

BELLES OF THE BALL
BOOK 2



OLIVE
AT THE
BALLROOM
ABBY AYLES

OLIVE AT THE BALLROOM

HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

BELLES OF THE BALL

BOOK TWO

ABBY AYLES



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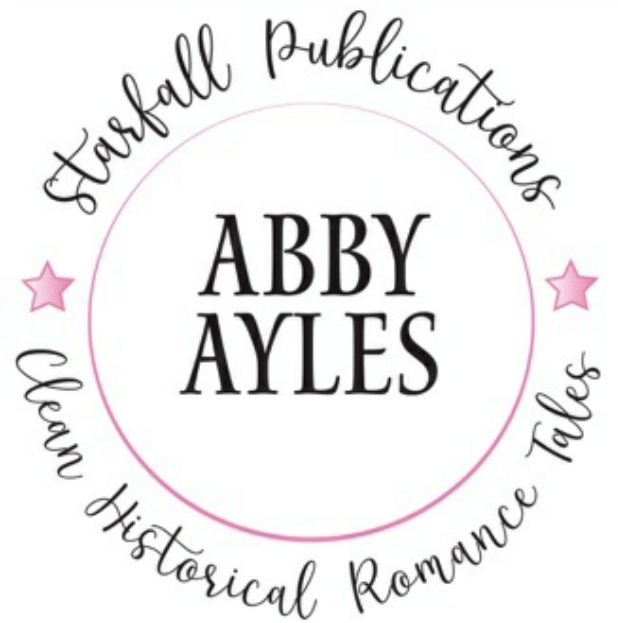
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PRAISE FOR ABBY AYLES

Abby Ayles has been such an inspiration for me! I haven't missed any of her novels and she has never failed my expectations!

-Edith Byrd

The characters in this novel have surely touched my heart.

*Linda C - "Melting a Duke's Winter Heart" 5.0 out of 5 stars
Reviewed in the United States on December 21, 2019*

This book kept me on the edge of my seat and I could not put it down.

*Wendy Ferreira - "The Odd Mystery of the Cursed Duke" 5.0 out of 5 stars
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Oh this was a wonderful story and Abby has done it again! This storyline was perfect and the characters were developed and just had you reading to see if they get their happily ever after!

*- Marilyn Smith - "Inconveniently Betrothed to an Earl" 5.0 out of 5 stars
Reviewed in the United States on April 8, 2020*

The sweetest story, with we rest abounding! I especially liked the bonus scene - totally unexpected engagements. Well written with realistic characters. Thank you!

*Janet Tonole - "The Lady Of the Lighthouse" 5.0 out of 5 stars
Reviewed in the United States on December 27, 2022*

I just finished reading Abby Ayles' *The Lady's Gamble* and its bonus scene, and I wanted to tell other readers about this great story. I love regency romances and I believe Abby is one of the best regency writers out there!

*Carolynn Padgett - "The Lady's Gamble" 5.0 out of 5 stars
Reviewed in the United States on March 16, 2018*

Such a great Book! So enjoyed the characters....they felt so “real”....and loved the “deleted” scene. Thanks Abby, for your gift of writing the best stories!

*Marcia Reckard - "Entangled with the Duke" 5.0 out of 5 stars
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I loved this story. It took you through all of the exciting ups and downs. The characters were so honest. I could read it again and again.

*Peggy Murphy - "The Duke's Rebellious Daughter" 5.0 out of 5 stars
Reviewed in the United States on December 3, 2022*

I am never disappointed when reading one of Ms. Ayles stories. They have strong characters, engaging storylines, and all-around wonderful stories.

*Donna L - "A Loving Duke for the Shy Duchess" 5.0 out of 5 stars
Reviewed in the United States on December 23, 2019*

A thoroughly enjoyable read! Love the complexity of the intelligent characters! They have the ability to feel emotions deeply! Their backstories help to explain why they behave as they do! The subplots and various interactions between characters add to the wonderful richness of the story! Well done!

*Terry Rose Bailey - "A Cinderella for the Duke" 5.0 out of 5 stars
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OLIVE AT THE BALLROOM

PROLOGUE

Olive paced around the bedchamber in her home at Silbury Manor.

“At last, I am going on my trip to bonny wee Scotland. I have yearned for this visit for too many years,” Olive remarked to emphasise the fact to her mother, who had never wanted her to go in the first place. She was meant to be overseeing the packing for her long trip away, but her mind kept drifting away with all the excitement. “I cannot wait to see Aunt Flora and Uncle Hector. I last saw them when I was a young girl, and now I am all grown up. I do hope they are still fond of me?”

The last few years had been busy ones, not allowing time for any long trips away. She’d been helping the Duchess, Lady Vera Wald, settle into her new noble life, after spending her old life in servitude to her husband’s family. Once they were wed, children soon followed, and Olive had wanted to be involved in the growing family, whom she considered to be the best of friends.

“I am proud that I played my part in the Duchess’ life, but it has all been most exhausting,” she said to her lady’s maid, Perkins. “It is not everyone who gets to bring two lifelong sweethearts together, is it?” Olive pointed out as she dreamily looked through the window at the bare tree branches.

They had meant to set off in the autumn months, but her mother constantly made excuses to hold her back. And now that December had arrived, Olive refused to cancel her journey. The weather in the South of England was still mild, and she saw no reason to delay the trip anymore.

“Tis a good thing that they had you too, if you ask me, my Lady,” Perkins replied, knowing that her mistress didn’t mind her speaking her thoughts. “A relationship of master and servant coming together in such a romantic tale,

can't be an easy one. Your trick of dressing the maid into a lady at the masquerade ball worked a miracle.”

“Yes, you are quite right,” Olive replied, coming out of her trance. “If anyone was going to make such a relationship work, it would be those two. They were childhood sweethearts, and nothing was going to part them,” she expressed. “Putting that aside for now, I must think only of my packing. Can you pack for me all the autumn-coloured gowns? Bright summer colours will look out of place in the middle of the snowy mountains, do you not agree?”

“It's a good job I know how you think then, Mistress, seeing as the packing is almost done,” Perkins said, tutting at her mistress' last-minute instructions.

“Oh, my apologies, Perkins. I am pleased that you know me so well. That you will be here with your new husband while we are absent, gladdens my heart to know that all will be kept in good order,” Olive gave a genuine smile of appreciation. “As you know, I had hoped that Lady Adelia would stay behind, but then you know her as well as I do.”

Perkins nodded in agreement as she tied up a big metal buckle on one of the larger boxes. “I do consider this to be my home too, my Lady,” Perkins said with ease. “Ever since you promoted me to your lady's maid, I have never been happier.”

“You make a wonderful lady's maid, but I am sure you were happier on your wedding day,” Olive smiled. She had always thought herself lucky to have such loyal servants in the household, even though they didn't have many. Perkins' husband was a blacksmith and had taken over the stable for his trade. Even though Perkins was now Mrs Angove, Olive still called her by her maiden name of Perkins. “Knowing you are happy though, means that you will take care of the house because you see it as your home too.”

She was about to speak again when Lady Adelia walked through the open door of her bedroom chamber.

“Ah, Mother, I was thinking how cold it will be for you in Scotland,” Olive reminded her, as she never stopped trying to talk her out of the journey.

“How can I not go with you on such a long journey?” Lady Adelia huffed, and at the same time, she checked on what Perkins was doing. “Besides, I do not trust your father's sister, even if she did marry a duke. I mean...he is only a Scottish Laird, and I am sure that means he is not of the English peerage. They don't have the same graces as English dukes as far as I am concerned. And who knows what scandalous behaviours they practice?”

On top of that, the man has a head of red hair, which is spread all over his face too.”

Olive wasn't sure whether to laugh at her mother's statement or be angry, but she gave her a half smile. “Rest assured, Mother, there is nothing scandalous about my aunt and uncle. They are kindly people and Father adored his older sister if I remember rightly.”

“Hmmm...but where was she when we needed help, answer me that?” Lady Adelia declared as she threw her hands up at the ceiling in her usual dramatic way.

“Father took the responsibility of his bankruptcy upon himself, you know that,” Olive insisted. “He would never have asked for help from others, particularly from a woman.”

“Yes, well...if he had done, things might have turned out better,” her mother chided, she'd always blamed her father for their financial downfall. Yet, her father always had a good business head, and his failure was more to do with wars abroad, than any mismanagement.

“We do not talk of Father often, but I will always defend him, Mother,” Olive said, annoyed with her and all her uncaring ways. “At least respect that I loved him as my father, and I love my aunt too.”

“How can I respect someone who married a man from another country?” Lady Adelia snapped.

“Scotland is hardly a different country, it is our neighbour, and a part of Great Britain,” Olive said. All the while wishing so hard that her mother would stay at home.

“That, Daughter dear, is a matter of opinion,” Lady Adelia huffed. “Now then Perkins, I want to see how you have folded those gowns. They are travelling a long way, and we cannot be having them all creased.”

Olive's mind wandered off again as she returned to the window view. The first time she'd thought of visiting her aunt in Scotland had been before the Duke and Duchess had married. Her mother had been so busy attempting to match her with the Duke of Cornwall, that she never set off. She'd always liked Lord Oscar Wald, but she hadn't felt ready to marry again after the death of her husband, the late Earl of Gosmore. Even though they'd had a short marriage, it had helped her to see that she wanted to marry out to love. It had been the pressure from Lady Adelia that had forced her to marry out of social standing because she was always striving for betterment.

Olive thought of her friends again; Lord Oscar and Lady Vera, now the

Duke and Duchess of Cornwall. She had never met two people so deeply in love, and she wished she could meet a man who might sweep her off her feet as he had done for his Duchess. Although she'd played her part in getting them together, they had joined in a whirlwind romance. All her mother ever wanted for her was to marry her off to any unmarried man with a title and wealth. Long ago, she'd decided that was not for her.

Her husband had wealth aplenty, but they had not been in love. She'd always believed that he married her out of pity. He'd been a good friend of her father's and had been about the same age, so she never felt comfortable with him as a husband. They never had children and it was his son from his first wife who had inherited the estate and most of his wealth. Thankfully, he'd left her plenty to live a comfortable lifestyle.

After he had passed away, her mother had never stopped trying to match her up with wealthy men of the peerage. That was partly why she didn't want her company on this trip. Then again, with Lady Adelia's opinion of Scottish Lairds, it could be that she might give up on her matchmaking skills, for a while at least.

As it happened, over the last few years her mother had settled down a little. She'd been so shocked over the Duke marrying a servant, instead of her daughter. Then, it had very much been the hot gossip of the elite for years to follow. That was partly why Olive had given the Duchess such strong support. She had liked Vera right from the day they first met, and now she felt close to the entire family.

But this Christmastide was to be spent in Scotland, and not at Welwick Hall as had been their custom for the last few years. Every year since the wedding, the Duke held a grand ball on the Twelfth Night of Christmastide. He claimed it was in celebration of the night he proposed to his wife. The balls were wonderful occasions, but Olive was determined that Christmas in Scotland would be marvellous too.

Her uncle had inherited lands through many generations of his family. So, now her aunt lived in a real castle, and that was to be her destination for Christmastide. As much as her mother had complained about staying in a large, draughty castle, Olive thought the whole idea very romantic.

"My dear, what are you dreaming of now?" Lady Adelia's voice came to her, snapping her out of her reverie. "It is time that you married, then all this wandering around the world would end."

"Mother, Scotland is not the world!" Olive said in surprise at such a

comment. "I have said many times that I am happy to travel there alone," she added, never giving up hope that her Lady Adelia might change her mind.

"I am your mother, and I would advise that you do not ever forget that," she chided. "And if you spent more time instructing the servants on how to do things correctly, I would not have to do it for you."

Olive looked over at Perkins as she rolled her eyeballs. The two of them hid their smiles as Lady Adelia continued giving out her orders over the packing. At least Perkins was to have a rest from Lady Adelia, whereas she would have to put up with her presence and interference forever.

Not that it would dampen Olive's excitement over her trip. In a sense her mother was right, Scotland did feel like another country, but in a good way. To her, it was to be a place of adventure as she spent time in the mountains and living in a castle. And who knew what Scottish Lairds she might meet? Perhaps she might even find that whirlwind marriage after all.

Tomorrow's journey could be the beginning of a whole new life. Whatever it might bring, Olive was determined to have a good time. By the time they returned, Lady Adelia would finally come to realise that her daughter was a woman of independence. As always, Olive strived to be rid of her controlling ways as often as she could. If, and when, she was to marry, it would be on her terms and it would be for love.

CHAPTER I

“We’re almost at the point of leaving England,” Olive said as she stroked the small dog lying next to her on the bench seat of the carriage.

“You say that as if it is a blessing,” Lady Adelia exclaimed. “Entering Scotland is not a good thing as far as I am concerned. Can we not stay in Cumberland for the night?”

Olive sighed; Lady Adelia had complained constantly about her visit to Scotland. Yet she hadn’t wanted her company in the first place, but she refused to allow her to go alone.

“I am keen to get to our destination,” Olive said, ignoring the plea for an overnight stop. “I have informed the driver to plan the fastest route possible.”

Lady Adelia tutted in defeat. “The only good thing about this trip was that I could bring along my little pooches,” Lady Adelia muttered as she fussed over the dog laying across her lap. “At least they will do as they’re told, won’t you, my little baby,” she said, cooing to the dog.

Olive smiled because she too loved the adorable little Pugs. “Daisy and Leo are quite old now, you can hardly call them babies anymore.”

“Nonsense, I still look on you as my baby too, though you never do as I ask you to,” Lady Adelia tutted again.

“I am not a baby,” Olive reminded her. “I am an independent woman in my mid-twenties, and I would prefer it if you did not compare me to your pets.”

Lady Adelia didn’t reply, instead, she fussed over Daisy, which gave her an excuse not to speak with her daughter. Not that Olive minded, she didn’t particularly wish to speak with her either. Although she was determined that this trip would be a turning point in their relationship, no longer would she

allow her parent to dictate her life.

Looking out of the window of the private carriage, Olive thought of her late husband, Lord Jonathan Brent, the late Earl of Gosmore. She'd lost him some years ago now, but their marriage had been a very short one. He had been an old man when they wed, and she had not known that he was already suffering from a terminal illness.

He had treated her with great kindness, but they were never in love as a man and wife should be. This had made her all the more determined that if she ever married again, it would be to a man that she loved. Not that Lady Adelia had ever understood the concept of marrying a man that one loved. All she cared for was that her daughter married a man of wealth and nobility. It had caused many a heated debate between them over the years.

"Well, Leo thinks it is all a jolly good adventure, don't you boy?" Olive said as the pug wriggled its way onto her knee. "No Leo, stay on the seat, you are too heavy to sit on me. My knees will go numb if you stay there."

"He can come and sit with me if he is an inconvenience for you," Lady Adelia was quick to retort.

"No, he is fine where he is," Olive said, determined her mother would not win every argument. "It is more that he is bigger than Daisy, and heavier too, so I do not want him on my knee, it is that simple."

"Well, there is nothing adventurous when one is forced to stay in flea-bitten roadside inns," Lady Adelia added, determined to have the last word.

Olive sighed as she decided not to react to Lady Adelia's complaints. She glanced through the carriage window again and watched the tall pine trees as they passed them by. From what the driver had told her, they would soon enter a mountain pass where the roads were narrow and windy, and going would be rough. She'd thought it better not to inform her mother that Scotland's roads were even more rugged than England's, it would only give cause to complain even more.

The air had become colder and as the carriage rocked them from side to side, she noticed the fall of snowflakes.

"Oh, how beautiful," she declared without thinking. "The scenery is quite breath taking."

"This journey will be the death of me," Lady Adelia said with a scowl, refusing to look out of the window. "If I look at the moving landscape, it will make me feel nauseous."

"I have read that the cold weather comes earlier, the further North that

you go,” Olive remarked. She continued to watch the snow falling faster and could see that it was getting more intense. “Oh dear, I fear this is not the first of the snowfall. It has already settled into drifts along the road.”

As she said the words, the carriage started to slow down, no doubt because of the treacherous weather they had come across.

“I knew it in my bones, we should have delayed this journey until next summer,” Lady Adelia complained, wiping the window to take a tiny peek. “And now we will end up in the dark of the night on some unpassable road in a foreign country. It is a wonder that we will not suffer from an attack by the locals next. These people are untrustworthy ruffians.”

To make matters worse, the dogs were starting to whine too, and Olive could sense a new kind of angst in her mother’s voice. It was clear that she was no longer complaining for the sake of it, she was genuinely quite worried. Olive said nothing, but she couldn’t help but notice how quickly the daylight was diminishing too, only to be replaced by the eerie gloom of a storm.

“Worry not,” she said in a cheery voice. “Our driver is most experienced at travelling in such conditions, he told me as much.”

“Well, I hope so, my dear, because our lives are in his hands,” Lady Adelia replied with a timid voice of worry.

“I can see that the road is still clear. I am sure that the driver knows what he is doing,” Olive tried again, though she had little faith herself as their driver was an old man.

He had indeed told her that he’d travelled the mountain passes of Scotland many a time, but now that they were upon them, it no longer seemed like an adventure.

“If you were married by now, we would not be making this ridiculous trip,” Lady Adelia grumbled, but Olive didn’t have the heart to ask her to be quiet.

She reached over to a box that had been placed on the floor to the side of where they both sat. Out of which she pulled more blankets and placed one over her mother’s knees. Taking the other, she sat back down and huddled underneath it.

“You think an extra blanket will save us in a snowstorm?” Lady Adelia questioned, not even thanking her for the extra warmth.

“No, of course, I do not,” Olive snapped back, starting to lose her patience over such an ungrateful attitude. “I do believe that our driver will

take great care of us.”

It was a relief when Lady Adelia didn't reply, for she was in no mood for further conversation. Even better, she watched as Lady Adelia closed her eyes and soon nodded off. At least she would have some peace for a short while.

Though in truth, she too was worried about getting caught out in a snowstorm. Not only was it dangerous, but she would never hear the end of Lady Adelia's moaning if that were to happen. Determined to stop her worrying, she forced aside all bad thoughts of storms and mountain passes. They were here now, and there was nothing she could do about it. She should have faith in their driver, they had paid him well enough, so she needed to have confidence that he knew what he was doing.

The best thing to do was close her own eyes and take a nap. It would pass away the time and hopefully, when she awoke, they might be at their destination. With that thought in mind, she closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

Thoughts of the Duchess' twins came to her mind. Lady Vera was such a good friend and a small part of her regretted that she had insisted on making this trip to spend Christmastide with her aunt and uncle. The past few years she'd enjoyed wonderful Christmastides at Welwick Hall, with the Duke and Duchess. Even Silas, Vera's twin brother, had always joined them too. Though he was spending less and less time on the Broadmoor Estate as the years passed by.

Silas was quite an adventurer, and it was he who had assured her that Scotland was beautiful in the winter months. A mere snowstorm would not have put Silas off. He had travelled all over the British Isles after giving up his responsibilities as the Duke's Estate Manager. It was the Duke himself who'd turned Silas' head to business matters instead, and he was quick to turn his hand into assisting the Duke with his dealings instead. In turn, that had led to Silas' curiosity about the world, and she was aware that he'd become quite the little adventurer.

A part of her wished that Silas was with them in the carriage, for he would alleviate her worries that Scotland was a harsh land to be travelling in. He loved Scotland, Ireland, and Wales too, and often told them tales of his travels. But he wasn't here, and the reality was that the storm was getting worse, she could sense it.

Her eyes shot open, and she noticed that they were now in the pitch black of the night. The glass window reflected the uncanny brightness of the

settling snow, making it appear ghostly. What started as an adventure through the roads of England, had turned into a nightmare on the roads of Scotland.

Glancing at her mother, she was pleased to see that she still slept. Leo's big bug eyes looked up at her as if he sensed her worry. Looking through the window again she noted how the snow's brightness threw shadows of huge shapes along the sides of the road. Although the driver had slowed down his speed, the road was now much rougher. She could feel every bump that the wheels passed over, and then she heard the neigh of the horse.

"Oh, Lord, the poor thing must be freezing out there," she whispered.

For a moment she was tempted to knock on the roof and stop the driver to ask his opinion on the weather. But then she thought she had better not disturb his concentration, reminding herself that he knew what he was doing. By now, she even admitted that she was scared, and she willed her mother to stay asleep.

Though she started to wonder how Lady Adelia could sleep through this nerve-wracking experience. Olive recalled the flask she had been carrying. When she'd spotted Lady Adelia taking a few swigs from it earlier, she'd assumed it might contain watered-down gin. But now, listening to her light snores, she thought it must be something stronger, like brandy, and not watered down at all.

Perhaps the clever Lady Adelia was much wiser than she took her for, a few drops of brandy was a good idea to calm the nerves. Olive reached over to take the flask from Lady Adelia's purse, careful not to wake her. Once it was in her hand, she unscrewed the small lid, looking forward to the warm liquid inside. Alas, as she tipped the bottle to her lips, it was empty.

Taking a sniff of the empty vessel only confirmed that it had held brandy. "It is all gone now, Leo," she said to the dog that watched her every move. "Look, if you do not believe me," she stressed, tipping the bottle upside down to show Leo that there was not even a drop left in there. "Ah well, at least she should sleep through the rest of the journey," she added in a soothing voice as she stroked Leo's back to give him some reassurance. Though she did not doubt that he could still sense her worries, travelling in a snowstorm was not a pleasant experience for any of them.

CHAPTER 2

Olive pulled the curtains that covered the two small windows shut. A howling wind was picking up and the glass was letting in draughts. Leo had started to whine a little and she allowed him to put his head on her lap while she stroked him, but he refused to close his eyes. Little Daisy wasn't settling to sleep either and gave out a little yap.

"Hush, Daisy!" Olive called over to her, placing her finger over her lips as if the dog might understand her instructions. "Don't wake, for goodness' sake."

Leo wouldn't stop his whimpering, as if he'd sensed something to get him all worried. "Very well, you can come onto my knee then," she said as she helped him to lay across her knees. "There, there, little one," she spoke to him with a gentle voice to calm him. "It is a little stifling in here, even though it's cold, isn't it sweetie? But you can stop all your fretting, we will be there soon enough, and it will worth all this discomfort...whoa!"

The carriage started to sway from side to side, it happened so fast and hard that it threw Olive from her seat. She landed with a thud on the hard wooden floor, hearing a cracking sound in her knee. A searing pain shot up her leg as Lady Adelia sprawled out on top of her. The carriage continued to rock around, becoming more intense. Neither of them could do anything but cling to the edges of bench seats, at the same time as holding on to the dogs that each of them had in their arms.

Her mind whirred with thoughts of what had occurred, and she could only assume that something must have spooked the horses. The driver must have been attempting to slow them down because they seemed to be moving at speed.

“Use the seats for leverage to see if you can climb off me. I am afraid that I’m in terrible pain,” she panted, now that Lady Adelia had stopped her screeching noises.

“Oh dear...oh dear, I simply cannot do it, Olive...I...oh...” Lady Adelia cried out as the carriage took an almighty swerve.

Olive was glad they were all wedged on the floor because it seemed like the safest place to be while the carriage was so out of control. But the pain in her knee was stinging sorely.

And then the carriage jolted to a sudden stop as if it had impacted with something. Olive knew by the angle of the carriage that they had crashed, and she thanked her lucky stars that they were all still alive.

“Are you hurt in any way?” Olive asked, forgetting about her own pain for a moment.

“No...but I cannot for the life of me move to climb away from you,” Lady Adelia said with a surprisingly calm voice.

“Stop trying, I do not want you to hurt yourself,” Olive instructed her as she began to wriggle around to get out from underneath Lady Adelia. She let go of Leo who managed to move around, and then she twisted herself at the waist to grab at one of the seats. By holding onto the wooden seat, which was now broken, she pulled herself up, and from underneath her prone mother.

“Stay where you are, at least until I can help you,” Olive said, realising that the door was at an awkward angle.

Using every ounce of strength she could muster in her aching body, she pushed her hands at the door, and it flew open. All she could see through the gaping hole was the swirl of falling snow. There was an eerie silence in the air and Leo yapped before he jumped up to get through the opening.

“Is Daisy with you?” Olive asked, aware that she had not seen the dog since the carriage had come to a stop.

“She is underneath my seat,” Lady Adelia replied, her voice now squeaky with the strain. “I can see that she’s well, but the poor little thing is shaking.”

Olive turned to find Daisy and sure enough, there she was wedged in a corner trembling.

“Come, baby, come to me, Daisy, it is all over,” she said in a soft voice as she managed to stroke her head.

“Is she hurt?” Lady Adelia asked. “Where is that driver, he should be helping us?”

“She is not hurt, so do not fret over her. I am going to try to climb up

through the doorway,” she said, leaving Daisy where she was because at least she was safe there. Before she attempted it, she called out for the driver, “Hello, I say, is anyone there?”

There was no reply so she used her arms, and the leg that wasn’t injured, to pull and push and twist, until she practically tumbled out of the open doorway. Even though it was nightfall, the snow gave off enough light for her to see that the horse was still standing. Though the poor animal looked fearful as it tried to rear at being attached to a fallen carriage.

She glanced around to see if the driver was anywhere to be seen, fearing the worst for him.

Turning back to lean into the open doorway, she reached out for her mother’s hand. “Use my hand, to pull and twist yourself around so that you can at least sit up and see to Daisy.”

For once, Lady Adelia did as she was asked, and she soon found herself in a seated position. The first thing she did was reach out for Daisy and embrace the shaking little dog.

“I want you both to stay in there while I go and look around for the driver,” Olive said.

Little Leo stayed close to her side, not attempting to jump back into the carriage. Olive shivered unexpectedly but soon came to her senses. Gusts of wind were swirling the snow as it continued to fall, and she could see no sign of the driver anywhere.

“Lord, we are in the middle of nowhere,” she mumbled as her teeth began to chatter at the cold that was settling into her bones. She tried to walk, but a burning pain shot through the knee that she’d injured. “I cannot even see where the road is,” she mumbled, looking around. The horse’s frightened snorting noise caught her attention and though she was thankful that it was still alive, it did sound in pain. She limped her back towards it and managed to approach. Stroking at its ears, she could see the whites of its eyes wide open in fear.

“Oh, you poor thing,” she said, attempting to soothe its fears.

Once the horse started to relax a little, Olive looked around, only to see that they were standing in the middle of two dark, giant beasts looming at either side of them. The pass was a valley between two huge mountains. Above her was a deep black void, blanketed with swirls of white as the snow fluttered down onto her head.

“Olive!” Lady Adelia’s voice called out. “Are you still there?”

“Yes, I am still here,” she called back and hobbled over to the carriage again. Leaning into the open doorway, she spoke to her mother. “I cannot see the driver anywhere. He must have been thrown from his seat.”

“I was thinking that you could ride the horse and get help,” Lady Adelia suggested, and it surprised Olive how calm she was.

“The horse is injured, though I do not think it is too bad,” Olive replied, glad that at least Lady Adelia could keep dry inside the fallen carriage. “I will need to untangle him from the reins, and then he could carry us away from here.”

“I will stay here so that you ride faster?” Lady Adelia insisted, as they shouted out to each other. “You can leave Daisy and Leo with me, they will protect me.”

This caused Olive to smile at the thought of the little, plump dogs protecting anyone. As far as she was aware there were no wolves, nor any other creature that could harm them. The only real fear would be of highway robbers, but she doubted any would be out on a night like this. What had she been thinking? England had shown no sign of snowfall, why was Scotland so different?

“I am going back to the horse, and assess if he has any bad injuries,” she said, leaving her mother in the shelter of the fallen carriage.

Hobbling over to the horse, she leaned down to pet him again and he was more accepting of her this time. Little Leo had stayed by his side, and she assumed that was why the horse was calmer.

“Hey, boy, or girl, I do not know what you are, so I will call you Snowy. It will be a good name, seeing as that is what we are surrounded by,” she said quietly, not wanting to startle the poor beast. “Shall we see if we can get untangled from reins?” she asked, as if she was seeking his permission. Her eyes followed the lines of leather that led back to the carriage. “You stay there, Snowy, and I will attempt to unstrap you.”

The horse snorted back at her, making no attempt to do anything but stand where it was. “I can do this, so don’t you fret, Snowy,” she assured it.

Even though her fingers were starting to stiffen with the bitter cold, she worked deftly on the various buckles. She needed to untangle the straps so that she could separate the horse from the carriage. Every time she put weight on her injured knee though, a sharp pain wracked through her body.

“Damn it!” she cried out, after another wave of agony shot through her, her brow sweating even though her body shivered with the chill in the air.

As she breathed heavily, white clouds of air expelled from between her lips. “I am more thinking that we will freeze to death out here,” she murmured, wishing she could think of a way to untangle the messy reins. “I am never going to be able to untie you, am I?” she puffed, looking back at the prone horse. Hobbling back to the poor creature, she leaned down to stroke at his face again. “You are such a brave horse, and I promise I will keep at it,” she said, noticing that Leo remained by the side of Snowy. “And you are brave too, little Leo, for being such a comfort to this poor creature.”

She returned to the tangled lines of reins again and decided that the only way to disentangle them from the horse was cut through them. “But what will I use to do that?” she asked herself. Twisting around to see if any sharp implement could be found, she leaned on the wrong leg. It caused an unbearable sharp pain to shoot through her leg, and the other leg gave way as she stumbled to the icy floor.

For a while, she was forced to remain where she had fallen because the pain was so intense that she couldn’t move. Determined not to give in to throbbing agony, she was about to try and stand when she felt a vibration in the earth below her. It was soon followed by a deep rumbling noise.

“What the—” she called out, confused by the unearthly noise.

The deep rumble was getting louder, and she lifted her head to look around, fearing it was some kind of avalanche that she had read about. But all seemed still on the mountainsides. Yet the rumbling was turning into a dull roar that felt so terrifying against the deathly silence of the night.

“Olive! Olive! What is that?” Lady Adelia called out, fear at the depth of her voice.

“I...I do not know,” she called back. “But it sounds like the devil himself is coming for us,” Olive whispered, fear sinking into her soul.

CHAPTER 3

The thundering noise increased in volume, causing Olive to shiver involuntarily. She'd never been in a situation whereby she felt pure fear, but her throat tightened at the thought of what was approaching them. It was a terrifying sound as if the earth was trembling. For a flitting moment, she thought of Lady Adelia, and was relieved that she'd remained in the safety of the overturned carriage. Her body felt chilled to the bone with the aching cold, and the dull throbbing sensation in her leg was making her flush hot and cold all at once. All she could do was stay still and await her fate.

Leo had come to huddle up beside her and he whimpered pitifully as he too fretted over the situation. "Ssshhh, little Leo, I am sure whatever it is will soon pass. I have read of avalanches and earth tremors. It could even be happening in another mountain, and we can only feel the vibrations of it," she said, though she didn't believe her own words.

The noise was getting ever closer, and she realised that it was coming from the road that they had followed. If only she could get back up again and see what all the commotion was about. But the freezing chill was numbing her limbs, making it difficult for her to move.

There had been a short break in the snowfall, allowing her to look back at where the road might be coming from. Since they had crashed, it had become covered in thick layers of falling snow. From a distance, she thought she could make out a dark shape. It must have been coming towards them because it was increasing in size, and the noise grew louder.

"So, little Leo, it seems that something is approaching" she said under her breath. "With that noise and this storm, it cannot be anything welcoming. Oh, mercy be, am I imagining the whole thing?" she asked herself. "Is it a ghastly

phantom that I am seeing and hearing?” She wasn’t too sure of what was real and what was in her imagination, as her limbs became devoid of feeling. “If it is real, Leo, then I fear that it might mow us down it is so huge and fast.”

She was aware that her voice trembled. The poor little dog in her arms was picking up on her fear and so she squeezed him closer to her body, but it wasn’t easy with the growing numbness. Olive hoped that it might help to ease his disquiet, but he was shivering too, and she didn’t know if it was the cold, or fear.

