

A man in a black suit and white cravat is walking through a stone archway in a garden. He is holding a cane in his left hand. The background shows a path leading through a garden with various flowers and trees.

MESSAGE
FROM A

Lady

THE
SPIRITED
STORMS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JANE
CHARLES

MESSAGE FROM A LADY

JANE CHARLES

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Storm

Alfred Storm
Earl of Kenley (d)

m. 1758

Lady Margaret Whitton
(1740-1762)

m. 1766

Lady Judith Clarke
(1746 - 1805)

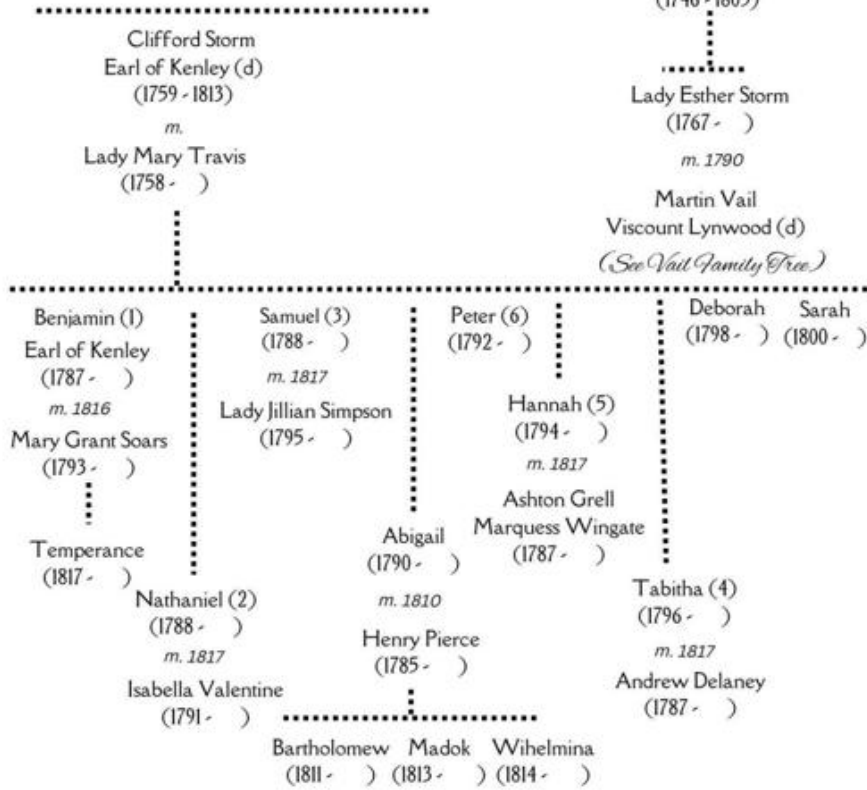


Lady Esther Storm
(1767 -)

m. 1790

Martin Vail
Viscount Lynwood (d)

(See Vail Family Tree.)



1. Christmas Spirits

2. Weathering Captain Storm

3. Ruined by a Lady

4. A Very Merry Viscount

5. Lady Hannah's Holiday

6. Message from a Lady

ABOUT MESSAGE FROM A LADY

Mr. Peter Storm loved only one woman, Lady Johanna Knight, but she would never be his. Her grandfather would only allow Johanna to marry a title. Peter was the fourth son of an Earl.

Johanna didn't care that Peter was only a mister and that his funds were limited. She loved him. He was her dearest friend. But he refused to even kiss her, let alone admit his love.

When Johanna faces danger, Peter realizes that more than his heart is at stake. It is up to him to save her, even if she will be denied him in the end.

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CHAPTER ONE

May 1818, London

A near perfect day. The sky was clear, the sun was warm, and the heady perfume of the roses, peonies and irises filled the air behind the Mayfair mansion of the Marquess of Wingate. Mr. Peter Storm did not normally attend garden parties, but he was here for two reasons. The first being that his sister, Hannah, the Marchioness of Wingate, was the hostess. The second, because of the lady walking beside him, Lady Johanna Knight.

She eyed the bruising at his jaw with a raised eyebrow. “Boxing or brothel?”

Peter placed a hand over his heart in mock shock. “Lady Johanna, one should not mention *brothel* in polite society,” he whispered.

She laughed. “I am aware of how frequently you visit houses of ill-repute, Mr. Storm, and I have ceased being

scandalized by your behavior.”

Johanna was one of the very few who knew his purpose for visiting brothels, gaming hells, and the rookeries, and it wasn't for the reasons most gentlemen visited such places.

“Yes, well, my reputation of being a rake, rogue and all-around scoundrel has unfortunately deemed me unmarriageable.” He made light of his reputation, and truthfully, it didn't matter what others thought of him. He only cared about the good opinion of the lady beside him.

Lady Johanna Knight! The woman of his heart. The woman he desired.

Unfortunately, neither her father, Viscount Ormonde, nor her grandfather, the Earl of Chedworth, would allow Lady Johanna to marry only a *mister*, regardless of his reputation. It didn't matter that Peter's father had been an earl. What mattered was that Peter had the audacity to be born the fourth son, would therefore never gain the title, and thus was unworthy of Lady Johanna. This wasn't merely an assumption made by Peter but had been told to him directly when he had first shown an interest in Johanna last year.

“His Grace, the Duke of Eldridge suffers from a similar reputation of late, yet my father and grandfather would have him as my husband without question.”

Peter laughed, though jealousy ate at his gut. “Eldridge is not so bad,” he said. “Until this Season, and before he inherited the dukedom last year, he was considered quite respectable, and many considered him a prig.”

Johanna wrinkled her nose.

He loved the little trait and how she scrunched her face when repulsed. It wasn't Eldridge who repelled her, but that she was only to consider gentlemen of certain titles and not their personality or reputation.

“What does lend him some respectability is that he has assumed guardianship of his five female cousins, all old enough to wed, and has provided them with a Season.”

“Respectable in Society, but quite the rascal once duties have been retired for the evening.” Johanna laughed. “Just like you.”

“Eldridge wants to be viewed as an undesirable husband no matter what his title,” Peter confided quietly. “He may visit the same places as I, but his participation is, shall we say, lacking. He even assisted me last evening when I met with resistance from a guard.”

“Was the young woman returned to her family?” Johanna asked.

“She was put on a mail coach this morning and hopes never to return to London again,” Peter assured her.

He had rescued innocent women before. The first had come about quite unintentionally. He'd been drinking with his friends from Cambridge when he accidentally mentioned that he was a virgin. None of them could have that, and as they knew of a virgin being auctioned that night, they took him off to the brothel and then proceeded to outbid everyone else. One

friend had even commented that with both being virgins, it would be quick for Peter being in such a tight channel that first time.

What had happened, however, was that Peter had encountered a terrified miss who had come to London for a position as a maid and had been kidnapped. All she wanted to do was go home. So, Peter helped her do just that by sneaking her out of the upper story window, then putting her on a mail coach back home.

He now waited for mail coaches to arrive, when he had the opportunity, just to make certain misses made it to their intended destination. When he received word that a virgin was being made available at a brothel, he investigated to learn the truth.

The one thing Peter could not stand was the very idea of any female being harmed in any way. What brothel owners intended was nearly the worst that could happen to an innocent miss and he'd not have it.

“While it is nice to know that His Grace is not an immoral lothario, and I will not breathe a word of his duplicity to anyone, he is still not for me.” Johanna slid a glance to Peter as if she waited for a response, but he said nothing.

She would never know what was in his heart because it would make matters all the more difficult. Instead, he maintained their close friendship and that was the extent of their relationship.

“My grandfather blames me for not bringing him up to scratch, which is difficult to do when His Grace won’t seek an introduction.”

“Eldridge intentionally avoids misses and ladies who are expected to marry this Season so do not take it personally,” Peter assured her.

“I do not, nor can I blame him. My brother’s desk is often flooded with invitations from mothers who hope that their daughters will one day become a countess no matter how distant in the future that may be. I am also thankful that His Grace has not noticed me,” she quickly assured Peter. “He is who my grandfather wants. My father wishes for me to be happy but will not go against his father. My brother, Alden, however, told me to find love and happiness and if grandfather didn’t approve then he’d escort me to Gretna Green.”

Peter always liked Alden Knight.

“I have attention from gentlemen I don’t want and the one that I wish would court me will not.” Her beseeching blue eyes glanced up at him again.

“Friendships are far more important than love,” he returned.

“My aunt married for love,” Johanna said. “She lived in a set of rooms with her husband and daughter above a bookshop and was quite happy.”

“Your grandfather and father never spoke to her again either. How would you feel if the same happened to you? It is

likely only your eldest brother would ever acknowledge you again.”

“I’d not like it,” she answered quietly.

“Which is why I will value your friendship above all else and will not pursue you when I know that I would be sent away. I’d not lose my friend.”

“Instead, you’ll spend your evenings in brothels and gaming hells.”

“Are you pouting?” he teased.

“Would it work if I were?”

She knew the answer as well as he.

Johanna had romanticized what it would be like when they married. Not that she’d been so blunt as to tell him, but she hinted often, such as the mention of an aunt who was blissfully happy living above a bookshop. Peter, however, knew the realities. He feared that she’d eventually regret marrying him when she realized how reduced her circumstances would become. His quarterlies were not enough to support a wife. Even if he accepted a position to become a Bow Street Investigator, he still wouldn’t be able to provide her with all she deserved.



Mr. Peter Storm was the most aggravating man of Johanna’s acquaintance.

They’d met last year, and she’d been quite taken with him.

It was more than that. It had been an infatuation the likes of which she'd never experienced.

She had thought of him all autumn and winter, anxious for the Season to begin so that she might see him once again. Peter claimed to have missed her as well, but he never claimed to love her, except once. That had been when she'd come across Peter and Alden deep in their cups, and he blurted out his emotions, much to the shock of Alden and Johanna.

Peter never mentioned love again and sometimes Johanna wondered if he even remembered.

Alden did, which was why he had offered to escort her to Gretna Green.

Johanna had even suggested that she court Peter since he would not court her, but he reminded her of their friendship, *again*.

She loved having Peter as a friend. In fact, he was closer to her than anyone, including her family. She didn't feel the need to keep secrets from him and when she was with him, like now, she felt at home.

If only she could bring Peter up to scratch! He was the only man she wanted to marry but he was not cooperating.

"Mr. Kendal has made an appearance," Peter whispered in warning.

There were currently three men who had made quite a nuisance of themselves and were determined to win her hand in marriage, Kendal being one of them. The other two were

Baron Cartwright and Mr. Turnbell. It wasn't that they were so enamored with her. It was because they each had empty pockets and her dowry was quite large. All three had also been rejected by her father and grandfather. Not even a baron was good enough in their opinion.

Oh, if only Peter would pester her as her three hopeful suitors had been of late, then they'd already be married.

"Is he coming this way?" she asked.

"No. He is in conversation with an heiress."

"Hopefully she will become the object of his affection and he will forget about me."

"How are your pets?" Peter asked in a way to change the subject.

"My *pets* are well," she answered. "If you had pigeons and trained them to travel between our homes, or if you allowed me to train mine to think of your home as a second place to find food, water and rest, we could share messages while we are both away from London."

Peter laughed. "A gentleman does not write to a lady to whom he is not attached."

Oh, if only they were, Johanna mentally sighed. "That rule applies to sending missives by post or human messenger, not carrier pigeon."

He chuckled again. "Yes, but the footman who takes care of them while you are away might read a message meant only for you. Think of the scandal," he teased.

“Marcus is forbidden from reading messages.” Johanna had made him promise never to look inside the little tubes because she had hoped one day to share secret messages.

Her hobby of raising carrier pigeons may be odd, but Johanna was fascinated by how they could be used. Even The Rothschilds, who had a banking dynasty in Europe, relied on carrier pigeons to send messages. She’d heard that they were the first to receive word of Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo because of a carrier pigeon and were able to financially capitalize on the victory.

Johanna never planned on becoming wealthy because of her pigeons. She simply wanted to train them to send messages back and forth. But the only person she wanted to share secret missives with would not cooperate.

In fact, each time she tried to advance their relationship, Peter retreated, and it aggravated her to no end.

“Have the two you sent out returned?” he asked.

“No,” Johanna answered. “They flew home and did not come back, which is what I feared would happen. They’d only been brought to London on two separate occasions, and I have not had the opportunity to train them to fly back and forth.”

She still had four pigeons with her, but when the first two did not return, she did not send the others out.

“Your family still does not know they are anything other than pets?” he asked her again.

