds remarkably like our meeting in your sitting room.”

Aunt stood. “I do believe I shall leave the two of you be for a moment or two. Ring should you need something.” She almost sang her words as she skipped from the room, dragging poor Carson along with her.

The door closed with a thump, and Robert turned his smile on her. “Still matchmaking, it would seem.”

“Oh, most heavily. You were lucky to escape last time without a proposal . . . but I do not believe you will be so lucky now.”

Robert stepped closer. So close that she could see each individual lash above his dark eyes. Eyes that were quite severely trained on her. “I have no intention of pushing my luck with your aunt.”

“Oh?” A horde of butterflies took flight in her chest. They were certainly the reason her single word came out so breathless.

“But I have a few other things to discuss with you first.”

Isabel nodded, not trusting her voice. There was something different about this Robert. *This* Robert was confident, certain. *This* Robert made *her* anything but. But in the best of ways.

“First, I met with your father—”

“Is he well?” Isabel could not help asking.

“Yes. He was on his way to get you after being delayed by a broken carriage wheel, but I asked if I might have the privilege . . . I hope that is agreeable to you. Though, I should add that he still insisted on coming—he simply agreed to wait in the carriage for a moment.”

Warmth bloomed in her chest, both at Robert’s presence and the knowledge that her father had still come for her. Her heart had not fully mended—it may not ever be whole again—but she was ready to give her new family a chance. Just because Papa remarried did not mean she need forget Mama. Nor did it mean he had.

“And *your* father?” she asked.

“Is an old fool and not sick in the least; it was only that his conscience had gotten to him and he wished to give me an excuse to return home. Have no fear—I nearly boxed his ears when I learned. But that is not particularly important at the moment. Now, would you please listen without interruption? I have never been one for a good memory . . . and the speech I prepared seems to be slipping out my ears.”

Isabel pressed her lips together and nodded.

Robert took her hand, tugging her an inch closer. “You are an extraordinary woman, Isabel Reid. Extraordinary and frustrating and too enticing for your own good.”

Isabel’s eyebrows lifted, but she said nothing, as promised.

“I had sworn off love. Sworn off a marriage of anything beyond convenience . . . but I’ve found that, well, that belief has grown *inconvenient* as of late. As I’ve found myself hopelessly, completely—embarrassingly, really—in love with you.”

His words echoed around the room and within her head.

Love.

*Love.*

*Love!*

With an amused expression, Robert squeezed her hand.  
“Isabel . . . have you anything to say to that?”

“Oh—oh! Of course I do, only you told me not to speak!  
Are you done, then?”

Robert shook his head, his cheeks reddening. “Was it not enough? My father suggested a longer speech, but yours said you hadn’t the patience for such a thing.”

“You spoke with my father about this?”

Robert’s eyes widened with mock horror. “Extensively. The man is terrifying.”

“What I would not give to have eavesdropped on that conversation.”

“Begging your pardon, my dear, but there is another conversation I would *really* like to finish just now.”

Isabel cocked her head at him. “Oh, you mean the part where you told me you loved me?”

Robert threw up his hands. “Yes, *that*.”

She recaptured his hands in hers, tempering her smile.  
“Would you tell me again?”

A question flitted behind his eyes, but his words were sure.  
“I love you, Isabel Reid.”

She dropped his hands, tentatively reaching for his face. Slowly, for she had never done such a thing before, she placed a feather-light touch to his cheek. Then she pushed back a stray hair with her other hand.

“Woman, if you do not say something, I shall not be content to be manhandled.”

She pressed her lips together. “I am testing your patience.”



“My what?”

“Patience. You will need a great deal of it if we are to marry.”

“I should like to know where your heart lies before we move to such things.”

Making him wait only another breath, she smiled. “Then you had best post the banns because my heart lies in your possession, Mr. Collingham. I love you, Robert.” His face split, but she hurried on. “And I would very much like to be your wife.”

“You did not give me a chance to propose!”

She lifted a shoulder unapologetically. “I am a woman who goes after what she wants.”