Soon, she was able to make out the shape of horses. “It is a carriage, I am sure of it,” she croaked in the dog’s ear. The horses were galloping as pulled a dark-looking coach. Yet, the horses looked strange, yes...almost ghostly. They were all a light grey with dark patches that looked like blood. As the image grew, Olive feared they would not stop, and they’d mow her down.

A voice called out while the coach was still at a distance, and by the time it reached them, they had come to an abrupt halt. The large coach looked eerie, and Olive thought she counted four horses. From where she lay, she knew the driver would not see her, but was that good or bad?

Brave little Leo jumped from her arms and yapped at the giants. Olive worried, knowing he was only trying to defend her and make sure those huge creatures came nowhere near his mistress.

“Well...at least I am not going mad if you can see them too,” she sighed, closing her eyes in a moment of sheer relief. Although the huge creatures looked quite devilish, she wondered what manner of a carriage they were pulling. Remaining on the cold, hard ground, she watched the best she could, and she waited.

With the help of the bright snow that illuminated the area, Olive could make out the huge horses. They were grey, of that she was sure, but each of them had bald patches of fur missing from their bodies. Even from her vantage, the horses looked like death itself with red sores and scars aplenty. What manner of horses were they?

“Am I dead?” she questioned herself as her teeth began to chatter. “Is this some ungodly place that I am in...ouch!” She stopped her words as the pain in her leg reminded her that she could still feel something in her body. Did that not mean that she was still alive?

Lifting her head to keep her eye on the ghostly scene before her, she wondered what was happening. All had gone silent and the horses stood stock still as if they were waiting for something. There appeared to be driverless as

if they had come from hell to collect her. But she recalled hearing a man's voice slowing them down.

Little Leo had gone quiet but he hadn't returned to her, as if he was not letting the giant beasts anywhere near her. She feared for him and called out his name, "Leo, come here," she tried. He took no notice of her because her voice had all but disappeared, all that came out was a croaky sound.

And then she saw him – a tall figure jumped from the driver's seat of the coach. She was sure he was real because she could make out that he wore a heavy winter coat. In the distance of her mind, she heard Lady Adelia's screams. Daisy started to howl, and she knew that the screams were real and not in her imagination. The dog's howling only added an unnatural sound to the menacing atmosphere, but she worried for them both.

The figure had stopped and was glancing over at the fallen carriage. He didn't approach at first, and she wondered if he might be assessing the situation to rob them. But with Lady Adelia screams, the figure dashed over to the carriage.

Leo had stopped his yapping, and his actions gave her a sense of joy as she managed to peek at him from where she lay. The dog was wagging his curly little tail at the man as if he trusted a complete stranger and all was going to be well.

A dizzy spell overcame her, and for a few seconds, her world became topsy-turvy and then dark. Still, she could hear Leo's yapping, and it seemed that Daisy had also joined in as the noise infiltrated her mind, bringing her back to her senses. Opening her eyes, she could feel something wet on her face, lending a temporary warmth to her skin. It was Leo, he had returned and was licking at her face as he stood over her.

As she regained her senses, she remembered the strange horses and the dark figure. The dizzy spell had caused her to fall flat on the ground, no longer able to sit up to watch the man. Her joints were stiff and sore, and her fingers would not move. At least her mother was to be rescued, and that had to suffice for now. Whether the driver would find her, she wasn't too sure about. The snow swirled as gusts of wind threw it around, each snowflake dancing with its own unique movement. As the snow landed, it settled on top of her coat, and soon she imagined she would be buried in it.

But Leo stayed by her side and would not leave her alone. She drifted into a cold dark place as she felt lightheaded again.

She dreamed that she was at a ball. It was the Christmastide ball that the

Duke and Duchess of Cornwall held every year. Though by her side stood a tall man who she did not know. But she knew that it was a person who she felt a great deal of love for. He was a shadowy figure that loomed over her, and try as she might, she couldn't see his face. Every time she looked at him, his features became a blur. All she knew was that he made her blissfully happy.

Slowly she came around again to the reality of the snow covering her body. She could hear voices shouting out in the distance of her mind. Recognising it to be Lady Adelia, she tried to speak to her, "Everything... will...be...well..." she whispered but she knew her mother couldn't hear her.

Try as she might, she attempted to shout, but the words wouldn't form on her lips. Her body was attempting to lull her to sleep, but her mind fought against it. She could hear a man's voice, but she didn't know what he was saying. In the end, she accepted that he was a figment of her imagination, and her world went dark again.

Olive was surprised when she found herself walking around with no pain in her knee. A river gushed by her, and she felt an urgency that she was meant to do something, but she didn't know what it was. On the other side of the river, four white horses appeared and reared up at her as they neighed. What were they trying to tell her?

"Do you need my help?" she called over to them but her body wouldn't move.

Somewhere in the distance of her mind, she could hear a yapping sound. It stirred some memory within her, and she soon found herself opening her eyes. Relieved that her dreams were only nightmares, she soon remembered her situation. She was going to die of the cold, she was sure of it. There was no way to let Lady Adelia know that she was lying on the floor covered in snow.

Her body urged her to go back to sleep again, and she knew that it would be all too easy to drift off. As she felt something pound on her shoulder, a little yap sounded out in her ear. She could feel that Leo was on top of her, trying to dig her out of the fallen snow.

"Leo is that you?" she called out to him, or she tried to, but her throat rattled with a dry, dull pain.

She had to come to her senses and stopped her mind from drifting, even though allowing herself to sleep seemed like the easiest option. Little Leo was standing on top of her as she lay on the solid, frozen ground, and she felt something wet on her face. *Snow? Yes...snow is on my face,* she reminded

herself as she opened her eyes. Olive could see the dancing white lines of snowflakes as they fell all around her. *But I feel so warm*, she thought, her mind confused. “Is it ever going to stop?” She asked herself, wishing she could go back to sleep because she felt so very tired.

Blinking, she tried to stop the snow from falling, but as she looked up again, a dark shadow loomed over her.

Something has come for me! I am dead...those horses...yes...they are to take me away. I need to tell Mother, for she will worry...

And her world went dark once again.

CHAPTER 4

Julius hadn't expected any other carriages to be out on the mountain pass in the storm, and so he'd been travelling at speed. The large coach he was driving wasn't his, he was taking it to a military base in Scotland. The four huge beasts that pulled it had been members of Royal Scots Grey Dragoons, but now they belonged to him.

These horses were a little different from the norm, all having been injured in the Battle at Waterloo. Julius had rescued each one of them from the brink of death, being a military veterinary surgeon. Now, he was on his way to start a new post at the Inverness base.

To his surprise though, he could see a dark shape blocking the road ahead, causing him to pull on the reins and slow down the horses. It wasn't an easy task in a snowstorm, and not one he was pleased about. His stout horses could cope well enough with the icy road, they were battle-hardened steeds and used to far worse conditions. But as they stopped, he knew by the snorting noises they made that they sensed something ahead. That was why they'd been quick to react to their master's orders to come to a halt.

At first, he remained in the driver's high seat on the coach, wary that it may be an ambush by local bandits. Anyone stupid enough to rob a carriage in a snowstorm such as this one had to be a madman, and so Julius waited and listened. Once the horses had settled, he could hear a woman screaming, and it was coming from the overturned carriage. Spurring into action, he quickly dismounted because now he was convinced that there had been a genuine accident.

The horses became unsettled again as if they smelled something in the air. Before dashing to the fallen carriage, he spoke to them, calming them with

his voice. Visibility was difficult, given the state of the road from the heavy snowstorm.

Confident his horses wouldn't bolt, he began to trudge through the thick snow, making straight for the overturned carriage. As he approached the carriage, he could see that the door was at an angle, and it was closed. At least it would have kept out the falling snow for whoever was in there. Not yet opening the door in case it might still be a trap to fool him and then rob him, he stood stock still.

The sound of a woman groaning inside came to his ears and he was sure this was no trickery. Immediately, he went to pull the angled door upwards so he could see inside the carriage. There, he found an elderly woman looking most distressed as she looked back at him.

"Oh, thank the Lord," she called out, her voice weak, no doubt from all the shouting she must have been doing.

"Are you injured, my Lady?" he asked, not wanting to attempt to move her yet, in case she was hurt.

"No, no, but you must find my daughter," she called back to him. "I haven't heard from her, and I fear for her life in this storm. Please, look for her first."

"And where might she have gone to, my Lady?" he asked, seeing no one else around at the sight of the accident.

"I... I do not know," the lady replied, and he could see that she was confused. "She...she might have gone to get help, or gone to look for the driver, I am not too sure, but please, can you find her?"

"I will...I will, but first I'll close this door again and I'll be back shortly to help you," he replied, and she nodded in acknowledgment.

Once the door was shut again, he glanced around at the tragic scene. He could see a single horse towards the front end of the carriage.

"No wonder the carriage veered off the icy road with only a one horse to pull it in these conditions," he mumbled. "No one in their right mind would come through a mountain pass with only one horse."

For a moment he pondered on the driver of the carriage, annoyed that someone would put so much strain on a single horse. His instincts stirred, and he wanted to go and help the animal, but he knew that he needed to find the lady's daughter first.

As he looked further along the snow-covered roadway, he heard a dog yapping, which seemed odd given the situation. He tracked the sound with

his ears, and his eyes soon returned to the shivering horse. The dog was with the horse but he still couldn't locate it and he assumed it belonged to the missing woman. Making his way towards the yapping sound, he could see that the horse was still alive. It needed untethering, and there appeared to be a bloody gash in its rear flank, otherwise it was scared and cold.

Before he could see to the poor creature; he attempted to trace the source of the yapping and soon found the small dog. Calling to it, it looked back at him and wouldn't move from where it was standing, still yapping at him. Being fond of all animals, he guessed that the dog was trying to get his attention, so he clambered around the horse to get to the dog.

As he leaned down to stroke the dog, he could see that someone was laying on the floor. It could only be the driver, or the old lady's daughter, he assumed. The falling snow had almost covered the figure, so he went to brush the settled snow away. As he dug out the person with his gloved hands, he prayed that whoever it was, was still alive.

First, he spotted light, blonde locks of hair covering a face. Gently, he kneeled down to assess the person, and that's when he realised it was a woman. Moving the soft hair aside, a pair of huge emerald-green eyes looked back at him. Even in the middle of a snowstorm and a tragic incident, he could see that she was beautiful.

"My Lady, I have come to help you," he said as he attempted to help her sit up. "Are you injured?"

She groaned as she shook her head, "Yes, it's my knee," she told him with a fading, pained voice. "I... I was trying to free the horse...my...my legs gave way."

The small dog still yapped at him, but now it wagged its tail, "Your dog protects you well. May I ask his name?"

"He's Leo," she said with a strained smile. "He's refused to leave me," she said, breathing heavily with the pain.

Julius could feel the woman trembling from the bitter cold, and he knew he had to get her into the coach.

"Well, Leo, you have done your job well. It is my turn to take over," he said, reaching out to pat the dog's head. Turning back to the woman, he said, "I want you to try and stand, with my help. I have a coach and we must get you out of this snow and in there, before you freeze to death."

She nodded to show she understood him, and she accepted his arm to pull her up. Once she was upright, she leaned into him so that he could guide her.

Taking only a few steps at a time, they began to move forward. They hadn't moved far when her legs began to give way. Without any hesitation, and before she fell to the ground, he effortlessly scooped her into his arms and carried her toward his coach.

When they arrived there, he lowered her legs onto the ground. Keeping his arm around her waist, he opened the door to the coach. Turning, he picked her up again and climbed into the coach, laying her down on a soft cushioned seat.

Before he left, he laid a thick blanket over her. "I must go and fetch the other lady now, so please remain here and warm yourself through."

She nodded, but she didn't reply. He could see that she was only half-conscious, but at least she was safe now. He needed to hurry and get to the other woman. The little dog had initially jumped into the coach with him, but as he left, so too did the dog. It proceeded to follow him as he returned to the stricken carriage.

"I have returned, my Lady," he said as he once again opened the angled door.

"Have you found her...have you found my Olive?" she pleaded; her face so pale he worried she suffered from hypothermia too.

"Yes, and she is safe, but now we must get you to safety too," he told her as he clambered into the angled carriage.

"No, no, I cannot go out there," she told him, her voice trembling with fear. "I cannot even move around in this box; I have tried already."

Julius stood assessing the situation, he spotted another dog and went to lift it up. Once he had the dog in his arms, he reached over to the open doorway to drop it through to the outside.

"Oh, my little Daisy, is she hurt?" the woman asked in a panic.

"No, she will have gone straight to the other dog," he assured her. "They are both waiting for you outside, so we must hurry because we don't want them getting any colder, do we?"

"No, you must take care of them. You see, I do not know how to get up," she answered as he looked down at her. Julius could see that she was a small woman, but perhaps a little heavy for her stature. Given her age too, she wouldn't have much strength to lift herself through the open doorway.

"Come, you must trust in me, and I will help to lift you out of this place," he said, pulling on the insides of her arms as he lent her his strength.

He soon had her into a standing position, and he advised her how to

balance so he could let go of her. Julius needed to climb back outside. From there, he assisted her through the open doorway, and she leaned against him as he led her to the coach.

The dogs were indeed awaiting her, and they followed them to the coach. When he opened the door to the coach, the other woman was conscious again and she looked over at them, breaking out into a smile at the sight of Lady Adelia.

Climbing into the coach with the two women, he lifted the dogs up with him and took out more blankets to cover the two women. The dogs jumped up onto the seats so they too could thaw out from the bitter chill. Before leaving them, he asked, "How are you both feeling now?"

"Much warmer, thank you kindly, sir," the younger one replied. "Though my leg hurts," she added as she still shivered underneath the blankets.

He nodded and then asked, "Do either of you know where your driver is?"

"Mother knows nothing, I made her stay in the carriage," the younger one told him. "I was trying to get the horse untangled from the carriage so that we might escape. It was just so cold, and my hands went numb."

"Rest assured, my Lady, you are all safe now," he said, going to open the coach door again. "I must go and see to the horse, and if I can, I will find the driver. It should not take too long."

"The horse, sir," the younger woman called out. "Please can you help him? If you can get him untied, he can come with us."

He nodded so that it would calm her, but his main priority was to find the driver and rescue him, if he was still alive. Then they could be on their way and get out of this god-forsaken place.

CHAPTER 5

Adelia had to admit to herself that she feared the rumbling noise. It sounded like something huge was hurtling toward them. It had become so deafening that the entire carriage she was entombed within had started to shake. Was something going to crash into her?

Without any warning, the rumbling noise came to a sudden stop, only to be replaced by the snorting of horses, many horses.

“Oh, dear Daisy, are we to be murdered or rescued?” she whispered to the little dog trapped in the carriage with her.

All around had gone completely silent; a stark difference from the previous thunderous roar of only moments ago. All Adelia could imagine was that highway robbers were capturing Olive right this minute. At that very thought, she took in a deep breath and screamed as loud as her lungs would allow.

At the same time, she attempted to shift her bulk and climb out of the upturned carriage. Her sole intent was to rescue her daughter no matter what or who was out there. It was fast becoming frustrating at being stuck inside when she should be out there helping Olive. Adelia was about to scream again when someone opened the angled door to the carriage, and through it peered a dark silhouette.

“Oh, thank the Lord,” she croaked. “Please tell me that you have come to save us.”

“Are you injured, my Lady?” the voice of a man asked.

She could see it was a man, as her eyes adjusted to the moonlight behind him.

“No, no, but you must find my daughter,” she said, thinking that he had a

look of kindness in his eyes, though a scarf covered the rest of his face. “I haven’t heard from her in such a long time. Please, will you find her?”

“And where might she have gone to, my Lady?” he asked her, and then disappeared as if he’d spotted something.

While he was gone, she continued trying to get out of the box she’d become imprisoned in. Sometime later, the man returned and informed her that her daughter was safe. Then, began to help her clamber from the hole she’d become stuck in.

Once out of the fallen carriage, she got her first glimpse of a huge, dark coach. Standing in front of it were four strange beasts. Even in the poor conditions of the stormy night, she could see that the horses were odd. They were a light grey in colouring, with dark patches of scars plastered all over their bodies.

“Let me help you into the coach, my Lady,” the man said as he went to hold her by the elbow.

“No! No... I cannot go near those... strange-looking monsters,” she told him, starting to believe that he might have come from hell itself.

“Please, my Lady, they are only horses with battle scars,” the man said. “We must get you into the coach and out of this storm. Your daughter is in there waiting for you.”

Giving the beastly horses a wide berth, she staggered towards the coach with the man’s help. He assisted her up the step to get inside and then climbed in after her. After handing Daisy over to her, he then covered them in a thick blanket. It felt most welcoming to her cold numb body.

Her daughter was already wrapped up well, and the stranger asked if they knew where their driver was, but neither she nor Olive had any idea.

“The horse attached to the carriage is very frightened,” Olive said between chattering teeth.

The man left without saying another word. As Adelia’s body temperature was thawing, she felt a little faint from all the drama of the last hour.

Through the coach window, she could see the man trudging through the heavy snow. He was now carrying what looked like a doctor’s bag and she assumed he was going to look for the driver.

“I wonder if he is a doctor?” Olive mumbled from under her blankets. “I hope he finds our driver.”

Adelia looked over to her daughter who was still shivering.

“Goodness, Olive, he should be taking us to safety first, and then he could

return for the driver,” Adelia said as she felt another wave of panic rush through her mind. “Do you think his intentions are respectful?”

“He has helped us both, Mother,” Olive replied, and Adelia couldn’t help but notice impatience in her daughter’s voice. It was something she was noticing more and more between them. “Do stop imagining that everyone is out to murder us. And I, for one, do not wish to leave without the driver,” Olive added.

For a moment, Adelia said nothing. Recalling the strange horses though, was increasing the fear in her mind.

“Did you see the beastly horses that are pulling this coach?” she said as her imagination played tricks. “They are more like monsters.”

“No, Mother, they are horses with scarred bodies, not monsters,” Olive replied, sounding stern.

The door to the coach opened again, causing Adelia to gasp as the man was standing in front of them, carrying the driver in his arms.

“My apologies, Ladies, but we have an additional passenger to make way for,” he informed them with a heaviness to his tone. “I’ll lay him out on the floor. He’s unconscious and I suspect he hit his head when he was thrown from the carriage seat.”

“But what of the horses pulling your coach, sir?” Adelia dared to ask, for once again she feared that they had been saved by the devil.

“Ah, yes...they may look grotesque to you, my Lady, but I assure you they’re strong and reliable. Thanks to them, I can get you all safely to your destination,” he replied, giving her a brief smile.

“They look very badly injured,” Olive said with sympathy and also curiosity over the huge beasts.

“They’ve all been in battle, where they were severely injured in the process,” he told them. “For their unstinting bravery upon many battlefields in France, I could not let them die. Thanks to my training, I was able to put my skills to good use and save them, even though I was ordered to shoot them all.”

“You were at the battles in France, sir?” Olive asked, having heard from others how terrible it had been. “Are you a soldier too?”

“Indeed, I was, and so were those four very brave horses,” he replied. “We’re on our way to the Scott’s Dragoon in Inverness, where I’m to be based for a while. I’m no real soldier, I care for the cavalry horses as a veterinary surgeon, and the steeds were gifted to me because they’ve served

their time. Indeed, this very coach is to be delivered to the military base there.”

“What exactly is a veterinary surgeon, might I ask, sir?” Adelia questioned; she had never heard of such a thing. “Are you a doctor, or more of a farm hand?”

“I’m not a doctor of people, my Lady, but a doctor of animals,” he said, bowing his head a little. “For now, I must close this door before you all freeze. Could you kindly share your blankets with the driver?”

“Is this a mail coach?” Adelia managed another question before he left, wanting to know more about who they were travelling with.

“No, it is a military coach. It has been built to survive extreme conditions such as these, so you are quite safe inside,” he answered, then hesitated before he closed the door, watching the younger woman lay blankets over the driver. “May I ask where you were bound for? My destination is still many miles away yet.”

“We were headed for Glengill Castle, sir,” Olive told him, feeling surprised with herself at how much she trusted this man. “We have relatives there, but what of the driver’s horse, sir?”

“Yes, I’m about to undo his reins so he can join us. I know of the castle. I’ve passed this way many times when visiting the various military forts in Scotland,” he replied, showing a thoughtful look on his face. “If I’m not mistaken, that castle is on the other side of this mountain pass. It could be the best place for us to head for, in these conditions.”

“We would be forever grateful to you, sir, if you could take us there,” Olive said, while her mother remained quiet.

Adelia neither wanted to be at the castle nor stuck outside in the storm. Given the choice though, a draughty castle might be the better choice of the two.

“Then Glengill Castle it shall be, ladies,” he smiled as he went to close the door.

“I do wish that it had been a nobleman who’d rescued us,” Adelia mumbled. “He is kind enough, I suppose, but he is more of a farmer, or rather a simpleton.”

“Mother!” Olive’s harsh tone shocked Adelia. “How can you be so ungrateful? The man has literally saved our lives. Would you prefer to wait in the snow until your nobleman comes along?”

“What kind of question is that, Daughter?” Adelia said, equally as stern,

though she felt more defeated than anything else.

“You can see out there, that it is snowing again,” Olive pointed out. “We are most lucky to have been rescued by the gentleman, who, I might add, has also agreed to take us to the castle. I, for one, think of him as our saviour, and I will be forever grateful to him.”

As her daughter finished reprimanding her, the coach began to move.

“This poor man was thrown a long way,” Olive remarked as she looked at the man lying on the floor. “It could be that he hit a tree. From what I can see, though, his injury don’t appear too severe.”

Adelia kissed Daisy on her soft, furry head, as a means comforting herself more than anything else.

“It does worry me that we have put our trust in this stranger,” she said, squeezing her small dog close to her body. “He could be taking us anywhere.”

She looked over at Olive, but it was hard to make out her features in the dark.

“Mother, please,” Olive sighed back at her. Her daughter was becoming most impatient with her, and on occasion, she was finding it annoying. “Let us be thankful that we have a rescuer. It is a better ending for us than it was for our poor driver. He looks most poorly. I do hope his injuries do not prove too serious.”

Adelia supposed her daughter was right, they could have been left outside all night long in the bitter cold. They could have been injured in the crash and lay bleeding to death. As luck had it, they had all managed to evade death, though she recalled that her daughter had hurt her leg.

“How is your injured leg?” she asked.

“It will heal, so do not fret,” Olive replied. “I can see that you are upset, Mother, but we are safe now. You must trust in that at least. Soon you will be in a warm bed and able to put this terrible experience behind you. I am proud of how you coped, Mother, for most of the time you stayed calm, and that helped me too.”

“I still wish our saviour was a Lord of the nobility,” Adelia said, and she heard her daughter sigh in response.

CHAPTER 6

Although Olive was grateful that the worse was now behind her, she couldn't help but feel a sense of great sadness. As the coach rocked them around, all she could think of was the injuries the driver and his horse had sustained. Not that she had known the driver beyond their business arrangement, but he had been injured whilst in her service. She vowed to herself that she would compensate him. Feeling guilt at allowing him to continue on the difficult mountain pass, when what she should have done was halted the journey until the storm passed.

Then there was the injury of his horse, which she hoped would not stop the beast from continuing its work. Looking down at the driver who was unconscious on the coach floor, she felt tired, and her leg throbbed with a burning ache. Olive, as usual, put on a brave smile at her mother's comments, but she quite liked the man who'd saved them. To her, he was their knight in shining armour, who'd come to save the damsons in distress.

He didn't have to stop for them, Lord knows there were enough people who wouldn't have. Yet he not only helped them to be on their way, but he also attended to the horse's needs and then searched for the driver. That, in her book, made him a decent, respectable, and very kind gentleman, whether of nobility or not.

Listening to Lady Adelia's light snores, she closed her eyes. The dogs and horse were safe, they were all safe, which could only mean that all was well for now. Leo snuggled up closer to her, giving out a little blissful snort. With her legs stretched out on the seat, she let him lay across her them. Though she couldn't bare for him to touch her injured knee.

It surprised her when something jolted her awake, she hadn't even known

that she'd fallen asleep in the first place. The coach had come to a halt, and she felt dread in the pit of her stomach, praying they hadn't damaged a wheel or something equally dreadful. As the coach door opened, she could see their saviour beaming at them with a pleasant smile. That had to be good, meaning they hadn't stopped for some tragedy.

"We are here, Ladies" he announced, and she peeked behind him to see the structure of a tall castle.

"Goodness," she said in surprise. "I must have fallen asleep, and you must be so very tired too?"

Lady Adelia stirred with a moan, and Leo began to yap and wag his tail at the man, jumping down from the seat. Even the carriage driver was coming around, though he looked a little puzzled as to where he was.

"It seems that the little one's pleased to see me," the man standing outside said, fussing over Leo.

"Sir, you have rescued us from certain doom. Trust me, I for one am also very pleased to see you too," Olive said as she attempted to stand up. "Mother, will explain what has happened to our driver? I do believe he is coming around and do, please, assure him that his horse is safe too."

The handsome, young man outside held out a large hand, "Julius Burke, at your service, my Lady," he told her, introducing himself.

Taking his fingertips, she smiled back at him. "Lady Olive Brent," she replied, almost falling back down to the seat. Mr Burke offered her a large, strong hand, which kept her upright. As she held on to him, she found that she was leaning onto him through the open doorway. "Thank you kindly, Mr Julius Burke, it seems that you are to be my saviour once again."

"Let me help you down, though I fear that you will need that leg looking at," he said, pointing to her injured knee.

As Olive climbed out of the coach and let go of his hands, she put a little weight on her injured leg, but it was too much. She felt herself falling again, only this time she landed on the hard ground.

"My apologies, Lady Brent, I thought you were stable," Mr Burke said as he leaned over and helped her back onto her feet.

"It was not your fault, sir, and please, call me Olive," she said, managing a smile.

"What is happening out there?" Lady Adelia called out. "Unhand my daughter, sir!" she added with an unsavoury tone.

"All is well, Mother. The gentleman is helping me to walk as I cannot

seem to do so by myself,” Olive explained. Although she was in pain, she found it all most amusing. “Stay where you are, and comfort our poor unfortunate driver while we go and get assistance,” she advised.

Olive closed the coach door to stop the dogs from getting out, and the cold from getting in. Once done, she turned to look at the castle. It loomed over them in its dark, yellow-coloured stones, with dark tiny windows seemingly allotted in random places.

“Gracious me, it must be dark in that place,” Olive commented at the small windows. She spotted a long stone stairway that led to a huge wooden door. “How will I ever get up there?” she exclaimed, she could hardly even stand, let alone climb.

“Lean on me, Lady Olive, and I will guide you along but do mind the icy patches,” Mr Burke offered.

“Yes, that should work, but do not tell Mother how close we were standing together,” she said, as they were forced into each other’s arms. He put his arm around her waist, and she wrapped hers around his shoulder.

Together, they hobbled towards the steps, stopping every few moments as she writhed a little in pain. When they arrived at the bottom of the stairway, she looked up it in exasperation.

“I will never get up there!” she sighed, keeping a tight grip on Mr Burke’s shoulder, in case she collapsed with the pain.

“We could do this in one of two ways,” Mr Burke said to her with a crooked smile, which she found most attractive. “Either you lean on that wall and let me go and knock on that door,” he suggested, pausing as he pointed to a broken-down stone wall.

“And the other?” she asked, secretly enjoying her continued closeness to the handsome, strong man.

“You are not going to like it,” he said, raising his brows as if he dared not to suggest it.

“Are you going to tell me, Mr Burke or will I need to squeeze the words out of you,” she chuckled, loving his company.

“I could carry you up there,” he finished, looking as if he had said the most ridiculous thing in existence. “If you agree to it, then please, call me Julius, seeing as we are thrown together in our closeness to one another.”

“Well, what are you waiting for then, Mr Julius? I have to get up there somehow. If you are willing, then so am I,” she said, opening her arms so he could lift her.

Wasting no more time, Mr Julius leaned in and picked her up as if she weighed nothing. “Do not worry, Lady Olive, I work with horses, so I have some strength,” he assured her as he began to climb the stairway.

“I have every faith in you, Mr Julius,” she said, pleased at how she could wrap her arms around him. “If you drop me, I will never talk to you again,” she threatened. At that threat, he laughed, and she joined his laughter, surprised that she managed to feel so merry after all they had gone through.

All too quickly, in Olive’s opinion, they reached the top and Mr Julius carefully set her down again. Taking a large round metal handle, she hammered it against the wooden door. At the other side of the door was a deep echoing sound, as the knock vibrated through to the other side.

“Oh dear, that must be why they have not come out to greet the coach,” Olive said, feeling concerned that they were not home. “Do you think they might be out searching for us?”

“Let me take you back to the coach,” Mr Julius offered. “And then I will look around the castle for other doors.”

“As much as I do not look forward to making our way back down that stairway, at least it might a little warmer in the coach,” she sighed. Olive resigned herself to the fact that everything was going wrong on this journey.

As she turned to face Mr Julius, so that he could assist her again, a loud clanking noise sounded out on the other side of the door. It opened with a creak, and an old man in a Scottish kilt stood peering out. Before he could say a word, her aunt and uncle appeared behind him, calling out her name as they greeted her.

“Oh my, oh my,” Aunt Flora exclaimed. “What on earth happened to you? We had expected you earlier in the day, not in the wee hours of the morning,”

“Aye, we were talking of sending out a search party, I kid you not,” Uncle Hector added.

“Well, your instincts would have been quite correct, Uncle Hector, for we were in a terrible accident.”

“I knew it!” Aunt Flora called out. “I knew we should have acted earlier. Oh dear, my child, tell me that you are well? Oh no! I don’t see Lady Adelia!”

“Calm yourself, Aunt Flora, she is well,” Olive said. “Mr Julius will need assistance in helping Mother, and the injured driver to get up those steps? Oh, I am so sorry,” Olive remarked as she looked a little shocked. “Where are my

manners? This is Mr Julius Burke, our rescuer. Mr Julius, this is my aunt, Lady Flora, and my uncle, Laird Hector Finlay. We can go into all the details later, or Mother and our driver will freeze out there?”

Mr Julius shook hands with Laird Finlay and tipped his hat at Lady Finlay, before he left.

“I can see that you are a charmer,” her Aunt said to him. “Hector, get some of the boys to help him, and don’t be forgetting their luggage too.”

“We do not have any luggage,” Olive said before her uncle left to get help. “It remains with the overturned carriage, and there will be much to do to clear things away.”

“I’ll go with the lad to help too,” Laird Hector said. “You take our wee lassie inside and get her by the fire.”

That was exactly what her aunt did, and soon Olive was snuggled inside a tartan blanket by the blazing, orange flames of a roaring log fire. While thawing out, she heard a cacophony of voices, including her mother’s, as she arrived inside the castle.

“What is it, Mother, what has happened?” she asked as she entered the warmth of the parlour room.

“I was tired and had fallen asleep when these two nitwits disturbed my rest!” she snapped at her daughter. “They are both strangers to me, what did they expect? When I refused to get out of the coach with them, they would not unhand me. I was then dragged up that terrible stairway and into this cold, damp place”

“Please, Mother, stop your complaining and come to sit by the fire,” Olive said with a soft voice, she could see her mother was upset. Aunt Flora provided another tartan blanket and soon Lady Adelia was by her side on a huge, leather Chesterfield sofa.

“We explained to Lady Adelia that there was a warm bed waiting for her in the castle,” Laird Hector said, rubbing his hands together over the fire. “She is a stubborn one for sure.”

“It was the dogs that helped us in the end,” Mr Burke added, staying behind the Chesterfield as he spoke. “When we threatened to leave her alone in the coach, and bring them inside without her, Lady Brent finally agreed to come with us.”

“I am not named Brent, I am Lady Smith to you, young man!” Lady Adelia snapped at him.

“Brent was my married name,” Olive explained as she twisted around to

speak with him. “Mother’s name is Lady Adelia Smith. By the way, how is the driver? I do not even know his name.”

“You are married?” Julius asked, ignoring her question and sounding a little shocked. Olive wasn’t sure if it was surprise or disappointment on his face.