“So long as I keep them out of the manor and on the roof or some other outside and safe location, they don’t care, nor do they pay me much mind with regard to my little *hobby*,” she grumbled. “Father assumes that once I wed, a husband will curtail my keeping pigeons, so he isn’t going to bother with denying me now.”

Johanna glanced up at him and smiled sweetly. “Are you certain you don’t wish to train pigeons to fly between our homes? It could be grand fun.”

“Johanna, come along. We must be on our way.” Her mother approached and offered a stiff smile to Peter. She was also of the opinion that Johanna should not marry so far beneath her.

Oh, why couldn’t he have been born first?

CHAPTER TWO

Higgins, the butler opened the front door to the family London home upon Peter's approach.

"You have a guest."

"Who?" Peter was not expecting anyone.

"His Grace!" The butler's dry tone indicated exactly which *His Grace* was paying a call.

Peter cursed under his breath as he strode down the corridor and entered the library.

"Why aren't you betrothed yet?" his great-uncle, the Duke of Danby barked.

"I am not in a position to wed," Peter answered as he crossed to the sideboard and poured himself a brandy. His great-uncle had already helped himself so there was no reason to stand on ceremony.

"The others I was forced to manipulate because they didn't know what was best for them," His Grace admitted. "You,

however, know exactly who you want so *my* interference should *not* be necessary.”

For these past few years the Duke of Danby had gone out of his way to see that his nieces, nephews, then great-nieces and nephews, married. Peter had hoped that Danby would be more interested in seeing his younger sisters, Deborah and Sarah, wed before disrupting Peter’s life.

It was also because of his sisters that Peter tried to protect misses arriving in London, too innocent to know the dangers that could lurk around every corner. Deborah and Sarah were protected better than most, and always chaperoned, so Peter didn’t worry so much, but he knew how he’d feel if something horrible happened to them. Thus he tried to protect those who did not enjoy the same privilege as his sisters.

“You already love someone, and she loves you. What is so difficult?”

“You don’t know if I love anyone,” Peter argued. He made certain that nobody knew what was in his heart, though he had a vague recollection of once telling Johanna that he loved her but decided that it must have been a dream from his muddled state of too much brandy.

“Bah!” Danby responded. “I know love when I see it. Marry the chit and be done with it.”

“Who is it I should marry?” Peter asked to be difficult. He was certain his great-uncle already knew and wouldn’t be surprised if His Grace didn’t have spies in every household in London.

Danby narrowed his eyes and thumped his cane. “You have been sniffing after the skirts of Lady Johanna Knight for the better part of a year.”

“I do *not* sniff after skirts,” Peter argued with disgust.

“Call it what you will, but you love her, she loves you. Court, marry and be done with it,” Danby ordered.

“I am not worthy of her,” Peter finally admitted. “Her father and grandfather have set their sights on Eldridge.”

Danby scowled. “Chedworth is a bloody earl, and his title isn’t so old. I will have a talk with him. He will be made to see reason.”

It would be just like Danby to call on Johanna’s grandfather and insist upon the marriage, but Peter didn’t want his uncle to manipulate his life as he had done to everyone else.

“It is not only their disapproval, but my current situation. I cannot afford to support a wife, at least not in a manner Lady Johanna deserves.”

“Bloody, damn pride,” Danby grumbled. “That makes you as bad as Chedworth. His pride won’t allow a granddaughter to marry anyone who is not titled, and you will not take a wife unless you are rich.”

Peter didn’t consider it pride, but he also wasn’t willing to argue the point to His Grace.

“What will it take for you to feel wealthy enough to support a wife and family?”

Peter blinked at him.

“I’ve estates all about England. I’ve purchased them over the years because I knew there would be second, third and even fourth sons who would need an income or something to make them attractive to misses and ladies. Which do you prefer? Farming, mining, fishing even? I’ll give you a list of properties. Choose one.”

His mouth agape, all Peter could do was stare at his great-uncle. “You would give me property that has an income just so that I could wed?”

“Yes, and you wouldn’t be the first.”

While an estate that he could manage and build wealth from would be a comfort, and bring security, it didn’t feel right to accept. “It is kind of you, but I will not take you up on your offer.”

“Why the bloody hell not?” Danby demanded.

“In your words, pride. If I cannot support a wife on my own, then I should not marry.”

“Bah,” Danby grumbled as he stood. “I’m not finished with you yet,” he warned as he crossed to the door. “It’s time you married, and I will see it done.”

“Bloody hell!” Peter murmured and stared down into his glass and shook his head.

Danby may think he could make others do his bidding just because he ordered it but he may meet his match when confronting Chedworth.

Peter chuckled. It would be enjoyable to watch, but he did not need Danby arranging things to suit him. If Peter had even the slightest chance of marrying Johanna, which he did not, it would be on his own terms.



“You will cease speaking to Mr. Peter Storm,” Johanna’s grandfather ordered. “He is not suitable.”

“The more attention you give him, the worthy gentlemen will take notice and believe you have already given your heart,” her father insisted.

She had, but Johanna didn’t dare tell her grandfather or father that she’d done so.

“If I do not cease speaking with him?” she asked, knowing that she angered them both, Grandfather more than her father.

Grandfather drew himself up, tilted his chin and stared down at her. “Then you will be sent to the country until a proper marriage can be arranged for you.”

This is what she feared the most—to be forced to marry a gentleman that she didn’t know or even like. “Very well.” She would simply visit with Peter in secret and not in full view of *the ton*.

“This is for the best, Johanna,” her father said. “You would be miserable married to someone who could not support you. Would you ever be certain that he married you for yourself and not for what you could bring to a marriage?”

It was on the tip of her tongue to remind her father that his sister had been perfectly happy living above a bookshop with her husband but did not. Aunt Louisa's name was never to be mentioned, especially in front of Grandfather. Further, Peter was the only man who did not want her dowry. The same could not be said for anyone else who had shown an interest in her.

“The Clarendon Ball is this evening. I expect you to engage the Duke of Eldridge's interest and forget that Mr. Peter Storm exists.”

“Yes, Grandfather. I will do my best, but he has no interest in marriage from what I have been told.”

“You will change his mind. He needs heirs and you need to wed.”

She needed to do something to keep her grandfather happy. She just wasn't willing to marry a gentleman that she didn't love. But how could she manage to do both?

It was a dilemma that plagued her and led Johanna to seek Alden out for his advice. Unfortunately, she could not call on Alden directly since he recently took up residence at the Albany, and no woman was allowed to cross the threshold of the building. Not even a sister visiting her brother. Therefore, she traveled there by carriage and sent a footman inside with a note to bring her brother out.

“What is so dire that you couldn't have sent a note and asked me to call?” Alden asked as he entered the carriage.

“This is not a conversation that can be held within earshot of grandfather or father.”

Alden narrowed his eyes. “What have you done?”

“Nothing,” she assured him, a bit affronted. “It is what they want me to do.”

Alden blew out a sigh. “Who have they set their sights on this time?”

“I’m to bring the Duke of Eldridge up to scratch.”

Alden lifted an eyebrow. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that grandfather is reaching so high.”

“He’d expect higher if a prince was available,” Johanna grumbled.

“What are your objections to Edridge?” Alden finally asked.

“I don’t know him,” she answered. “Further, I don’t love him.”

“How can you know you don’t love him if you don’t know him?”

“You can’t love someone you don’t know,” she answered.

“Then come to know him and then you’ll know if you can love him,” Alden stated as if the answer was simple.

“I don’t want to come to know him when I know that I won’t love him,” she argued.

“How can you be so certain?” Alden demanded.

“Because I love Mr. Peter Storm.”

Alden blew out another sigh.

“And he loves me,” she reminded her brother. “You heard him clearly as I did.”

“Unless Storm suddenly decides to elope with you, there is nothing you can do.” Alden eyed her. “Perhaps you should consider other bachelors because I doubt Storm will be bold enough to defy grandfather and if you continue to wait for him to do something you are likely to become a spinster.”

“I’d rather be alone than in a loveless miserable marriage.”

“Yet, you won’t even entertain the possibility that you might be able to love someone else.”

“Oh, you are no help,” Johanna cried. Her brother was supposed to help, not make matters more difficult.

“I’m not even certain what you wish for me to do,” he countered. “Unless you’d like me to kidnap Storm for you and drive you both to Gretna Green.”

She hadn’t thought of that possibility. Peter would have no choice but to marry her if she managed to be compromised. But one could not be compromised if a brother was present. “Simply kidnap, I’ll do the rest.”

Alden pushed open the door. “I was being facetious. I will not kidnap Storm on your behalf. You’ll need to do that all on your own.”

Peter wouldn’t be alone with her unless they were walking in a garden in full view of guests, so he certainly wouldn’t get

into a carriage with her, which made it quite difficult to kidnap him.

“Come to know Eldridge.” Alden stepped from the carriage. “Don’t pin all your hopes on a gentleman who will never ask for your hand. Even if he did, grandfather would never accept him, and Storm has too much honor to elope.” With that, Alden slammed the door and walked away.

“You have been absolutely no help,” Johanna called before she slumped back in her seat. That was the problem. Peter had too much honor, which was why they’d never be more than friends.

Certainly, there was something she could do to change that, but what?

CHAPTER THREE

“Why did Danby visit earlier?” Peter’s mother demanded.

“How did you know His Grace had been here?”

“When we returned from Hannah’s garden party we saw his carriage.”

“Yet, you didn’t return home,” Peter prompted.

“Of course not.” Mother placed a hand at her breast. “I’ll not have Deborah or Sarah near him, or he’ll see them married off.” Her eyes widened. “Has he made plans for them? You must tell me.”

Peter blew out a sigh. “Danby did not confide in me.”

“Then what did he want if not to take another daughter from me?” she demanded.

“His Grace is more concerned with me marrying, if you must know.”

“Thank goodness.”

“Thank you for your concern, Mother,” Peter offered dryly.

“You are a man. It is not the same. Deborah and Sarah are innocent misses and must have my guidance.”

She offered so much guidance that one sister had married someone who lived in Ireland to get away from her. Tabitha also loved her husband. Ireland had simply been a lovely bonus.

“See, Mother. We don’t have to avoid him,” Sarah, the youngest at eighteen exclaimed. “If the Duke of Danby is worried about Peter, then he won’t bother himself with me.”

Peter didn’t point out that he’d witnessed Danby arrange several weddings in one house party, and usually at Christmas.

“Besides, if he was going to worry about a female, he’d find Deborah a husband first since she is older.”

This was Sarah’s first Season and she wanted to enjoy every moment. However, their mother made it extremely difficult because she discouraged every gentleman she found unsuitable, which was solely based on the location of their estate. Mother wanted her daughters close, though only the eldest lived within a day of the ancestral estate where Mother made her residence.

Deborah, at twenty, looked up from her book and frowned. “Danby will not be arranging my future for I do not intend to wed.” She then returned to reading.

Mother didn’t even offer an argument and probably because if Deborah became a spinster, she would have someone in whom she could always *guide*.

“Danby may be worried about Peter at the moment, but that does not mean that I will not remain alert. I do not trust him, and I will not allow him to arrange another poor match for either of my daughters.”

Peter nearly snorted. Abigail, the eldest of his sisters had married a mister she loved and resided close to home, and Danby had nothing to do with that match. However, the ones that Danby had a hand in were Hannah, who had married a wealthy marquess and Tabitha who married a wealthy viscount. Those were hardly poor matches.

“Just stay by my side once we enter the ball and all will be well,” his mother insisted as the carriage came to a stop outside of the Clarendon mansion.

As soon as his mother located a place where she wished to stand with her daughters close, Peter took his leave of them and sought out the Duke of Eldridge. The two had become friends when His Grace’s sister had married Peter’s brother. It was Eldridge that he joined at White’s earlier in the day with complaints about Danby and voiced his frustration of why he could not ask for Lady Johanna. Peter had also warned his friend that Johanna’s grandfather expected her to bring Eldridge up to scratch, to which his friend had laughed.

When her name was announced, Eldridge turned to look.

“She is quite lovely,” he acknowledged.

“Yes, she is,” Peter admitted and then wondered if perhaps he shouldn’t have mentioned Lady Johanna to Eldridge at all.

“I believe I will gain an introduction.”

Bloody hell! “I’m certain nothing would make her grandfather happier,” Peter offered dryly.

“You have no need for concern,” Eldridge assured him. “Even if I were interested, which I am not, I’d not attempt to replace you.”

“Lady Johanna and I can only be friends.”