“I suppose that is something I admire. And, at this moment, I intend to be a man who goes after just what *he* wants.”

He looped an arm around her waist, pulled her closer, and lowered his forehead to hers. She did not need to rise to her tiptoes to meet him. But he paused, maddeningly, just before his lips met hers.

“Do you not know how to kiss a woman, Robert?”

“Oh, I know the basics. I am simply testing your patience.”

Utilizing the hands she still had at his cheeks, she threw his patience—and hers—out the window.

Their lips met in a collision of warmth. True to his word, he *knew* how to kiss her. He knew how to move his lips over hers in a way that forced the breath from her. He knew how to tease the corner of her mouth with his lips, then leave them bereft when he moved to place small kisses down her jaw.

She thought she heard someone cheering in the entry hall, but she did not pay the sound any heed. Her mind was otherwise focused—particularly when Robert leaned her back, gripping her waist tightly to hold her upright as he kissed her senseless.

Breathless, he pulled back just far enough to say. “For the

record, I fully intended to propose.” He pressed a kiss to her cheek. Then her nose.

Equally short on breath, Isabel nodded. “We can even tell everyone you proposed if that would help.”

“As if they would believe it.” And he kissed her again.

# Epilogue

*December 25, 1816*

“I AM CERTAIN I HAVE forgotten something.” Isabel anxiously twisted the rings on her left hand. One for Robert’s mother, the mother she had known. The other for the one neither of them had.

“We have not forgotten anything,” he assured her.

“Are you positive? The venison? The musicians? The candles! Oh goodness, did we get the six-hour candles? We cannot have the three-hour candles. Not tonight.”

Robert caught her hands, willing her to calm down, but her nerves seemed heightened, and not just because of the Christmas ball. He was fairly certain there was an addition to their family coming that he had not yet been informed of. He would let her have her secret for a few days more before he lost all patience.

“We have everything,” he said. “The tenants have begun to arrive, and your father, stepmother, and aunt are waiting in the drawing room to greet them.”

“Should we have greeted them?”

Robert gave her a sardonic look. “You wished to check your list again.”

“Do not blame our absence entirely on me. You did not need to join my checking.”

“No,” he mused, “but I was hoping for some alone time. I feel we haven’t had any since our guests arrived for the holidays.”

For the first time all day, she slowed down enough to look at him. Really look at him. He smiled. “There we are.”

She sighed. “I am sorry. I simply want tonight to be magical for everyone.”

“It will be.” He grasped her by the shoulders, setting her list on a sideboard and backing her up several feet.

“What are you doing?”

“Positioning you.”

“Why?”

“Because our servants do not hang nearly enough mistletoe, so it cannot be found in every single corner of our house.”

Isabel glanced up at the kissing bough now directly above her. “Someone ought to speak with them about that.”

“Yes, but not right this moment.” He took her face tenderly between his hands, giving himself ample time to appreciate her beauty and to know that inner goodness was far more beautiful than the face she showed to the world. Then he lowered his lips to hers.

“Do not ruin my hair, Robert,” she murmured against his mouth.

“Some might say it is not a proper kiss if your hair is not ruined by the end.”

She paused in thought, but only for a moment, before nodding. “Very well. You’ve convinced me.”

# About the Author



KAREN THORNELL GREW UP READING when she should have been sleeping, but it wasn't until 2019 that she started writing. Tired of ending books and saying “goodbye” to beloved characters, she wondered what it would be like to have her own characters that lived in her head always. It was probably a mark of sleep deprivation that she wanted people living in her head, but the idea was planted, regardless.

Karen lives in Utah with her husband and kids. When not writing contemporary or regency romance, she spends her free time doing endless loads of laundry, playing board games, and, yes, talking to those characters in her head.

Learn more about Karen at [karenthornell.com](http://karenthornell.com), and follow her on social media.

Facebook: [Author Karen Thornell](#)

Instagram: [@authorkarenthornell](#)

# **Other Covenant Books by Karen Thornell**

*Pursuing Miss Hall*

*To Marry an Earl*

*Edward and Amelia*