“I am a widow, but I still use my late husband’s name,” she explained. “Though that is a story for another day. For tonight, or rather this morning, I must ask my aunt and uncle if they can put you up. You cannot travel anymore in that terrible storm.”

“I...I thank you...your driver is called Barnaby Jones, and he is well, other than an injured neck,” Mr Burke answered. “I have my horses to see to, and the injured horse too, and then I must get going or—”

“You cannot be travelling in that storm, lad!” Laird Hector exclaimed. “Anyway, I’ve already had the grooms move the horses and coach into the stables. Jones is being attended to by our most competent housekeeper, Betsy, so do not fret yourself another moment, wee lassie. Come on, lad, I’ll take ye down through the courtyard to the stables. Ye can come back for a wee bit of supper and settle into your room later.”

Olive was pleased when Mr Burke accepted her aunt and uncle’s hospitality. Maybe it was because she felt that she owed him much for saving them all. Then again, she was aware that wasn’t the only reason. There was something that she liked about this man, his demeanour, and the way he carried himself with a certain confidence. She wasn’t ashamed to admit to herself that she would like to know more about him.

Her Uncle accompanied Mr Burke to the stables so that he could see to all the horses. Meanwhile, Olive told her aunt all about the tragic accident, not leaving out the injuries that her driver, Jones, and his horse had sustained.

CHAPTER 7

Julius felt disappointed at having to delay his journey. He'd hoped to be at the military base that very night and settle his horses from the arduous journey. There was nothing he could do as the storm was fierce, and it was getting worse by the minute.

"At least we'll all be warm here, Caesar," he whispered into the lead horse's ear after he'd finished checking on them all. He'd sewn the injury on the driver's horse, hoping it should heal and be able to continue its working life. Otherwise, the driver may sell it to the knacker's yard, and he didn't wish that to happen.

It pleased him that they had good stabling conditions and plenty of food. With his mind put at ease, he headed off to make his way back outside and into the swirling snow. The wind was biting at his skin as he made his way through a courtyard. He headed towards the door where his host had brought him through. Pushing on it, he found himself in a busy kitchen, situated on the first floor of the castle. Although everyone stopped to watch him pass them by, they were a friendly bunch of curious young girls and a few older women.

"Could someone kindly show me where the visiting party is gathered?" he asked, not knowing his way around the castle.

"I'll show ye," a pretty, young maid offered, showing him a beaming smile as she spoke with a broad Scottish lilt.

She led him into a large room with dark wooden panels covering some of the stone walls. It was warmed through by the two burning log fires, lit in huge stone hearths at each end of the room. Around one of the hearths sat the people he recognised, huddled with blankets wrapped around their shoulders.

The woman he knew as Aunt Flora, was looking at Lady Olive's injury.

"I could help with that if it's a bad injury," he offered, smiling at Lady Olive.

"Well now, that depends on how many ladies' knees you've treated in the past," Lady Flora said with a smile as she continued to hold a damp cloth over the injury. "I hear you are a qualified veterinary surgeon?"

"Indeed, and for all intents and purposes, one knee joint is the same as another," he assured her as he held out his hand in greeting. "Jules Burke at your service," he said with a genuine smile.

Lady Flora offered him her fingertips as she glanced down at her niece. "What do you think, Olive, should we trust this man to be touching your leg?"

"I assure you; I am well qualified as a practising doctor, to help with your injury," he said, feeling flustered at such an accusation.

"I trust you, Mr Julius," Lady Olive smiled cheekily at him. "If you can treat horses that have been injured in a war, then I am sure I can trust you to treat my injury too."

Lady Flora moved aside to give him access, but not before she gave him a teasing smile. He guessed that she was being playful with him, and although the situation was awkward, it also put him at ease.

"You're going to need to rest it," he said, assessing the swollen knee. "Once the swelling is improved, then you can begin with light exercise. I'm afraid it will hurt to start with, but the muscles around the torn ligament will need strengthening. That way, the ligament can repair itself."

"And you know all that merely by looking at my swelling?" Lady Olive asked him, as she too looked down at her bruised knee.

"Did you hear a cracking sound when it happened?" he asked.

"Well...I felt it more than heard it because Mother was wailing in my ear," she chuckled. "But yes, there was a wrenching pain as I was thrown to the floor of the carriage."

"I have something that will help you sleep for the first few nights," he offered as he pulled the hemline of her dress back over her slender leg. "It will hurt more at night, as your body puts weight on it when you relax."

"You are very kind, sir," Lady Olive said, showing genuine gratitude. "Not only have you saved this damsel in distress, but you've also tended to my injury."

"It is the least I can do for your family's hospitality towards my horses,"

he answered. "The storm out there is worsening, so I am grateful to you all."

"Nay, you saved my niece's life," Lady Flora declared. "Rescuing them from the storm was a brave thing to do."

"I am only too glad that your home was close to where the accident occurred," he replied. "It is good to be inside these thick walls and not on the outside in that raging storm."

"I agree with that sentiment," Lady Olive said. "Do come and sit down, Mr Julius, and warm yourself by the fire," she added. "Aunt Flora, I knew that you lived in a castle, but I never imagined it to be so huge. It must take many servants to maintain it every day."

"Not really, my dear, we have ourselves a wonderful cook, Jessy, whose husband, Rory, runs our stables. Of course, you have already met with Angus, our butler, who has lived in this castle all his life. Though we don't hold to the traditions of English servants because our maids work in the kitchens and throughout the entire castle. I'd say that we have around six people to help run the place but more come in when we need them."

"Only six?" Lady Adelia called out, and Julius realised that he'd forgotten all about Lady Olive's mother, which surprised him as she was not a quiet character. "But the building has so many floors to be tended."

"Well, there's also Jenkins, our land manager," Laird Hector added as he was leaning on the stone hearth. "He oversees the clan farms for us."

"Do you keep much livestock on the lands?" Julius asked, always interested in animals of all species.

"Aye, that we do," Laird Hector replied. "We have plenty of longhorns and a few herds of deer and stags. I'll show you around it all before you leave us if you wish?"

"I would be very interested to see what farmed animals are kept on the Scottish lands, thank you," Julius replied. He was fast taking a liking to his hosts with each passing moment.

"I must say, Aunt Flora," Lady Olive joined in the conversation. "From the outside, I thought your castle looked deserted. "But you have made it so very welcoming on the inside. I adore all the red and green tartan everywhere, it somehow reminds me of Christmastide," Lady Olive added with obvious delight in her voice.

Julius listened passively to their conversation, but now and then he found himself glancing over at Lady Olive. Now she was without her thick winter coat and all the scarves wrapped around her, Julius was struck by how

beautiful she was. He was glad that no one paid him any attention because he felt his face flush at the thought.

“That depends on whether you like to be surrounded by cold, stone walls,” Lady Adelia interjected.

“The walls are what keep the cold outside, Lady Adelia,” Laird Hector chortled. Julius could see that he was a humorous type of character, not to be put off by Lady Adelia’s complaints. “Throughout your stay, you must take the time to look at the many handmade tapestries that adorn our walls. They are all made by the locals, and by my good lady wife, of course.”

“I fail to see how a piece of fabric can keep out the howling winds. I can hear them through the walls,” Lady Adelia continued, tutting at the very thought of how cold she was going to be. “We could have died out there on those barren lands. Our journey in England was so much pleasanter.”

Julius had not yet taken a seat as he’d remained standing at the back of Lady Olive’s chair. It gave him ample opportunity to observe the group as they chatted. Off to a corner was a maid who was putting out glasses on a tray, along with a bottle of liquor. He couldn’t help but notice how she watched Lady Adelia, rolling her eyes when she heard the English lady complaining yet again.

It caused him to smile to himself, amused at Lady Adelia’s English snobbery. As he glanced away, his eye caught on the lady herself. She was looking back at him with a sneer as if she could read his thoughts.

“Is that not so, Mr Burke?” she said to him, but he had no idea what she was asking. “It seems that you are not paying attention, young man,” she added with a scowl. “I was telling our hosts how your beasts appear to look so frightful.”

Julius didn’t care for her tone or explanation, but he was too much of a gentleman to take insult.

“They have many battle scars, I grant you that, Lady Adelia,” he nodded, though he was very sensitive over his horses. “To me, they are each of them heroic, and represent a look of beauty.”

“You cannot deny that in a dark, storm, they have a devilish look about them,” Lady Adelia retorted.

“Mother, those horses were our saviour, along with Mr Julius here,” Lady Olive intervened, looking a little annoyed.

“Are you telling me that they did not shock you, Daughter?” Lady Adelia countered, not giving in, for she seemed to want the last word on the matter.

“The horses can indeed appear frightful at first,” Julius said, not wanting the topic of his horses to be turned into a heated debate between mother and daughter. “I assure you, though, Lady Adelia, they are strong in body and kind in mind. You could not meet a more loyal beast than a trained military horse. They give their lives to save their masters out on the battlefield.”

Lady Adelia didn't respond, and he hoped that would be the end of the discussion. After a few moments of silence, it was Laird Hector who broke the ice.

“You too are a brave man, Mr Burke,” he pointed out. “I understand that you worked to save them on the frontline of that dreadful war in France. You must have seen some dreadful sights?”

Julius pondered on his question, for it was not something he liked to speak about. He'd seen many a terrible situation and had been involved in a good few too. He recalled the many horses he had been forced to shoot on the battlefield, for when the battle raged around, there was no time to treat them.

“War is never a pretty sight, sir. Though it made me all the more determined to save those four horses that are now enjoying your hospitality as we speak,” Julius replied.

“I too have a great fondness of horses, Mr Julius,” Lady Flora joined in the conversation, referring to Julius's first name, the same way that Lady Olive did, which he quite liked. “And I commend you for saving those brave beasts. We are honoured to house them in their time of need. Now then, shall we have a sherry to warm our insides? Come and serve them if you will, Sheena, my dear. Though I do hope you have something stronger on that tray for the men.”

The warming drinks brought about a lighter atmosphere and the group was soon chatting about other things. Julius noted that Lady Adelia remained quiet once there was no opportunity to complain about things. He didn't dislike her, but he had met many like her with similar attitudes, among the officer's wives. The fact remained that he would always prefer animals to people, who he found were far too complex and contradictory, at least he knew where he stood with animals.

As he took a seat on a vacant armchair, he happened to glance at Lady Olive, and to his surprise, she was staring back at him. She raised her glass to him and gave him a friendly smile. He nodded back to her, pleased by the knowledge that she was nothing like her mother.

CHAPTER 8

Olive watched as inconspicuously as possible, as Mr Burke entered the dining room the next morning. He stood for a moment, looking as if he was and taking in the splendour of the room, seemingly as shocked as she had been at its grandeur. The stone walls were covered in huge colourful tapestries, depicting scenes from nature.

The stones above their heads had been structured to make a curved ceiling, lending the room a medieval appeal. At the far end of the long, wooden table, where she was seated with her uncle, stood a tall, leaded glass window. Through each small panel, daylight streamed in, to light up the room.

It had surprised her when she'd arrived, that on the table was an array of meats, cheeses, and loaves of bread. Plus, so many other foodstuffs that it seemed excessive for so few people.

"I trust you slept well, lad, after what you went through," Laird Hector asked from the end of the table.

"I slept like a baby, as they say," Mr Burke replied, taking a seat on the other side of her uncle.

"Mr Burke, this is my very dear friend, and winter guest, Lord Fergus Elfinstone. Would you believe he is a true Irishman, the Viscount of Stormont?" Laird Hector said, with an outstretched arm pointing to the man at the other end of the table.

Mr Burke bowed his head a little, in acknowledgment of the Viscount. Lord Fergus smiled back at him, as he twirled the end of a slightly curled, handlebar moustache.

"I have heard the most dreadful stories from the ladies, Mr Burke," Lord

Fergus said, with a slight Irish lilt to his accent. “You should consider yourself quite the hero.”

Olive struggled to tear her eyes away from the handsome Mr Julius Burke, who looked so very different now that he was all cleaned up.

“Did your knee bother in the night, my Lady?” Mr Burke asked of her.

“Not at all. The tincture you made up for me did the trick,” she replied.

“I will make you a lotion to rub on it to ease the pain,” he offered.

She was about to thank him when Lady Adelia entered the room. Her two dogs ran around, yapping loudly at everyone as if saying their good mornings.

“How delightful, Hector, we have even more visitors,” Lord Fergus said as he stood up to greet the lady entering the room. “May I offer you a seat next to mine, my Lady,” he suggested, pulling out a chair.

To Olive’s surprise, her mother accepted it graciously and went to sit down next to him. Mr Burke glanced her way and Olive took it as an opportunity to smile at him. She felt her face flush a little because he had caught her staring at him, but why should she care, he was indeed her hero.

She turned away to speak with her uncle, “Will you be able to go out in the storm today, Uncle Hector? She asked, noticing the snow still falling through the long window.

“Well, my young niece, you ladies cannot be going out there, I can tell you that much,” Laird Hector replied. He paused to take a mouthful of his porridge oats from a dish. “You need not worry your pretty head over such matters though. If you are concerned over your clothing, and possessions, I have already sent a team of men out to recover them.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Olive replied. She hadn’t thought of her belongings, she was only too relieved that they weren’t going to be leaving the crash scene unattended. “How is the driver doing in his recovery, do you know?”

“Jones is most comfortable after Mr Burke here saw to a neck injury he’d suffered from. A few pulled muscles out of place, I’d say. He’s occupying a room near to Betsy, our housekeeper. She’ll keep a close eye on him until he can be on his way. We’re also arranging repairs to his carriage while he’s stuck here in this storm.”

“Good grief man!” Lady Adelia called out as she stood up with a suddenness. “Have we not been through enough without having to relive the awful events of yesterday? That driver does not deserve all the care and

attention you give him, he nearly killed us.”

“Mother, we cannot ignore Mr Barnaby Jones. Please, sit back down and try not to be so rude to our hosts.” Turning to her uncle she added, “I would like to recompense his family for their loss. If you could please consider how much I should give to him before he leaves us, I would be most grateful. It is the very least that I can do.”

“No, I will not allow it,” Lady Adelia snapped, refusing to take her seat. “The commoner’s injury is his own doing and of no concern to us. I will not let you give away what little money we have!”

“I do not wish to discuss this matter around the breakfast table,” Olive said, her annoyance building up. “Now please, this is my last word on the matter.”

“May I ask the name of your dogs, Lady Adelia?” Lord Fergus asked, and Olive guessed that he was attempting to change the topic before it became too heated. “I am guessing the little pretty one is the female?”

Lady Adelia turned away from her daughter to look at the Viscount. Olive could see the fury in her face soften as she watched Lord Fergus handle little Daisy with a kind gentleness. Her mother sat back down and spoke with the Viscount.

“Yes, she is my baby girl,” Lady Adelia told him as she looked at Daisy, who seemed quite content in the arms of the Viscount. “You are fond of dogs, Lord Stormont?”

“Please, call me Fergus because we are to be friends, are we not?” the Viscount said, and Olive was grateful to him for being a calming influence on her mother.

“Very well, Lord Fergus, and yes, we can be friends because my little Daisy has taken a liking to you,” Lady Adelia smiled as she petted Daisy’s head.

Olive’s eyes scanned the room as she looked away, and she spotted a couple of maids off to a corner of the room. They were huddled up as they whispered to one other, giggling with amusement at the older couple who fussed over the dog. It gave her cause to smile, for she knew perfectly well that her mother couldn’t give a fig about what servants thought of her. On her part, she was only too pleased that Lord Fergus had taken kindly to her mother. Olive knew how much her mother felt out of place, in what she saw as a foreign country. Any friendship would help her to settle better.

“Have you not work to be doing?” Lady Adelia called over to one of the

giggling maids, meaning that she too had spotted them. “I would have one of you fill me a plate of breakfast, and the other can pour me some tea.”

Olive smiled, pleased to see her mother had bounced back to her normal self. It meant that she too could relax a little easier.

“I do hope your rooms are satisfactory?” Lady Flora asked, and Olive took her attention away from her mother.

“Yes, I find my quite opulent, Aunt Flora,” Olive replied, showing her fascination for the castle. “I adore the dark, oak panels that have been built against the stone wall. It lends the room a warm, lavish feel. Thank you, Aunt Flora.”

“I will show you around the castle later, if you wish, my dear,” Lady Flora offered.

“On the contrary,” Lady Adelia grumbled from across the table. “Mine is dark and draughty. I find the corridors dimly lit, and I could hear noises all night long.”

“You must embrace sleeping in such a historical building, Lady Adelia,” the Viscount said reassuringly.

Olive breathed a sigh of relief; it seemed that the Viscount was to be her saviour too. For some unknown reason, he had taken a liking to her mother. She had been worried that her mother wouldn't settle, but it seemed the Viscount had every intention of making her feel welcome. He was helping her to adjust to the ways of Scotland and its people.

With her mother's attention taken by the Viscount, she turned to her aunt with an apologetic look.

“Don't worry yourself, dear,” Lady Flora said quietly. “We can cope with a refined English lady. I would do anything to have this time with you.”

“Thank you, Aunt Flora, I did worry that she would complain a lot,” Olive explained, keeping her voice hushed.

“You will have all the freedom you need on your visit to our home,” Lady Flora promised. “I am only too sorry that I didn't get to be with you when your husband passed away. I know you received my condolence letters, but it is not the same as conveying my sorrow in person.”

“You need not be overly concerned for me, although my husband was a very kind man, our marriage was one without love,” Olive admitted. She would not lie to her aunt because she respected her far too much. She was the only relative that she had from her father's side of the family.

“I suppose it was Lady Adelia who encouraged the marriage?” Her aunt

asked. Olive nodded in acknowledgement, as her aunt had guessed right.

“Once this storm has passed us by, you should go out onto the glens on horseback, or do some shooting with your uncle,” Lady Flora suggested. “We will keep Lady Adelia busy too, so that you might be a little more independent of her,” her aunt added, a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

Olive was relieved that her aunt seemed to understand the situation with her mother. It would be wonderful to spend time away from her, but that would depend on how much the Viscount was willing to entertain Lady Adelia. Meanwhile, she hoped that Mr Burke would stay a little longer so that they could become better acquainted

For the rest of the day, she did not see much of Mr Burke. He’d insisted on going to help in the recovery of the upended broken carriage and lend a hand in clearing it from the road. When the menfolk returned, her uncle had nothing but praise for the battle-scarred horses that belonged to Mr Burke. It seemed that they had been a godsend in the moving of the broken carriage.

They had also brought the luggage that had been left behind and taken it to the maids to air out all the clothing.

For the rest of the day, Olive was delighted to spend so much time with her aunt. She was patiently teaching her how to make the thick wall tapestries. Olive had taken a liking to them, saying they would look wonderful on the walls of her home back in England. Lady Adelia was in the drawing room with them. The Viscount was busy entertaining her as they played cards and board games, a pastime her mother adored.

With the two dogs laying in front of the log-burning fire, Olive smiled as she heard them both snoring and grunting. She looked over at her aunt, hoping the snoring dogs wouldn’t offend her, but her aunt smiled at her as if she hadn’t even noticed the doggy noises.

“Don’t worry yourself, dear,” Lady Flora whispered. “Your mother and her dogs are most welcome here, so long as I have you.”

Olive sighed with a sense of happiness, finally able to unwind after the horrors of yesterday. All she wanted now was a change of clothes, and for Mr Burke to return and join them, and then her day would be complete.

CHAPTER 9

At dinner that evening they discussed the day's events, and Julius felt exhausted. He had spent most of the day pampering his horses to some much-needed care and attention. He'd also cleaned out the coach because if bright day was a sign that the storm had passed them by at last, he too must be ready to leave, as had Jones that very morning.

"I do hope that those beasts of yours are well secured in the stables, Mr Burke," Lady Adelia remarked with a look of distaste.

"Of course, my Lady," was all Julius could reply. It was obvious she had no regard for the brave horses and what they had done, which, to him, was sad. But he knew that unless one had been on the battlefield, then one could not respect the heroes that returned from it.

Too tired to join in with the after-dinner drinks, Julius took the first opportunity to escape, and take himself to his room. Even conversation with the lovely Lady Olive hadn't tempted him. He supposed his low mood was his way of coming to terms with the fact that sooner or later he would be forced to leave her behind in his life, and he did not wish to make a big fuss of it. After all, she was a lady of nobility and not within his reaches.

His hosts constantly insisted on him staying on, and indeed, he had unpacked all his belongings after accepting that he'd be stuck here a long time as he waited for the storm to pass and the snow to melt. But if Jones was willing to attempt the roads, perhaps he should too. Though this was not a warm part of the country, and the winter snowfall was much heavier than he was used to in England. He had a much heavier load than Jones had, so he would wait to see what tomorrow's weather brought about and make his decision then.

Taking out a book on animal husbandry, he finally felt at ease for the first time that day. Julius always enjoyed reading on the subject of caring for animals. The more he read, the more he learned about upcoming techniques in their welfare. For a few years, he'd moved overseas to attend veterinary school because they were better established in France. Though he'd also studied at the Royal Veterinary College in London to further his learning. As far as he was concerned, one should never stop learning new ways.

Finishing a chapter, he put down the book to rub at his tired eyes. As he did so, Lady Olive popped into his mind. He wondered what her life story was and thought that it would be nice to get to know her better. Although, as soon as the storm eased, he intended to move on. Then he thought that perhaps he could ask her if she would be interested in writing to him.

Picking up his book again, he started another chapter, but it was never easy to read by candlelight. For some reason, his mind was a whirl even though he'd felt tired earlier. The battles he had witnessed in France often grated in his mind, causing him sleepless night. Not to mention his newfound adoration of Lady Olive. She was very beautiful and kind, and he could not ignore how very different she was from her mother. One of them thoughtful and kind, and the other noisy, snobbish, and from what he'd seen so far, selfish too.

He did wonder, had they not been involved in the accident, might he never have met the lovely Olive?

"Bah! I must stop all this thought of romance," he told himself. "My life has taken a different turn and that is where I must focus my thoughts."

To taking his mind away from thought of romance, he recalled the moment when he'd received his commission. And not, he was on his way to take up the permanent role of veterinary surgeon for the Royal Scots Grey Dragoons within their British bases and not on the battlefields of France. He had been most excited about it, even though he'd worked at all the military bases around Britain, this role was to be permanent, with no return to France. So he had better get used to being stuck in the snowstorms of Scotland, for he had heard it might become a regular occurrence.

His thoughts were interrupted by a noise that sounded as though a door had banged shut, and he stood up to go and investigate it. Looking down the dimly lit stone corridor, it surprised him how it all looked so warm and inviting. The small burning sconces fixed on the stone walls, made dancing shadows along the corridor. Now that he felt awake, he felt an urge to wander

around the castle a little. He'd like to find the kitchen again, and get a glass of warm milk, as it might help him sleep.

Putting on a thick tartan night robe that hung on the back of the door, he set off looking for stairways that would take him down. He knew the kitchen was on the level of the courtyard, but should he go too low in the castle, he might end up in the cellars.

The thick walls were built of yellow sandstone, and he recalled how they had darkened on the external walls. Inside though, it seemed that some of them had been painted with bright greens and reds, depending on the colour theme of a room. Yet he could still smell the earthiness of the quarried stone, mixed with the aroma of the burning sconces.

Along the corridors, he noted that the lady of the house, Lady Flora, had done a wonderful job with her hanging tapestries. It brought an array of reds and blues, adding warmth to the corridors. The small windows contained glass frames, and he could hear a faint howling of the wind through the ones that he passed. Now and then he came across huge animal heads hanging on the walls. So far he'd seen a stag, a bear. Now, he was looking at a stuffed eagle, causing him to shiver at the very thought of being stuffed, or hung on a wall.

At least the ornate rugs that covered the flat slabs of stone, helped to muffle the echo of his footsteps. Heavy red tartan fabrics had been hung across the larger windows, lending a Scottish atmosphere to the home of the hosts.

As he arrived at a spiralled stone stairwell, he could hear voices echoing from below. Not sure if he'd found the kitchen, he decided to descend the steps and speak to whoever was down there. They could set him in the right direction at the very least. As he reached the bottom of the stairway, he was pleased to find himself in the warmth of a kitchen; at last, he'd found it. There, he recognised the old man who'd answered the door to the castle when first they had arrived.

"Good evening to ye, sir," the old man smiled over at him. "Come and sit yerself doon by the fire," he invited. He'd raised his arm to point to a bench by a long, wooden table. It gladdened him that the table was situated by a huge coal fire, surrounded by heavy, metal ovens.

"The name is Fergus," the old man introduced himself. "We met when I answered your knock on the castle door. And the lassy over there is Jessy, our resident cook. The other one, beating up the bread dough, she'll be

Sheena. And Rory, you already know from the stables.”

They all greeted him with friendly smiles, and Julius felt welcomed as he took the seat closest to the hot coals.

“Shall I be heating ye up some milk then?” Jessy asked, her smile lighting up her ruddy cheeks and happy eyes.

“Many thanks, Jessy, that would be perfect,” he replied, and then turned to Rory, asking. “Did you see Jones off this morning?”

“Aye, thanks you to you, young master, his horse should be strong enough to get him home to his family,” Rory replied nodding in respect.

There was much banter between the small group, which also led to laughter as they discussed this and that. Jessy soon approached him and placed a hot, steaming mug of milk on the table in front of him.

“That is most welcome, thank you, Jessy,” he said, looking forward to the warming feeling the milk would give him as he sipped on it.

Before he’d even drunk his first mouthful, everyone turned to look at the stairwell. Coming down them, and hanging on to a rail, was a hobbling Lady Olive. She too wore a thick, tartan night robe, and for a moment he was speechless. Julius couldn’t believe his luck; he’d get to talk with the lovely Lady Olive. That cheered him no end and he jumped up to assist her down the steps. The servants greeted her with the same friendliness they had shown him, and he guided her to sit in the warmest seat.

The servants who ran this castle didn’t seem to mind at all when the guests disturbed their privacy. They were keen to share what they had and welcomed the strangers into their lives.

“I am so sorry to be disturbing you all,” Lady Olive said apologetically as she looked at Jessy and Fergus. “Whilst my bed is very comfortable, I am finding my mind will not slow down and I cannot sleep.”

“Well then,” Jessy exclaimed. “You’d better come and join this young man, as it seems he’s got itchy feet too.”

“Did you not try your tincture, Lady Olive?” Julius asked.

“I do not like to take too much of it,” she answered. “Whilst it does lessen the pain, it makes me overtired.”

Julius was about to advise her further, when Jessy approached them.

“Can I be making ye some warm milk too?” Jessy asked Lady Olive, who nodded with happy relief at her warm welcome.

Julius couldn’t help but grin back at her, so pleased was he to see her. “It seems then, that we both suffer from the same restlessness,” he suggested.

“When you taste this milk, it will help you relax, it is truly delicious,” he assured her.

“Aye, well it be from our very own cows that we keeps in the barns,” Jessy called out. “Extra creamy, and I puts my own added magic touch to it.”

Lady Olive smiled, and her smile caused his belly to flutter. Though she made him quite nervous, he was pleased to see her looking so relaxed.

“She’ll be adding a touch of nutmeg to that milk, it ain’t no secret,” Rory said, eliciting a frown from his wife.

“You old scallywag. I shouldn’t be letting you in my kitchen, not with yer big mouth,” she laughed, while Rory looked sheepish. “Anyways, ye don’t know all the ingredients I be adding.”

Julius and Lady Olive found their banter amusing, it was clear that in the kitchen, Jessy was in charge.

“It is no wonder that you cannot sleep this night, Mr Julius,” Lady Olive said as they spoke quietly to one another. “Taking care of those huge horses cannot be an easy task.”

“It gives me much pleasure to ease their pains,” he said, sharing a grin with her.

“Aye, Mr Burke here, is a good one in my opinion,” Rory said, listening in. “We couldn’t have moved that wreckage without those big horses of his. We’d have needed to get the oxen out to shift it, and that’d been only when the storm passed us by. Thanks to his horses, we even got the carriage fixed well enough for the driver to take advantage of this break in the storm.”

“You think it only a break?” Julius asked. “I’d hoped it might be clear tomorrow also.”

“Don’t be too fooled by the calm in the eye of the storm, lad,” Rory replied. “I told Jones he’d have to make a good distance in leaving Scotland this day, if he was to miss the storm that will surely return tomorrow. That was why he left so early in the day.”

“How much longer will it continue, do you think?” Julius asked Rory. It seemed that none were willing to commit to a straightforward answer. “This is Scotland, lad, a storm like this one can seemingly go on forever,” Rory answered, a faint look of worry in his eyes.

“My auntie lives up in the Highlands,” the maid, Sheena, called over to them. “Our storms are wee little things compared to theirs.”

Fergus laughed, “Bah! Those highlanders always think they got it harder than anyone else. The truth of it is that they’re protected by the mountains.

It'll be far worse here than up there, if ye be asking me my opinion on it."

"No one's asking you, Angus, 'cos your opinions are far too biased for you to be giving out advise," Jessy tutted at the butler.

"I hope you will not be too disappointed being stuck here at the castle a little longer, Mr Julius," Lady Olive said.

He wanted to tell her that her company more than made up for the storm, but his nerves got the better of him. Though he did feel a sense of contentment at being seated so close to Lady Olive. Every time he saw her, she seemed to have a calming effect on him. He was more familiar with being around men, because of his service, than he was with women. Yet, with Lady Olive, he felt completely comfortable in her company. A part of him hoped to develop more than a casual friendship with her, but then he realised how stupid that idea was. It forced him to stand up and ready himself to leave the warmth of the friendly kitchen.

"I thank you for the milk, Jessy," he said with a bow of his head. "And the rest of you too, for such good company, but I'll be off to my bed and see if I can finally sleep."

"Could I come with you? I could do with someone to help me hobble back to my room" Lady Olive asked, at which his heart skipped a beat at the very thought.

"It would be my pleasure to escort you, Lady Olive," he said, going over to assist her.

Everyone called out their goodnights and Julius helped the lady climb back up the spiral, stone stairwell. "I hope I can remember the way, Lady Olive, for this castle has so many stairwells and floors."

She stopped to rest and turned back to look at him. "If we lose our way, at least we will be lost together. I would rather be with you than alone," Lady Olive told him, and he couldn't help but notice a twinkle in her shimmering green eyes.

CHAPTER 10

Adelia Smith could swear blind that she didn't sleep a wink during the night. All night long she'd listened to doors banging and wind howling. Yet when she arrived in the dining room for breakfast, she felt quite refreshed, only to be disappointed to find that it was empty. It wasn't like her to be the first one to arrive for breakfast, and she wondered if she had missed a party gathering the previous night. Then again, she recalled everyone turning in early, including herself.

Seeing an ornamental brass handbell standing on the hearth, above a burning log fire, she picked it up and shook it hard. No answer came, but she was confident that it had to be for calling the servants, and she shook it again. Within moments of the second ring, a maid came dashing into the dining room looking flustered.

"What on earth is happening in here?" Sheena asked, looking at her in shock.

"Do not take that tone with me, young woman," Lady Adelia snapped back at her. "If you were in here doing your job, I would not need to call for you. Where are the breakfast foods? Where is my tea? Breakfast should be on the table long before the first person arrives to eat it."

"Lady Smith, we are not here at your beck and call—"

"I beg your pardon!" Adelia screeched. "How dare you speak to me in that way, it is an insult to my constitution. I feel quite faint at the shock of your attitude. You would not get away with this in England, I can assure you that much. You would be dismissed as being extremely lazy and there would be no references to follow, I can tell you that."

"Lady Smith, I was in the kitchen, preparing the food for your breakfast.

If I hadn't been so rudely interrupted, you would be eating your breakfast by now, now wouldn't ye?" Sheena answered, and it appeared to Adelia as if the maid cared not a smidgen by how she spoke to her.

"In England, servants know their place. Whereas in Scotland...well, I cannot understand how a household can run at all, not with such impudence," she snapped at the maid, just as the Viscount walked in.