“We shall see.” Then Eldridge left him and crossed the ballroom to engage the Earl of Chedworth.

The gentleman practically beamed and introduced Lady Johanna.

Even from a distance Peter could see that her smile was tight as she looked past Eldridge to Peter, a frown drawn between her eyebrows. He shrugged and she returned her attention to His Grace.

It was likely she believed that Peter had put Eldridge up to his introduction after the discussion the two had shared this afternoon, but that had not been his intention. Peter had simply been confiding in a friend and was beginning to wonder if that had been a mistake.

Moments later Eldridge returned to Peter. “I’ve secured the supper dance.”

“I am happy for you,” Peter ground out, feeling everything but pleased. No, the emotion that was closest to his heart was betrayal.

While Peter knew that he couldn't have Johanna, he hoped that when she did marry that it would be to a stranger, not his friend where he'd have to witness their happiness.

"I assure you that my interest strays no further. I simply wish to become acquainted with the lady who has you tied in knots."

"She has not," Peter insisted.

To which Eldridge laughed. "Yes, she has, my friend."

Peter hated this. What if Johanna realized that Eldridge could offer her more? Much, much more than he ever could. In addition, Eldridge was likeable and when he wished to, could be charming.

"You know my cousins, do you not?" Eldridge asked as he nodded across the room to five females.

"Yes. I've made their acquaintance."

"They are of an age to wed, and my responsibility."

Peter shot him a look. "I am acquainted with them, but that is all." It was bad enough that Danby was already trying to manage him, he didn't need Eldridge doing the same.

"I am not trying to matchmake," Eldridge assured him. "But you should engage one of them in the supper waltz and then we can share a table."

"Why?" Peter wasn't certain what he was about.

"I overheard Lady Johanna's grandfather address her as I walked away. Now that she'd gained my attention, she was

reminded that she was not to speak to you again. Therefore, if we share a supper table, there is little he can do since he does wish me to offer for her. If you are with one of my cousins, who is also a ward, he cannot complain.”

“I don’t wish to offer false encouragement.” It was one matter to engage in a waltz. It was quite another to request the supper waltz as it would mean that they would dine together and have the opportunity to engage in further conversation.

“I can assure you that none of them are in any hurry to marry. Their father was a reverend who believed London was full of sin. This is their first Season. As much as I wish my responsibilities at an end, I will not push them into a courtship they do not want, nor do anything so archaic as to arrange a marriage.”

That explained why Peter had not seen them until this year. “Two have reached their majority, have they not?” Peter asked.

“They have but I cannot simply turn them out to become a governess or find other employment. Their lives were difficult enough with my uncle who allowed them no freedom whatsoever and forced pious prayer. They deserve a Season or two.”

As Eldridge finished speaking, those very cousins approached.

“Which one of you has the supper dance free?”

They blinked at him in surprise.

“One of you must have it available.”

“I do,” the second eldest, Bernice said.

“Give it to Mr. Storm.”

She blinked again in shock and Peter could tell that she wished to argue but wasn't certain if she should, then looked helplessly to Peter.

“Please?” he asked.

Miss Bernice Simpson reluctantly handed over her dance card.

“I promise to explain later,” Eldridge assured her. “In fact, we may need your assistance in the future, if you are willing, but I cannot explain here.”

“Of course, Henry,” Miss Bernice finally said as she cast concerned eyes upon Peter.



Johanna remained with her father but watched Peter. She knew the relationship he shared with Eldridge and couldn't help but wonder if Peter wasn't responsible for His Grace asking for the supper waltz.

When the time arrived, Eldridge came to collect her, then led Johanna onto the floor. It wasn't until the music began and he took her in his arms that he spoke.

“I understand you are to bring me up to scratch.”

Shock filled her being as heat rushed over her face.

His Grace chuckled. “No need to be embarrassed,” he assured her. “Storm has told me the way of it.”

She was going to kill Peter. He had no right to divulge what they had discussed in private.

“I already knew your grandfather’s intentions,” Eldridge confided. “I have received weekly invitations to dinner, which I have declined.”

“Then why ask me to waltz?” she asked. “Especially the supper waltz.”

“Because Storm is a friend and relative.” Then he explained his plans for the evening.

Johanna stared up at him. “Why are you doing this?”

“I believe everyone should be happy, Lady Johanna,” he answered. “If I am seen escorting you about town and whatnot, I will be left alone, your grandfather will be happy, and you’ll be able to speak with Peter without consequence.”

“There is no purpose in doing so,” she finally said. “Peter will never offer for me and even if he did, he would be rejected. Nor will you seek my hand, so my grandfather will not be pleased when the Season comes to an end.”

“It will bring us all a little peace for a short time. Further, much could happen between now and when everyone retires to the country.”

She supposed he was correct. “I will do my best to bring you up to scratch, Your Grace.” She quietly laughed. “When I fail, I only ask that you explain that you hold nothing against me other than we do not suit or an excuse that my grandfather would accept.”

He stared down at her. “Would he be difficult?”

“He can be, and if you are willing, I prefer that all blame be placed on you.” It was a risk that she asked him to take on such. But Eldridge knew as well as she that a gentleman could nearly get away with murder and not suffer any consequences, but a lady could be ruined by a whispered rumor whether it was true or not.

“My excuse will be that although you managed to capture my heart, I cannot consider marriage to anyone until at least two of my five wards are settled. However, if you are available next Spring, I may reconsider my situation.”

Johanna nearly snorted. “You’ve thought this through.”

“I’ve been navigating Society for the better part of ten years. I’ve developed a talent for doing exactly what one wishes without giving all that is hoped for. In the end, no one will think poorly of you or me.”

“Other than my grandfather,” she chuckled.

“Yes, well, I don’t value his opinion since he’d rather have you titled than happy.”

“I still won’t win Peter in the end,” she reminded Eldridge.

“We shall see,” he murmured. “You and I are not the only ones wishing to see *him* brought up to scratch. In fact, someone even more powerful than your grandfather is certain to see it done.”

“Who?” She couldn’t imagine anyone else would have an interest in whether she and Peter married.

Eldridge didn't answer. He simply smiled with a gleam of calculation in his deep blue eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next fortnight was rather pleasant. Eldridge accompanied Johanna everywhere and the two seemed to get along famously. If Peter didn't know any differently, he would assume they were falling in love.

It also ate at him. Eldridge could give Johanna what she deserved, and he would care for her, and might even come to love her. Further, her family would welcome him.

Worse, he never had the opportunity to speak with Johanna alone. What if in their duplicity Johanna and Eldridge did fall in love?

Though, could he really object? As much as Peter loved and wanted Johanna, she could never be his. Her grandfather would never allow a marriage, so perhaps it was for the best if he did lose her to Eldridge. All that really mattered in the end was that she was happy, even if it left him miserable.

Peter was often with the two, as he was usually escorting Bernice. He had feared she would not wish him to do so, but

once Eldridge had confided in her the subterfuge, she'd been delighted to play her part as she didn't wish to truly be courted by anyone. She simply wished to enjoy the freedom of not having a man dictate what she was allowed to do, which was how her father had been. Bernice had no desire to wed just so a husband could do as her father had done. In fact, she confessed that she may never wed.

However, having Eldridge and Bernice with them constantly did not allow Peter to speak with Johanna privately.

He missed their conversations and sharing confidences, but then reminded himself that it was for the best. They had no future, no matter how much he may wish it.

Perhaps he should absent himself from Johanna for good. Then she could find another love and happiness.

It might even be with Eldridge.

Right now, the two were sitting in the front row of Eldridge's box at the theatre. Their heads were together, whispering and Johanna quietly laughed at something Eldridge had said.

They were friends, of that Peter had no doubt. But could they be more if he were not in the way?

"Are you not enjoying the farce?" Bernice asked quietly.

"Truthfully, I have not been paying all that much attention to what is happening upon the stage."

"Because you are paying far too much attention to what my cousin and Lady Johanna may be discussing."

Bernice was wise, quiet and observant.

“Perhaps,” Peter admitted. “I was also contemplating visiting my brother.”

“Which brother?”

“Sam and his wife Jillian.” Jillian was Bernice’s cousin, and the younger sister of Eldridge.

“You would travel to Barbados.” Her eyes widened with alarm. “Why?”

“It is for the best,” he answered simply.

“Their courtship is not real,” Bernice reminded him. “At least no more real than ours.”

“Lady Johanna will never be mine and I’m simply doing her a disservice by always being present. It is unfair to her.”

“She loves you,” Bernice whispered.

“Shouldn’t she be given the opportunity to love another? She will not do so if I am present.”



Even though Peter sat behind her, Eldridge was making witty comments and there was a performance on the stage before her, Johanna heard every word Peter had said to Bernice. She wasn’t certain if she was angry or hurt.

Why wouldn’t he fight for her? Why wouldn’t he try to find a way that they could be together? Why did he give in so easily?

Did he not love her in the way she loved him?

Were they truly only friends?

He had told her he loved her. It didn't matter that he'd been drunk when he once uttered those words because she had taken it to heart.

Johanna also knew why he never said it again—because he did not want to tie her to him.

Had he always intended to walk away as soon as there was someone to replace him?

Did he think her affection could so easily be transferred?

As the act came to an end and the lamps grew brighter, Eldridge stood. “Would you care for some refreshments, Lady Johanna?”

“Yes, please. Though, I would prefer to remain here.”

“I'll go with you,” Bernice quickly offered.

Eldridge turned to Peter. “Will you remain and keep Lady Johanna company?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Peter answered, though Johanna had a feeling he'd rather be gone.

As the curtain to the box swished and closed at their exit, she turned in her seat to fully face him.

“Did I hear correctly? Are you off to Barbados?”

He blinked at her in surprise.

“I heard everything and am quite vexed with you.”

Peter blew out a sigh. “We will never be allowed to marry, Johanna. You must know that.”

“You could take me with you.” She loved the idea the moment she voiced the possibility. “Then my grandfather wouldn’t have a choice. We could even live there.”

“How would I support you? I have no skills other than rescuing kidnapped misses.”

“There must be something you wish to do,” she said.

“In truth, I’ve never known. But regardless of what becomes of me, I will end up in trade and you will be denied to me.”

“Not if we run off to Barbados, or even Gretna Green. You love me Peter, I know that you do, just as I love you.”

“I will not say those words to you, Johanna. It is not fair to either of us if I do.”

Tears filled her eyes. “Then you have decided to simply turn your back on what we have, could have in the future, and deny my happiness.”

“It is for the best.”

“No, it isn’t. I don’t want a marriage based on titles and connections, Peter. I want love.”

Johanna glanced up as the curtain opened, expecting to see Eldridge and his cousin. Instead, her grandfather stood there. “You are coming with me, Johanna. Now!”

He was livid if the high color in his cheeks, tightness of his jaw and the pulse pounding at his temple was any indication.

“Has something happened?”

“No, which is the crux of the problem.”

His words made absolutely no sense.

“Gather your things and come with me now.”

“Yes, grandfather.”

She pulled her shawl about her shoulders and picked her reticule up off the seat then followed her grandfather, though she glanced back at Peter one last time in fear that she might never see him again.

Once they reached grandfather’s carriage and settled upon the benches, he glared at her. “This *farce* of yours has come to an end.”

She said nothing. It was better to know exactly to what he referred before confessing a secret she had hoped that he knew nothing about.

“I received confirmation of your duplicity and this sham courtship between you and Eldridge. I warned you what would happen if you spoke to Storm again.”

Johanna swallowed against her tightening throat and feared her breath might be cut off. She feared what he might do.

Silence stretched between them until they entered his manor. She had hoped to quickly escape to her set of rooms but stopped short when she noted that trunks were stacked in the entry. Instantly her stomach tightened.

Grandfather had warned that he'd send her to the country and arrange her marriage. Was he now making good on that threat.

“Please grandfather...”

“Not another word. I warned you.”

She quickly closed her mouth and grew quiet though her mind didn't rest for thinking of ways out of this predicament.

He couldn't send her from London. Not now.

Worse, she couldn't allow him to arrange her marriage to a stranger.

This could not be happening to her.

“You will leave immediately, return to Hartfield Park and not leave until I come for you.”

Leave immediately? She wouldn't even have the opportunity to sneak out. But where could she go in any case?

Oh, why had her brother taken rooms in a location where females were not allowed?

However, that didn't mean that she couldn't send him a note and maybe Alden would come to rescue her.

“I feel this is rather drastic, Grandfather.”

Johanna turned to find Alden here, which he rarely was. He stood in the doorway to the parlor, a glass of brandy in his hands.

Johanna turned pleading eyes to him.

“We’ve had this discussion and it is not your decision what is to be done with your sister,” Grandfather barked.

There was sympathy in his eyes, but Alden shrugged, which meant he would not stand in the way of grandfather’s plans.

If Felix were here, he would help, of that she was certain. But Felix, her older brother, and the spare, had not been seen in nearly five years. After a horrible row with grandfather, he had left and never returned. Being a female, she did not have the same option.

Try as she might, Johanna could think of no argument as her panic mounted.

“Your maid will accompany you. The driver has been instructed not to stop except to change horses.”

“What of an outrider?” Alden asked.

At least Alden was concerned with her safety, not just who she wed.

“There are no worries in travel between here and Hartfield Park,” her grandfather dismissed. “No one would dare stop a coach with my crest.”

Her grandfather spoke as if he were ranked just below God or the king, and perhaps there were those who feared him. Johanna certainly did in this moment.

She couldn’t believe that her grandfather was sending her from London, now, after night had fallen to embark on a six-hour journey to her family estate.

“I must insist that guards accompany my daughter,” Johanna’s father argued.

“You’ll insist on nothing,” Grandfather bellowed. “Had you any control over her, I would not have had to suffer the embarrassment of taking her from the theatre.” Grandfather turned and strode down the corridor, finished with her and the conversation.

Johanna glanced about, hoping to be rescued but her father simply shook his head. “All will be well, Johanna.” Then he turned and abandoned her as well.

At least Alden came forward and drew her close.

“Why aren’t you helping me?” she asked.

“I am,” he whispered.

Johanna pulled back from his embrace. “How?”

“You are freer away from him and if you choose to do as Felix, you will find what you need hidden in the back of the wardrobe in my set of rooms.”

Johanna could only blink at him. Did Alden expect her to run away as their brother had done?

“If he forces someone on you that you do not want, go to Felix. He will take care of you.”

“You know where he is?” She assumed nobody knew.

“I’ve always known. All will be well, Johanna.” He kissed her forehead. “Do what he wants for now. Once you are away

from here, it will be your choice and I will support you in whatever you decide.”

Tears filled her eyes and she quickly blinked them away. They may be sending her off to be sequestered at Hartfield Park, but Alden was the one who really cared. “Thank you.”

As she left the mansion, Johanna vowed that she’d not wait to see who her grandfather chose to be her husband but would leave Hartfield Park at the first opportunity and travel to join Felix.

CHAPTER FIVE

Johanna had been asleep when the carriage came to a sudden halt in the early morning hours. However, she hadn't become alarmed until she heard shouting outside of the carriage. As her maid, Margaret, pulled herself into the corner of her seat and drew a blanket about her, Johanna peaked out to see who had stopped them. Two men wearing a cloth about their faces sat on horses, but she couldn't see the man who was telling her driver to get down from his seat.

So much for her grandfather's prediction that nobody would dare stop his carriage, she nearly snorted.

The carriage shifted and then the door was opened by the coachman.

The third man, also with a cloth across his face, ordered Margaret from the carriage but not Johanna. Her maid whimpered but did as she was told. She then overheard them tell the driver to remove the trunks belonging to the servants but to leave Johanna's.

She couldn't understand the reason. Perhaps it was because she'd been pulled from sleep and her mind was still foggy, but she couldn't make sense of why they would do this.

Unless...

Good Lord, she was being kidnapped!

But why and by whom?

She started for the carriage door, unwilling to sit there without having a say and make her own demands, but was stopped when a man stepped in front of the door and ordered Johanna to return to her place.

Johanna glanced to the pistol he held, and fear snaked down her spine.

She was in a precarious position with no means of escape. Johanna took a deep breath and forced her mind and pulse to calm. At least, that was her intention, but her heart still hammered in her chest.

If she was being kidnapped for ransom, then she needn't fear being harmed for Grandfather wouldn't pay a shilling without first seeing that she was safe. He was quite wealthy, and it served him right for making her leave in the middle of the night without anyone to guard them.

With no choice, she stepped away from the door and settled on the seat once again.

The door closed and the carriage shifted as someone climbed to the driver's perch.

“What is the purpose of this?” her coachman demanded.
“Why are you taking Lady Johanna?”

“Storm wants her. Once delivered, they’ll be off to Gretna Green.”

“She should have her maid,” Margaret insisted.

One of the men chuckled. “She won’t be needing a maid.”

The carriage then lurched forward as Johanna frowned. Peter was not responsible for this. If he had wanted to stop her from returning home, he would have come for her himself. Further, he couldn’t have known that Johanna had been sent to the country as soon as she returned from the theatre.

So, if not Peter, who was responsible for this perfidy? How did they know where she’d be and why did they wish to put the blame on Peter?

Fear began to stir in her belly. The only way anyone would know where to find her was if she’d been followed or at least watched.

Trepidation filled her being at the very idea that someone had been spying on her and waiting for an opportunity to take her. Yet, that didn’t explain why they named Peter, unless it was to have her father search where Johanna would not be.

Her maid and driver would certainly report to her father what they had been told and then her brother would race to the border to find her and Peter. They could spend days searching, which would allow her captors to take her further away.

With luck, Margaret and her coachman would find help as quickly as possible, but there was little comfort since nobody would know where she was.

Goodness, that thought was disconcerting. Who had really kidnapped her and for what purpose? It would be days before her grandfather realized he had been duped, but what would happen to her in the meantime?

That was the frightening question, which was why she needed to remain alert and plan, which was exactly what she did. Her captors hadn't bothered to blindfold her, nor did they pull the curtains inside the carriage, so Johanna was able to note where they traveled.

As the sun rose and grew brighter, she was able to read the road signs better. She may not know exactly where she was, but Johanna knew the name of the last town they passed before the carriage came to a stop. She also knew the next town they would come to if they had remained on the same road. She'd often come this way to visit her mother's family.

Johanna stepped out of the carriage and glanced about, trying to take in details that might be necessary to describe. The light stone manor was dirty with age and falling into disrepair. The bushes were overgrown, and the beds held weeds instead of flowers. Moss crept up the base of the house, and a few windows on the upper floor were broken. Did someone actually live here, or was she just to be kept captive in this crumbling manor? No doubt there were rats, mice and other curious creatures scampering about inside.

One of her captors pulled on her arm, marched her to the entry then ushered her inside. It didn't look much better in here than it did outside. Besides being dark, all the furniture was draped, as if the house had been closed up, and not for a short absence. Besides the musty scent, dust particles danced in the air. The owners had not been here in some time.

They were soon greeted by a man and a woman who were to keep her here and provide meals. She suspected they were husband and wife, though no names were given.

The woman complained that she had not been given nearly enough notice to prepare and the man informed them that the upper floors were uninhabitable and dangerous. The two also sent disapproving looks in her direction for reasons Johanna couldn't understand.

She wasn't the one who wished to be here. If the couple wanted to take their irritation out on someone, it should be the two men who had brought her here, or their employer, for whom she still did not have a name.

"You'll use the parlor as a chamber," the housekeeper announced. "A bed has been brought down and made up for you."

She was led down a corridor to a back room. However, it was one of her captors who entered first and Johanna followed, noting that the only windows and other door led to a walled terrace. She followed him out onto the stone paving and glanced about. The entire area was surrounded by tall, stone walls and the manor on one side. There wasn't even a

gate, but there were openings with delicate iron scrolling. Escape wasn't impossible as she could find footholds within the iron scrolling and could climb up, over and down the other side, but she'd risk injury in the attempt and would need to give the possibility careful consideration in the event she was not rescued.

Johanna tried to remember how far away she was from the nearest village or even estate. They were far enough that if she did manage to leave, there weren't many places to hide along the road to the next town as they were mostly surrounded by open fields. If her absence was discovered too quickly, she'd be caught. Therefore, Johanna needed to plan carefully.

At least she would be allowed fresh air when she wished, and it was far more than she could hope for given her current circumstances. She would have been quite put out to be locked in a dungeon, or something unpleasantly similar. Further, having access to the terrace provided her with the very thing she needed. "This will be perfect for my birds."

"What birds?" one of her captors asked.

"The birds that are in cages on top of the carriage. I am certain they are quite hungry now. Could you please bring them to me before they die?"

He looked to the other captor then nodded.

Johanna crossed the terrace to one of the covered openings and looked out over the landscape but could see nothing beyond but fields and a cluster of trees near a small pond.

“There is nowhere to go,” the housekeeper warned.

Johanna turned around and smiled. “I realize the impossibility, but these accommodations are far more pleasant than I was anticipating.”

“Glad you like them because you won’t be stepping beyond your temporary chamber.”

She suspected as much but Johanna didn’t need to go anywhere else.

The second captor returned a few moments later carrying the covered cages and then set them down in the middle of the terrace.

“Pigeons! You raise pigeons?” the woman asked in disgust when Johanna pulled the draping off.

“Yes, and I take them with me everywhere.”

“They will be staying out here, and not in the manor.”

“I promise to keep them outside,” Johanna answered dutifully. “They will need water for their bowls and I’m certain they are hungry.”

“I am not feeding any birds. They can fly away and find something.”

“Their diet is not so difficult. They can eat peas, beans, corn or barley,” Johanna assured the woman. “If I let them fly off, they may not come back. I’ve had these birds since they were chicks and I’d be most distressed if I lost them.” Tears welled

in her eyes, and she hoped to convince the housekeeper for some food. The pigeons would need their strength to fly home.

“If you are so worried about them eating, then share your meals with them since you will likely be fed the same.”

While Johanna didn't exactly want to exist on a diet fit for her pigeons, it was more important that her birds got their proper nutrition since they were her only hope of being rescued if she didn't manage to escape on her own.

Over the following days, Johanna only saw the housekeeper when meals were delivered, and no words were ever spoken. The man also made regular rounds outside of the manor. He often stopped by and looked through the openings of the terrace to see that she was still where she was meant to be. He even did so through the long night, which made it difficult for Johanna to determine when it would be safe to escape.

She held out hope that in time he'd not be so diligent and once he began sleeping through the night and not bothered with her, Johanna would take the opportunity to go over the wall. To do so now would result in her being captured because he currently walked the area every two or three hours and that wasn't nearly enough time to get far enough away so as not to be caught.

After she had been held captive for two days, she sent her first bird out with a message.

She had also calculated how long it would take to travel to Gretna Green, based on information she had overheard, and if she and Peter were truly running off to elope, and assuming

the carriage would have only stopped to change horses, then she added additional hours as a precaution. Johanna then allowed a day for her brother to search the village only to learn that she and Peter had never arrived, and how long it would take for them to return to London and advise her father. That would take a total of five days, six at the most because they would be in a hurry.

Her father would no doubt next locate Peter and demand to know where she was.

Of course, he would not know, but she was counting on Peter to determine how he could find her.

Three days later, Johanna still waited for help to come and considered if she should send another message, wait a few more days, or attempt to climb the grating and escape.

Johanna closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the stone. If only she hadn't forbidden Marcus from reading any messages, she might have been rescued by now.

Then the most frightening thought occurred to her. What if Peter had decided to leave England? What if he didn't know that she'd been kidnapped? What if he was on a ship bound for Barbados? If that were the case, nobody would ever read her messages.



It had been days since anyone had seen Lady Johanna. After her grandfather had taken her from the theatre she'd disappeared.

When Eldridge called the day following the theatre and in the days that followed, he was advised that she was not at home. Bernice was told the same and eventually the two stopped calling on Lady Johanna.

Both had reported to Peter each time they tried to call on Johanna and now Peter feared she would be married to the first duke, marquess or earl who asked for her hand with no consideration for what she may wish, and it sickened him. And, with each day that passed with no word, the more he drank and worried.

It was more than that. His heart ached for her. A small hole of emptiness had begun that night in the theatre when he finally acknowledged that it would be best if he distanced himself from Johanna, yet Peter had yet to book passage on a ship sailing to Barbados. Each time he decided that it was time, he could not bring himself to do so.

“You two certainly bungled it,” Danby barked as he strode into the library where Peter and Eldridge were drinking brandy.

“Bungled what?” Eldridge asked.

Danby snorted and marched to the sideboard. “I knew what game you two were playing at and was surprised it took so long for Chedworth to catch on.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Peter said.

“She could have been yours,” Danby snarled. “If you would have let me handle the situation, you two would be together

now, cuddled up somewhere and working on an heir, no doubt.”