Adelia hoped that he would reprimand the maid for her insolence, but instead he smiled at her saying, "Someone is in fine spirits this morning."

"Lord Fergus, I am shocked that my hosts are not here to organise their servants. Guests should be able to eat their breakfast on time," Adelia told him, unable to comprehend how Scottish people behaved.

"Ahh...well there I can answer your question," Lord Fergus said.

As he spoke to her he still managed to wear a smile on his face, which Adelia couldn't understand. Why was he not shocked at the lack of service in this household?

"Please do explain it to me, Lord Fergus. For I am flabbergasted at how...how these people are so disrespectful to their betters," Adelia spluttered. "I...I need to sit down. I am lightheaded at the shock of my morning experience."

"Please, Lady Adelia, do take a seat. I would like you to get yourself comfortable, so you can share breakfast with me," Lord Fergus said, offering her a chair, which she took straight away. "You see, my Lady, the fact is, our hosts are not morning people, if you understand that phrase."

"No, I cannot," Adelia barked. "The world has gone mad, Lord Fergus. So, do please tell me what a morning person is?"

The Viscount looked at the maid with an amused grin. "I will take it from here, Sheena, my dear," he said to the furious-looking maid.

Adelia watched as the maid flashed her an angry glare, causing her to gasp.

"Oh, my giddy aunt, thank ye, mi'Lord. I can go back to slavin' in my kitchen, can I now?" Sheena said, throwing up her arms and causing Adelia further shock. Adelia was about to reprimand her again when the Viscount raised his hand to stop her.

"Let me explain, my dear Lady," Lord Fergus said as he went to sit by her side. Adelia was forced to bite her tongue to stop herself from reprimanding the young woman as she left. "My...my, Lady Adelia, you do have a fire in your soul, I must say. But you see, the servants are quite used to the Finlay's

coming down for breakfast much later. It is only because we have guests at the castle that they're cooking breakfast as we speak."

"It is quite unacceptable," Adelia complained as another maid entered the room. She couldn't help but notice that the young girl looked nervous as she put a teapot down, along with china cups and saucers. "A lady should not be forced to wait for her breakfast."

"There, look now," the Viscount raised his arm at the teapot. "See! They've brought you tea while you wait, Lady Adelia, is that not kind of them?"

"Hrmph! It is a start, one supposes. And do tell me, Lord Fergus, that is not a Scottish lilt I hear in your voice," she pointed out, feeling pleased that he was the one pouring her the tea. "Where, may I ask, are you from?"

"My home is in Ireland. It can get to feel like a lonely place when you live in a mansion all alone," he told her, handing her a jug of milk for her tea.

"I must say, Lord Fergus, you are indeed a very refined gentleman. It surprises me somewhat that you do not have a wife," she said, hoping to find out more about him.

She hadn't said anything to Olive because her daughter could be most sensitive about these matters. But she had already concluded that the Viscount would make a perfect husband for Olive. She had every intention of steering them towards one another, with little hints here and there.

"Alas, my dear wife passed from this life some years ago," he informed her.

"That is most unfortunate because you are a very pleasant fellow," she said, turning to watch the servants arriving in the dining room. At last, they had begun to laden the table with bread and cheeses. "It is a wonder that you have not yet found a replacement," she told him, turning to the young maid. "I say, maid, is there nothing warm to be eaten at this breakfast table?"

"Yes, ma'am...erm...I mean, my Lady," the young girl stammered nervously. It wasn't anyone Adelia recognised, and she assumed the young wench to be the scullery maid; if they had such maids in this country.

"It pleases me that you find me pleasant, Lady Adelia," Lord Fergus said with a smile, taking her attention away from the girl. "You see, as it happens, I find your fiery personality very appealing. You are not a woman not to be trifled with, are you? I find that an unusual trait in an English lady. They're usually quite a timid bunch, for my liking, anyway."

"Nonsense. English women are made of the strongest of constitutions.

Both myself and my daughter are such women,” she replied, tapping her feet on the ground as she waited impatiently for hot food to be served. “We have needed to be. My husband also passed away, and then my daughter’s first husband passed too. You see, Viscount, we have been left to cope alone on many an occasion and therefore have our wits about us.”

“That is a sad affair, my Lady, when there are men like me who are seeking a wife,” he admitted.

“That is a most gracious coincidence because my daughter is seeking a husband too,” she told him, hoping he might take the hint.

Before he could reply, her daughter entered the room, and close behind her was the dreadful Mr Burke. Adelia was not pleased with how the farmhand seemed over-familiar with Olive. She would admonish her daughter later and might even risk leading their conversation toward the Viscount.

Even worse the farmhand took his seat by her daughter’s side, but she was having none of it.

“Daughter, please come and sit by my side,” she instructed, but nothing had prepared her for Olive’s answer.

“You do not need me to hand feed you, Mother,” Olive said giving out a light laugh. “Besides, my chair is warmed up now, so I will stay where I am.”

Adelia felt herself tremble at her daughter’s insolence. Was there something in the air of Scotland, that caused all young people to lose their manners?

“I am more than happy to be by your side and keep you company, Lady Adelia,” Lord Fergus said, and his lulling voice stopped her from saying anything more.

“You are a kind gentleman, Lord Fergus, more so than the young man who keeps my daughter occupied,” she said. Though she chose to speak in a hushed tone so that Olive wouldn’t hear her complaint.

The Viscount glanced over at the young couple, who were now being served warm food by the maid. Adelia thought of complaining because she had not yet been served even though she had been first to arrive, but she decided against it. Lord Fergus had a calming effect on her constitution, so, for now, she would sit and enjoy her food.

But, observing her daughter, she worried at how friendly she behaved with the commoner. At this sight, she allowed her imagination to run wild and briefly wondered if Olive was closer than she should be with such a man.

But then, she knew her daughter would never do anything foolish. Then again, she had helped a maid marry into nobility in the past, so she could be wrong. She surmised that the sooner she matched her with the Viscount, the better. In fact, the sooner this storm passed them by, the better too, for it would surely mean the departure of the commoner.

For the next hour, she ate her breakfast and enjoyed the company of Lord Fergus. The more she could find out about him, it would serve to help her when she came to matchmaking him with her daughter.

CHAPTER II

Olive could see her mother glancing her way, and it annoyed her no end. If anything, it caused her to flirt a little with Mr Burke because she knew that it would vex her. She laughed in a loud manner at the things he said to her, and then she leaned into him to whisper in his ear. Her performance was purely to get under her mother's skin.

Although, if she was honest with herself, she was rather enjoying his company, perhaps a little more than she should. Mr Burke's presence made her feel good, there was a charm about him that helped her relax whenever in his company. She wasn't afraid to admit to herself that she liked him very much, even a tad more than she should.

As she leaned into him, enjoying the firmness of his muscled arm, her aunt and uncle entered the dining room, giving out a cheery welcome to those present.

"Ah...is it still morning though?" Lady Adelia asked, raising her brows in question. "When I arrived in the dining room, the entire household still slept in their beds. But for the Viscount, I would have assumed myself alone in this cold castle. Lord Fergus is most attentive and will make some lucky lady a perfect husband."

Olive took the hint at meaning he would make her a perfect husband, and she glared over at her.

"Why, might I ask, must you always complain?" Olive questioned, wishing she had insisted on coming alone to Scotland. "I am sure that Lord Fergus is more than capable of deciding if he wishes to find a wife, without any assistance from you. You must forgive Lady Adelia, Lord Fergus, and make sure that she does not put her matchmaking skills at work on you."

Of course, Olive knew that her words were not going to stop her mother. In fact, nothing could stop her from trying to find a husband for her daughter.

“Nay, I would not object to Lady Adelia’s attentions,” Lord Fergus said, with a kind humour in his tone.

“My daughter thinks herself no longer in need of a mother’s helping hand,” Lady Adelia said, glaring back at Olive. “But if she was left to her own devices, she would stray from the path that life has set for her.”

“I do not have a set path,” Olive snapped, for her patience was wearing thin. “If I wish it, I could remain a widow for the rest of my life.”

“Why would you say such a thing when there are many refined gentlemen seeking a wife? Take the Viscount here, for instance, he would only seek to make his future wife a very happy one indeed.” Lady Adelia rebuked. “Is that not so, Lord Fergus? Did you not say that you are seeking a wife? And when you find your future bride, will you not treat her well?”

“I cannot deny any of that, Lady Adelia,” Lord Fergus agreed openly. “Would I to find such a fine woman as yourself, I would cherish her and keep her close by my side.”

“There, you see for yourself, daughter,” Lady Adelia teased. “Lord Fergus has already confided in me that he prefers a strong woman, so our bloodline should appeal to him, am I not correct, my Lord?”

“You are, my Lady,” the Viscount agreed, not taking his eyes from Lady Adelia. “Yet again, I find that I cannot deny my interest in your bloodline.”

“Mother! Please will you stop. I know what you are doing... and I—”

“A loving marriage is a wonderful goal,” Lady Flora intervened. “And I am sure that Olive will one day marry a man that she loves dearly.”

“Thank you, Aunt Flora, for that is the whole truth of this matter,” Olive smiled down the table at her aunt, who was trying to eat her breakfast in peace. “I apologise for ruining your breakfast with such talk, but you do speak the truth of it. I will never marry again unless I am sure there is love between us.”

“Fiddlesticks!” Lady Adelia called out, shocking everyone around the table. “For a marriage to be successful, it must be treated as a business deal. Two people who are compatible by social standing, are far more successful in their union than two people who are joined in love and are poor.”

There was a grave silence around the room, and Olive felt uncomfortable at her mother’s statement.

It was Mr Burke who broke the silence, when he moved back his chair

and stood up. "I wish you all a good morning, but I must go see to the horses. It is bitter cold out there and I will need to put a salve on their battle scars."

"Ah, my lad, might I help you with such a task?" Laird Hector asked as he wiped his mouth with a large, cloth serviette. "We can check on the straw supply too, my stable hand sent word that it was running low."

Mr Burke turned to give Lady Olive a little bow before the table. "I would appreciate all the help I can get, for it can be quite a task treating four giant horses. As for the straw, I will, of course, compensate you for all your hospitality."

"Nay, lad, what's a bit of straw between two friends," Laird Hector said with a smile.

Olive watched them leave the room, feeling a little forlorn at Mr Burke's departure. She was beginning to understand how much she liked being in his company. "Will I see you when your task is complete?" she called after him.

"Olive!" her mother called out, causing her to jolt in her seat at the shock of her name being shouted out so in such a way. "Please do not make yourself appear so encouraging for the company of a man. You must all forgive my daughter; her head is still dizzy from the accident."

"It was my knee I injured, not my head," Olive countered, ready to do battle again if needed.

Lord Fergus stood up, moving the attention away from the two battling ladies. "I too have chores to be done, so I will bid you ladies a brief farewell."

All the men had now left the dining room, leaving the ladies alone. She would have liked to use the opportunity to give her mother a piece of her mind, but the maids were still clearing the table. Not wanting to cause any embarrassment in front of the servants, she remained quiet, but it seemed her mother had no such qualms.

"I do wish that you would not flaunt yourself so, with that farmhand," she said to her from across the table.

Olive noticed one of the maids tutting as she glanced over at Lady Adelia.

"I do not feel any shame in my friendship with Julius. What is more, he is not a farmhand. He happens to be a skilled and well-trained veterinary surgeon. There is a huge difference if only you would take the time to notice," Olive countered, wishing her mother would listen to the facts.

Her mother was about to have her say when Lady Flora intervened again. "It is quite true, Lady Adelia. It takes many years to train as a veterinary

surgeon. No doubt Mr Burke will have attended the best colleges in the world.”

Olive couldn't help but give her mother a smug look, but Lady Adelia was not to be bettered as the three women remained around the table.

“It is typical of you to go against me!” Lady Adelia turned on Lady Flora. “Even when my husband was alive, you would always side with him. You would have preferred him not to have married me, don't you think I did not know of it? But where were you when he needed help?”

Olive could see that her mother was in a fighting mood, and she wasn't having her insult her aunt as well. “Mother, Aunt Flora has never done anything to harm you, please do not speak to her in such a way. I am sorry Aunt Flora,” she apologised, turning to glance at her aunt and ignoring Lady Adelia.

Lady Flora raised a hand to stop either of them from saying another word. “This is a most unfortunate conversation for us to be having in front of Olive,” she said, looking over at Lady Adelia.

“Well, I only speak the truth,” Lady Adelia snapped.

“Please, Mother, Aunt Flora is our host. Do not insult her with one of your temper tantrums” Olive begged, upset that this unpleasantness had come about.

“There is more to your aunt than you know,” Lady Adelia insisted, her face flushed as she stood up. “That woman left your father and me in a debtor's prison. She took you away from me because she wanted you for herself. Your aunt thought she would raise you, while her brother rotted in hell.”

“What?” Olive asked, shocked at what her mother was revealing. “You have never told me of this.”

“They were only in there a few nights, Olive,” Lady Flora said, appearing much calmer than Lady Adelia. “I knew that my brother had all the right connections to get them out. But I could not bear to leave you in there, it was no place for you. Whilst you, Lady Adelia, needed to support your husband.”

“Why did you never tell me of this?” Olive asked, surprised her mother had kept such a dark secret from her.

“Because I was ashamed of it, why do you think?” Lady Adelia cried out. “But mark my words, your aunt wanted to take you away from me, and she is wanting to do it again.”

“I am a grown woman, and I belong to no one but myself,” Olive said,

slamming her hand down on the table. She couldn't help herself; she was so annoyed at the silly accusations against her aunt. "Thank goodness my aunt took me away from such a place. Surely you did not wish me to remain there with you? And Aunt Flora is quite right, it was where you belonged, by Father's side. How you expected my aunt to help you, I cannot think. She did not have money or influence, but at least she did the right thing by caring for your child."

Olive stood up and started to head for the door, but her mother called out again.

"I did support your father, and you will not talk to me so disrespectfully," she yelled again, showing no remorse for upsetting her daughter.

"Perhaps it is because I disrespect you, Mother. For all your incessant complaining and attempts to marry me off to some wealthy man I know nothing about," Olive said. It seemed a good time to get all her annoyances out in the open. "I am going for a stroll. When I return, I hope that you will have thought about your own attitude and expectations."

With that, she did not wait for a reply, no doubt her mother would have one. Leaving the room, she slammed the door behind her, not caring who heard or saw her. All she wanted was to get away from her mother, a woman who knew how to upset her, and now, it seemed, a woman who had kept secrets from her.

CHAPTER 12

Julius saw that the Viscount had followed him and Laird Hector out of the room and gave him a small wave as he headed off in different directions. Trailing after Laird Hector towards the courtyard door, he knew it would lead them to the stables.

In the courtyard, the snow had drifted with the high winds. It was piled high against the castle walls. It crunched underfoot as they made their way to the stables, and they needed to tread with care. The wind was picking up again, blowing some of the settled snow into their faces, and he was glad when they entered the stables.

Once inside, the familiar musty smell of damp hay assailed his senses, and he heard Caesar neighing, sensing his master close by.

“Whoa boy!” Julius called out as he approached the huge horse’s flank. “Don’t be getting too excited when you’re indoors.”

If the horse reared it could strike its head on the stable roof because the building was not tall. Castle stables weren’t built to accommodate such large horses. The other horses that resided there looked much smaller in comparison to the war horses.

“I’ve come to give you your daily attentions,” Julius laughed as he spoke to his horses.

He went for the brown, canvas satchel hanging on a metal hook. It contained the salves and oils that he’d made up before setting off. Julius was hoping that it wouldn’t run out, their journey was taking much longer than originally expected. Taking out the jars, he first approached Caesar, as he’d been damaged more than the other three.

Laird Hector made sure the lamps were lit so they had plenty of light, and

then he came to watch Julius as he rubbed the oil on the horse's skin.

"Will the nasty swellings ever go down?" Laird Hector asked, looking closely at the red welts of skin that appeared angry and inflamed.

"It's hard to know for sure," Julius replied. "Saving a horse that has been badly burned isn't in the textbooks, so I'm not sure what to expect in the long term. I only know that it eases the soreness they must be feeling."

"Aye lad, they can't be feeling good with so many scars," Laird Hector commented, pouring some of the oil on his fingers. Taking one of the other horses, he looked for the familiar plucked skin and began to run it into the sore. "Do you do this every day?"

"At the moment I do because of the chill air," Julius nodded his head as he rubbed at Caesar's scars. "Once the summer comes, I'm hoping they'll be much better in the warmer clime. We'll allow the sun to dry it up in a more natural way."

"Were you riding the beasts when this happened?" Laird Hector asked, busying himself assisting all he could.

No, but I was near the barn when the enemy set it alight," Julius began to explain the event that had led to the terrible injuries. "My priority was to get all the horses out, but those at the back were caught in the fire. I was ordered to shoot them and put them out of their misery, but the horses on the frontline are heroes. I couldn't do it. I refused to shoot them because we wouldn't do that for an injured soldier."

"Will they return to active duty?" Laird Hector asked, a look of worry on his face.

Julius shook his head, "They were gifted to me for my efforts. I'm afraid they're not considered healthy enough to be part of the regiment anymore. Though I have permission to take them with me, and they can live in the barracks too, where they'll be well cared for."

"Ah, yes, you're heading up that way for a new posting, is that right, lad?" Laird Hector asked, rubbing the ears of one of the horses.

Julius could see he was gentle with animals, and that was all he ever asked of anyone who was to be his friend.

"It's not so much a new role for me because I'll be working with the cavalry horses," Julius explained. "I've worked in Inverness before, but now I'll have a permanent basing there, and I'm ready for it after my time in France."

"You know lad, we tend to forget how bad things are over there. We're

all safely tucked away in our own wee castles,” Laird Hector said, taking out a cloth to rub the horse down. “You’re a brave one, I can tell that much about ye. You’re not a soldier, yet you went right to the front line. So, either you’re a fool or a brave soul. My bet is on the latter.”

“It was my job to keep the horses as safe as possible,” Julius said, going over to another of his horses with the oils. “If I can save an animal, and take away its pain, then I’m a content man.”

Laird Hector moved on to the last horse, which was the least injured with scarring only down one side of its body. The other three had suffered burns over most of their bodies.

“You know, lad, I have great admiration for people who work with animals. They’re a dedicated bunch, and I see that trait in you. We have a lot of livestock on these lands, and most of the time we have to get on with it and hope for the best,” he said, and Julius nodded his head as he listened. “On the odd occasion one of your folks comes our way, I mean a veterinarian, and they seem to work miracles on our animals. We could do with one living closer to us, that’s for sure. It would be a great way to make a living, how did you get started in it?”

Julius thought about the Laird’s question, it seemed to him that he’d been a veterinary surgeon all his life. “As a child I watched my father’s tenants struggle every time they lost a cow or a sheep. It always made me sad, so I followed my dream of doing the best I could for animals. There’s no complicated reason, it was a childhood dream.”

“Are ye from one of those English noble families then?” Laird Hector asked, stopping what he was doing and looking over at Julius with curiosity.

“No, my father was a racing horse trainer. When he married, he bought land, and so I was raised surrounded by livestock. My parents didn’t run the farms, but they had tenants. Father saw it as an investment for his children.”

One of his other horses became a little unsettled and as Julius looked around the stable, he looked over the stalls, he could see it was Snowy.

“Hey boy, you jealous you’re not getting any attention?” Julius called over to Snowy. “I’ll come and give you a brush down too, when I’m done with Caesar, I promise.”

“I’ll see to him, lad,” Laird Hector offered.

“That is good of you, thank you,” Julius replied

“I see my niece has taken a shine to you,” Laird Hector said, smiling back at him as he went towards the horse. “And I can see that you’ve taken a liking

to my niece too?”

“Erm...” Julius stuttered “I...I will be moving on any day soon, I should think,” Julius said, going over to Caesar to give him a rub down.

“Well, ye’d be a fool to try getting over those mountain passes yet, lad,” Laird Hector advised. “Ye can’t always tell where the edge of the road is, and one of those big horses could easily go tumbling over the side of the mountain. Ye know that you’re welcome to stay here for Christmastide. Surely, it’d be better than spending it with a bunch of soldiers?”

“I’ll think on what you’ve said about the roads,” Julius replied as he went on to the next horse.

The two of them each groomed a couple of horses each, and finally got to putting the grooming tackle away, making their way to leave the stables.

“I’ll be going for a stroll if you don’t mind,” Julius said as they passed through the stable door. “While the snow’s stopped, I wouldn’t mind taking a look at that view again.”

“Aye, it’s a grand view around here, I’ll give ye that one,” Laird Hector chuckled. “I’ve lived here all my life, and I still enjoy a good walk to look yonder. By the way, it looks like ye got yerself a friend there following you,” he said, pointing at a large, brown Labrador dog.

“What’s her name?” Julius asked. “I see she’s suckling too?”

“Aye, she is that,” Laird Hector confirmed, rubbing at her head. “Betsy’s not long since birthed five pups. No doubt she could do with a break from them.”

“Come on then Betsy,” Julius called over and she wagged her tail, looking keen on escaping for a quick run.

Julius was used to being accompanied by dogs on his walks, from when he’d lived at home. His older brother, Matthew, was the one managing his father’s lands these days. He’d continued to train and breed horses, much the same as their father had. On the occasions he visited home, there were still many dogs around, his brother was as keen on animals as he was.

Setting off along an animal trail, Betsy seemed to know where she was going, so he let her lead the way. He could see her round belly suffered from some excess weight, no doubt caused by the litter and lack of exercise in this winter weather. She wandered off, sniffing at this and that, but always circling back to him as he moved along.

Thoughts of childhood memories came to play in his head, after talking about his father. Their home was in Richmond, Yorkshire, and it was a place

he loved to visit. When his father passed away, only a few years ago, he'd bequeathed him a good sum of money to make up for his brother inheriting the lands. Julius had never been disappointed with that decision, Matthew ran the business far better than he ever could. He was a natural horse trainer. Whereas Julius liked to travel, but now, he felt ready to settle, for a while at least.

The things he'd seen on the battlefields in France, were not something he wanted to rush back to. Being medically trained, he'd helped out in the hospital camps too. It felt good to put all that behind, and concentrate on keeping horses healthy and strong.

Despite treading with care through the snow-covered path, he'd already almost tumbled down a couple of times. There were so many lumpy things he couldn't see underneath the deep snow. Perhaps he would take Hector's invitation and stay here over Christmastide. If the paths this low down were treacherous, no doubt the mountain pass higher up must be even worse.

Besides, being here for a while had other advantages. He could enjoy the company of Lady Olive for a little longer. Laird Hector was right when he'd guessed that Julius had taken a liking to her. She'd coped admirably with the accident, even though she'd been injured herself. He was aware that the injury to her knee had to be painful, yet she never complained. Had it been her mother, it would have been a different story altogether. Lady Smith enjoyed grumbling about almost everything, or so it seemed to his poor ears.

The thought gave him a chuckle, and Betsy looked up at him with her ears pricked up in curiosity.

"All's well, Betsy, girl. I'm laughing at the antics of people, not at you," he reassured her, and she ran off with her nose close to the ground.

It felt good to be outdoors, and he was as pleased as Betsy to escape the confines of the castle, for a short while at least.

CHAPTER 13

Olive had walked further than she meant to, and her knee was giving her some pain. It had been worth it though because the view of the mountains was spectacular. All along the snow-covered mountainside, the trees appeared as white giants. Everything was blanketed in white glistening snow. The trees close by looked as if they were standing to attention, like an honour guard. It was a grand sight to behold.

She smiled at the thought of such fairy-tale surroundings, but Scotland did that to her, it was so full of beauty.

It must look glorious in the summer too, she thought. How wonderful it would be to live here, in these peaceful mountains. But she knew her mother would never move from England. A sudden thought struck her, *I don't have to live with my mother for the rest of my life. I could move here, and Mother can stay on at Silsbury Manor. My aunt and uncle would welcome me, I know that. It might be exactly what I need to change my life.*

Standing on top of a rock formation that she'd somehow managed to clamber onto, she continued to stare at the amazing white vista laid out before her. The sound of a dog's bark broke into the silence that she'd been enjoying. The barking was getting closer and as she looked back, she could make out the figure of a person walking towards her, with a dog dashing around. Immediately, she recognised the dog as Betsy. She knew that Betsy belonged to the castle, but she couldn't quite make out the tall figure that was with her. Olive felt certain it wasn't her uncle because the man, she was certain it was a man, was too tall and slender. Whoever it was, he was of a younger stature and moved with ease across the snow-filled field.

Betsy got to her first, and she jumped onto the flat rock that Olive was

perched on. Olive leaned down to fuss over her in greeting.

“Hello there, girl, what are you doing out here, then?” she asked, ruffling up her neck fur to show her affection. “Should you not be feeding those little pups of yours?”

“She wanted an escape,” a familiar voice told her, causing her to look up to see the formidable figure of the veterinary surgeon. “Much like you and I, I suppose.”

“Mr Julius, I thought you were in the stables?” she queried, though the thudding in her chest confirmed to her how excited she was to see him.

“Once my duties were complete, I wanted to take advantage of the break in this storm,” he answered, unravelling a thick, brown scarf from his face.

Olive’s heart melted as he uncovered his handsome features, with a strong jawline and high cheekbones. She thought she’d picked up a faint Yorkshire accent in his voice, but it wasn’t overly obvious. He spoke as any refined gentleman, and she thought that his background must be from a family of wealth. Though she’d not shared such thoughts with her mother. She liked Mr Julius, and didn’t want to encourage her mother’s interference in their friendship.

“You should not be out here on your own, it’s treacherous,” he warned.

“I have a little wild streak in me that does not listen to what I should and should not be doing,” she told him, giving him a cheerful grin. “You are right though, I was escaping, but not so much the castle, which I love. My excuse is Mother, she sends me to the very edge of despair sometimes.”

“Ah yes, the lovely Lady Adelia. She does have an opinion or two, I must agree,” Mr Burke said, and Olive could see that he was choosing his words with care.

“Only one or two?” Olive questioned, patting her gloved hands together for warmth. “I would say she has far too many opinions, and all of them strong ones too,” she added, laughing.

“I will not say another word on the matter,” Mr Burke uttered, smiling back at her. She enjoyed the way his eyes glimmered when he smiled, and a dimple appeared on his left cheek. “Will you join me in walking a little further?” he asked. “That way, I will feel much better, knowing that you are not alone.”

“Thank you kindly, sir,” she replied, taking a careful step towards him. “That would be most obliging, but I warn you, I cannot walk much further as my knee is aching with the cold.”

Mr Burke reached out a strong arm to help her balance, "I can walk you back to the castle instead. You should not be out if you are in pain."

"Do I endure the physical pain of my knee, or the pain in my head that Mother causes me?" Olive put her thoughts to him.

"I see, well...in that case, at least let me accompany you while you escape for a while," he suggested as she grabbed onto his arm to steady herself. "Is your knee not getting any better?"

"Yes, it is, every day sees less pain, which is why I chose to take a stroll," she explained. "My injury is healing well, thanks to you."

"Nay, Lady, I cannot take any credit," Mr Burke said as he began to walk on. "With such an injury, only the bearer can quicken the healing. The more you exercise it, the sooner it will return to normal."

"You do not give yourself enough credit though," Olive said as Betsy ran around them, her nose busily sniffing at the ground. "You have such a kind heart, and I can see why you chose to be a healer."

"I followed a childhood dream to care for animals. On the very odd occasion, that can include people too," he admitted as she sensed the warmth of his body while they walked close together.

"You have always longed to care for animals then?" she asked, taking this chance meeting as an opportunity to find out more about him.

"I come from a livestock background," Mr Burke explained, for the second time that day. It seemed that those around were curious about his life. "Father was a horse trainer, and he owned lands in the vicinity of Yorkshire."

"Goodness, that is considered the sport of kings," Olive said, knowing that it was a pastime of the wealthy.

Mr Burke nodded in agreement, "He also bred horses too. Though not only for racing. Since he passed, my older brother now runs the stables and the lands," Mr Burke added, never feeling any shame in his background.

"I am very good friends with the Duke of Cornwall, Lord Oscar Wald, and his lovely wife. He comes to mind because I know of his love for horses," she replied, sharing a little detail of her life with him. "I do not think he has time to be involved in horse racing, though it would not surprise me if he did."

"Yes, many a nobleman enjoys a wager or two on the horse races," Mr Burke agreed, continuing to keep his arm firm, so that the lady would not take a tumble.

They walked on, Olive hanging onto Mr Burke's strong arm, and Betsy

skirting from side to side. The dog's nose stayed firmly attached to the ground as if she did not wish to miss a single scent while she was out and about.

"Will Lady Adelia not be worried about where you have got yourself to?" he asked her. "She seems to be quite attached to you."

"That is a good observation, Mr Julius, and it is one I mean to change," she told him, pausing in her tracks for a moment. "You must forgive her ways. I do love her with all my heart, but she is so consumed with marrying me off to some wealthy suitor, that she forgets herself."

"Please, do not feel the need to apologise to me. I find Lady Adelia a most amusing character," he said, separating himself from her to pick up a stick that poked out of the snow. As he threw it for Betsy to chase after, he said, "No doubt her strong nature is a credit to you. You will have inherited it from her, and it will have made you all the more resilient."

Betsy barked, bringing the stick back, it appeared that she knew the game well. She waited patiently, her tail wagging, for one of her walkers to throw it again.

"I should have brought Mother's dogs along too," Olive muttered. "They would have enjoyed a roll in the snow."

"It might be too deep for such small dogs," Mr Burke pointed out. "Here, would you like to throw the stick for Betsy?"

Olive accepted the damp stick and threw it with all her might, only to watch it flop to the ground a few feet away. Even Betsy looked disappointed, and Olive laughed at her poor effort.

"Oh dear, Betsy is not at all impressed with me," she admitted, as the dog returned the stick and dropped it in front of Mr Burke.

"It is all about technique. You must use the muscle in your shoulders to get any distance. Here, let me show you how to throw it further," Mr Burke offered as he gave the stick once again.

Olive wasn't sure she needed to learn how to throw sticks a long way. It wasn't something she'd ever had to do for her little dogs. Though, when Mr Burke moved closer to her back, she decided that it might be a good lesson after all.

From behind, Mr Burke took a firm hold of her arms and moved them in a coordinated fashion. His body kept touching hers, and the thrill it gave her, surprised her. It felt good indeed, to have him standing so close. His hands felt strong as he touched her to give her instructions. Even better, his deep

voice was close to her ear.

“Pull your arm back at the shoulder and not at the elbow,” he showed her. “When you let go, to throw the stick, use the muscle in this shoulder here,” he said, touching her shoulder with deft fingers

Olive threw the stick, pulling all the energy from her shoulder. Lo and behold, the stick went much further. Her success made her feel powerful and she clapped her gloved hands together in joy. Turning around to thank her teacher, without thinking, she wrapped her arms around him. It was only a very quick hug, for she soon let go and moved back a little, but it had felt good. Holding Mr Burke in her arms had given her a feeling of completeness. Instantly, she knew that it was a sensation she’d been trying to find for a long time.

“Thank you, Mr Julius,” she said, conscious that her face felt flushed and warm. “My little dogs will appreciate my stick-throwing skills when this snow is all gone.”

Mr Burke seemed to spot her embarrassment and he stepped away from her a little.

“Shall we turn around and head back to the castle now?” he asked, and she could tell that he was pretending not to notice her brief discomfort.

“Yes, that is a good idea,” she nodded, and they both ignored Betsy’s barks for more of the same game.

The dog soon turned around, following them in the new direction. They all made their way back towards the castle, and Betsy obliged staying with them, in a roundabout fashion of her own.

“Betsy’s puppies are very cute,” Olive said, choosing a cheery subject for conversation.

“I haven’t seen them, but I will be introducing myself now that I’ve met Betsy,” Mr Burke confirmed, allowing Olive to lean on his arm again.

“Are you looking forward to living in Scotland?” she asked, a little envious that she couldn’t boast the same situation. “From what I have seen, it is a most enchanting place.”

“I like being in a mountainous terrain, and there are many lochs where I’m going, too,” he informed her. “There are little houses with thatched roofs, and it boasts a quaint fishing port. Inverness is only a small base, but I’ll travel around the other bases, going where I’m needed the most.”

“It sounds like an exciting life,” Olive said, liking what he was telling her about Inverness. “Will you have a permanent home in Inverness?”

“I do hope so. I intend to build a house there, though it won’t be much more than a rustic little building, I suppose.”

Olive picked up an element of pride in his voice. “I am envious, sir, for I would love to live in the Highlands of Scotland.”

“That surprises me, Lady Olive,” he said as they arrived back at the castle. “Perhaps once I’m settled there, you can come and visit.”

Olive didn’t get a chance to reply because as they stepped through the rear door to pass into the kitchen, Sheena called over to her.

“Oh, my...Lady Olive, ye must be going to your mother. She’s been making such a fuss about you being out there all alone,” the maid warned her.

When Olive found her mother in the main drawing room, Lady Adelia instantly approached her and marched her out of the room.

“Have you been out there alone with that man?” Lady Adelia asked as they lingered in a stone hallway.

“Mr Julius assisted me, as it turned out, and—” but she was soon interrupted by her mother’s raised hand, stopping her from saying another word.

“I suspected as much,” Lady Adelia tutted. “Promise me that you will not allow yourself to be alone with a man again. It is most inappropriate behaviour, Olive, and you know this.”

“No, Mother, it is acceptable here in Scotland. My aunt and uncle do not hold to such rules, I can assure you of that,” Olive tried.

“This trip is bad enough, Daughter, without you flaunting the bad behaviour of these people in my face,” her mother all but growled at her. “Do not let it happen again because I wish to set a good example, so these people can learn something from us. Good manners maketh a good woman. And now, I must go to my bed because my wayward daughter has given me such a headache.”

Olive watched as her mother waddled away, taking her pompous ways with her.

“I will never be the perfect English Lady, and the sooner you accept that Mother, the better for the both of us,” she mumbled to herself. Putting on a brave smile, she returned to the drawing room where her aunt was sitting sewing.

CHAPTER 14

That night, they all came together for dinner in the dining room of the castle.

“I had always believed that old castles like this would be cold, but the log fires that burn everywhere keep out most of the chill,” Olive remarked as she looked over at the blazing fire in the stone hearth.

She continued to stare at the dancing flames, and Julius was about to comment on it when Lady Flora broke the silence.

“We recently had one of best stewards leave us, to go off and get married in Northumbria,” Lady Flora said, making conversation around the table. “He was a very pleasant young man called Duncan Fenwick, and I must say, I do quite miss him, don’t you, Hector?”

Laird Hector briefly paused from eating to reply. “Aye, he used to join me when we culled the deer, he was a good shot too” he chuckled at the memory.

“It is easy to become fond of the people who are in your household every day. I am quite fond of my lady’s maid, Laura Perkins,” Lady Olive said, joining in with the flow of the conversation. “I would be lost without her. She too is recently married, and I trust her so much that she and her husband are caring for our home in our absence.”

“Well, I for one do not agree that servants should be friends, not on any level,” Lady Adelia chimed in with her opinion. “A good servant does their work efficiently and quietly, so one does not even know of their presence.”

The conversation went a little dull after that revelation, and Julius noted all the maids in the room glared over at Lady Adelia. She was doing herself no favours and would never win a popularity contest. Though he understood

that she was set in her ways, as many of the older generations were.

“Well, I must disagree with that, Lady Adelia,” Lord Fergus joined in, and Julius was surprised. The Viscount had always appeared to have a soft spot for Lady Adelia. “I would be very lonely without my servants around me. They keep me company in my empty manor house. Though it would be better with a wife to share my life with.”

Julius reached out to get a chunk of bread, so he could dip it in the rich gravy of the venison stew. As he did so, he noted a sympathetic look on Lady Adelia’s face.

“That is most wretched for you, Lord Fergus,” she remarked, even showing a sadness on her face. “I put it to you that we must find you a wife.”

The Viscount looked delighted at that prospect. “If she is anything like yourself or your lovely daughter, I know I will be very content.”

Though it seemed to Julius, from his observations, that Lady Adelia had lost interest very quickly in what she was promising. She turned to call a maid over, and what happened next was of no surprise. Lady Adelia requested the maid pour her a glass of water, even though the jug and glass were situated right in front of her. Anyone else would have poured it themselves, but not Lady Adelia. The result of which was that the maid missed the glass and poured a little water over Lady Adelia’s dress.

“You clumsy fool!” Lady Adelia called out, shooing the maid away as she flicked her with the serviette that had been placed upon her knee. “Are you sure that your servants are trained for what they do, Lady Flora?” she called down the table to their host. “They serve red wine with fish, when it should be white, and then spill water all over the place.”

“Thank you, Rosy, you may return to the kitchen,” Lady Flora said to the flustered young girl. She then deftly changed the subject. “Tell me, Mr Burke, are you not considering marriage yourself?”

Julius was surprised that he’d been chosen to discuss such a topic and assumed it was meant to take the attention away from poor Rosy.

“It is not something that has crossed my mind,” he answered, being open and honest in his reply. “I have always been so busy studying for my work. Even now I continue to study books to improve my skills. It leaves little time for anything else.”

Lady Flora smiled and then nodded at his reply, but not Lady Adelia, she had to have her say.

“One supposes then, that you are married to your animals,” she said with

a mischievous tone to her voice.

“Erm...I suppose you could say that, yes,” he replied, thinking it an odd remark. He didn’t want to appear rude, so it was easier to accept the strange conception.

He glanced briefly at Olive, who smiled back at him. He’d enjoyed their time together out on the walk, and hoped they’d get to do it again. When she was with her mother, their conversation didn’t flow as freely because he always felt as if Lady Adelia didn’t care for him very much. It mattered not to him, but it raised a wall between himself and Olive.

“I do consider myself a very lucky woman, to have such a wonderful husband,” Lady Flora announced, chuckling as she looked down the table at her husband.

Julius smiled to himself, he could see that Laird Hector was covered in grease from a bone of meat he’d been finishing. He didn’t exactly look the part of an attractive partner, but it seemed clear that Lady Flora adored him, nonetheless.

“I too am matched with the woman of my dreams,” Laird Hector laughed, wiping his greasy, red beard on a large cloth serviette. Out of the blue, he blew his wife a kiss and she blew one back at him. It was all rather romantic.

“That is exactly what I hope to find in a marriage,” Olive spoke up, looking a little excited at her confession. “I want my husband to love me, as you love Aunt Flora, Uncle. And I want to feel love for the man in my life. It would make me feel so complete.”

Of course, what followed could only be expected, as Lady Adelia scowled over at her daughter. “That is such dribble, Olive,” she began. “When a gentleman marries, it is not to dilly-dally around pampering to his wife. He needs to be free to run his estate, and carry out his business affairs. There is no room or time for a clingy wife who demands his attention all the time.”

The conversation stopped there, and a deathly silence lingered in the air. The silence did not perturb Lady Adelia and she carried on.

“A married lady should be busy running the house. She needs to put the servants in their places too. One cannot have servants who do not comply,” Lady Adelia added as she looked down at her dish, spooning up the rich stew.

“That is a bold statement, Lady Adelia,” Lord Fergus dared to speak up, while everyone else was still getting over her shocking statement. “You are

indeed a woman of action, and I admire that you are never afraid to speak your mind.”

“You have one good point there, Lord Fergus,” Olive said, looking rather stern as she glanced at the Viscount. “Mother is never afraid to speak her mind, even to the point of—”

“Oh, my dear niece,” Lady Flora interrupted, and Julius assumed it was to stop her from insulting her mother. “I do hope that you have brought a ballgown with you for our Christmastide gathering. It will be a grand affair, with many visitors.”

“How will they ever get here, in this dreadful Scottish weather?” Lady Adelia asked, brushing the Viscount’s compliment aside.

Julius wondered if she was making a point of blaming the bad weather on Scotland alone. Even the south of England, where she came from, sometimes suffered from snowstorms.

“It will take more than a snowstorm to stop my neighbours from attending our Christmastide celebrations,” Lady Flora said. She let out a little laugh at the very thought of her guests not arriving over Christmastide or Hogmanay.

“Surely they will not be able to wear refined clothing if they are travelling in the storms?” Lady Olive asked, and Julius started to imagine what she must look like in a grand ballroom gown.

“Of course, they will not travel in their refinery. On the day, they will look the part, mark my words,” Lady Flora assured her. “And when Hogmanay arrives, some of them will return at the stroke of midnight for the first footing.”

Julius was familiar with the traditions of New Year in Scotland, but he could see Lady Olive’s puzzled look.

“What happens with the first footing, Aunt Flora?” she asked, looking genuinely interested in the tradition.

“Uncle Hector goes outside and makes sure he is the first one to step back indoors, after the last stroke of midnight,” Lady Flora explained with a big grin. “Though I have to tell you that it should be a tall, handsome man, though Uncle Hector will have to do,” she said with a chuckle. “After that, he’s followed through the door by our closest friends, all singing *Auld Lang Syne*. Even the servants will enjoy a wee dram of whisky with us, as we all eat a black bun, to welcome the new tidings in.”

“How very ridiculous!” Lady Adelia called out, dabbing her serviette on

her mouth.

At the same time, Lady Olive asked what a black bun was, and so everyone ignored Lady Adelia's remark.

"It is a fruit cake, my dear, made by Jessy's hard-working hands," Lady Flora explained. "And the next day we go out and give gifts of food to the locals. You should come along with us, for it is a splendid time that we all have."

"And let's not forget the *saining* of our castle," Laird Hector joined in the merriment that her aunt was sharing.

"Oh, do tell, Uncle Hector. It sounds as if we will all have such fun," Olive said, laughing at the thought of everything that was to come.

"We will go all around the castle with our good friends, as we sprinkle water from the river everywhere. At the same time, we'll carry burning juniper branches with us. It drives away any mischievous spirits that might happen to be lingering around," he laughed heartily. Julius wasn't sure if it was a serious event or done in fun.

"It will make the castle a little smoky, will it not?" Lady Olive asked, in puzzlement at such an odd tradition.

"As we move through the castle, we open all the windows to cleanse away the spirits," Lady Flora said. She too was laughing, clearly, they enjoyed the new year's tradition. "Besides, we'll drink plenty of whisky to keep us warm, and Cook makes a hearty breakfast for us to enjoy, once we're done with it all."

"I never knew of all this, and I must say, I am thrilled to be joining in this year," Lady Olive said, and her excitement was clear.

"I, for one, will be staying in my room, where I do hope not to be disturbed," Lady Adelia said, looking a little pale at all that had been revealed.

"Yes, it can be a little tiring," Lord Fergus agreed as he looked over at Lady Adelia. "Perhaps, Lady Adelia, you could spend the time with me, and we will tag on behind, leaving the younger ones to play out their traditions at the front."

"Well, I will be joining in, Mother, and I am so very pleased that we came to Scotland to experience such a fun tradition," Olive chirped.

Julius imagined it would be quite a night to remember at Finley castle. For himself, though, he hoped to be on his well way before Christmastide, let alone the Hogmanay celebrations.

CHAPTER 15

Adelia watched on in amusement as Lady Flora made an announcement, clapping her hands together “Everyone is welcome to join in any of the festivities. But for those who don’t want to, that is acceptable too. Now then, let us move to the drawing room so that someone can play a merry tune and we can all enjoy a dance or two.”

It took a few moments before the group began to move from the table, as they were all engaged in conversation about Hogmanay, though Adelia didn’t join in the chatter. Lady Flora asked if anyone was going to play the pianoforte, or if they should get out the bagpipes.

“Absolutely not!” Adelia was quick to answer. “I cannot bear the horrible din that comes out of those strange contraptions,” she complained. “Olive can play, she is most skilled on the pianoforte,” she said, her voice turning sickly sweet as she turned to the Viscount. “My daughter received a fine education, and you will find that she also knows how to calculate the finances of a household. Something a husband will find most useful, do you not agree, Lord Fergus?”

She watched as the Viscount nodded his head with an agreeable smile, offering out his arm to accompany her into the next room. She took it, and the group passed through the double doors that were held open by the butler, as they continued on with their chatter. Mr Burke was discussing something with Laird Hector, and Adelia was not pleased when Olive went to join them.

“Will you help with the music sheet, Mr Julius?” she asked of him.

Adelia knew that he would agree because it meant standing by her daughter’s side at the pianoforte.

“Lady Adelia,” the Viscount’s voice came into her ear, but she continued

to stare as the farmhand passed them by. “Would you care to dance with me, if you are not to play on the pianoforte yourself?”

She spotted the farmhand smirking when the Viscount took her hand and led her to the centre of the room to dance.

“Oh, you are a cheeky one, Lord Fergus,” Adelia said, taking his request well even though she was annoyed at that dreadful farmhand. “I have not played for years, but yes, I will take a turn with you on the dance floor. Then we can sit and listen together to my daughter’s musical talents.”

“What shall I play?” she heard her daughter ask as she pondered over the music sheets. “Oh, look here, I have found the sheet of Robin Adair. It is a little Irish ditty, or it could even be Scottish, who knows?” she laughed as she placed it on the pianoforte shelf.

“Will you sing for us too, my dear?” Adelia asked, hoping to impress the Viscount even more. If he saw how talented Olive was, he should begin to consider her as a future wife.

“No, Mother, I do not wish to sing, but I will play, with the assistance of Mr Julius,” Olive answered.

Adelia noted that her daughter gave the commoner a wide smile, and she did not approve of it, not at all.

“Hmmm...I do wish that farmhand would move on,” she said in a hushed voice to the Viscount. They began to dance to the delicate tune that echoed out from the pianoforte. “It is not his place to be with the gentry. Would he not be better-suited mingling with the kitchen maids?”

The Viscount did not answer but she thought him a skilful dancer and she began to enjoy herself. Lady Flora and Laird Hector came over to join in dancing, and all enjoyed the tune that was skilfully played by Olive.

Yet Adelia couldn’t help but to keep glancing over at the pianoforte, scowling at Mr Burke and wishing he would not stand so close to her daughter.

“Look at him,” she sang out as she met up with the Viscount in the dance steps. “He is vying for my daughter’s attention, and it is not right and proper, not right at all.”

Lord Fergus smiled down at her as they touched hands, according to the steps of the dance. “Lady Olive is a most attractive young woman, Lady Adelia,” he said, adding a smile to cheer his dance partner up a little. “It is of no surprise that she attracts the attention of young men. You should be proud in your role as a mother, you have brought a blooming flower into the

world.”

Adelia said nothing but she was very pleased with the Viscount’s response. It meant that he had noticed Olive. She thought from what he said, he must be considering her a suitable wife. He had spoken so much about being lonely and seeking a wife. And now, he had admitted that he found her daughter attractive. It had worked, and she had found Olive an excellent suitor.

Olive needed to realise the truth of things. A woman was nothing without a man of influence by her side. Olive needed to marry someone important and of good standing so that she would be comfortable for the rest of her life. Living in debt with her own husband had taught Adelia that much.

Following her dance partner, she was soon looking over at the pianoforte again. Still, she did not like what she was seeing. The farmhand was standing much too close to her daughter, how dare he assume such familiarity with her? They were talking and laughing together as the farmhand leaned in to turn over the music sheet. She could take it no longer and turned to the Viscount.

“My apologies, Lord Fergus, it seems that I have overdone myself,” she told him, before marching over to the pianoforte. “Olive, I wish you to stop playing and allow someone else to take a turn,” she said, turning to Laird Hector. “Your uncle, he...he might like to blow on those Scottish pipes. You must let someone else take centre stage.”

Olive looked at her with surprise and embarrassment. “I do apologise, Uncle Hector. I must have become carried away with myself. It was all the talk of Hogmanay; it excited me, and I have played longer than I meant to.”

Adelia had not meant to embarrass her daughter, she only wanted to get her away from that farmhand. Why did he have to linger around her? And worse, why did Olive feel the need to encourage him to do so?

“I would like you to come and sit with me,” Adelia ordered her daughter.

“Shall we indulge in a game of charades?” Lady Flora said as she stopped dancing. “And a glass of sherry for the ladies. Yes, yes, Hector, let us arrange drinks all around, it is almost Christmastide.”

Their hosts were doing their best to create a party atmosphere and all in all, Adelia was having a good time. The Viscount was paying her much attention, which she knew was because of his interest in her daughter. Olive, however, was not pleasing her. It appeared as if she was flirting with the farmhand, who had no right to be joining in on the family’s socialising.

She would seek words with her daughter later; when other eyes were not watching, and ears were not listening. All she could do was hope that the Viscount was a patient man and one who would forgive her daughter's indiscretions.

A glass of sherry was exactly what she needed to calm her nerves, and she soon became involved in the game of charades. The Viscount was most amusing and made her laugh, something she had not experienced in many a year. Laird Hector was hilarious, and she laughed even more, in fact, she had not laughed so much in a long, long time.

"Lady Adelia, would you like to take a turn on the balcony and get some air?" Lord Fergus asked her as her cheeks were so flushed from the merriment.

She wanted to accept his offer, for a little cool air might help to settle her giddy mood, but she glanced over at Olive, and it did not please her for doing so. It appeared as if her daughter was also participating in laughing. Only she was mingling with the wrong type of guest, and she didn't wish to take her eyes away from them.

"Erm...I am not too sure it is a good idea this very minute," she said, unsure if she should allow her daughter to behave so brazenly with the commoner.

"You are quite safe, Lady Adelia," Lord Fergus assured her, and she gave a small laugh at his remark.

"I never assumed for a moment that I would not be," she replied, a little puzzled at his remark.

"What I mean was that I only ever behave as a gentleman should," he remarked. "I may have Irish blood in my veins, but I am as respectable as any Englishman, I promise you."

Adelia could see that the Viscount was doing his best to help her feel at ease, and she felt it would be rude to refuse his offer of some cool air.

"My Lord," she addressed him, as she held out her hand. "You are the perfect gentleman, and your bloodline does you proud."

The Viscount took her hand and helped her up from the seat. At first, her legs gave way a little, and he reached out to keep herself upright.

"It is very stuffy in this room," he said, taking her firmly by the arm and blaming her dizziness on the heat and not the sherry. "The cool air on the balcony will help you to clear your head."

"Thank you kindly, Lord Fergus, as always, you think only of others,"

she recounted. "Unlike some who, in my opinion, do not belong here."

The Viscount said nothing about her remark, and she glared over at Mr Burke.

The balcony doors had been thrown open to allow some circulation of air into the room, which Adelia could feel as they approached the doors. She shivered at the chill and the Viscount stopped her.

"One moment, Lady Adelia," he said, pointing a finger in the air as if an idea had come to him.

She watched the Viscount as he approached the back of a chair and took hold of a blue tartan blanket. Returning to Adelia, he folded it into a triangle and placed it around her shoulders.

"We do not wish you get any chill in your bones, do we, my Lady?" he said with genuine concern in his voice.

"You are such a kind and thoughtful gentleman, Lord Fergus," she said, acknowledging the warmth of the cover. "You truly will make a good woman a fine husband."

He led her towards the balcony doors, "I do hope so, Lady Adelia, I very much hope so."

His words pleased her for she believed they were aimed at her daughter. Not only was he the perfect mate for Olive, but he was showing that he would take care of her too. As she stepped outside, she insisted on keeping the door ajar, so that she could keep her eye on her daughter's behaviour.

CHAPTER 16

“Do not be afraid of the dark, Lady Adelia. I have brought along an oil lamp,” the Viscount assured her as he set it down on a small table on the balcony.

“How could I fear anything when in the company of a gentleman such as yourself?” Adelia smiled as she watched him.

She was impressed with how much he was going out of his way to impress her. No doubt it would all lead up to asking for her daughter’s hand in marriage, Adelia surmised. All she needed to do now was convince Olive to accept such a refined gentleman.

Adelia did worry a little over the age differences between the Viscount and her daughter. Olive’s last marriage had been much the same, and she was sure it was the reason her daughter did not wish to marry again. But she had to begin to accept that marriage was about common sense first and romance last. If Olive married the Viscount, she would have a far richer life, not only in wealth but also in those all-important connections.

“You do think of everything, Lord Fergus. I must say that you impress me no end,” Adelia said, hinting at her approval, for when that proposal finally came with regards to her daughter.

“You have no idea how good it is to hear your words of confidence,” Lord Fergus said as he came to stand by her side.

He was a little closer than she would have liked. Though, given that he was doing everything he could to appeal to her better nature, she would forgive him for such a small faux pas.

“Oh, yes, Lord Fergus. I most certainly do think of you as a very kindly gentleman,” she added, appreciating how important her endorsement was to

him.

“It is a wonderful opportunity for us to enjoy a private conversation, out here on the balcony,” he continued. “Is it not?”

Adelia felt almost giddy with delight, anticipating that he would soon ask for her permission to marry her daughter. She’d played hard to get him interested, even though Olive hadn’t helped one bit. In her opinion, she knew what was best for her daughter’s future, and marrying a viscount was far better than being single. After all, Olive was in her late twenties now, and she should be thankful that a viscount was considering her at all.

“It is always pleasing to speak with you, Lord Fergus,” Adelia countered, as she did not want their conversation to feel awkward. The Viscount had to feel comfortable enough with her, so that he could ask her the all-important question, with regards to Olive.

“May I ask you a rather personal question, Lady Adelia?” he said, looking her way.

Adelia thought that perhaps he was going to come straight out with it. He must wish to get the request over with so that he could start to enjoy Olive’s company sooner rather than later.

“Of course, you may, Lord Fergus,” she replied, encouraging him. The last thing she wanted to do was scare him away, or put any doubts in his mind. She must remain as the go-between and therefore she must accept his temporary unease at what he was about to put to her.

“I wondered if you might agree with me, that everyone deserves a chance at love?” he asked.

It wasn’t the question she’d been expecting. She also thought that she’d made it more than obvious what she thought of the concept of love in a marriage.

“Well, I...erm...” she stuttered, not wanting to appear negative. Then it occurred to her that perhaps he was hinting that he knew Olive wouldn’t love him to start with, and she knew then that she had to encourage him still. “One supposes that love comes to some...though not to all, and that is acceptable too.”

She turned to glance his way because the question had confused her a little and thrown her off balance somewhat. His face looked as perplexed as hers, so what answer had he been looking for, to such a ridiculous question?

“What I suppose I mean is, was your marriage not one built on love?” he persisted with his probing curiosity.

“My husband was an endearing character,” she found herself admitting. This surprised her somewhat because she never spoke of her marriage with anyone. Yet she felt comfortable in doing so with the Viscount. “I did not love him because he suffered with a weak nature. When first I married him, he was a wealthy merchant who I believed would go far. Alas, he brought naught but poverty our way.”

“Lady Flora often speaks of her brother with fondness,” Lord Fergus said, leaving her wondering why he would want to discuss her husband at all. “Surely, much of his misfortune was a part of the terrible wars that our country has suffered with the French?”

“It is more that I wanted better for my children,” she explained. As far as she was concerned, that was a good enough excuse to put her late husband down a peg or two. “I only had one child, in the end. He gave her a terrible shock in life when his business dealings failed. It was a great stroke of luck that my poor Olive was rescued with the offer of marriage from a member of the peerage. But even that was not to last.”

“Lady Olive seems very content with her life, so you must have been a wonderful mother,” Lord Fergus said, grinning back at her.

“My daughter does not believe she has a wonderful mother,” Adelia frowned, knowing that Olive was impatient with her these days. “She does not understand the sufferance of poverty, fortunately, she was rescued from it. For myself, I will never live down the shame of it. My husband left us with nothing but the clothes upon our backs.”

“I see, well surely that is all the more reason why you, Lady Adelia, should welcome a chance of love in a marriage?” he asked of her.

It was yet another part of their conversation that she had not expected. His statement shocked her, and she couldn’t hide her horror. Even the light in the oil lamp flickered wildly as a breeze blew by the balcony, and the moon hid behind a cloud. In her mind, they were all in alignment with her own dismay.

“Do you not feel the terrible chill in the air, Lord Fergus?” she asked him, though she knew that she could not reprimand him too harshly for his mortifying questioning. “I will never seek to marry, ever, but I do wish to see my daughter married to a man who is fitting of her status. For despite my husband’s inadequacies, our daughter received the finest education.”

Again, she noted the look of confusion on the Viscount’s face. He was starting to confuse her, why did he not simply ask for her daughter’s hand in

marriage?

“Then I must ask you, Lady Adelia, if I may, why do you not consider marrying again?” he asked, and she noted a look of genuine concern in his dark eyes. His thick brows were burrowed, showing a concern she did not care for.

“I am too old to be bothering with such things,” she answered, wondering why he insisted on asking such impertinent questions.

But she knew that she must endure his interrogation, surmising that it must be his way of prodding her to find out more about her daughter.

“If you must know, Lord Fergus, my daughter and I are born of very different natures,” she admitted. It was her intention to lead the conversation away from herself so that they could focus on Olive. “You do not need to shy away from her. She is more than capable of taking on the role of a peer’s wife, after all, she was married to an earl.”

“I do not doubt that, Lady Adelia, for your daughter has had a good mother to teach her the ways of life,” Lord Fergus said. “You have suffered so much, and I can see that it has toughened your constitution. From what I have witnessed, Lady Adelia, you are a woman who says what she feels, and is not afraid of the consequences.”

For a moment, Adelia flustered over his words, which was not something she felt often. Indeed, she was a woman who was unafraid of life.

“You are most observant, Lord Fergus. It pleases me that you concern yourself with my well-being,” she answered. It did please her to know that once the Viscount married her daughter, he would also care about her as part of his family. “My daughter will be lucky to find herself a husband who is half as caring as you, my Lord,” she added. She was about to look his way for his response, but something caught at her senses.

The balcony door had been left ajar, not too wide so as not to allow the chill to enter the room. Yet enough so that it did not appear that they were alone while outside. It was Adelia herself who had insisted on leaving it open a little. But now, she could sense that someone was standing behind the door and listening in on their conversation. Without any warning, she pushed it open and almost knocked over a maid who was standing on the other side.

“What is this?” Adelia called out, as she stared down her nose at the wavering maid. “I see that you have a large set of ears so that you can better listen in to conversations that do not concern you,” she yelled. At the same time, she was wagging her finger at the girl, and her eyes bore into the

servant.

“I...I...was coming to ask if you needed a shawl, was all,” the girl stuttered, but Adelia was convinced that she had been listening to them.

“Oh, that is your story, is it?” Lady Adelia scowled, not giving any leeway to the girl. She’d been caught red-handed doing something she should not be doing. “In my country, a servant who grows big ears is one to be dismissed without any references because they are not to be trusted.”

Adelia was furious with the girl; how dare she step above her station, assuming she could listen in to her betters?

“You would not have a position in my household, girl, I can assure you of that,” Adelia continued to lay into the girl, she was so cross with her.

It was Lady Flora who approached, wondering what all the commotion was about. “Whatever has upset you in such a way, Lady Adelia?” she asked.

As Adelia turned around to get the support of Lord Fergus for what she was about to accuse the girl of, she caught a note of amusement in his eyes. It took all her self-control not to shout at him too; why was he smiling at her predicament?

“Rosy, take yourself back to the kitchen,” Lady Flora instructed the girl. “Now then, Lady Adelia, why don’t you come by the fireside and enjoy another sherry with me? You will have caught a chill from the outdoors, no doubt.”

Adelia certainly felt a chill, but it wasn’t from the weather. However, she knew that she had to calm her nerves for the sake of her daughter’s intended. She liked the Viscount and didn’t wish to put him off her daughter, so she forced herself to calm down.

“Yes, that would be acceptable,” she nodded to Lady Flora. “But I abhor eavesdropping, it is the source of all gossip,” she snapped. Adelia was determined to explain herself because no one liked a gossip, so it would show why she had lost her temper in such a way.

She followed Lady Flora back to the warmth of the fire and settled herself on a cosy chair. The whole situation had left her frustrated because the Viscount had still not requested her daughter’s hand in marriage. Adelia determined that she must try harder. She must think up ways of bringing Olive and the Viscount together, being careful to not make it look as if she was interfering in any way whatsoever.

CHAPTER 17

“Your uncle’s clan has a dark green background to their tartan,” Lady Flora explained to Olive as they sifted through rolls of tartan fabrics. “While you do have your mother’s green eyes, I do believe that your fair hair is more suited to a red.”

Olive picked up a red sample, but underneath, and hidden away, was a yellow and black one. “I love this one, Aunt Flora, can I choose it?”

Lady Flora picked up the yellow tartan and remarked, “It is the tartan of the MacLeod’s, in the Highlands, and a fine choice. I will get to making you that hat for New Year’s Eve so that you can look the part of a wee Scottish lass.”

But Olive worried about not choosing the green one, “Will Uncle Hector be terribly disappointed in me, for not wearing his colours?”

“Don’t be daft,” Lady Flora laughed, and the maids who were clearing away the unwanted rolls of fabric laughed too.

“What?” Olive asked in wide-eyed surprise. “What are you all finding so amusing, that I cannot see?”

“Take no notice of the girls, Olive,” Lady Flora said, smiling at the maids’ mischief. “They’re both from the Highlands, so they’ll be pleased that you chose their colours.”

“You’re not to worry, for sure, Miss Olive,” Sheena said, taking on some seriousness. “Those not of Scottish bloodline can wear any colour they like. You would not believe how many different prints there are of tartan and plaid. The clan patterns are only made for those belonging to that clan, well...most of the time anyway.”

Olive looked over at Sheena who was busy removing a roll of green

tartan fabric from the end of the long table. "I do not wish to insult anyone though. Perhaps it would be better if I do not wear any Scottish colours at all."

Sheena and Rosy began to laugh again, and Olive still didn't see what they found so amusing.

"Truly, Miss Olive, no one will be insulted by your choice," Sheena tried again to reassure her. "You're an English woman, you have no rules to abide by."

"Stop teasing my niece," Lady Flora stepped in, though she too was smiling at their sense of humour. "They are mischief makers, my dear. Take no notice of their whisperings and giggling, they do it to annoy. Am I right, Rosy?"

At that, Rosy's cheeks flushed a little, "Yes, ma'am," she admitted. "Tis Sheena who keeps making me want to laugh. She says it annoys the English woman, oh...erm...I didn't mean..."

Olive was starting to see that the maids were not laughing at the discussion over the colours, they were, as her aunt put it, mischief-making.

"You mean Mother, don't you? Well, if I were you, I wouldn't let Lady Adelia hear you giggling like that in her presence," she warned. Though for a moment she wished she hadn't mentioned her mother's name because Rosy went pale, and her face turned quite fearful. "Oh, my apologies, Rosy, I did not mean to spoil your fun."

"Oh, she avoids Lady Adelia at all costs," Sheena announced, not seeming embarrassed at the slight insult she had aimed at Olive's mother. "I do not mean to be rude, Miss Olive, but your mother is very much an English Lady, full of airs and graces."

Olive gasped at the comment, not sure how to take the maid's words until Sheena burst out laughing, and her aunt was chuckling too.

"Oh, my..." Olive chuckled. "I have never known any to dare speak the truth so openly as you do, Sheena. You are a brave one, that's for sure."

"I do think that we had better hush with the insults now," Lady Flora suggested, calming the giddiness down a tone. "It is not polite to be offending family members. As for you two," she said, turning to the maids. "Nor is it polite to insult guests, do you hear?"

The silliness quietened down a little, but Olive had not laughed so much in a long time. "Tell me, Sheena, are there any Scottish ways that I need to learn for the festivities to come?" she asked, changing the subject so that they

could end their merriment, but they all three had to put their hands over their mouths to calm down.

Lady Flora looked over the three of them with a frown, warning them to stop their disrespect. "I am sure the girls can give you some insight into the ways of Scottish traditions and put behind their silly ways."