Peter hadn't even kissed Johanna. He didn't dare because he knew where it would lead. Or, where he would want it to lead, which was another impossibility, so he had not given in to temptation. It was better not to know the sweet taste of her lips than to carry the memory and know that someone had claimed what he coveted.

“It was a foolish idea to begin with,” Peter admitted. “All it did was give me more time with Lady Johanna for nothing but selfish purposes.”

“It was not selfish and could have been your future if you weren't so bloody proud,” Danby nearly yelled.

“I am resigned to my future,” Peter argued. “No matter how much you attempt to manipulate the situation, I will not marry until I can support a wife. Further, her grandfather will never allow her to marry a man without a title.”

Eldridge got up from his seat and refilled his brandy, intelligent enough not to insert himself into the argument.

“None of my relations will remain a bachelor,” Danby ordered.

“This one intends to be just that and there is nothing you or anyone else can say or do.” Peter would be damned if he would allow a great-uncle to order him about even if said uncle was the Duke of Danby.

“Of all my relations, you by far are the most foolish and stubborn,” Danby grumbled. “Some were difficult, but I never thought *you* would be the most trying.”

“Thank you.” If foolish and trying meant not being a pawn to Danby’s plans, then Peter was happy to be such. Further, he knew that every relation who had been a victim of Danby’s scheming would applaud him.

Or perhaps not. They were all blissfully happy as a result, but Peter wouldn’t think on that now.

Danby took a deep drink of his brandy, his eyes narrowed on Peter as if he could force him to crumble under the weight of his stare.

Peter drew himself up and looked His Grace in the eye. He would not back down.

“What if I allowed you to purchase the property instead of making it a gift?” Danby suggested amiably.

Peter was immediately suspicious. One must always be when dealing with Danby. “I have no funds with which to do so.”

“A percentage of the payments from rents and crops until I have been paid in full. Certainly, your pride would allow such. Every gentleman has taken a loan at one time or another.”

This was the first time Peter gave consideration to Danby’s proposal. He could make his own wealth if he managed the estate well enough. But what did it really matter? What was the point of owning an estate if he was going to live alone?

“I appreciate your offer, Your Grace, and if the day comes that I wish to wed, we will revisit the topic.”

“I demand to see him now!” a man yelled from the front of the house as heavy boots pounded down the corridor right before the door was flung open with such force that it bounced off the wall.

“Where is she?” Johanna’s father, Viscount Ormonde, demanded.

Peter’s heart seized. Johanna was missing! There was no other reason for Ormonde to be here.

“Where is she?” Ormonde lunged forward and grabbed Peter by the cravat, nearly choking him.

“I do not know.” Peter held out his hands so as not to be a threat.

“You took her, and I want her back!”

In a blink, Danby’s cane came down on Ormonde’s arm, barely missing Peter’s face.

“What is the meaning of this?” Danby demanded.

Ormonde pulled back and rubbed his arm where Danby had struck him. “Your great-nephew took Johanna and I demand that she be returned.”

“I did not take your daughter,” Peter insisted. “Why do you think that I did?”

“It is what your men said as they were leaving.”

Danby poked Ormonde in the chest with the end of his cane. “Tell us everything but I can promise you that Storm had nothing to do with what happened.”

Ormonde looked from Peter to Danby and back to Peter and that is when he saw the fear in the man’s eyes. “My father sent Johanna to the country until he could arrange a marriage. Her carriage was waylaid. The driver and her maid were left behind when the men took Johanna and Father’s carriage. One of the men said that they were taking Johanna to Storm to run off to Gretna Green.”

“I sent no men, nor would I be so dishonorable as to kidnap your daughter,” Peter insisted as his gut tightened. “When was this?”

“Five days ago.”

“Five days!” Peter yelled, as panic settled into his bones. Anything could have happened to her in that time. Horrible things that he didn’t wish to contemplate.

“We sent men after the two of you, all the routes one could take to Scotland and the last one just returned having not located you.”

“That is because it was not me!” Bloody hell! Someone had kidnapped Johanna *five* days ago.

Fear, anger, and worry swept through Peter’s being as he tried to think of who may have done this, why, and where they may have really taken her.

“Who could have taken her?” Eldridge asked.

“Kendal, Cartwright or Turnbell,” Peter answered. “Their pockets are empty and all three hoped to marry her.” He didn’t want to think of the possibility that it had been miscreants who might harm or even kill her. Though, if any of those three men were responsible, they’d stop at nothing to see her ruined so that a marriage could take place and they could claim her dowry.

Rage and sickness engulfed Peter as he imagined what he would do to the person or persons who were responsible for bringing harm to Johanna.

“Except they didn’t take her to Gretna Green,” Eldridge reminded him since Johanna had not been found.

“Any place in Scotland would do.” Peter strode for the door and stepped out into the corridor. “Ready the carriage and have my belongings packed.”

“Where are you going?” Eldridge asked.

“To find Lady Johanna.”

“What if she is already wed? Or worse—ruined?” Eldridge asked.

Peter stepped forward, his hands in fists. “Johanna will never be ruined in my eyes.” Then he looked to his great-uncle, the very powerful Duke of Danby. “If she has unfortunately been wed against her will, His Grace will see the matter rectified judiciously and quietly.”

Danby stared at Peter for a long moment and then gave one nod. It was already as good as done if necessary.

Peter turned back to Ormonde. “Are you certain they said nothing else?”

“That was all the maid overheard.”

“And nobody remained with her?” Peter hated to think that Johanna was alone with whoever had taken her. “A footman? Anyone?” Though if the driver and maid were left behind, it was unlikely the kidnappers would allow anyone else to remain with her.

Why the blazes hadn't she had more protection than a driver?

“Only her blasted birds, which hardly matters,” her father grumbled.

Peter didn't even stop to explain as he strode out of the townhouse and demanded his horse, no longer patient enough to wait for a carriage or to have anything packed.

“Where are you going?” Danby demanded.

“To Chelmsford.” Peter knew that was the location of Chedworth's ancestral estate even though he had never visited.

“She is not there,” Ormonde yelled at Peter. “What do you expect to find at Hartfield Park?”

“A message from a lady.”

Peter knew without a doubt that Johanna would send a message home at the first opportunity. He also knew that the man in charge of their care would never check for a message, which meant that he must.

CHAPTER SIX

Peter stopped only long enough to give his horse rest, but after six hours, he arrived at Hartfield Park.

Peter didn't wait for the footman but launched himself from the horse and marched right up to the door and began pounding.

A startled butler answered, but before he could ask anything, Peter entered and demanded to know where Lady Johanna kept her pigeons.

The butler stared, mouth agape, as did a few servants.

"Show me to Lady Johanna's pigeons." he demanded.

A footman stepped forward. "Right this way."

He led Peter out of the manor, around the side, and toward the stables before he stopped at a small building. "These are the mews. They once held falcons, but Lady Johanna has converted them for the use of her pigeons."

"Are you Marcus?" Peter asked.

“Yes, I am.”

Peter quickly introduced himself then explained what had happened to Lady Johanna. “I know that she is traveling with her pigeons. Have any returned recently?”

“One a few days ago,” Marcus offered.

Hope surged. “Which one?”

Marcus stared at him blankly. “I don’t know.” He stepped inside the mews. “They all look the same to me.”

Three pigeons sat on perches inside the mews. “Close the door so that they don’t fly out.” He then attempted to check each tube for a message, but the blasted birds flew away from him.

“Let me,” Marcus said then was able to bring each pigeon to him to check the little tubes. On the third pigeon, he withdrew a small piece of rolled paper and gave it to Peter.

Between Braintree and Halstead

White or grey manor

Dilapidated

Unkept.

He wished Johanna would have written more, but the paper was small, as was her handwriting, as were the tubes so that a pigeon could carry them.

He gave the message to Marcus. “If her father, grandfather or brother arrives, give them this. I’m off to rescue Lady Johanna.”



By the afternoon of her fifth day of captivity, Johanna was growing anxious and began to pace. First, inside her chamber, and then on the terrace.

This being cooped up was driving her mad but she had little choice. Those first days hadn’t bothered her so much, as she’d sent a pigeon and hoped that the message would be found.

Now she feared that it wouldn’t.

If Peter were still in London, would he know if she had her birds? The last he knew she was keeping them in London. He might think she’d only been on a short visit and had not taken her birds.

He might not even remember she had birds!

Johanna would then shake her head. Peter would not forget about the pigeons.

She’d then go back to pacing or stop to look out one of the iron-framed openings in search of a horse or a carriage.

Peter *would* ask about the birds. He had to ask, and he would use that information to find her.

But when would he learn that she was missing?

What if he was on a ship to Barbados?

What if her family decided to search the whole of Scotland and not just Gretna Green? She could be here for weeks and that would never do.

With those thoughts, Johanna began to plan her escape, which she should have been doing from the very beginning.

The man and wife keeping her captive had finally begun to relax and last night he hadn't walked around the outside of the manor after everyone should have retired. Therefore, it was likely he wouldn't do so tonight, and she'd make her escape as soon as it was late enough.

She didn't need Peter. She didn't need her father, grandfather or brother coming to her rescue. Johanna could rescue herself. All she needed to do was get over that blasted wall and she'd be free. She knew the general location of the estate and the distance to each town. Certainly, there were other homes in between. Maybe ones that she might recognize from having visited them.

Johanna stormed into her chamber and searched her trunks for the darkest clothing and most sturdy boots.

Tonight she would set her birds free and then climb the intricate iron and then she'd be escape.

But first, she must rest, as she couldn't leave until after the others had retired. As she would likely be walking most of the night, it was best that she slept now.

Johanna was just drifting off to sleep when a key turned in the lock of her chamber door and it slowly opened.

She sat up in her bed and then sucked in a breath. This wasn't the housekeeper, nor any of her captors, but a man in a long dark coat, his face shielded by the shadow cast by his beaver hat.

Her heart suddenly took on heavy beating as her pulse hitched. So as not to be at a disadvantage, Johanna quickly slid from the bed and back toward the terrace, even though it didn't offer an escape. She simply wouldn't feel as vulnerable.

"Who are you?" Johanna wished her tone would have been stronger. Instead, it shook and sounded weak to her ears.

"You don't recognize me?" He laughed as he removed his hat.

"Mr. Turnbell?" she gasped. Of her three potential suitors, he had been the least troublesome. "What do you want?"

"Money," he answered frankly.

"I will not marry you."

He laughed again. "I never wanted to marry *you*. Then I realized, why settle for a dowry when I could get far more in ransom? I'd have funds in my coffers and not be saddled with you."

This time Johanna gasped. "You'll never get away with this."

"Of course I will." He offered a negligent shrug. "You are the only one who knows my identity. Further, anyone who assisted me will be silenced." He looked up, black eyes cold and hard. "As you will be." He stepped over the threshold and

back out into the hall. “Enjoy what remains of your last day, and night, for tomorrow I will deliver your body and collect my reward.”

“My grandfather will not pay unless I’m alive,” she argued as panic rose.

“He’ll see you sitting all pretty in the carriage when he hands over the funds to my men, who will be long gone by the time your father realizes that it is only your corpse he will find.” He grinned. “I won’t kill you so quickly. We’ll first enjoy a pleasant drive tomorrow morning and when we arrive at the meeting place, I’ll simply strangle you and disappear.”

Turnbell then shut the door and turned the lock once again.

Johanna sank down into a chair and tried to calm her racing heart.

He would make good on his threat to kill her. Of that, Johanna had no doubt.

She had foolishly assumed that she’d remain unharmed if it was a simple matter of a ransom but she’d been so wrong. Thank goodness she had decided to escape tonight. However, before she did anything, she needed to send a final message in the event she was not successful.

The first message was that her captor was Turnbell and that he intended to kill her and when. The second was that she was going to attempt an escape that night. The last, a message for Peter because he was the only one who would think to look for parchment in the tubes. It simply read, *Peter, I love you.*

Johanna also realized that by the time these messages were read, it may be too late for her, but she had to send them anyway. Even if Peter never came for her, Marcus would realize that the birds had returned while she was held and look for messages to give to her father. At least with evidence, Turnbell wouldn't get away with murder.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Peter traveled the road between Braintree and Halstead first quickly, looking along both sides for a property that matched the description of what Johanna had written. When he hadn't seen it by the time he reached Halstead, he turned and rode back the way he came, though at a slower pace, exploring lanes and drives.

It was just nearing dusk and Peter feared that he'd not find the location before it was too dark to see when he emerged from a lane and stared at what was once a white stone house, now in disarray. Parked before the entry was a nondescript carriage.