Sheena had stored all the fabrics away in the chest they had come out of. On the table, she had left the yellow and black tartan that Olive had favoured for her hat. Lady Flora began to lay out the tea service, and she invited Sheena and Rosy to join them.

"Come now girls," Lady Flora encouraged. "You normally have plenty to say on your Scottish ways. Educate my niece on some of your traditions."

The four of them each took a seat around the table to enjoy tea together. To Olive, it felt as if they had been friends for many years, so comfortable were they in each other's company.

"Have ye ever heard of Haggis Tossing?" Sheena asked as she picked up a piece of fruit cake to nibble on.

"What is a haggis?" Olive asked, assuming it was an object such as a skittle. "Is it made of wood?"

Sheena and Rosy began their giggling once again. "Oh no, Miss Olive, 'tis a Scottish delicacy," Sheena managed to say between mouthfuls of cake. "The story goes that a couple of hundred years ago, Scottish women would toss a bag of cooked haggis across a river. This was meant to feed their menfolk who worked in the fields. That's how the tossing games began, so they say, anyway."

Olive was still confused, "But I don't know what a haggis is."

"'Tis a ball of mixed offal, mixed with spices and oatmeal. Then it'll be wrapped in a sheep's stomach for the boiling pot. We have plenty in the kitchen, so you'll be gettin' a turn at tasting it," Sheena explained. "The celebration on Burn's Night will be a haggis supper."

"I see. It sounds tasty. But you must now tell me what Burn's Night is?" Olive asked. "It seems that I know so little."

"I can answer that one," Rosy delighted in joining in. "'Tis to celebrate the life of the Scottish bard, Robert Burns. Or, I should say Rabbie Burns, as we know him."

Olive's aunt offered another explanation, "He is likened to the Scottish version of the English Shakespeare. That might better explain who he was."

"Ah yes," Olive offered. "I have heard of one of his poems. Auld Lang

Syne, is that not his?"

"Well, done, Olive, yes, it is," Lady Flora clapped her hands together, pleased that her niece was catching on. "You already know of the First Footing after midnight on New Year's Eve but what of Redding the House? Rosy, will you be so kind as to explain it to my niece?"

Rosy went a little shy, but her confidence soon returned because it was a tradition she knew well. "It means that we clean the castle from top to bottom on New Year's Eve before all the celebrations begin."

"My goodness, not quite from top to bottom, so do not look so worried, my dear, Lady Flora stepped in. "The maids will clean out all the fireplaces, that is what Rosy means."

"Aye, we cannot be going into a new year with a dirty house now, can we?" Sheena added. "And then there's the Burning of the Clavie."

"Of the whatie?" Olive asked, her eyes wide at all the strange words she was hearing for the first time.

"A Clavie is a half barrel that's filled with things to burn," Sheena was keen to take over explaining this one. "The strongest man in the village will carry it around all the houses, once it's set alight. Ye see, it'll bring good luck to all village folk. There's more to it than that, but that's the main story of it all."

Olive looked on bewildered at learning about all the Scottish ways. "I never knew there were so many traditions in Scotland," she declared. "I am so looking forward to being a part of it all this year."

Lady Flora smiled, saying, "Considering their Celtic background, it is of no surprise. I have found them to be warm, welcoming people, and I will never leave now that I am here."

Olive smiled, for she too was falling in love with this new place and all its traditions.

"Now that we've shared some of our secrets with you, Miss Olive, would you share something with us? What do you think of your handsome animal-man?" Rosy dared to ask, which made Sheena burst into fits of giggles once again.

"I am assuming that you mean Mr Julius?" Olive asked as she looked at Rosy, smiling at the young girl. "I admit that he is a handsome one, and I find that he has a charming mannerism."

"What the girls mean is, that they believe him to be erm... a little overfond of you," Lady Flora explained the reasoning behind the impertinent

question.

“I do hope so, for I am fast becoming fond of him too,” Olive admitted. She had no idea why she was being so honest. Her aunt’s relationship with her servants was so refreshing that it put her very much at ease.

“Well... I am glad to say that you are much more fun than your mother,” Lady Flora said, and a look of embarrassment quickly spread over her face. “I apologise if I speak ill of a family member. My older brother loved Lady Adelia very much, and that was good enough for me. So, I accepted her ways.”

“Do not fear, Aunt Flora, I know of Mother’s faults all too well, and she has many, that is for certain,” Olive confessed. “The difficult times she endured hardened her somewhat, and I do believe that is what changed her.”

“Indeed, and we shall say no more of it,” Lady Flora said as she once again clapped her hands together. “Come now, girls, let us get this table cleared away. It is almost time to be running along to the kitchen to help Cook with dinner.”

With that, the girls seemed to change straight away. They went from pleasant tea companions to becoming servants once again. Olive loved how her aunt treated her servants with such warm friendships. Although her mother saw servants as people to do her bidding, Olive had never felt that way.

“You know, you remind me more and more of your father, every day I spend with you,” Lady Flora told her as she led her out of the parlour room. “Come along, we must find Lady Adelia and share some of our time with her before dinner.

“You must tell me more about Father, in the earlier days of his life,” Olive requested of her aunt.

“It would be my pleasure,” Lady Flora agreed. “But, for now, know that I see much of him in you. Come, dear, let us not give Lady Adelia reason for complaint. She is deserving of some female companionship for the rest of the afternoon.”

With that, Olive followed her aunt, but her father was in her thoughts. Her mother never spoke of him, and when she did it was never complimentary. It would be good to hear of his good side, from someone who probably knew him best of all, his sister, and her aunt.

CHAPTER 18

The Viscount rarely suffered from restless nights, but last night had been one of those uncommon occurrences. He'd tossed and turned in his bed, dreaming of his long-lost wife, Felicity, of whom he had adored when she was alive. She had been gone from his life a good ten years ago, and in the beginning, he'd vowed he would never marry again. Last year he'd turned sixty, and regrets about not taking another wife were beginning to grow.

His wife had been a forthright woman and had run their household like clockwork. Everything had to be in its place and every person had to play the right role in her life. Some had thought her a stern woman with a hard heart, but they had not seen her the times she had miscarried their children. His Felicity had desperately wanted children and tried so hard to have them. Yet, every time she was with child, her body could not cope.

Trying to have children, had quite literally been the death of her. The only time she had reached full term, he had lost both his wife and baby. It had been a tragic night in his life, and one that had imprinted itself in his memory forever. He would happily have had a childless marriage if it meant that he still had his Felicity by his side. But he had understood how much she wished to become a mother and she would have had it no other way.

An outward display of emotions was not something he cared to show, he had always been a joker, of sorts. Yes...he had been the merry one, while his Felicity had been the serious one. Though together, they had been perfect, or so he had thought.

Waking up, believing that his Felicity was laying by his side, he sighed at the disappointment that it had only been a dream. He remained laying in his bed to dust off the cobwebs of sleep, when he heard a light scuffling noise

over by his bedchamber door. At first, with a mind foggy from sleep, he thought that someone was entering his room, but the door did not open.

Sitting up, he stretched out his aching limbs and put his feet into the slippers that he'd left under the bed the previous night. The stone slabs on the floor were cold on the skin and jarred at his aching knees first thing on a morning. He was mindful that he wasn't getting any younger, but only because his aching body was a constant reminder.

Recently though, something had changed for him. He had found a woman who was an equal match to his feisty wife. Both the female guests of his hosts were fine women, yet one of them was most special to him.

Hobbling over to the door, he could see a piece of folded-up paper had been pushed through the gap at the bottom.

"How odd," he mumbled to himself, bending down to pick it up.

It was still a little dark in the room, so he went to open the small, heavy curtain that covered the high window. It didn't let in much light, but such was the way with castle windows. He enjoyed nothing more than his annual visit to stay in Scotland with his very good friends the Finlay's, and wouldn't have it any other way.

In the beginning, it had been his wife who had befriended Lady Flora whilst they all visited Edinburgh. He had an investment in a newly opened distillery there, and they had been staying in a lodging house for a week. That was when the two ladies met. Lady Flora had not been long married to Laird Hector, and she was such a pretty, little thing, much the same as the young Olive, her niece. And so, the family friendship had begun, and it had continued across the Irish sea.

Unravelling the piece of paper in his hand, he could make out some handwriting. It wasn't the finest he'd seen, so he was curious as to who the writer must be. As he opened-up the sheet of parchment, a fragrant aroma hit his senses.

"Now then, that is a note from a lady, if ever there was one," he said, smelling the sweet perfume. "Hmmm...the smell is familiar to me, but I can't quite place it."

Being a man who lived alone, back home in his mansion in Ireland, he was quite accustomed to talking to himself and thought naught of it. Before he read the words, he went to grab his nightrobe to give him some warmth. The castle rooms were quite chilly in the winter, and he always visited with his thickest of clothing.

Sitting in a wooden chair, he began to read the scrawling words, curious about the whole thing.

My dear Viscount

I must convey to you how charmed I am by your visage and gracious mannerism. As we do not get to speak much in private, other than when we are on the balcony, I am sending my affections to you in this written letter.

I look forward to another rendezvous on the balcony sometime soon.

From a great admirer

“Glory be!” he exclaimed as something came to his mind. “It is the smell of Lady Adelia. Is she my self-confessed admirer? Well...who would have thought it?”

Folding up the letter, he placed it underneath his pillow so that he could read it again that same night when he returned to his bed. For now, he washed and dressed to make himself presentable for Lady Adelia’s eyes only. For the first time, he wished that he’d brought along a valet, for he needed to look his best. But he’d allowed his personal assistant, old Wilson, to spend Christmastide with his family.

Humming a merry tune, he made his way down the winding stairwells toward the dining room for breakfast. He hoped that Lady Adelia might be up early for her breakfast, but alas the only people he found at the table were Mr Burke and Laird Hector.

“Well...well... Top of the morning to the both of you,” he said in greeting. “And whilst I do find you two to be the best of company, it seems that we’re lacking the presence of the beautiful ladies this fine morning.”

“I can put on my kilt, if ye like, Effinstone, and do you a twirl,” Laird Hector made fun of his friend. “But I’m afraid the women appear to still be sleeping.”

“I don’t think I wish to look at your stout legs,” the Viscount countered.

“You see, I may have found love in my life once again, and it is her legs that I would rather gaze upon than yours, my dear friend.”

“Are you not fond of a man in a kilt, Lord Fergus?” Mr Burke asked, chuckling at the light banter.

“I do love a fine kilt. It is more that I am aware my friend here has knobbly knees and bony shins,” Lord Fergus said in jest.

At that jolly insult, he went to serve himself some warm bread and sweet jam, on a China plate.

“Did I hear ye correctly man? Surely you didna say that you’ve found love?” Laird Hector asked, his bushy eyebrows raised inquisitively at such a confession.

Before the Viscount could answer, the lovely Lady Olive entered, asking what the menfolk were so jolly about.

“Tis the thought of my legs in a kilt,” Laird Hector replied, not bringing up the topic of the Viscount’s declaration of love. “Lord Fergus, here, was saying how he cannot wait for Hogmanay when he knows I’ll be wearing all my Scottish regalia.”

“Well, I for one look forward to seeing your hairy legs, Laird Hector,” Mr Burke chuckled again, though his eyes seemed to follow Lady Olive across the room.

“And so you shall, young man,” Laird Hector nodded. “What’s more, I’ll have a kilt for all of ye, so we can all show off our legs together.”

“Goodness me, what is my husband so excited over?” Lady Flora said as she entered the dining room. “Isn’t it a little too early for such jolliness, I’ve barely rubbed the sleep from my eyes for goodness’ sake?”

“You know that laughter keeps me young,” the Viscount said, wondering if he should reveal to Lady Adelia when she arrived, that he knows she wrote the note.

“Talking about the young ones,” Lady Flora said, smiling over at the two whispering women. “Look at my niece and Sheena collaborating, they’re like two peas in a pod. Are you two plotting some mischief?” she called over to them.

Lady Olive laughed, “No, Aunt Flora, I do not do mischief at my age. I was asking Sheena for some paper so that I can write home to my friend, the Duchess, Lady Wald.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a bit of mischief at any age, young miss.” Laird Hector interjected, “Look at me, not a day goes by without mischief of

some sort or other!”

“What is mine, my dear, is yours, and yes, Sheena will get you some paper,” Lady Flora said, tutting at her husband. “Now come, and let us help ourselves to the lovely breakfast that Sheena has spent so long putting together. The eggs look delicious. Do tell Cook I said so.”

Sheena continued laying out the buffet breakfast, while Lady Olive joined her aunt to place food on a plate.

“I must say, I do find Sheena to be someone I can go to whenever I need something, she is a mine of information,” Lady Olive said as she nudged Sheena playfully.

The Viscount recalled that Lady Olive had been writing a letter only the prior evening. As the thought festered, he started to wonder if his note might have been from her. While chewing over his confused thoughts, Lady Adelia arrived for breakfast. She caused his face to light up, and he pushed all thoughts of the note aside.

“My word...I was in such a deep sleep,” she admitted and sounded quite jolly too. “I was dreaming wonderful things and it must have caused me to oversleep,” she added. “Maid girl, kindly get me a plate of food and bring it over to the table,” she ordered of Sheena.

The Viscount pulled out a chair and offered it to Lady Adelia, taking the chair that was by her side. Once everyone was seated, Sheena came over to deliver the breakfast plate of food to Lady Adelia. He thought it was so like the lady to order the servants to serve her, used to being waited on hand and foot. For the first time, he thought that her daughter was so different.

For him, he didn’t care either way, but he was used to the friendliness of the servants whenever he visited the castle. In his home, he too treated his servants as friends, but perhaps it was because of his loneliness. What he needed was a woman around the place once again.

Sitting back, he observed the chatter around the breakfast table, noting that Lady Adelia was in a very good mood. Could it be because she had sent him the note? Or was the note sent from Lady Olive, who seemed to have run out of paper?

The attention of an admirer had certainly left him feeling in a good mood. Soon, he joined in the conversation around the table, where everyone seemed in fine spirits on what was starting to be a very good day.

CHAPTER 19

Olive was in good spirits at the breakfast table. Every mealtime she and Mr Burke sat together and chatted, and it pleased her very much that he had not yet continued on his journey.

“I have been informed by Mr Jones, your hired carriage driver, that he will be leaving today,” Mr Burke told her.

“My goodness, is it safe to travel?” Olive asked as she thought the man would do better with more rest.

“He wishes to be home with his family for Christmastide,” Mr Burke explained. “And he was most grateful for the generous compensation you passed on to him.”

“Do you think his horse is ready to take on such an arduous journey on the icy roads?” Olive asked with concern.

“The gelding is mostly recovered,” Mr Burke replied, not showing any worry. “It was a deep cut that required stitches, but I’m of the opinion that Mr Jones is fond of his horse. I’m sure that he will take the greatest of care. Even the carriage is now repaired and ready for the roads, thanks to your uncle and his kindness.”

“Should I go see him and say farewell, do you think?” Olive enquired, not sure that her mother would approve of such behaviour.

“It might be better not to, because he feels a little guilty for the harm that befell you and your mother. Mr Jones believes he is responsible for undertaking such a risky journey.” Mr Burke advised. “Besides I’m not so sure that your mother would approve of you going out of your way to say goodbye to a servant, as she would put it.”

“Poor Mr Jones. It was I who insisted that he continue the journey,

against his advice not to,” Olive admitted. “And you are getting to know Mother well, Mr Julius,” she said, smiling with a raised brow.

They both looked over at Lady Adelia, right at the moment that she happened to glance their way too.

Mr Burke looked away, “It could be that Mr Jones may have set off already as he was keen to get off early. And I meant only that Lady Adelia would not wish you to be overfamiliar with a servant. It would only spell trouble for you.”

Olive was pleased with how observant Mr Burke was, and she continued to watch her mother.

“My dear,” Lady Adelia called over to her, interrupting the conversation she was having with Mr Burke. “I would wish to take a turn with you outside, after breakfast. I could do with some air, and a talk with my daughter.”

Olive took on an expression of surprise, “What? Why?”

Lady Adelia threw up her hands in exasperation, “Can a mother not spend time with her daughter?”

“It is not that, Mother,” Olive replied across the table. “I know that the snow has stopped falling, but underfoot will be treacherous. Are you sure that you wish to go outdoors and risk a fall?”

“Lady Olive is only thinking of your safety,” the Viscount intervened, as attentive as always. “Most especially when she is still recovering from an injury herself.”

Olive smiled over her gratitude to the Viscount, he was ever attentive to the needs of others, and she was fast becoming fond of him.

“You are quite right, Lord Fergus,” Lady Adelia nodded in agreement. “What am I thinking? Instead, we shall take a turn on the balcony in the drawing room. I would not wish to slow down the healing of your injury, daughter.”

“My knee is healing well, thanks to Mr Julius here. But it is very chilly outdoors, Mother,” Olive warned, in the hope of putting her off going out into the winter chill.

“We can wrap up in warm clothing,” Lady Adelia insisted, not to be put off by any excuses. “I insist on having words with you, and in private will please me better.”

Olive accepted her fate; a morning lecture to start her day. Before she had a chance to leave the dining room, the Viscount approached her with a warm tartan shawl.

“You are very considerate, Lord Fergus,” she remarked, again resigning herself to her mother’s private chat.

“If you are to go out into the chilly winter air, Lady Olive, as Lady Adelia insists, then yes, I am concerned for your wellbeing,” he answered with his usual smile.

She nodded her thanks and allowed him to place the shawl over her shoulders.

Olive knew that she should not take out her annoyance on the Viscount, his kindness came quite naturally. As she looked over at Lady Adelia, who was already adorned with a woolly shawl, she wished her mother could learn a lesson or two from him.

The two ladies made their way to the drawing-room, which was on the floor above the dining room, within the castle. The winding stone stairwells were not easy for Lady Adelia to tackle, in the many-layered dresses that she insisted on wearing. If only she would wear the much simpler and far more fashionable dresses, without all the paraphernalia of corsets, she would do much better. Olive could never understand why her mother insisted on continuing to wear such unpleasant undergarments.

But then Lady Adelia liked to do her own thing, much like herself. With that thought, she supposed that must be where she got her stubbornness from, her mother. Leaving Lady Adelia to take a slow pace up the stairwell quite suited Olive, as it also put pressure on her injured knee. Though she would never complain about it in front of her mother.

Once in the drawing room, Olive opened one of the doors to the balcony, allowing Lady Adelia to step outdoors first. As she followed in her wake, a blast of cold air hit sharply on the sensitive skin of her face and forced her to pull the shawl up over her chin.

The clear view of a snowy mountain range was now in her vision, and it was spectacular, making up for the inconvenience of being outdoors. Olive looked out over the snowy tops, and it surprised her to see a faint blue dome covering the landscape. The winter sun was attempting to melt everything, and there was not a single cloud to be seen.

“Even I know beauty when I see it,” Lady Adelia spoke, as she too enjoyed the impressive backdrop. “That is because I was blessed with a beautiful daughter.”

“Goodness, Mother,” Olive said, turning to look at Lady Adelia as she wondered what she was up to. “It is a rare occasion when you give out such

compliments.”

“I will come straight to the point, daughter,” Lady Adelia said, taking on a stern tone as she turned to face Olive. “I am aware that you do not welcome my assistance, which you call interference, in your life. But I do believe that the Viscount has an interest in courting you. What is more, you could do much worse. I do believe him to be a most kindly fellow, considering that he has Irish blood in his veins.”

Olive went to counter her words, but Lady Adelia raised her hand to stop her. “I will have my say, Olive, and you will listen to the wise words of your mother. One supposes I can only blame myself that you do not listen to my wisdom. On this matter, I will insist that you allow Lord Fergus to approach you. I detect all the right signs that he admires you with the greatest of respect.”

Olive glared at her mother, waiting patiently for her to finish talking, even though she was fit to burst in giving her an answer.

“Well, I have let you have your say, Mother, and now I will have mine, which I will keep simple. I have no romantic interest in the Viscount, whatsoever, though I do agree that he is a kindly fellow.”

“How many times must I tell you that romance is nothing to do with a marriage?” Lady Adelia said, going red in the face with frustration at her daughter’s insistence on some fairy tale romance.

“Upon my word, you are wrong, and it will have its place in my next marriage, should I even marry again. What is more, I refuse to marry anyone that I do not love,” Olive said, staring her mother down and daring her to challenge her beliefs.

“And what about your family commitments?” Lady Adelia was willing to throw everything into the debate. The Viscount was a rare find and not one that a flighty daughter should let pass them by.

“What family, Mother?” Olive snapped, seething through her grated teeth. “You had no respect for Father, and nothing but contempt for my aunt and uncle. In fact, I thank you for bringing this up. It allows me the opportunity to tell you that I have no idea why you came to Scotland. While I am being so open and honest with you, I look forward to your return home, for I am staying on much longer.”

Olive knew that she had overstepped the boundary but when was her mother going to realise that she was no longer a girl? Not taking her eyes away from Lady Adelia, she awaited her reply, which she knew would not be

a good one.

“Might I remind you, Olive, that I am still your mother,” Lady Adelia stood her ground, and Olive almost felt a twinge of pride at how strong her mother could be. “That is something you cannot turn your back on, even though I can see you would like to.”

“If only all your efforts were not aimed at marrying me off all the time, I would show you the love of a daughter,” Olive tried.

“This is why I am forced to insist on speaking with you in private,” Lady Adelia rebuffed. “You always speak to me with disrespect, and that is not something I wish others to witness. It was unfortunate that your marriage ended in such tragedy, but you must still consider your obligations. Your income will not last into your old age, my dear, and then it will be too late to marry anyone, let alone a man of wealth and honour.”

“Have you quite finished, Mother?” Olive questioned, her body shaking with anger. “It is a pity that one cannot choose one’s mother, as one can choose a husband. I would have chosen a mother with more compassion than the one I have, who appears to have a stone for a heart.”

Olive did not linger after her outburst. She knew that her words were cruel, but her mother drove her to the point of madness with her constant interference. She stormed off the balcony and practically ran towards the drawing-room door. As she opened it in her haste, she collided with Mr Burke who happened to be entering the room. Mr Burke apologised and smiled, but Olive was on the edge of shedding tears of frustration and had no smile for him in return. If anything, she wished that she could fall within his arms and seek comfort, but she held herself well as she stared into his soft eyes.

CHAPTER 20

“Lady Olive, I was looking for you,” Julius said as they bumped into one another. He could see that something had upset her. “I’m sorry if I have disturbed you with this intrusion, but I wanted to say goodbye before I leave.”

Lady Olive looked up at him in surprise, her eyes watery, and he felt an overwhelming urge to take her in his arms and comfort her. She didn’t say anything, but as he went to speak again, Lady Adelia stepped through the door that led off to the balcony.

“You cannot leave, Mr Julius,” Lady Olive said, as he watched Lady Adelia approaching them. “I have heard that the roads are still covered with heavy snow. You will not be able to see them, and where you can find the trail, it will be slick with thick ice.”

“You cannot seek to delay the farmhand, Olive,” Lady Adelia interrupted, as she came to stand behind her daughter. “Farmers have no time to waste with Christmastide events, their animals need them.”

“Mother, Mr Julius is neither a farmer, nor a farmhand,” Lady Olive snapped.

Julius worried that he was coming between them. “I take no offense in Lady Adelia’s description of my occupation,” he said, not wishing to be the cause of any rift between them. “Though I prefer to specialise in horses, I am always willing to turn my hand to treating any animal.”

“See, the man works out on the fields,” Lady Adelia said as she brushed past him to leave the drawing room. “I am sure Mr Burke does not wish to remain in the confines of these stone walls, any more than I do. Goodbye, Mr Burke. I wish you and your beasts a pleasant journey.”

Julius didn't reply because he knew that Lady Adelia was not looking to have any kind of conversation with him. She turned her back on them and walked away.

Unexpectedly, she turned around again to speak, "Olive, I do not expect you to linger with your farewells," she called back. "Mr Burke will not understand the etiquette of socialite rules. But you know better, and an unmarried lady must not be alone with a man. Mr Burke, do not risk my daughter's reputation and be on your way."

Again, he said nothing in return. It seemed clear that Lady Adelia thought of him as someone unworthy of her attentions, or more specifically her daughter's. But when Olive burst out into laughter and grabbed at his sleeve, the insult faded from his memory.

"Do not listen to Mother," she told him. "She understands full well what your trade is. What is more, she knows that you are from a respectable background. It is more that she has her own agenda, and it does not include you, I hasten to add."

"Perhaps I should be grateful for the fact that I am not under her scrutiny," Julius chuckled. "Let us not linger here then. Would you like to take the dogs for a walk together?"

"That would be most welcome Mr Julius. I could do with getting out into the air, especially while the snow has stopped," Lady Olive agreed. "Let me go and change into something warmer and I will also go and find Daisy and Leo. We can meet up again in the boot room. Can you find Betsy?"

"I will," Julius smiled, pleased that she had agreed to accompany him on his walk because he wanted to spend some time with her before he left. "She'll be with her pups in the kitchen and will appreciate escaping them, so she'll be more than keen."

Around half an hour later, the two secretly met up again in the boot room, Lady Olive with the two little Pugs, and Julius with an excited Labrador. The two smaller dogs ran rings around the larger one, as they set off clambering over the crunching snow.

"I do wish you would reconsider your journey, Mr Julius," Lady Olive said as she hobbled along.

"Oh dear, I did not consider your injured leg, did I?" he mentioned as he slowed down the pace.

Lady Olive waved him off with her arm, "My knee is fine, and you said that exercise like this helps. If anything, it tends to get stiffer when I am

sitting around doing nothing. And do not ignore my remark, Mr Julius, please stay on a little longer I implore you. The roads truly are difficult to navigate, ask my uncle.”

Julius threw a couple of sticks for the charging dogs, answering, “You forget that I have four sturdy steeds. Each of them strong enough to cope with the roads underfoot, so long as the snow and wind continue to hold off.”

“Do, please speak with Uncle Hector before you make your final decision,” she begged him. “He will have a better idea of whether the storm has run its course or not.”

They kept walking, but their pace was slow, given that the snow underfoot made walking difficult. A few times Lady Olive worried over losing sight of the Pugs because they kept digging holes in the thick layers of snow.

“I was not aware that Leo and Daisy liked to dig,” Olive said, banging her gloved hands together against the chill in the air.

“Pugs don’t normally dig but they’ll be bored at being stuck indoors for such a long time,” Julius said, turning to see where Lady Olive had got herself to.

Suddenly, something crashed down onto his arm, as he looked up, he could see Lady Olive bending over to make snowballs. Watching her, he felt a tenderness in his heart for the alluring young woman before him, acting so bizarre. He could hear her giggles as she acted like a child, and he wanted to hold on to the moment forever.

“Did you just attack me with a snowball?” he questioned her with a big grin.

“Yes, Mr Julius, did you think a lady could not throw a snowball,” Lady Olive called out, laughing as she aimed a second one.

The little Pugs began to get the hang of the game and jumped up and down yapping. While Betsy ignored them all, as she was busy sniffing around the ground. Julius leaned down to collect some snow in his gloved hands, and though he aimed the snowball back at Lady Olive, he was careful not to throw it hard.

“Where did you learn to play such an unladylike game?” he asked, as she threw another handful of snow at him.

“I have never played before, but I have heard of it, and I could not resist all this snow,” she called out as she threw bits of snow at the dogs in fun. “Do you like that, Leo?” she laughed with merriment.

“I suppose one must get some enjoyment out of such bad weather,” he said, watching her run around. “It pleases me that your injury is doing so well.”

“It hardly ever hurts anymore, thanks to your healing which has worked wonders,” she said, slowing down from her giddy play. “I kind of feel like a young girl again. Out playing with my best of friends,” she said, and then slipped down to the floor only to fall onto her back.

Julius ran over to her, worried that she’d hurt herself, but when he got to her, all he saw was the little dogs jumping all over her. Her laughter sounded sweet and musical. A warm sensation churned in his belly, and he knew that his affections were increasing with every passing day they spent together. Holding out his hand, he offered it to help her get up from the cold ground.

“You will end up becoming ill if you stay down there too long,” he said, only to have her pull on his arm and send him crashing down too.

He almost fell on top of her, but he was quick to remove himself and shift to her side.

“That was a terrible trick to play on me,” he said, laughing at her antics. Turning to look at her, he noticed that her ruby-red lips matched her red cheeks.

“A lady cannot fall down on her own,” she giggled. “To save my feelings, you needed to fall with me.”

As he went to sit upright, Betsy came over to lick his chin. “In that case, I would willingly fall to the floor for you, Lady Olive. But I’d better help you up before your coat gets too wet from the snow.”

Turning onto his knees, he pushed himself to stand, and once again held out a hand to assist her from the floor. This time she obliged and took his hand to pull herself up. Daisy was yapping wildly, wanting to be picked up, and Lady Olive went to do her bidding.

“It looks like she’s had enough of the cold snow,” Lady Olive fussed over the little Pug, which now looked most content.

Julius went to stroke Daisy as Lady Olive held her, and their hands touched as he did so. They both wore sodden gloves from their snowballing game, but still, he quickly moved away, not wanting to appear too forward.

“Shall we start to head back?” he asked her, worried that the damp air might be making her cold.

“The sky is looking rather dark, almost yellow even,” Lady Olive remarked, looking upwards. “Do you think that perhaps the storm is to

return?”

“I’ll check with Laird Hector, as you suggested,” he said, enjoying standing so close to her.

“Would it be terrible of me if I said that I hope the storm returns?” she said, looking at him with mischief in her green eyes.

“Why would you wish such a thing?” he asked, puzzled that she preferred a snowstorm to the winter sunshine.

“It could mean that you would be forced to stay for Christmastide, and I would like that very much,” she replied.

“I am honoured that you enjoy my company, Lady Olive, as I also enjoy yours,” he chuckled. “Even though you attack me with snowballs and then pull me down onto the snowy ground.”

“Life would be very dull if we did not do things to make us laugh,” Lady Olive told him.

“This is true, and you, Lady Olive, have made me laugh this day,” he replied, not taking his eyes from hers.

For the briefest of moments, Julius wished that he could lean in and place his lips on hers, they looked so soft and inviting. But what if she took his approach as an insult? Not wanting to upset her, he didn’t dare to risk it. Instead, he turned away and called out for Betsy, who had wandered off.

The large dog soon came trotting over to him, from behind a bush, with little Leo in her wake.

“What have you two been up to?” he asked, pleased that they hadn’t gone far.

“Leo enjoys mischief, much like his mistress,” Lady Olive said, laughing again.

“Yes, you certainly do, Lady Olive, I can vouch for that,” Julius smiled back at her. “Do you think that Leo will want carrying too? His little legs put him so close to the cold ground.”

“No, he is a tough little dog, and he likes having fun with Betsy too,” Lady Olive said, so he left the smaller dog running around.

“Come, let’s start heading back,” Julius said, taking on a serious tone. “You were right, those clouds don’t look inviting, do they?”

And so, they turned around to make their way back to the castle. Both remained silent for the return walk back, and Julius contemplated on the fun day they’d enjoyed together.

CHAPTER 21

Betsy's bark was much louder and deeper than the little Pug's yapping, breaking the silence between Olive and Mr Burke. By coincidence, they turned to look at one another at exactly the same time. The moment caused Olive to laugh, and she felt her cheeks turning from pink to a dark crimson red.

"I was going to ask you if you would consider writing to me, Miss Olive?" Mr Burke asked, smiling back at her.

She felt a sudden shyness and stopped the slow-paced walk, turning to watch Betsy and Leo sniffing around a bush. As they moved the branches, white puffs of snow fell onto their backs, but it didn't bother them because they both shook it off.

"Yes, I would like that very much," Olive remarked. While she didn't want to appear too keen, had Mr Burke not asked her, she would have mentioned the possibility of it anyway.

"Do you mean it?" Mr Burke asked in surprise as his voice took on a high pitch.

"Absolutely. You have done so much for us, it would be rude not to stay in touch with you," Olive answered, and wished she could be more honest. She wasn't wanting to write to him out of duty, but she knew it would sound too forward if she admitted how much she liked him.

"It would be good to meet up again too. You know...I mean on your next visit to Scotland. If you come to stay with your aunt and uncle again," he stuttered, and now he was the one looking embarrassed.

"Yes, I would like that too, Mr Julius," she agreed. "I do wish you well with your new job."

“It isn’t a new job, not really,” Mr Burke replied. “It’s a continuation of the same job, but it gives me a permanent base.”

They did not resume walking as Olive hoped to stretch out her time alone with Mr Burke. She wanted so much to tell him that she would like him to stay on longer, but who was she to request that he delay his work?

“Do you know how much longer you will be staying on in Scotland?” he asked, and she was pleased that he’d made no effort to start walking again.

“That is a good question, Mr Julius,” she replied, her thoughts jumbled as she was toying with an idea in her head. “It could be that Mother will return without me, as she is keen to return home. As for me, well...I like it here and I haven’t made a decision yet, on when I will return to England.”

Mr Burke nodded his head, but he wore a look of confusion. “I see...do you mean to stay in Scotland for long?”

“I am very fond of my aunt and uncle, and I have little commitments back in England,” she rationalised, but more to herself than to Mr Burke. “I will not rush into making any decisions until the festive celebrations are over. I find these lands quite mysterious, and at the same time very charming. It will be hard to part from them, so perhaps I will stay on and adventure a little further.”

She watched Mr Burke as he turned to stare off at the distant mountain range. “Yes, I agree with you, these lands. And it is a country that is at its best in the thick of winter. The mountains seem to call to you, and it is hard to drag yourself away from them, do you not find?”

Olive nodded in agreement; she too shared the same view as Mr Burke.

“Look, over there! It’s a stag. Can you see it?” he said with a soft voice, reaching out with his arm to point it out.

“No, I cannot see it, Mr Julius,” Olive said, exasperated because she wanted to see it before it fled. “Where...where is it?”

Julius moved closer to Olive so that he could direct her line of vision in the right direction. He leaned in towards her and they almost touched as he pointed out his arms again, to help guide her eyes. Whilst Olive did wish to see the stag, she was enjoying his closeness more.

“It’s standing in all his glory, right between those two tall snowy covered pines,” Mr Burke said, trying not to speak too loud in case he scared it away.

Olive spotted the stag, and she gasped at the magnificent creature with a fine pair of antlers on its head. She was so engrossed in watching it that she barely noticed Mr Burke had leaned in even closer. It was his hand on her

shoulder that finally made her aware, and she shivered at his touch. Being this close to him, she could smell the aroma of peppermint oil and leather, his signature smell. Though she was still excited at the sight of the stag. It was standing firm as it stared back at them, she could almost feel its strength as it seemed to challenge them.

“You see how he stares us down?” Mr Burke declared. “This is his territory, and he doesn’t suffer intruders lightly? I get the impression that he’s willing us to challenge him.”

“He is a most handsome beast, is he not, Mr Julius?” Olive remarked.

They were now standing so close together that when Olive turned her face to look at him, their cheeks almost touched. A scandalous thought rushed through her head, longing for him to kiss her. No matter how hard she tried she dispel it, she couldn’t. Olive knew that she could not resist him if he did so; she would welcome his embrace and accept his kiss if it was offered.

For one brief second, she believed he was about to do just that, and she closed her eyes, willing and ready to accept his advances. But their kiss was not meant to be, they were soon interrupted by the loud barking of Betsy. Olive sensed that the dog was barking for a good reason and, as it appeared, so too did Mr Burke. Each of them pulled away at the same time, only to see that they had been joined by other walkers.

As Olive looked upon her mother, who was accompanied by the Viscount, her heart was already pattering at a fast pace. Her legs had already been shaking from the possibility of a kiss, but now they almost gave way.

“Oh!” she said out loud enough for her mother to hear. “My knee is hurting. Mr Julius, could you please help me?” Only now her face was flushed too as she did all she could to cover up their closeness.

Mr Burke reacted instantly and reached forward to grab for both her elbows.

“Mother! You gave me such a shock that it caused me to almost trip over with my sore leg,” she accused, turning the blame onto her mother.

“Have you lost all your senses, daughter?” Lady Adelia called out from a distance away. “How many times must I insist that you do not walk out alone with a man? I can see that I will need to stay by your side, more often than not.”

“Mother, we are only walking the dogs,” Olive argued, not wanting to remind her mother that she was no longer a girl. She should shout out to the world that she was now a grown woman and a widow at that. There was no

reason why she shouldn't walk the dogs with Mr Burke accompanying her. But she said not a word, now was not the time or place to be arguing with her mother.

"Mr Burke, you are no gentleman if you believe this situation to be acceptable. Being found alone with my daughter is most ungracious" Lady Adelia barked, unwilling to let her point go. It seemed to Olive that she was determined to embarrass everyone.

"I apologise in advance for anything that comes out of the mouth of my opinionated mother," Olive whispered to Mr Burke. There was still a little distance from her mother, and he continued to hold her up in case she fell over.

He turned to look at her, and Olive knew that he too was disappointed that they had not managed to steal that one kiss between them.

"Worry not, Miss Olive," he said with a soft voice. "I am only too glad that at least we got to spend some time together. Why don't you lean your arm over my shoulder and let us pretend that your injury is affecting your balance? That way, we get to defy Lady Adelia, and at the same time, I get a moment longer to feel you by my side."

"How wicked of you, Mr Julius, but I like it," Olive whispered back, and then called out in a loud voice. "Do not let me fall, Mr Julius, for my leg is throbbing with such pain." As she leaned into him, she then whispered, "Is Mother falling for it?"

"Please, Lady Olive," Mr Burke said, also using a loud voice. "Allow me to help, I wouldn't want you to fall and further injure yourself." Then he too played into the whispering game. "She's getting closer to us, and she's looking at us with the challenging eyes of that stag."

"Do you think she believes us?" Olive whispered, enjoying Mr Burke holding her with his strong arms, and knowing that they were deceiving her mother.

"I take it back," Mr Burke whispered back at her, as Lady Adelia gained ground, getting even closer to them. "She is not a grand stag challenging us after all. She is a bull, with furious steam coming out of her ears."

Olive stifled a giggle at the description of her mother, likened to that of a raging bull.

"This is not a time to be sniggering," Mr Burke warned her in jest.

"Let us move forward a little and I will hop," Olive suggested, taking a quick glance at her approaching mother. "I will make it look as if I am in

pain, and perhaps Mother will take pity on me.”

“It is not wise to be fooling your mother, Miss Olive?” Mr Burke worried. “From what I have learned of Lady Adelia, she is not one to be duped easily. In that, I have the greatest of respect for her.”

Olive was surprised at his words. Despite her mother always belittling him, he still afforded her undeserved respect.

“In this, I insist, Mr Julius,” she whispered, observing her mother’s face of fury as she neared them. “If we do not pretend injury, we will both be doomed to the wrath of my mother. She likes to think I am still a child, and she will treat you with the same affront. I would not wish to insult you with an old woman’s rantings, for she is a formidable enemy.”

She felt Mr Burke chuckle at her warning, “Come now, Miss Olive, we are in this together. So be it, you must ready yourself for a long lecture. There is no shame in listening to the words of wisdom from our elders.”

“Very well, Mr Julius, let us go forth and do battle, together,” Olive agreed, and they pushed forward to meet Lady Adelia. As Olive held her arm over his shoulder, she emphasised her limp. She hoped it would help to dampen the hammering blow that her mother was about to send their way.

CHAPTER 22

“I say, young man!” Lady Adelia shouted out as she continued to stumble her way toward them. “Unhand my daughter and move away from her this instant.”

“Mother, I am injured!” Lady Olive pleaded back to her.

“If you do not part ways, I will arrange for that man to be physically removed.” Lady Adelia was having none of it and kept on with her insistent demands.

Julius realised that she wasn’t a woman to be fooled, but he knew that he must play along with Lady Olive’s wishes, so he did not move. Nor did he want to.

“Oh, do stop being so dramatic, Mother,” Lady Olive barked. “Mr Julius is every bit a gentleman and he is helping me return to the castle. How else do you propose I hobble back?”

Lady Adelia glared at him furiously, making it obvious that she didn’t care for him, not one little bit. She had her mind set that he was a farmer, all because he tended to animals. If only he could get her to understand that his profession as a veterinary surgeon required long, hard years of academic study.

“The Viscount can assist you,” Lady Adelia grumbled as she turned to speak with him, but he wasn’t by her side. “Oh, where has that man gone off to now?”

“Do stop insulting Mr Julius all the time, Mother,” Lady Olive pleaded as she continued to lean on him. “He practices a well-respected profession and is deserving of your respect.”

Julius listened vaguely at the toing and froing between mother and

daughter, but his mind was elsewhere. The scent of coconut and floral essence emanated from the long hair that had come loose from its pins in Lady Olive's head. The strands now lay upon his jacket, assailing his nostrils most pleasantly.

Lady Adelia finally reached the pair, only to stand in front of them as she tutted up at Julius.

"I mean no offense to you, Lady Adelia, or your daughter," he tried, but she continued to scowl at him.

"I have big plans for my daughter's future, and I assure you, young man, that you are not included in them," Lady Adelia snapped.

Julius found himself speechless, for he had made no display of any advances towards Lady Olive. He was unsure why her mother would say such a thing to him.

"Wait a moment, Mother," Lady Olive was the one to reply. "You have no idea what my future plans include. What is more, you have no right to speak to Mr Julius in such a tone. He has done you no harm, nor has he ever insulted any of us in any way. He makes me laugh and I enjoy his company very much. I will be most sad to see him leave. After everything he has done for us, you should be grateful to him."

Julius was about to intervene in the heated debate between the ladies, when the Viscount walked up to them, from behind Lady Adelia.

"Ah, there you are Lord Fergus," Lady Adelia remarked as if he was a lost puppy that had now been found. "I wish you to tell this young man that you will assist my daughter back to the castle. She needs help to return, so will you kindly step in?"

All eyes were on the ever-reliable Viscount as he stood holding a small branch of wild red berries.

"I would be most happy to assist Lady Olive," Lord Fergus replied, looking over at Lady Olive. "But I do believe the young Mr Burke is the stronger of the two of us. Therefore, he is the best choice in this matter."

Julius was attempting to stifle a smile behind his free hand, as was Lady Olive. He wondered how Lady Adelia would take the gentle refusal given by the Viscount.

"Lord Fergus, while I respect your point of view, I do not wish my daughter to be attached to that man any longer than necessary," Lady Adelia replied. Julius could see that the situation was a strain for her. "You are a gentleman of great honour, whereas Mr Burke is a...he is a..."

Julius raised his brow as he waited for the next session of insults from Lady Adelia. The Viscount though was not to play along.

“I find your company very pleasant, Lady Adelia,” Lord Fergus replied. “And I would wish us to stay out in the air for longer, so that I may continue to converse with you. The young ones can manage their way back without any help from us.”

Julius turned his eyes upon Lady Adelia, whose mouth was agape, and there appeared to be nothing coming out of it.

“Besides, I have too much respect for this young man here,” the Viscount added. “Mr Burke is a person of a scholarly nature. He understands all the functions of the living body. Is that not the most admirable occupation that a young gentleman could ever hope to aim for? Your trade and skills are most impressive, Mr Burke. I have nothing but the greatest of respect for you.”

“He is nothing but a farmer,” Lady Adelia seemed determined to have her say.

“Nay, Lady Adelia. But then, a lady such as yourself, protected from the tragedies of war, could not possibly perceive what Mr Burke’s trade consists of,” the Viscount said. Julius thought his words sounded very genuine. “I am not setting out to go against your wishes, my dear Lady. No, no...but I understand the intricacies of the situation you have found yourself in. A lady of society can have no associations with the machinations of war. Nor can you be expected to have any dealing with the illnesses of any animal. How then can you understand the true nature of this man’s work? His hands are truly skilled, and his knowledge is beyond compare.”

Again, all eyes were upon the Viscount, his speech had captured everyone’s attention.

“That was a most refreshing version of my work, Viscount,” Julius said, smiling at Lord Fergus. “Thank you for such wonderful praise.”

“Thank you, Lord Fergus, for your kind and honest words,” Lady Olive said, smiling knowingly at her mother; for she had won this round. “It is refreshing to hear from someone who understands what a veterinary surgeon’s profession entails.”

“Indeed, Mr Burke, you have a rare skill,” Lord Fergus was happy to provide a good reference for the young man, whom he found fascinating. “I imagine that you could work your magic hands anywhere in the world. From the priceless Arabian horses owned by the princes of the desert to the wild beasts in the jungles of Africa. You are a doctor of animals, a profession to be

respected by all.”

“You oversell me, Lord Fergus, but your words are kind nonetheless,” Julius uttered, giving the Viscount a bow of his head.

“Not at all. You deserve praise for your years of learning and your skills upon the battlefields,” Lord Fergus returned the bow with one of his own. “Now then, Lady Adelia, shall we continue our stroll? I have picked a branch of winter berries to add a splash of colour indoors,” he said, holding out the colourful branch.

“Well, I...erm...I would rather return to the castle,” Lady Adelia stuttered, speechless at all the eulogy the Viscount had afforded the young man. “Though, I must point out how polite you are, Lord Fergus. A man who has brought back with him the winter flora, for a lady’s pleasure, is how a true courtship is done,” she said. “An untrained young man might learn some polite manners from you, do you not agree?”

Julius smiled at how Lady Adelia had picked herself back up again. At least now she might have some idea of his profession and stop calling him a farm hand. He had the Viscount to thank for that and would do so later. For now, he needed to keep up the pretence that Lady Olive was in pain. But if anything, he was more than willing to allow her to lean on him along the path.

They all set off to return to the castle together. Lord Fergus said not a word about how Lady Adelia had assumed the red berry branch was for her daughter. Though Julius believed it had been more of a gift for Lady Adelia. Still, the Viscount was far too polite to complain, and he had given Lady Olive a little bow as he’d handed the berry branch to her.

“You are right about a splash of colour, Lord Fergus,” Lady Olive said as she admired the berry branch. “These are such colourful berries, they will cheer up the drawing room no end.”

For a short while, the four of them made their way back along the path that they had all trodden on their way out. The dogs continued with their play, and Lord Fergus offered to take Daisy from Lady Olive’s arms.

Julius felt a little over about duping the Viscount with Lady Olive’s injury deception. It had been a necessary mistruth so that her mother would stop her incessant nattering. As they approached the castle, Lady Olive and Julius began to make their way to the boot room entrance, at the back of the castle.

“You cannot enter through the back door,” Lady Adelia called out as she

was making her way to the front door, albeit up the long stairway.

“Yes, we can, Mother, our boots are muddy, and the dogs are filthy,” Lady Olive pointed out. “Unless you want us to traipse muddy footprints all through the beautiful reception hall of the castle?”

Once again, Lady Adelia accepted that she was defeated. The dogs did need to be taken to the back entrance. “I do not suppose you could climb this stairway with your injury anyway,” Lady Adelia concluded. “Very well, we will see you in the drawing room. I will ask your aunt to arrange warm drinks for us all.”

“And I will arrange a warming drink of brandy for your arrival, young Mr Burke,” the Viscount said with a friendly grin.

Each couple went their different ways, and Julius was glad of the break from Lady Adelia.

“Well, I thought that went well,” Lady Olive remarked, as he opened the door to the boot room, allowing Betsy and Leo to run inside first. “I do believe that Mother will now see you in a different light, after that speech.”

She let go of his shoulder as they no longer needed to continue their pretence of hobbling along. “Oh, I am sure that she will think up some reason to put me back in my place,” Julius said, taking off his wet coat and boots.

“I am sorry, Mr Julius, for Mother’s ignorance,” Lady Olive said, looking over at him as she took off her wet overcoat.

“I am only too pleased that you, at least, seem to be happy in my company,” Julius replied.

“I adore your company, Mr Julius, and I will do everything in my power to get you to stay for Christmastide.”

Julius experienced a warm feeling of delight at her words; was he ready to leave her yet? He knew then that Lady Olive was the best thing that had happened to him in a long while.

CHAPTER 23

Olive lifted the two dogs onto the large wooden table in the boot room and gave them a good rub down with a towel used for such purposes. Mr Burke saw to Betsy, and they had a good giggle together as they cleaned up their doggy friends.

“If Mother saw me doing this, she would be horrified,” Olive said, feeling pleased to be in the company of Mr Burke. “She would be lecturing me; Why are you doing such a task? Leave it to the servants,” Olive said, mimicking her mother’s voice.

Leo gave out a little yap and Olive chuckled again. The simple things in life can be so enjoyable, especially when you’re doing them with a friend. When the task was complete, they each carried a Pug through to the kitchen, with Betsy following. The Labrador went off with a wagging tail to see to the yapping pups that called to her.

“I was wondering what all that giggling was in the boot room,” Sheena called out as she turned around from her task at the kitchen table. “Your aunt said to give you instructions to make your way to the drawing room.”

Olive’s face flushed a little at the realisation that the entire kitchen could hear her having fun with Mr Burke in the boot room.

“We were cleaning the dogs off,” Olive said in a quiet voice, hoping her explanation would suffice.

“I know, Lady Olive, don’t be looking so guilty now,” Sheena said, giving her a cheeky smile. “I’ll be pulling your leg is all. Oh, and don’t be forgetting that hobble of yours, or Lady Adelia will be giving you one of her famous talks.”

Again, Olive felt a pinch of guilt at not being honest with her mother.

Although it was her mother's fault; if she hadn't been so hostile towards Mr Burke, then she wouldn't have needed to deceive her.

Making their way up the spiral stairway out of the kitchen, they arrived in the corridors of the next floor and headed for the drawing room. Olive could hear laughter coming through the open doorway, and she was the first one to enter. Putting Daisy onto the floor, she pretended to have a slight limp, hobbling into the room.

The first thing Olive noticed was the scowl her mother sent her way. It seemed that her disapproving attitude was not to relent, despite the Viscount's glowing words for Mr Burke earlier.

"Ah, my beautiful niece arrives at last," Lady Flora called out as she came to greet Olive with a light hug, and a kiss on each cheek. "Come and enjoy a warm drink of posset. It's been curdled with ale and a wee dram of whisky, so it will warm up your innards."

Olive wasn't fond of the hot milky drink, but the whisky would be welcome touch, lending her the confidence to stay by Mr Burke's side in front of her mother.

"This is an extravagant spread of food for our midday meal, Aunt Flora," Olive said. She stared at the buffet spread of cold meats, bread, cheeses, cakes, biscuits and so much more. Of course, there was also a variety of spirits because her uncle was fond of a midday dram.

"Hector and I would like to sing a special song in honour of my lovely niece joining us this year," Lady Flora announced to everyone.

Making her way to the pianoforte, she sat on the stool, with her hands hovering over the ivory keys. Everyone in the room settled down, but the atmosphere was very much that of a party. Her aunt and uncle were doing all they could to bring everyone together to have fun.

"In the spirit of Christmastide, we are beginning our celebrations today," Lady Flora announced. "Other guests will begin to arrive over the next few days, but on this day, we are holding a small party for those closest to our hearts."

"My friends never fail to surprise," the Viscount said, raising his glass to thank them.

The mood was light, and Olive felt that finally she could relax. Her aunt started to play a tune, to which her uncle began to sing along, in his deep tenor voice.

"On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, a partridge in a

pear tree.”

The Viscount clapped his hands together at the end of the verse, shouting out, “Bravo, old boy, a fine voice you have there.”

Lady Flora continued to play, but this time she sang out with her soprano singing voice.

“On the second day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree.”

Everyone clapped their hands together at the end of the verse.

The third verse was sung in harmony by her aunt and uncle.

“On the third day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, three French hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree.”

As they finished the verse, Lady Flora called out to everyone, “And now it is time for you all to take your part in the remaining verses. Olive, could you sing verse four for us, then Lady Adelia can follow with verse five. After which our wonderful Lord Fergus and Mr Burke will kindly sing verse six. After that, we can finish the rest of the song together. Are you ready Olive?”

Her fingers played the simple tune, and Olive sang her heart out. Her mother’s voice quivered a little but at least she got all the words right. By the end, everyone was joining in, and together they blasted out the words to The Twelve Days of Christmas. The final verse was the longest and caused the most laughter, as they attempted to remember all the previous verses which were to be repeated.

When the song came to an end, everyone clapped with delight. They’d managed to begin their Christmastide celebrations with such vigour and merriment.

The afternoon was filled with songs, food, and wine, or sherry as Lady Adelia insisted upon.

“Now that we are all gathered together,” Laird Hector boomed out as he gained everyone’s attention. “It is a good time to discuss our annual Christmastide ball.”

Lady Flora went to stand by her husband’s side. This was a time when they came together and worked hard to keep their guests entertained for a whole week or so.

“And the celebrations will not end there,” Lady Flora added. “You will have a short interlude after Christmastide. And then we will move on to the celebrations of Hogmanay. We all know that the Scots like to bring in the New Year with style,” she laughed as everyone murmured their approval.

“Oh, do stay on Mr Julius, you simply cannot miss out on all the fun at the castle,” Olive said out loud for all to hear.

She’d already concluded that if she did it that way, everyone would support her and encourage him to stay. But then, she had not accounted for her mother.

“Daughter!” Lady Adelia called out, a look of shock on her powdered face. “You cannot keep the man from his so-called profession which everyone is at pains to tell me is of the utmost importance. He is needed elsewhere and does not have time to be dilly-dallying at parties.”

All eyes turned to Mr Burke, and Olive was beginning to regret her plan that had now backfired, thanks to her mother.

“Lady Adelia has a point,” Mr Burke spoke up. “I am needed elsewhere, even though my post doesn’t begin until the new year. Nonetheless, I should leave while there’s a break in the storm.”

“Did you say that your post doesn’t begin until the new year, lad?” Laird Hector asked as silence had now fallen upon the room.

“I did, Laird Hector, but the storm—” he tried to explain.

“The decision is made then!” Laird Hector boomed, talking over the young man. “I insist that you stay and enjoy our hospitality, sir. Otherwise, I will take it as a personal insult.”

Again, silence fell upon them as Mr Burke looked shocked at the odd invitation.

“You know that my uncle doesn’t mean it the way it sounds,” Lady Olive intervened. This time she was the one to break the stilled muteness that filled the room. “But I for one would be very honoured if you could stay on and enjoy our hosts’ kindness.”

The Viscount was the next one to speak up. “Being a man of many more years than yourself, young Mr Burke, I must advise you that one should take every opportunity in life to enjoy oneself. Before you know it, you will be old and alone in the world if you don’t make friends. Should that happen to you, you will live with only your regrets for company.”

Laird Hector raised his tankard full of ale, “Spoken like a true Irish man,” he toasted. “Tell me young Mr Burke, have you ever attended a Scottish ball?”

Olive could see that Mr Burke was struggling with his decision and she felt a little guilty that she was the cause. “Mr Julius, we will understand if you choose to leave. We have all seen your passion for your profession. With

the storm now gone, I suppose you must take that as a time to be moving on.”

She couldn't help it, but her spirits dropped a little at the thought of him leaving. For her, the joyous moment of the party atmosphere had now dissipated. She turned away from Mr Burke, deciding that she would rather be alone. Tomorrow, he would be gone, and without him, Christmas would not be as she had hoped.

“Yes,” Mr Burke called out, causing her to turn back around again to look at him. As he spoke, he was looking over at her and their eyes met, melting her heart. “I will stay on for the celebrations because I am enjoying such pleasant company. Thank you, everyone, for making me feel so welcome.”

Olive couldn't help but think that the reference to the *pleasant company* was meant for her, or at least she hoped that it was. A feeling of elation rushed through her; she could enjoy Mr Julius's company for much longer, and she was thrilled at the prospect.

Though she caught a glimpse of her mother's glare, and it sent a chill down her back, but she would simply ignore the demands of Lady Adelia. At twenty-six years old, she did not need to jump to her mother's every instruction. This was an occasion that was worthy of celebration. What a wonderful Christmastide they were all going to have, well...so long as she could avoid her mother's withering gaze.

CHAPTER 24

“I thought I’d find ye in here, lad,” a jolly voice called out as Julius brushed down one of his horses. “The women up there are busy organising the celebrations. I was looking for an excuse to get away. Times like this, us menfolk need to hide away, do ye not agree?”

Julius nodded with a smile; he wasn’t surprised to see Laird Hector in the stable. He was a laird of a castle who didn’t mind mucking out horse manure and doing hard labour. Despite his age, he was quite a robust man, built like an ox.

“Laird Hector, and what a fine day it is too,” Julius replied, preferring to avoid discussing the women folk.

Ever since he’d agreed to stay on, he’d mulled over the idea of apologising to Lady Olive for almost kissing her when they were out walking. But if he did, it could be taken as an insult. What if the lady didn’t wish to admit it ever happened in the first place? Rules and etiquette in such matters were not his strong point as he didn’t often attempt to kiss a lady. In the end, he decided it was best to put the memory aside and forget about it. Yet how could he? It had been but a brief moment, but a wonderful one.

Laird Hector picked up a towel and began wiping along the horse’s hide, where Julius had brushed. “These are fine beasts, Mr Burke. It is a blessing that you managed to save them with your clever skills.”

“Yes, I am privileged that they befriend me as they do,” Julius said, patting the hide of Caesar’s flank. “They share their trust in all that I put them through, even when it caused them pain.”

“Ye mean rubbing on those healing lotions? They don’t cause any pain, do they?” Laird Hector enquired.

“Not so much now, but when I first began their scars were raw and festering. Yet still, they let me handle them,” Julius explained. “I often feel bouts of guilt when I’m forced to instil pain, even though it’s a necessary evil.”

“Aye, I imagine ye do, I can see that you have yourself a sensitive nature. But there’s no denying that you’ve done well by them,” Laird Hector said as he continued to assist Julius with his horses’ daily routine. “Tell me, lad, you’re not hiding down here too, are ye?”

Julius knew that Laird Hector could be a canny man, not missing a trick in his household. “I was taking longer than usual, yes. There are things to think on. Thoughts that weigh heavy on my mind.”

“I knew it! I’ll bet a bottle of my best spirits that it involves that niece of mine. Am I right?” Laird Hector questioned.

“You never miss a thing, do you, Laird?” Julius gave him a shy smile, but he was glad to be sharing his burdens.

Laird Hector continued in his task with the horse, not looking Julius’ way as he waited patiently for him to speak again.

“I’ll come straight out with it,” Julius offered, stopping his work and standing up to look over in Laird Hector’s direction. “I’m carrying a bag of shame around with me. You see, I have to admit that I attempted to kiss your niece.”

It surprised him when Laird Hector didn’t even look up as he kept wiping the horse’s hide down.

“What is it lad?” Laird Hector asked, looking up at him only briefly. “Are ye expecting me to go into an outrage?”

Julius flustered in his reply, N...no, but are you not angry with me for making advances to Lady Olive?”

At last, Laird Hector stopped what he was doing. He looked over at Julius to give his reply, “Look, lad, if it churns you up, then take yourself off and apologise to her. It’s as simple as that, is it not?”

Julius shrugged, raising his palms in a questioning gesture. “What if Lady Olive would prefer me not to mention it because it’s a source of shame for her too?”

“Are ye ashamed of yersen, lad?” his host asked. “Or are ye disappointed that the kiss never happened?”

“Well, both I suppose...I mean...I didn’t mean to insult Lady Olive. But yes, I would have preferred it if we had kissed,” Julius admitted with a huge

grin. At last, as he'd finally declared his love interest in Lady Olive to someone. How Laird Hector had managed to get him to open to him about his feelings for his niece, he wasn't sure. But it felt good to have someone to talk with over such matters as the heart.

"Then get yersen back in that castle and speak to my niece will ye," Laird Hector ordered. "Ye'll be finding her in the drawing room, choosing gowns for the ball, I do believe."

"Is Lady Adelia in there with her, do you know?" Julius asked, not wishing to appear feeble, but he knew that the battle was lost from the word go if her mother was around.

"Bah! Take no notice of the old battle axe," Laird Hector brushed off the idea with a wave of his hand. "We all humour her, but my niece is more independent of her than it seems. Besides, if you don't start to relax soon, the Viscount and I will be forced to get ye drunk."

Julius smiled nervously, "Right then, I will go and—"

"I'll be finishing off the grooming for ye," Laird Hector offered. "I see that you've done with the creams, so I'll see to settling them down, and you dinna worry about them, lad."

"Thank you, Laird Hector. It feels good to share with someone how I am feeling towards your niece," Julius replied, not moving from where he was standing.

"Be off with ye then," Laird Hector boomed, laughing at the same time. "Ye are a big, strong man, go and prove it. Oh, and knock on the door first, or ye might find the lady in her undergarments."

Moments later, Julius was doing exactly that, tapping on the drawing-room door. He recognised the voice that shouted out for him to enter, as that of Lady Olive.

Entering the room, he was greeted with a most stunning sight. Lady Olive was standing still, adorned in a glittering, golden gown of silks and laces.

"You look...glorious, like a bejewelled queen," he announced in a gravelly voice, which caused him to cough nervously. "I...I can return later, now that I've seen how busy you are."

"Mr Julius, do not leave, please, come in," Lady Olive encouraged. He closed the door behind himself and stepped into the room. "Ladies, please go and continue with the decorations over there. I would like to speak with Mr Julius with some privacy," she instructed the maids.

As they moved over to the other end of the room, to continue with their

task, she turned to speak to him. “Oh dear, Mr Julius, you wear a look of worry on your handsome face.”

It pleased him that she referred to him as handsome. Although he was not used to compliments from ladies and it caused him to look away.

“Do tell me, what it is that worries you so?” she asked.

“Very well, I will come straight to the point,” he said, coughing into his fist. “I...I...erm...wish to apologise for...well, for the fact that I overstepped my...erm...my; I mean for attempting to kiss you. I realise that it must have caused you much embarrassment.”

Lady Olive giggled, and her smile was genuine enough. “On the contrary, Mr Julius. I am not embarrassed at all. If anything, I am more annoyed at the interruption Mother caused for us.”

“Oh...I...erm...see, well then, I must tell you that I have become very fond of you,” he stuttered his way through, wondering why he felt so awkward. He’d attended frontline battles and witnessed horrors that no one should ever see. Yet here he was, withering like a thirsty flower. “You are the only reason I have agreed to stay on for the celebrations, and I wanted you to be aware of how I felt...I mean how I feel about you.”

“One moment, please, Mr Julius,” Lady Olive said, leaving him to walk over to her maids.

Is she telling them all about my feelings toward her? Should I flee the castle right here and now, and never return, ever again?

He watched on as one of the maids went to the door and opened it a little. She remained standing in the space and appeared to be looking up and down the corridor.

Lady Olive returned to his side, took hold of his hands, and led him to a settee, where they sat side by side.

“You see, Mr Julius, I want to tell you that I also feel the same way, she admitted, staring into his eyes as she did so.

“You do?” he asked, his eyes wide with surprise. “I mean...that is good. It is very good, Miss Olive because I have never felt this way before, other than over my horses. Not that I mean to compare you to a horse, but—”

“Sshhh,” Lady Olive pressed a delicate finger to her lips. “You have no idea how happy it makes me feel, that you have agreed to stay,” she told him. “The Christmas celebrations would not have been the same without you present, Mr Julius.”

As she spoke her soft words, he glared into her shimmering green eyes,

and he took in her pale, curly locks against the golden fabric.

“You are not offended then?” he asked, only to make sure he understood correctly that she did not mind his advances. He might not have been born of noble birth, but he was well-educated on how to treat a lady correctly. He was also aware that what he had done would not be acceptable in many circles.

She went to hold both his hands once again, and it helped him relax a little better, while in her company.

“Why is it that a man cannot see when a lady likes him?” she asked, looking amused. “I like you very much, Mr Julius, and by the time we are, how shall I put this...*that we are forced to part ways*, yes, that is what I mean. What I am trying to say is, that I hope we will get to know one another better.”

“I would like that very much, Lady Olive,” he agreed. Now that he could relax a little, he was looking forward to the week of celebrations.