As he was not certain what he would find inside, Peter tied his horse to a tree within the wood and made his way to the edge of the thicket to study the manor and a means to get inside without being noticed.

He had wanted to rush forward to rescue Johanna but was forced to use patience so as not to endanger her or himself. Once it was dark enough not to be seen, Peter made his way

toward the manor and kept out of sight. The carriage had not moved, and the team of horses had been left to stand there while the driver remained perched on his seat.

Peter first glanced into each window before he tried to open them if he saw that a room was empty. None would give. Either they were locked, nailed shut, or perhaps the wood had swollen about the frame because this property looked as if nobody had lived here in years.

Was it possible he had the wrong place?

But how many houses sat along this stretch of road that could match the description provided by Johanna?

He made his way back to the entrance, then had to duck behind an overgrown bush as a man wearing a dark coat and hat emerged from the manor. Peter strained to see who it was, but there was no light to illuminate his face and soon the man entered the carriage.

Peter stayed hidden until it drove down the lane and disappeared.

Before attempting to enter by the front door, Peter decided to continue around the manor and look for another way into the house that would not announce his arrival. He also needed to know if there were any guards about and plan how to render them powerless so that he could free Johanna.

Except, he still wasn't sure he was in the correct location, but he could not leave until he was certain.

It was no different from when he sought to rescue an innocent from a brothel, so he settled into the ease of what he knew and proceeded with caution around the other side of the building, only stopping when he came to an open window and one that had light within the room.

Just inside, sitting at a scarred table was an older woman and man sipping tea. Each face was drawn with worry and concern.

Peter ducked so as not to be seen but leaned close enough to hear what was being said.

“He means to kill us,” the man whispered.

“You are certain that is what you heard?” the woman asked.

“I was just around the corner. He didn’t know I was there, but I heard sure enough,” the man said. “He means to silence anyone who knows anything.”

“Even her?” the woman asked.

“He plans on doing it tomorrow before his men collect the ransom.”

Johanna’s grandfather or father must have received a demand after Peter had left. They were also likely paying it and not searching for her.

“There are to be no witnesses and she can identify him,” the man said. “We need to leave tonight, before he comes back.”

“He said he won’t be back until tomorrow,” the woman said.

“And I don’t want to be here when he does.”

“Why did you wait to tell me this now?” she demanded.

“I didn’t want you to know until he left. I was afraid you’d say something or let on that you knew.”

“Aye, I might have,” the woman worried. “We’ve got to take her with us.”

“No, she stays,” the man insisted. “We were hired on to make the manor ready for a guest. Nobody told us that the woman had been kidnapped and was being kept against her will.”

“We can explain,” the woman insisted.

“If we would have stopped this as soon as we realized the truth, we might not have been in trouble. But we kept her here for nearly a sennight. The courts won’t take too kindly to kidnapping and I don’t take too kindly to facing the gallows.”

“He will kill her,” the woman reminded him.

“If we take her, we’ll die by hanging. If we stay, he will likely slit our throats,” the man argued. “We are leaving and getting as far away as possible before it is too late.”

“We should at least unlock her door so she can escape too,” the woman said.

“She could get away too soon and identify us and I am not risking that. We are going now. Go pack your things.”

Peter waited until the kitchen had been vacated and then lifted himself up to the window, except it was too narrow for him to slip through and he dropped to the ground and waited.

It would be easier to enter and get Johanna after the two servants left. He really didn't care what became of them, though he'd like to see them captured. However, what mattered was Johanna. The two servants were already skittish, and they may bury a blade in his belly if he came upon them.

At least there didn't seem to be any guards that he would have to fight, but he also hadn't walked the full perimeter of the manor. Therefore, he continued to make his way along the wall, looking in windows and trying to get them open. Finally, he came across a walled terrace and looked through the decorative iron covering the opening to the inside.

He was just about to climb the wall, using the iron as a foothold, when he saw Johanna standing within a chamber.

His breath lodged in his throat when he realized she was only wearing her shift and he took in the sight of her nicely turned ankles, shapely calves and perfectly rounded proportions silhouetted by the thin linen.

It was rude of him to watch and not call to her, but he was without words.

This was wrong.

She was in danger, and he was gawking at her like a schoolboy seeing a woman half dressed for the first time.

"Johanna," he whispered, but she didn't hear him.

"Johanna," he called louder, and she yanked the dark dress against her body to shield it from being seen.

"Over here."

She looked in his direction and rushed forward. “You came!”

“Yes, and I need to get you out of here.”

“As soon as I’m finished dressing.” Her eyes grew wide. “Turn your back and I’ll be with you in a moment.”

Peter chuckled. He’d tell her later that he’d already seen her. Right now, he was simply relieved that he’d found her, and she was unharmed.



Johanna should never have doubted Peter. She knew that he would come for her. He had remembered the pigeons, or he would have never found this place.

Certainly her grandfather would allow them to marry now. Peter had rescued her—from death!

She pulled the dark dress over her head then settled to pull on her boots and withdrew the dark cloak from her trunk. Everything else would need to remain behind. She then returned to the terrace, confident that they would return home, and stepped before the opening.

At the sound of a door, Peter ducked down.

“Hide,” he hissed.

She stepped behind the wall and listened as the housekeeper and the man made their way across the field.

“I hate leaving her behind.”

“I hate being killed,” the man grumbled. Before long, she couldn’t hear either of them.

“I’m going to find the door and come get you,” Peter whispered.

“I’ll be waiting.” Her heart pounded as she hurried back to the chamber and waited for him to walk in.

She waited, and waited longer, then fear crept in again.

What if there had been someone else in the manor? What if Peter had been harmed or worse, killed, trying to rescue her.

She would never forgive herself if something happened to Peter.

“Johanna,” he called to her. Not from the other side of the door, but from outside.

She hurried back out of her chamber and to the opening.

“All the doors are locked, and I can’t pick them or break them down.”

At least he wasn’t harmed. “Then I will escape as I already planned to do tonight, except you will be here to help me.” With a deep breath, she put one foot into the carved iron and began to climb. When she reached the top of the opening, Johanna breathed out a sigh of relief. Then, with another breath, she slowly slipped over the side until she found another foothold, then began her descent as she made certain that her skirt didn’t catch. When Peter’s hands grasped her waist, Johanna knew that she’d reach the bottom without injury. His

heat scalded her skin through her clothing as he lent her support until her feet touched the ground.

“That was much easier than I thought it would be.” She grinned up at him.

Except, Peter wasn’t smiling. His blue eyes were dark and intense and before she could comprehend what he was about, he drew her close and placed his lips against hers.

Johanna had waited so long for him to kiss her and all it took was a kidnapping to bring him around.

Her arms wound about his neck, and she returned his kiss. Before long, he had her pressed against the stone wall while he devoured her and mated his tongue with hers.

Heat rose and all Johanna could do was clutch tight to his shoulders for fear her knees would give out.

Peter finally broke the kiss and pulled away.

“I’ve wanted to do that for so long but knew that it was unfair to both of us, as I wouldn’t court you.”

“Why now?” Johanna asked, hoping that he would finally confess that he loved her.

“When I feared that I’d lost you, or might never see you again, I knew that I would regret for the rest of my days not having kissed you.”

It wasn’t the declaration of love that she’d hoped for, but it was close enough—for now. Peter had been so resolute in

keeping them friends that she took his passionate kiss as a sign of hope for a future.

“We need to go before it’s too late.” He then grasped her hand in his and led her across the field and into a thicket of trees where a horse had been tied to a branch.

“I’m afraid that I don’t have a carriage. Traveling by horse was quicker,” he explained.

“I do not mind.” She’d walk all the way home if necessary. What was important was that she was finally free.

Peter placed his hands about her waist again then lifted her onto the horse. He then came up behind her, pulled her back and close to his body before he guided the horse back onto the lane.

“Which direction?” he asked.

“I’ve no idea. But it was Turnbell who arranged my kidnapping so whichever direction is the opposite of his would be my preference.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Peter wasn't certain which direction to travel. This manor was located equally between Braintree and Halstead, so Turnbell could have taken a room in either town. However, Braintree lay in the direction he would need to return Johanna to her home, therefore, he turned south. It was likely they would not reach Chelmsford before the sun rose, but they would be beyond Braintree, and Turnbell, if that was where he'd taken a room.

The night was clear and quiet, and not overly cool. Peter enjoyed having his arms around Johanna and her body snuggled against his chest and between his thighs.

He shouldn't have kissed her as he had. But in an instant the need had overcome him and had been so strong that he hadn't had the will to deny himself. It hadn't helped that as he watched her climb the other side of the ironwork that he'd viewed not only her ankles, but knees and thighs as well because she'd kept her skirts out of the way so as not to snag them and fall. He'd also taken a step back as he didn't trust

himself not to try and glimpse further up her skirts. It had not been the time for lust and desire, but once her feet had touched the ground before him, Peter had held back no longer.

Her kisses and the way her body had molded to his were even better than Peter ever imagined. She was perfect for him, just as Peter always knew she would be.

Was it so important that he be rich before he married her?

If he purchased an estate from Danby, at least he would have more to offer than his family home in London. An estate would allow him to live with her privately instead of having to endure his family under the same roof whenever they came to Town.

But he couldn't give her a new wardrobe each year, or the jewels, or everything a lady wished and required to be in Society.

Was it fair to ask her to go without?

"If I weren't afraid of being caught by Turnbell, I'd enjoy riding with you this evening."

Peter chuckled. "I'm enjoying having you with me even though there is a danger," he admitted.

"What will become of Turnbell?" she asked.

"As soon as you are safe, I will inform the authorities. You may need to testify at his trial, but he will be arrested and dealt with."

She shivered in his arms.

“Why did you wait so long to attempt an escape?” he asked.

She quickly explained how she had to wait for the opportunity, and that she had hoped that Peter would look for a message.

There really wasn't much along this road and she could have been found by Turnbull, or anyone just as dangerous, before Peter found her. “I'm glad you had faith in me.”

She then told him how she had released the rest of her birds early in the evening, after Turnbull had told her of his plans, and that each carried different parts of the message of who her captor was and what he planned to do.

“You are safe now and that is all that matters,” he assured her.

“I am safe unless we are caught,” she countered.

Johanna may have relaxed back against him, but she still watched, turning her head from side to side as if she expected someone to emerge from the darkness on either side of the road.

“I am also quite ruined,” she said.

“Only if Society ever learns of the kidnapping.”

“Or that we were alone in the middle of the night without a chaperone in sight.” Johanna tilted her head back and grinned at him.

“Are you suggesting that I have ruined you?” he chuckled.

She looked away. "I'm certain that kiss has ruined me for any other gentleman. Goodness."

Peter bit back a grin. Goodness indeed. "I can promise that it won't be the last, if you will have me," he whispered beside her ear.

She sat up so quickly that they almost lost their balance. Then she turned toward him the best that she could. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying that I love you. That I have loved you for at least a year. That when I thought you were lost to me forever, a part of me died inside. I cannot offer you much Johanna, but I do know that I don't want to live without you, if you will have me."

"Have you?" she nearly cried. "I've wanted you for months. And I've loved you," she quickly added. "I just thought you'd never come around."

"I am serious that I cannot give you much. Not the life that you are accustomed to living."

Her face softened. "None of that is important to me, Peter. You are what matters."

Peter believed her, but would the same hold true in the future? Only time would reveal the answer. "Now, please turn around before you fall off the horse." She was leaning precariously backward. "I'd hate for you to be injured."

Johanna offered him a grin before she straightened, faced forward and then snuggled back against him once again.

“Your grandfather and father may reject my offer,” he warned.

“Then we will have two choices,” she answered. “I’ll let everyone know that you were alone with me all night after having rescued me from a dastardly criminal, which will see me ruined. Or we can sneak off to Gretna Green. I am quite agreeable to either.”

Peter chuckled. “Scotland would be less ruinous to our reputations, so I will have a carriage prepared to whisk you away if rejected.”



Johanna must have drifted off, but she could not have slept long as it was still dark when she opened her eyes.

“Where are we?”

“Nearing Hartfield Park.”

Now she was fully awake. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Nearly two hours. I didn’t wish to disturb you.”

“I am sorry.” Johanna quickly apologized.

“I am not.” Peter’s voice was low and comforting. “These last days could not have been easy. It’s no wonder you fell asleep.”

She recalled her eyes getting heavy as they rode and perhaps it was because she was finally safe and with Peter.

“I enjoyed having you in my arms and the weight against me. I look forward to a future of the same, just not on a horse.”

Her face burned at the idea of sleeping with her head on Peter's chest and a part of her warmed at the very idea. Especially after the kiss he'd given her earlier.

"It appears the household is awake," Peter murmured.

Johanna straightened and looked down the hill to Hartfield Park, the home where she'd been raised.

"Why would everyone be awake at this hour?"

"They likely found it difficult to sleep with you missing and after receiving a demand for ransom to be paid today. I know that I haven't slept since I learned you had gone missing, and they've known five days longer than I have."

"When did you learn?" she asked.

"Yesterday, and I left for Hartfield Park immediately."

"You haven't had the opportunity to sleep." She chuckled. "I am certain grandfather will provide a room where you can rest."

"It just will not be yours," Peter grumbled before he kissed the top of her head.

As much as she wished to remain with him in this manner, Johanna would also be glad to be down from the horse. As soon as they stopped outside of the massive doors to the manor, Peter slid from the horse's back and then lifted her to the ground.

Her knees nearly gave way as she was not used to being on a horse for so long.

“Can you walk?” Peter asked with concern.

“Yes. I just need a moment.” She glanced at the manor once again. “At least we will not be waking anyone with our early morning arrival.”

Peter offered his arm and escorted Johanna to the entry, but the door was opened by Walters, an aged butler who had been with the family since before her birth.

“Lady Johanna!” he exclaimed.

“Good morning, Walters. Can I assume my family is awake?”

“Yes, they are in the sitting room. I shall advise them of your arrival.”

“That is not necessary, I will go to them.”

Johanna then led Peter to the sitting room where her family had gathered. Even her mother was awake, clutching a handkerchief in her hand.

When she entered, her mother rose, crossed the room, and drew Johanna into her arms. “I was so frightened for you.” She drew back. “You are unharmed?” Her eyes bore into Johanna’s.

“I am well. Nobody harmed me. They just kept me locked away. Mr. Storm helped me escape.”

Her mother turned to Peter and reached out a hand and grasped his. “Thank you.”

Tears glistened in her mother's eyes and Johanna realized this was the first time that she'd ever seen her mother cry. She was always such a proper stoic woman, and it was nice to see some tenderness.

“Who took you?” her grandfather demanded.

Johanna told them everything that had happened from the moment their carriage had stopped to when she and Peter arrived here. During the telling, her brother had pressed a glass of brandy into Peter's hand while tea was delivered for her. She'd like to have a drop of brandy herself since she was the one who had gone through the terrible ordeal.

“He was going to kill you?”

“Yes, so that I could not identify him as the captor.”

“This couple. Who are they?” her grandfather demanded.

“I never knew their names.”

“They are gone too,” Peter offered. “They overheard plans for their demise and left the manor and Lady Johanna behind.”

“I thank you for saving my granddaughter, Mr. Storm,” her grandfather said. “I will see you rewarded.”

Peter stiffened and Johanna glanced from him to her grandfather and back again.

“All I ask is that when you return to London that you don't speak of this matter to anyone. I will protect my granddaughter's reputation.” He stood. “I'll see that a carriage

is prepared for your return. It is not necessary you remain. The family and I must discuss how best to handle this situation.”

The room stilled and went silent.

Johanna looked to Peter. She would not allow him to be dismissed in such a rude manner, especially after he had rescued her, but waited until he said something.

His face grew somber, and his jaw tightened.

Johanna rose and went to stand beside Peter. “Mr. Storm will remain here. He’s not slept and cannot return at this time.”

“He cannot remain here,” her grandfather countered. “People may assume...”

“Assume what?” Alden, her older brother asked.

“That they are courting or betrothed,” her grandfather said in disgust.

She slipped her arm into Peter’s once again to keep him by her side because she feared that he might change his mind about marrying her.

His arms were tight beneath his jacket, and she noted that his hand was fisted.

“Actually, Lord Chedworth, I do *not* need a reward for saving the woman I love, other than her hand in marriage.”

Alden grinned and lifted his glass toward Peter. At least one of her family members wouldn’t mind.

Her grandfather’s face hardened. “Just because you rescued her from a madman’s schemes does not give you the right to

marry her. I've been clear from the moment you first called on Johanna that you were not worthy of her. She will marry a duke, marquess, earl or an heir to one of those titles."

"No. I will not," Johanna said, finding strength to defy her grandfather because Peter stood with her, and she knew that Alden would support her. He may be the only one, but at least she had him.

"I believe Storm has earned the right to marry Johanna," her father said as he came to his feet.

"You and I will discuss this later," her grandfather barked.

"No, we will not." Her father's words nearly echoed Johanna's. "I lost my sister because you made the same demands of her, and she married a man she loved instead of a title. I should have stood up to you then. I will not lose my daughter for the same reason. If it is her wish to marry Storm and if she loves him, then she has my blessing."

"She certainly does not have mine."

"As she is *my* daughter, yours is not needed."

Goodness, Johanna had never seen her father stand up to Grandfather before.

"I stand with my husband," her mother said and looked to Johanna. "Will Mr. Storm make you happy?"

"Yes, very much, mother."

"That is all I need to know."

“We will just see if he still wishes to marry her when I withhold her dowry.”

“I never wanted her money, Lord Chedworth.”

“She does have a dowry that you do not know about,” her father said. “While I’ve been living here, under your thumb, I’ve been saving my own fortune because I anticipated that this day might come. Neither I nor my children need anything from you, and I can support my family.”

“Then support them away from here,” Grandfather barked. “This is still my home and my estate and if you cannot respect my wishes, then you can all leave and only return when I’ve kicked up my toes.”

“If that is what you wish.” Her father nodded. “We shall go pack our things. I should have left years ago.”

Johanna blinked, shocked at this turn of events. Alden grinned and tossed back his brandy before quitting the room. Her mother, father and younger sister followed, leaving Johanna standing alone with Peter.

“This is all your fault young lady. I hope you are happy with the destruction you have caused.”

In truth, Johanna suffered not one smidgen of guilt.

EPILOGUE

Though Peter wished to wed immediately, he had bowed to the request of her mother and father to wait a month so as not to invite gossip.

However, her hope failed when Turnbell was caught boarding a ship in Dover. The kidnapper's plans for fleeing to the Continent quickly came to an end with his arrest. Within a day, the newssheets in London detailed his crimes. Unfortunately, Johanna's name was not left out, nor was Peter's, thus there was renewed speculation about their relationship. All of London knew that Johanna's grandfather insisted she marry a lord and wondered if they were now marrying only so that Johanna wouldn't be ruined.

"I love him," she had finally exclaimed loudly at a ball because she had grown tired of the gossip.

Peter had been standing away from her speaking with friends when he heard her declaration and turned. "I hope that is me you claim to love?" he asked loudly.

The room had gone silent as those gathered watched them both carefully in hopes that there would be further gossip. They may have even hoped that she claimed to love someone else.

Johanna had grinned. “You know it is and in a sennight you will be my husband.”

“If only the days did not pass so slowly my love,” he declared and crossed floor and took her hand in his.

In that moment, the violins began a waltz, and he drew her to the center of the floor. By the time the music ended, and because of how scandalously close they had shared the dance there was no further speculation about Johanna and Peter marrying for anything other than love, but that if they shared such another dance so closely, she did risk ruination.

A week later they wed before friends and family, though Johanna’s grandfather was absent and had been spending his time to make certain Johanna’s father gained nothing from the estate except that which was entailed upon his death.

Peter also learned that despite the confidence and assurance displayed by Johanna’s father, he was not as wealthy as he claimed. The knowledge had come to light when he confessed to the family that he barely had the funds to rent a home, let alone provide for them, right before he began collecting his wife’s jewelry so that it could be pawned.

Peter had stopped him from doing so. They had made it possible for Peter to marry Johanna and he would not see her

family destitute, which had brought him to the door of the Duke of Danby.

He had hated to ask his great-uncle for anything and had anticipated how His Grace would crow when Peter requested assistance.

That had not been the case, however, and after discussing the circumstances, Danby had sold him an estate not far from London. The manor was large enough for Johanna's family and one that she and Peter had hoped to start, and Peter set to building his future and his fortune, with the assistance of Johanna's father who had far more knowledge of land management than Peter ever would.

He also never thought he'd wish to live with in-laws, based on the fact that Peter hoped to never have his mother move in with him. Her visits were stressful enough. But Johanna's family was everything but intrusive, and he enjoyed living in a home with others in residence. It reminded him of when he was living with his brothers, sisters and parents before he went off to make something of himself.

Except, he hadn't done anything grand until he met Johanna, and her family was welcome to live with them for as long as they wished.

All those memories floated through his mind as he cradled his son, not even three hours old, in his arms.

Peter glanced across the chamber to Johanna, who was fast asleep after her grueling labor.

It was exactly a year ago today that he had rescued her and kissed her for the first time.

There had been many kisses since, as there would be many more in the future.

His heart swelled with love for both her and his son, and Peter realized that as much as he hated to admit it, Danby had been correct and had made it possible for Peter to have everything of which he had ever dreamed. Though, he would never admit as much to His Grace. Doing so would make him more unbearable than before.

With a chuckle, Peter glanced down at his son, and ran a finger across his soft cheek.

“At least Danby can turn his attention to your aunts,” he whispered. “It is time that Deborah and Sarah married, and I shall not stand in my great-uncle’s way in seeing it done.”

THANK YOU

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EXCERPT – CHRISTMAS SPIRITS

If you have not had the opportunity to read the other stories in the Spirited Storms series, might I suggest you start at the beginning. However, it is not necessary that they be read in order, and each can be read as a stand-alone novel or novella.

Christmas Spirits

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Benjamin,

I am very much aware that you have been avoiding me since the wedding of Mr. Jonathan Bridges and Miss. Genviève Mirabelle nearly a year and a half ago. Your excuses in the past have been flimsy at best, and I will accept no more. You will attend me in Yorkshire, with your equally absent siblings, and remain at the castle through December 26th. If you wish to stay longer, I have no objections. However, you must present

yourself to me no later than December 17th. If you fail to do so, the retribution will be harsh and long in duration.

Danby

One

Danby Castle, Yorkshire ~ December 17, 1816

Benjamin Storm, Earl of Kenley, eyed his great-uncle, the Duke of Danby, with trepidation. For the past year and a half Benjamin been able to avoid His Grace, but no longer. The threat in the missive was non-specific, but he was not about to take any chances. While he wasn't exactly certain what His Grace could actually do to him, his great-uncle *was* the Duke of Danby and held almost as much power as Prinny or the Prime Minister.

“Where are your siblings?” His Grace demanded. “I was very specific that you bring them with you.”

Benjamin resisted the urge to pull at his cravat and sat straighter in the chair before His Grace's massive desk. “I have no idea where Nathaniel is, though last I heard, he was in India.” That was months ago. His brother could be anywhere right now and if he ever bothered to write, Ben would know where that was.

His Grace frowned.

“As you are well aware, Abigail delivered a daughter a few weeks ago and cannot travel.”

“Your sister is *not* my concern,” Danby ground out.

Of course not. Abigail was married and now the mother of four, which only solidified Benjamin’s suspicions as to why he’d been ordered to the castle.

“What of Samuel?”

His other wayward brother, and Nate’s twin. “Barbados.”

“Still?” Danby demanded incredulously. “He’s been there five years!”

Benjamin simply stared at his great-uncle and wished to be done with this unnecessary conversation. Danby knew exactly where his brother was. In fact, he likely knew where each of his siblings were at this very moment and what they had for supper a week ago.

“He needs to come home.” His Grace thumped his cane against the floorboards. That’s probably why there was no carpet or rugs in this room. One could not have the desired effect of a thumping cane if it were muffled by tightly woven wool.

“I believe he rather likes it there,” Benjamin answered dryly.

“Bah!” Danby narrowed his eyes on him. “Is he still with that Easton fellow?”

The Duke didn't like Easton, never had. As younger sons, it had been Easton who decided to travel to Barbados and take over his uncle's plantation. Samuel thought it a grand idea and went along and soon after purchased his own land. Neither had returned to England and saw no reason to do so. "Yes, he is. Both have been very successful in their endeavors and have become very wealthy gentlemen." So successful that if the crops didn't improve next year, Benjamin would be seeking financial assistance from his younger brother to help save the estate. It was far more palatable than marrying a dowry.

"I assume there is an excuse for each of them for not being here?" His Grace grumbled.

"Peter remained home with Mother, as did my younger sisters," Benjamin answered honestly. "Mother has not been feeling her best and they are concerned, as am I." He sat forward. "So, if we can bring this interview to an end, I'd like to return home."

Danby narrowed his eyes. "Your mother is no more ill than I am. She twisted an ankle, which would not prevent her from entering a carriage and traveling."

"Besides the discomfort, of course," Benjamin answered wryly.

"She injured it a fortnight ago." Danby thumped his cane again. "There is no reason she could not travel. If it still pains her, you need a new physician. I'll send mine if she doesn't recover before the ball."

Benjamin didn't bother to argue. He knew as well as His Grace that his mother had latched onto the excuse so that she didn't have to endure a holiday at Danby Castle. It wasn't the castle she objected to as much as the current owner. Further, Benjamin wouldn't put it past the woman to have intentionally caused the injury. "Do as you see fit." He'd let his mother deal with His Grace because Benjamin wasn't about to become embroiled in the middle of any dispute that may arise.

"Very well then," Danby announced as he stood. "Let's discuss the reason why I summoned *you*."

Benjamin already had a fairly good idea but held his tongue. Instead, he watched as his great-uncle strode to the sideboard and poured two glasses of a golden liquid. Benjamin followed him to the sitting area, hoping he didn't have to return to his seat before the desk. It was too reminiscent of sitting before the chancellor and waiting to be disciplined. That was many years ago, of course, but that sick feeling he always got in the pit of his stomach returned with a vengeance in these situations. Besides, he was a gentleman of nine and twenty and did not need to be disciplined like a wayward schoolboy by his great-uncle. They could discuss His Grace's concerns in the comfort of the chairs, or the blue and gold settee arranged before the fireplace.

Danby turned and handed him a glass before taking a drink of his own and sinking into the well-worn dark leather chair.

Benjamin sipped slowly and let the liquid roll over his tongue to burn a trail down his throat. No hint of poison could

be detected. Not that he expected His Grace to try and kill him, but Benjamin wouldn't put it past the old man to somehow render him unconscious only to wake and find himself married to a lady of the duke's choosing.

The whisky was excellent, however. Superb in comparison to the others he'd enjoyed over the years, and he took another sip. If anything, His Grace had excellent taste in whisky.

His great-uncle gestured to the settee and Benjamin settled into the comfort of the soft cushion.

“Why haven't you married?”

Benjamin practically choked on the whisky. He knew the question was coming but would have preferred if it hadn't been asked mid-drink or without a more pleasant lead into the topic.

“I have not found the right lady.”

“Have you looked?” Danby demanded.

“Diligently!” he defended. “For the past five seasons, if you must know.” Benjamin knew he owed a duty to the title. He was an earl and was expected to produce an heir and a spare before his death. As much as he'd like to think he could rely on at least one of his brothers to fill the role should something happen to him, Benjamin did not have the confidence they would. Nathaniel, the spare, was never in England long enough to even discuss the matter, and half the time, Benjamin had no idea where to even find him. Should something happen, Benjamin wouldn't be surprised if Nate faked his own

death to get out of those duties, thus foisting them onto his twin, younger by five minutes, Samuel. Sam also had no intention of ever leaving the Caribbean. He wouldn't go so far as Nate to avoid the responsibility. He'd just ignore it and go about planting sugar as if nothing had changed.

Danby snorted. "You couldn't find a bride in five years? Where were you looking? The brothels?"

Benjamin looked his great-uncle in the eye and in all seriousness answered, "In truth, I found many candidates that would suit at Madame Delight's. Unfortunately, society would frown on a soiled dove becoming my countess."

The corner of Danby's mouth quirked slightly then he frowned again. Had Benjamin not been watching, he would have missed the reaction completely.

"What's wrong with the suitable young ladies?"

"That depends on which lady you are inquiring about." He had met several, and though none would suit, the reasons varied.

Danby pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it.

"Good God, is that list of ladies?"

"You should have anticipated that I'd be prepared."

Benjamin suffered a sigh and stood. He was not going to be allowed to leave until his great-uncle was satisfied, so he poured more whisky into his glass. If he must endure the

interrogation, there was no reason why he could not partake of the excellent whisky in the process.

As His Grace began listing names of the current crop of debutantes and those who had been out for a few years, Benjamin in turn provided one-word answers of why he would not consider them, such as: pretentious, unkind, antagonistic, condemnatory, insipid, anxious, conceited, feather-brained, bluestocking, and silly.

Danby folded the list and Benjamin hoped this meeting was concluded.

“I noticed you used silly several times.”

“In truth, Your Grace, I do believe those being presented get sillier each and every year.” Ben sat back down, relaxed against the upholstery, and crossed his legs, feeling much more at ease. He wasn’t sure if it was because the interrogation was turning into a conversation between gentlemen or the whisky or both, but Ben was glad to no longer be on edge.

“Yes, I can see where you’d believe so.” Danby stood and refilled his glass. “A few of your relations fall into that category,” he grumbled.

Benjamin was not certain which of his relations Danby referred to. There were so many first, second and third removed, that it could be almost any of his younger relations..

“It does not matter,” Danby dismissed. “I’ll deal with them, *and* their mother.”

By the austerity in His Grace's eyes, Benjamin was thankful he was not part of that family, whoever they were.

“So, you don't want a silly chit.” He nodded and took a drink. “What of physical characteristics. Are they not pleasant to look upon either?”

Benjamin chuckled and shook his head. “They are all pretty, some beautiful, but that means little when contemplating a future.”

Danby frowned at him.

Ben blew out a sigh. “Of course I wish for an attractive wife, but beauty often diminishes over time. I'd rather have someone I enjoy spending time with, conversing with, than simply looking at.”

His Grace settled back, studying Ben with shrewd eyes.

“God willing, I'll be spending many years with my bride, and I'd prefer to like her, even love her, as opposed to a beautiful lady with little substance.”

For the longest time His Grace said nothing, and Ben's nerves began to resurface. Not for one moment had he forgotten what Danby had done to his own grandchildren to see them married off, and he wasn't fooling himself by thinking His Grace didn't have the same plan for him. All Ben could do was wait for the pronouncement. An order to go find a bride and be quick about it, ignoring what Ben may wish for himself.

As the silence continued, Ben finished his drink and poured another. He would remain at the castle tonight regardless of how much he wished to be gone, and if Danby was going to issue a dictate that would see his life miserable, he might as well get properly foxed. Ben stared down into the glass. He was going to be miserable enough on the morrow, so perhaps he shouldn't add a headache and sickness to his misery. Besides, he shouldn't lose his head now. Not while sitting with Danby. His Grace wouldn't hesitate to take advantage of the situation and secure an agreement from Benjamin that he would regret for the rest of his life.

“Very well,” His Grace finally said.

“Very well, what?”

“You know what you want. I'm certain you shall find it.”

Ben eyed him suspiciously. That was too easy.

“I can see you've given this a good deal of thought and am confident you will make the right choice when the time comes.” He finished his drink, set the glass on the table. “Now that the discussion of your future is concluded, I have a request before you return to your mother.”

Ben set his glass aside, no longer wishing to drink. Apparently, His Grace was going to let him plan his own life, much to his relief. Though, Ben still didn't trust that his great-uncle might not still attempt to manipulate a marriage in the future, at least he was free of such this Christmas.

“I've been waiting on a delivery, and it hasn't arrived.”

“What type of delivery?” He couldn’t imagine anyone would have the daring not to fulfill a request by the Duke of Danby. Well, unless they were dead.

Danby nodded to the decanter. “The finest whisky ever produced.”

“Whisky? That’s what you’re waiting on?” Yes, it was a fine whisky, but Ben was just as certain bottles could be procured from other sources if necessary.

“Two cases of the spirits. I need it before Christmas.”

“I’m not sure how I can be of assistance.”

“Dear boy, I wish for you to go and retrieve them.”

“Spirits for Christmas?” He couldn’t believe this was what was being asked of him, but it was far preferable to a strange bride.

“Exactly! Christmas Spirits.”



Falkirk, Scotland

“Are ye certain Lachlan is no’ goin’ to return for Christmas?” Mary Soares asked her mother, hoping for a different answer this time.

“Ye ken his wife recently had a bairn.”

“I doona know why she couldn’t have had the babe here like the first one,” Mary grumbled. Had her brother and Madeline

just come north for the birthing then she would not be in this predicament.

“Yer brother had it difficult enough this summer with all the rain, getting’ stuck on the road, the poor barley crop, and bleak skies. He dinna wish to add to his troubles by takin’ his family away from Grosmont for fear they’d get stuck, or encounter ice covered roads.”

“Aye, but the babe was born a month ago. Surely he could come now.”

“And not make it back in time for Christmas?” her mother scolded. “That would be unfair to Maddie and the children.”

Mary blew out a breath. Her mother was right, but it didn’t help their current circumstances at . With a sigh she settled at the scarred table in her work room. Her brother, Lachlan Grant, Marquess of Brachton, was to have seen to the delivery of the mounting orders for whisky. Her sister’s husband, Magnus, was to have helped, but he’d fallen from a ladder nearly a month ago and still couldn’t sit in a wagon for long without severe pain.

“I wish Ian would come home.” Ian was the next oldest, and in charge of the distilling, but he also helped with deliveries on occasion. However, he’d been in Edinburgh for the last fortnight waiting on the ship to take whisky to London. For years Jonathan Bridges had shipped their whisky to his London warehouse and the ship was to have been here by now. Ian had to remain because they trusted nobody else to see to the cargo.

There were several men and lads who helped with the planting, harvesting, and distilling, but never on the deliveries. It was far too dangerous. She'd never forgive herself if they were caught by the excisemen who were currently in the area looking for smugglers. She'd seen the lights when they appeared on the hillside as soon as the sun set yesterday. A warning to all not to take the whisky from hiding until the gougers were gone.

Mary had few options available to her: They could pay the taxes, which were so high that it was impossible to make a profit; wait until the excisemen were gone; or risk moving the whisky. If caught, the whisky would be confiscated. Or worse, someone could be killed. It wasn't unusual, unfortunately, for fighting to break out between the gougers and the smugglers, especially along the border, often ending with someone's death. Tensions were high as it was. Crops failed this last year because of the unusually cold weather, and food was scarce in many places. Not only did smugglers need to worry about the excisemen, but thieves as well.

In the past, only Lachlan or Magnus drove over the border into England but as neither of them were available, the task would now fall to her.

Mary sorted through the orders, setting aside those who would receive a note explaining the delay, then held back the most demanding requests. Three letters and all from His Grace, the Duke of Danby.

If she thought him reasonable, she'd write to him as well and explain the set of circumstances they found themselves in, but nothing about the Duke of Danby struck her as reasonable. Demanding – yes. Reasonable – no.

He'd been to her home twice, when once would have been more than enough, to call on her brother. Why His Grace hadn't called on Lachlan at his estate in Grosmont was beyond Mary's comprehension. Grosmont was in Yorkshire, Danby Castle was in Yorkshire, so it stood to reason that estate was much more convenient for His Grace than traveling to Falkirk, Scotland.

He was also their most important customer and one they did not wish anger. Lachlan had reminded her time and time again that whenever His Grace requested a shipment, it was to be sent immediately. Which was all fine and good, until there was no one to make the delivery.

She needed to find a way to get the whisky to Danby Castle and the rest would just have to wait. Except she had no idea how to go about it.

Lifting the lamp from the desk, Mary made her way to the stables. She could use the traveling coach, with the Brachton coat of arms, as her brother often did, with the bottles wrapped in wool and hidden in the seats and floor. But that would require a driver and a maid to accompany her, thus putting three people at risk if they were caught.

Beside the coach was the wagon Magnus used for deliveries, and above it on wide shelves, the means in which

he hid the whisky. A smile pulled at her lips. "Of course!" She had driven many wagons in the past and was quite comfortable doing so. Happy with her plan, Mary made her way to the distillery and gave instructions to have the wagon prepared so that she could leave at first light and hope the excisemen were gone. She wouldn't be home by Christmas, but at least His Grace would be happy, and that was really all that mattered.

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USA Today bestselling author Jane Charles is a prolific writer of over fifty historical and contemporary romance novels. Her love of research lends authenticity to her Regency romances, and her experience directing theatre productions helps her craft beautiful, touching stories that tug at the heartstrings. Jane is an upbeat and positive author dedicated to giving her characters happy-ever-afters and leaving the readers satisfied at the end of an emotional journey. Lifelong Cubs fan, world
traveler and mother of three amazing children, Jane lives in Central Illinois with her husband, two dogs and a cat. She is currently writing her next book and planning her dream trip to England. Be sure to join Jane on Facebook @JaneCharlesAuthor.