“Shall we make a game of it?” Lady Olive asked, a quivering excitement in her eyes. “We will sneak away from Lady Adelia’s spying eyes whenever we can. What fun we will have together, Mr Julius, if you agree, of course.”

Squeezing her smaller hands in his, he kissed her fingers, “So long as I am with you, I would agree to anything. We shall be likened to Romeo and Juliet, though I do not wish for such a tragic ending.”

“You are versed in Shakespeare, Mr Julius?” She questioned, looking a little surprised.

“I adore reading, that is when I am not with my horses,” he nodded. “And when I am not studying animal husbandry, of course.”

“Then you and I shall get along fine because I too enjoy reading. Though, like you, I do not wish for any tragedies. Let us hope that the accident with the carriage was the worst we will have,” she said.

As she spoke, she gazed at him, and they each looked longingly into one another’s eyes. With the silence between them, they shared a look of contentment, with no need for spoken words.

CHAPTER 25

Through the corner of her eye, Olive could see the maids surreptitiously looking their way. She made no effort to hide the budding romance she was enjoying with Mr Burke, even if it was happening right under their noses. She saw no reason to be concerned in front of them because they acted as if they were more ally than enemy. The only thing she cared about was getting time with Mr Burke, away from her mother's attention.

"Here we come a-wassailing," Sheena sang out as she began a merry ditty, causing Olive to smile at her cheekiness.

"I might have known that a Scottish lass would sing a song about the new year," Olive pointed out to Mr Burke.

"Among the leaves so green," Rosy joined in with the popular Christmas song.

"Here we come a-wand'ring, so fair to be seen," they sang together in a sweet harmony.

"Love and joy come to you," Olive joined in. *"And to your wassail too."*

"And God bless you and send you a Happy New Year," Julius was next to join in, and Olive burst out into a fit of laughter, causing Julius to stop singing.

"Does my voice amuse you, Miss Olive?" he asked, regretting making any attempt to join in with the merry tune.

"Not one little bit, Mr Julius," Olive replied. "You have a wonderful singing voice, but I am giddy with joy. Come, let us dance as Sheena sings, she has a wonderful voice. It will also help me to see if this glamorous gown is going to be comfortable on the dance floor."

Olive went to stand up, but she could see Julius was a little nervous about

dancing in front of the maids, so she held out her hand in encouragement.

“Please, sir, let us make merry and do a little country dancing,” she pushed on. It helped because he stood up and shared a broad grin with her.

“Now then, dancing I can do,” he said, taking her hand and leading her to a space on the floor, between all the furnishings.

They danced to the rest of the Wassailing song. As it came to an end, Rosy offered to play her flute, explaining that her father had made it for her on the previous Christmas.

“We have much in the way of celebrations in our house,” Rosy said as she took out the flute. “I won’t be there this year, so I brought it along to the castle, to play whenever I can.”

Olive looked a little unsure, a poorly played flute could resemble a wailing cat, and she couldn’t dance to that. “Have you had much practice?” she asked, showing her reluctance.

“Miss Olive,” Sheena came to step into the conversation. “Our Rosy, here, she plays the instrument beautifully. I have heard her many times, so stop all your worrying and get dancing with Mr Burke while you can.”

“Then play you shall, Rosy,” Olive agreed, and they all awaited a merry tune.

As soon Rosy’s lips blew on the instrument, Olive’s doubts were dispelled. Sheena had been true to her word and Rosy’s talents were delightful. First, she played Joy to the World, giving it an expert touch, and everyone sang along. That was soon followed by God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen, and then onto Hark the Herald Angels Sing.

“Gosh, I have never sung out so loud,” Olive laughed as they stopped to rest. “I must give my voice a break. Can you play something with a little melancholy, so that Mr Julius and I can dance again?”

“I’ve been learning a little part from a waltz, if you want to try that new dance,” Rosy suggested.

“Oh yes, that will be wonderful,” Olive clapped her hands together in delight. “Do you know of this new dance, Mr Julius?”

“I do, it was taught to me by soldiers, would you believe,” he answered, looking pleased with himself. “They all favoured it at dances because it meant they could get close to the ladies. Oh...I don’t mean anything by that, Miss Olive, only that—”

“Mr Julius, it is exactly for that reason that I would like to dance the waltz with you,” Olive said, feeling the need to put her dancing partner at

ease. “Or at least some sort of version of it, that we can manage to do to a flute.”

Rosy began to play, and the sweet sound filled the room. Olive wasn't familiar with the tune but that didn't matter, all she wanted to do was dance. As Mr Burke came to stand in front of her, he stretched one arm around the back of her waist, and with the other, he took hold of her hand. Her other hand sat on his shoulder and soon they were gliding around the drawing room floor, in a world of their own.

Olive imagined that they were at a ball; the music was so perfect. The waltz was quite new to her, but she'd practiced it with the Duchess back home.

“Lady Wald and I rehearsed this dance together before we dared to perform it with any man,” Olive admitted to Mr Burke.

“Well, that's fine because I practiced with a load of men, and they were not gentlemen either,” Mr Burke replied with a smile. “As for you, Miss Olive, you dance it like an angel; so graceful and elegant.”

Olive blushed, but she didn't shy away from Mr Burke's gaze. Because of the dance moves, their cheeks almost touched as he swirled her around the room.

They were all having such a good time that when Enid, the maid on door duty, closed the door, none of them had noticed. She was forced to call out loud and inform everyone that Lady Adelia was on her way. The merriment disappeared in an instant as the maids quickly took up their tasks, and Rosy hid away her flute. Olive had noticed the look of concern on Mr Burke's face.

“I don't wish for Lady Adelia to give any of you a lecture, but alas I am caught out,” he said, looking crestfallen.

“I have an idea,” Olive said, putting her hand up and pointing towards the balcony door.

Wasting no time, she dashed over and opened the door, “Do you mind waiting outside, Mr Julius?” she asked, and to her delight, he wore a look of relief, no doubt at being saved from her mother.

“I will do anything to escape the wrath of Lady Adelia,” he chuckled.

Olive was quick to close the balcony door, though she feared that Mr Burke might freeze out in the dark. All she could do was hope that Lady Adelia would not linger long, but she moved to stand by the side of Rosy.

Before Lady Adelia arrived, Sheena dashed to the balcony door and closed the drapes. “Let's not invite trouble, Miss Olive,” Sheena warned.

“Lady Adelia might glance through the window.”

Within seconds, the drawing room door opened, and Lady Adelia entered. “I say, what is all the noise that I hear coming from this room?”

Olive looked up from a task she was pretending to do. “Oh, we were singing Christmas Carols, Mother, but you have missed out I am afraid, for I cannot sing another word.”

All three maids smiled knowingly at each other, each of them whispering in a huddle.

Lady Adelia pointed over to them, “And what reasons do you three have for smiling, I hope it is not at my expense?” she boomed, then turning to her daughter. “Really, Olive, I do not know why you use these Scottish servants. They are quite disrespectful,” she said, tutting their way once again. “Now then, it is good that I have come across you for I must speak with you over an urgent matter.”

Olive knew what was coming, and she also knew that she had to stand there and listen to everything that Lady Adelia had to say, or her game would be up.

“The Viscount’s intentions are very respectful, dear,” Lady Adelia began. “I implore you to consider courting him.”

“But Mother, he has shown no sign that he wishes to do so,” Olive tried, but she knew that would not be the end of it, and she must allow her mother to say her piece.

“Yes, yes...but he has told me, not outright, but with many hints. Not only that, but I also truly believe him to be a good man. What I would like, is for you to spend more time with him over the festive celebrations.” Olive could tell from her mother’s tone that her words were not a request, but a demand.

Olive then worried that Mr Julius might hear her mother hinting at her supposed relationship with the Viscount. So, she attempted to object, but her mother put up her hand in the air, to stop her from talking.

“Now, now, dear, on these matters I know best,” Lady Adelia went on, not even stopping for a breath. “He is perfect as a potential husband for you. Indeed, he has wealth and good connections. I know that I am right on this, and I insist that you listen to me.”

Olive thought it best not to argue with her, instead, she fretted over Mr Burke hearing the conversation. Standing by the fireplace, she allowed her mother to give her a continual list of her expectations with the Viscount. All

the while, the maids whispered over in their corner. Even Olive wondered at what they were finding so amusing, especially when they knew what was at risk. She didn't want to get her mother's suspicions in motion and was almost tempted to call over to them to quieten down, but she resisted the urge. If she did anything out of the ordinary, her mother would work out that something was amiss.

Why does mother always feel the need to interfere? she thought to herself, shutting out the sound of Lady Adelia's voice.

"I am aware that you hoped to find love, but I do believe that will come about with Lord Fergus. I do not doubt that he was very handsome in his younger years. For that reason, you must overlook his present age," Lady Adelia said. As Olive's attention came back to her, she couldn't believe that she had so much to say on the matter. All she could do was pray that Mr Burke could not hear her voice as she spoke of trying to marry her off to someone else.

"Mother, can we not talk about this another time?" she tried again.

"Yes, we can, and we will," Lady Adelia agreed to Olive's surprise. "For I find that I cannot stay in this room with servants who chatter behind my back," she huffed and then stormed back through the door that she'd left open.

Olive could not bear to leave Mr Burke out in the cold a moment longer, and she immediately went to the balcony door and let him back into the room.

"Quickly, Mr Julius, come out of the cold," she said as she watched him shivering. "I am sorry to have put you through that."

"Nay, it is I who must apologise," he said, looking at her in confusion. "I had not realised that you held an interest in the Viscount. If you will please excuse me, I must go and sort out a warm bath so that my blood might flow once again."

"Yes, that is a good idea, and I can do that for you," Olive offered, sad that all their joy was over. "Sheena, can you go and sort out the hot water for a bathtub?"

The three maids left the room to do their bidding of filling a bathtub. It would take many kettles and pans of boiling water to do it, and the more people at hand, the quicker Mr Burke could thaw out his body.

"Thank you, Lady Olive," he said, and Olive could see a sudden change in his mood. "I must change into warmer clothes, so I bid you a good day."

She watched him leave, and a rush of anger over her mother hit her senses.

Oh, dear, how am I going to convince Mr Julius that I have no interest in the Viscount? None whatsoever. This is all my interfering mother's fault, she deliberated to her herself as she slumped on the settee. "Everything was going so well, and now she has ruined it all," Olive said out loud. "I have to make sure that Mr Julius knows he is the only man I am interested in, I simply must. If Mother had let me put a word in, I could have assured him that I disagree with her. Why did I not resist more, then he would have known this is only Mother's dreams and not mine?" she mumbled on to herself, regardless of whether anyone could hear her or not.

CHAPTER 26

Julius couldn't leave the room fast enough, he felt like such a fool. There he was, attempting to court Lady Olive when all the time her mother intended on marrying her to the Viscount. He couldn't believe he'd been so blind not to have realised this sooner.

He recalled an earlier conversation he'd had with Lady Olive when he'd tried to apologise for attempting to kiss her. Yes, she had indicated that she *liked* him. She had even mentioned that she too felt that her mother got in the way. But then she'd gone on to talk about being, *forced to part ways*. Those very words should have told him that she never had any intentions on staying with him.

As he made his way from the drawing room, he could hear deep voices coming from the snooker room. To get to the spiral stairway leading upstairs, he needed to pass the open door of the games room. As he did so, he recognised the Viscount's voice. He had no idea why, but he popped his head around the open doorway.

In the room, Laird Hector was playing snooker, with the Viscount seated at a desk, appearing to be penning a letter.

"Ah, young Mr Burke," Laird Hector called out in with his usual gusto. "Come on in, please do, I have need for you."

"I can't stay long," Julius said, wishing he hadn't been so tempted to look through the open doorway. "I'm having a bath drawn up."

"Will you not take over the Viscount's snooker cue for a short while?" Laird Hector asked, looking desperate. "He's so busy with his letter, that I've been winning every game. It becomes boring after a while."

Julius didn't like to let his host down, so he agreed, "I can take a few

turns, my bath should be at least another hour.”

“You can also advise Lord Fergus on the contents of his letter,” Laird Hector pointed over to the Viscount, who looked up only momentarily. “He’s driving me to distraction whenever I take a turn on the table. What say you, Viscount? How about the advice of a younger gentleman?”

The Viscount looked over and nodded, “I’m replying in kind to a letter sent to me from a beautiful lady,” he told Julius.

Instantly, Julius’s heart thudded in his chest. *Why had I not realised there was a secret romance going on between them? Even the Laird seems to know about it.*

“Now listen to this, for a beginning, Mr Burke, and see if you approve,” the Viscount said. “*My dear secret admirer,*” the Viscount began. “I use that title because that is how she signed off in her letter. I thought it best to pretend that I don’t know who she is,” the Viscount added, tapping the side of his nose as if the whole thing was a big secret.

Julius didn’t want the Viscount to learn that he too had been interested in the attentions of Lady Olive. Not being a dishonest man, he decided he wouldn’t tell mistruths, but nor would he give anything away in that regard.

“I am sure, Lord Fergus, the lucky woman in question will be more than happy to have gained your admiration,” Julius replied. “You are, after all, a Viscount, and that is a tempting title for any lady seeking a husband.”

At first, he regretted insinuating such a thing. But he recalled the words of Lady Adelia when she’d said as much. She’d made it known that the suitor she had in mind had wealth and good connections. Titles were attractive to many ladies in society, as they increased their chances of marrying into wealth.

“Nonsense, I do not believe that she’s interested in me for my title,” the Viscount countered, with a small chuckle. “She’s a decent woman and holds many strengths, who, if truth be told, most likely doesn’t need a man in her life. So, I must convince her to take me as her husband.”

“Husband, ye say?” Laird Hector called out as he took his shot on the snooker table. “I hadn’t realised things had become that serious with you, Fergus, old friend.”

“Yes, that is what I hope for. I’ve had enough of being all alone in my mansion,” the Viscount replied, his pen still in hand as he stared at the snooker table, looking deep in thought. “I never thought I would marry again because I loved my Felicity with all I had in my heart. But it appears that my

love has been renewed and now I am ready to take another lady into my life. You must understand what it is like to be alone, Mr Burke, being a bachelor yourself?”

Julius desperately wished he could walk away before he said something out of turn, but he liked the Viscount, and he stayed the course. “I have my horses, Viscount, they fill a void and keep my mind occupied.”

“Well, you never know lad,” Laird Hector interrupted. “We have a ball tonight, so there will be ample time to woo yourself a lady before you leave.”

“I agree with Hector,” the Viscount said. “You must consider finding yourself a lady, for a man is twice as strong with a lady by his side, is he not?”

Julius avoided the questions as he leaned in to take his turn at the table. He took his time lining up the cue stick with the coloured balls, in the hope that Viscount would forget he’d asked it.

“Now then, I’ve added some more choice words, so listen to this then?” the Viscount said, tapping his pen on the desk. “*I would like us to meet up, on the balcony once again. Only there, may I put to you an important question. A question that can only be spoken, and not written on paper,*” he quoted, reeling off the words for the letter. “I’m not so sure that I want to propose in the letter itself. It doesn’t seem romantic enough for my liking. Call me old-fashioned if you will, but there you have it.”

“Ah, but by letter, it will give her time to think up the right words to refuse you, eh, old man?” Laird Hector laughed, and all in the room knew he was teasing his friend.

“There will be a wedding, of that I am certain, my friend. There is a special connection between us,” the Viscount insisted, not the least bit offended at his host’s insult.

The Viscount went to stand up, folding his piece of paper to put in his jacket pocket. “Prepare yourselves for an invitation to my wedding because I will be offering myself to this woman, one way or another,” he said, with a knowing smile.

“That’s my man,” Lord Hector said, waving his cue stick about in joy. “The handsome Viscount and his beautiful bride, I cannot wait.”

“Oh, and best be keeping this to ourselves,” the Viscount said. “I don’t want her to be hearing of my marriage proposal before I’ve asked her, now do I?”

“Your secret is safe with us, Fergus,” Laird Hector assured him. “The

young man here will not be saying a word, will ye now, lad?"

All eyes focused on Julius, and he felt the urge to tell the Viscount there and then, that he too loved the woman that he sought. But what right did he have to spoil things for the couple?

"I wish you all the best, Lord Fergus," Julius said, but he was unable to smile, given that his disappointment was gut-wrenching. "Though, I must tell you there is doubt on my attending your wedding. Once I'm on duty, I'll likely not be able to get any leave to attend."

"That will be a bitter disappointment, Mr Burke," the Viscount said, placing his hand on Julius's shoulder. "You were the one who rescued my future bride from the bitter snow. If not for you, she may not have survived. I know that she feels gratitude, and knows the truth of things. Please, Mr Burke, reconsider. Do your best to come and see us again, on our happiest of all days."

Julius felt uneasy as he wondered if Lady Olive had only been paying him attention out of her gratitude for what he'd done.

Anyway, he was telling the truth, the army didn't allow its soldiers to do as they pleased. But then, he wasn't a soldier, was he? No doubt, he could manage to attend a friend's wedding, but he knew it was all a ruse. In truth, he didn't want to see Lady Olive marry the Viscount.

"Now, now, Fergus, let's wait and see if the lady agrees first, before ye go booking dates for your wedding day," Laird Hector pointed out.

"Given all the signs I've been receiving, I'm sure that the lady doth love me," the Viscount said with drama in his voice as if he was acting in a play. "I could do as they do on stage, and go down on one knee. She would like that, do you not both agree? What lady doesn't like theatrics?"

"Aye, she'll most likely love it, but prepare yourself for a disappointing answer," Lord Hector insisted. "If it were me, I would marry you in an instant because I know that you are a good man. But she does not know you that well, does she? So, I put it to you that the lady may refuse, the first time around."

The Viscount looked shocked, clearly thinking about Laird Hector's words. Julius moved away from them, by taking his turn on the snooker table and pretending not to listen.

If the conversation went on much longer, he knew that he would confess to his own feelings too. Not that there was much to admit to, but he too had thought that Lady Olive had an interest in him. If the Viscount believed the

same thing, then it must mean that he had been mistaken regarding himself. And why should a woman such as Lady Olive have an interest in life with a veterinary surgeon, when she could live with the wealth of a viscount?

His bath would be ready soon, but he'd decided to linger on in the hope of speaking with Laird Hector alone. But the Viscount remained while he battled out his uncertainties. Julius was sure that no lady would refuse a marriage proposal from the Viscount. He was indeed an attractive, rich man. A little older perhaps than the lovely Lady Olive, as her mother had pointed out. But what would that matter? He was still young of mind.

Julius had befriended the Viscount over his short time at the castle, and he liked him very much. For that reason, he would keep his miseries to himself, while in the presence of Lord Fergus. The Viscount didn't need to know how Julius felt because this was not a competition. If Lady Olive had already written to him, as the Viscount had stated, then she had already made up her mind.

He only wished that he'd not misread her actions as he had. When they had sang carols together and danced to the flute, they'd laughed so much that he was sure she liked him. But that wasn't enough, was it?

"I must take my leave," the Viscount announced at last. "What a good idea a bath is, Mr Burke, I will order one too. I must be at my very best for the ball if I am to propose to my wonderful lady."

Julius nodded with a half-smile, unable to show much enthusiasm for the Viscount's excitement of what lay ahead for him later that night. All Julius wanted to do was get as far away from the ball as possible.

He went to sit down so that Laird Hector could take his turn on the snooker table, but he couldn't help his low mood. He'd believed that he'd found love. Lady Olive was a woman he could have spent the rest of his life with, of that, he was sure.

If only they'd shared that kiss, at least he would have had that much.

If only he had managed to convince her of his love, perhaps she might have considered him then.

But no, his heart felt empty and his spirits down. As soon as the Viscount was clear of the room, Julius intended to speak with his host.

It was time to move on whether he wanted to or not.

CHAPTER 27

“Now then, Mr Burke, are ye going to tell me what it is that’s getting ye down so much?” Laird Hector asked him after the Viscount left the snooker room.

“Am I that obvious?” Julius stated, sharing half a smile.

“To me, yes. I should’na worry about the Viscount too much. He’s busy with his own issues to notice anyone else’s,” Laird Hector replied, putting down his snooker cue and going over to sit with Julius.

“I am of a mind to leave the castle before the ball this evening,” Julius began. “And before you object, I have my reasons.”

The two men sat in silence for a while. Julius mulled over his miseries, not even noticing that his host hadn’t asked him why.

“It seems to me, lad, that now’s a time to have friends around ye, not to go running away from them,” Laird Hector advised. “Tell me, Mr Burke, do you know many at your new camp?”

Julius shook his head, “No. It’s the nature of such bases, that personnel move on and change all the time. I could visit one month and make acquaintances, then six months later there will be a different set of people there. They move on to go to war. Those lucky enough to survive will return back a few months later.”

“And you will remain on the camp permanently now, I suppose?” his host asked.

Julius nodded, “I’m not a soldier, and I’ve seen my fair share of the frontline for now. I suppose I’m due some respite from it. But you’re right, to begin with, I won’t know anyone.”

“Then I insist that ye stay on at the castle where ye do at least know a few

people,” Laird Hector said, in his usual booming voice. “At least here, lad, ye can go off and sulk in ye room, if ye must. And then ye can share dinner with friends. Come now, Mr Burke, ‘tis a time of year to be joyful, not melancholy.”

“I can’t seem to get into that kind of mood, Laird,” Julius replied. I’m afraid that my heart’s been crushed, and my dreams shattered. I don’t wish to burden you with my woes, and I’d only spoil the mood of those around me.”

“Right then, lad, ye be forcin’ me to give ye a talk, but I’ll be doin’ it for your own good,” Laird Hector said, looking at Julius with wisdom in his eyes. “Are ye to listen to me?”

“Of course, I will, Laird. I would never disrespect you,” Julius said, feeling a little hurt that his host would think him so lacking in courtesy.

“Very well,” Laird Hector replied, leaning in to place his hand on Mr Burke’s shoulder. “I will say to ye that ye should not give up on love so easily,” he began, and Julius knew then, that his host had guessed what was bothering him. “What’s more, love that’s hard to win over, is all the more appreciated when you do manage to get it. But first, ye need to admit that you’re in love. What’s more, don’t you be thinking that I’m wanting my niece to marry an old man like the Viscount. He might be my friend, but I do believe you are the one she wants.”

Julius was surprised by the Laird’s honesty, and he was about to ask for more advice when Lady Flora entered the games room.

“Do tell me that I heard you right?” she questioned her husband. “Did you say that my niece might be marrying the Viscount?”

Julius hated to hear those words, but they would soon be on everyone’s tongue anyway once Lady Olive received his proposal.

“Aye, ye heard right, wife,” the Laird answered. “He’s been penning a letter of proposal to her because it turns out that she wrote to him first.”

“I thought that was all about Lady Adelia?” she remarked.

Both Julius and the Laird looked baffled at such a suggestion.

“Who in their right mind would wish to marry your sister-in-law?” Laird Hector asked laughing.

“No, no this will not do,” Lady Flora tutted, ignoring her husband’s joke. “We must stop him at once. I will not have my niece marry an old man, even if he is our very good friend.”

Laird Hector nodded in agreement, “And there was me thinking those exact same words.”

Even Julius managed to break into a smile, seeing a little amusement in the messy situation.

“Don’t stand there grinning, the pair of you,” Lady Flora retorted. “Get your thinking caps on, we have a proposal to stop.”

“Don’t embarrass Lord Fergus on account of me though,” Julius said, with a little more seriousness in his tone. “I do believe that Lady Adelia approves of the match, so I would not wish to interfere in a family matter.”

Lady Flora glared at Julius, and he knew he’d offended her by the scowl on her face.

“Am I not family?” she asked, looking a little insulted. “I will be putting over my opinion on this matter, at once, I can assure you of that. And why are you not fighting harder for her heart, might I ask?”

Julius felt a slither of shame that he’d shown no fighting spirit in the matter. “The last thing I want to do is offend the Viscount, he is an honourable gentleman. And nor can I cause Lady Adelia any more grief, she already thinks of me as uncouth. As for Lady Olive, I thought that I made my feelings for her obvious, but alas I am not to her liking, so it appears. I have no more to offer. “

His little speech was not going down well, he could tell by the stern gaze from Lady Flora.

“I see, and there was me thinking that you loved my niece,” she threw back at him.

This was a new side to Lady Flora, one he had not seen before, she was usually always very convivial.

“I cannot offer a mansion, Lady Flora, I live in a garrison,” Julian argued. “Nor am I wealthy. Besides, I overheard a conversation over this subject, and I can know that I am not the first choice for Lady Olive.”

Lady Flora had taken the spare seat in the games room, and as she flushed, Julius could see she was fuming.

“What is it that you thought you heard, young man, spit it out?” she demanded. “I will get to the truth of this, and before the ball tonight.”

“I heard Lady Adelia was explaining to her daughter all the advantages of marrying the Viscount,” Julius admitted. Though he wasn’t willing to share how he heard the conversation.

Julius didn’t wish anyone to know that he’d hidden away on the balcony, from Lady Adelia. At the time he’d done it for the sake of Lady Olive. Now though, his thoughts were that she must have been too embarrassed to be seen

with him by her mother.

“How very odd this all is,” Lady Flora mumbled to herself.

“Aye, the lad wants to leave before the ball. But then, I’m of the opinion that he’ll be running away from it all,” Laird Hector said, managing to get a word in.

“I tend to agree with my husband,” Lady Flora nodded. “Who is to say what and whom my niece desires?”

Julius shifted on his seat in discomfort, he’d never wanted to make his fondness for Lady Olive into common gossip. Yet now, here he was, embroiled in some kind of competition with the Viscount.

“I respect Lady Olive too much to put her in the position of having to choose between myself and Lord Fergus,” he pointed out, defending his decision. “As Lady Adelia made obvious, Miss Olive will be better off with the security of the Viscount’s wealth and status. For goodness’ sake, I care for animals, and at the end of my day, I reek of them too. That is no life for a lady, and her mother would be outraged.”

At that, there was a pause from the heated conversation in the room, as each of them pondered on the situation.

“You do not paint your life very well,” Lady Flora said, looking at him but now with pity in her pale blue eyes. “I do not believe that my niece cares for the wealth that the Viscount could give her.”

“But nor will she care for the stench of horse manure, which would be her lot in my life, Lady Flora,” Julius argued. “Can you not see how little I have to offer, in comparison to the Viscount?”

“I thought that you loved her, Mr Burke?” Laird Hector asked. “And one thing I do know that is certain about my niece, she is looking for love.”

“I like her a great deal, Laird Hector, but I believe that love is something that grows between two people over time,” Julius replied. “My heart aches to be with her, but I cannot know if that is love. I have never felt this way about a woman before, that I do know. But marrying me would be a step down for Lady Olive, and Lady Adelia seeks a far better match for her daughter.”

Lady Flora offered him a nod in response, and Julius assumed that she understood his point of view. He was not one to force himself on others; he’d been raised to be a patient man, not a brute.

“You are from a family of wealth, Mr Burke, and should not put yourself down in such a way,” Lady Flora pointed out.

“It is true that I have led a privileged life. But I have no noble titles, only

academic ones that I've earned in my studies," Julius argued. "A doctorate will not give me a mansion and vast lands."

"I say again, I do not believe that my niece cares for such things," Lady Flora countered, determined to make Julius stay. "Besides, you may not hold any fancy English titles, but my niece will keep hers anyway because of her first husband's status. So don't you be thinking that you're taking anything away from her in that regard. It is my belief that she seeks love for her next union, not mansions and riches. Promise me that you will not leave before the ball, Mr Burke. You deserve to enjoy the festivities, not to sit in your army lodgings all alone."

Even the Laird was looking at him with pleading eyes. How could he desert such kind people who'd opened up their home to him?

"Very well, but I cannot stay on for much longer," Julius agreed, though he dreaded the ball.

"Excellent," Laird Hector chuckled. "We'll be keeping ye so busy that ye won't have time to be sulking."

"I do not sulk," Julius retorted.

"Yes, you do," the Laird claimed.

"Stop it, both of you," Lady Flora interrupted.

"I must be on my way. My bath should be almost ready by now," Julius said, glad of an excuse to get away from the discussions.

"Yes, and do dress in your finest, Mr Burke," Lady Flora suggested. "There will be many a pretty lady at my ball and much dancing to be had."

Julius bowed his head and stood to leave. Once out of the games room, his dire mood returned. He'd never been one to push himself upon others, least of all ladies. Perhaps he would never marry, as his horses were his life, and what fine lady would want that in a husband? Lady Adelia was right, a farmer's daughter would most likely be the perfect match for him and not a lady such as Miss Olive. She deserved the very best in life, and the Viscount could offer her that. It was clear to him that she had only showed any affection towards him because he had rescued them from the carriage accident. But she owed him nothing. The sooner he was out of her life, then she could get on with courting a gentleman of her equal status.

CHAPTER 28

Flora and her husband remained in the games room after Julius left.

“I suppose you’ll be planning something in that head of yours, will ye?” Laird Hector asked. “I can tell by that scheming look on yer face.”

“Tell me, Hector, why did you assume that the Viscount was proposing to our niece?” she asked, looking puzzled.

Hector scratched at his bushy, ginger beard as she waited for him to answer. “It was the letter!” he said, pointing his finger in the air as if he’d remembered something important, which he had.

“A letter, you say?” Flora nodded. “And what do you know about this letter?”

“It was from Lady Adelia,” he answered smugly because he was confident that he had the right answer. “Yes, that was it, she was giving her approval for Fergus to approach her daughter.”

“Are you sure of its contents?” Flora continued with her questions, determined to get to the bottom of the mysterious letter.

“Erm...no, I don’t suppose I am, but there’s no way Fergus would be proposing to Lady Battle-axe, now is there?” Laird Hector chuckled at the very thought.

Flora poked at his arm, “Don’t call my sister-in-law by that name,” she complained. “Only I am allowed to insult her. Though I would agree, she does have a habit of adding titles to her family line. By the Gods, Hector, I’ll not allow that woman to marry my lovely darling niece off to Fergus!”

Flora’s raised her voice as her temper grew, turning red in the face with angst.

“Calm down, will ye, my love,” Hector tried. “All we need to do is

encourage our young friend, Mr Burke, to have more confidence in his approach. Our Olive is bound to choose him over Fergus.”

“But what if the letter was from Olive?” Flora questioned, unsure of herself. “What if Olive is taken by Fergus, and seeks his courtship? We cannot be seen to be interfering in her love life, can we?”

“You bet that we can, wife,” Hector replied as he stood from his chair to pace the room. “I’ll not have our beautiful niece wasted on an old man. She’s already been through an arranged marriage to an old man with a title. Look where that got her; into widowhood, that’s where!”

Flora could see that her husband was irritated, and there was nothing worse than a Scottish Laird in a rage.

“Now it is you who should calm yourself, husband,” she said, sighing at the conundrum, which neither of them seemed to know how to resolve.

“We’ve known Fergus since our honeymoon in Edinburgh,” Flora stated. She joined her husband in pacing the room, as she put on her thinking cap. “Do we tell him outright that we disapprove? Or do we speak with Olive and steer her toward young Mr Burke?”

Her husband shook his head with displeasure, “I don’t think we should be interfering, my love. Fergus is our friend and he’s a very considerate man. If Olive agrees to his proposal, then I know he’ll take good care of her. He’ll do his very best to make her happy.”

Flora didn’t bother to turn her head at her husband’s comment, instead, she pretended she hadn’t heard him.

“What we need to do is get hold of that letter he’s writing,” she mumbled. “It might give us a better idea of what’s going on, and we could stop it from being delivered. That would put a stop to the meeting.”

Laird Hector stood up, staring after her with his mouth open in dismay. “We cannot go around poking our noses into the private affairs of our good friend, woman. Be reasonable in this matter. Besides, do you think that Fergus will give in at the first hurdle? He’ll only send another letter.”

She turned to look at him with mischief in her eyes but soon relented when she saw his face wore a worried frown. Flora approached her husband and stroked his ruddy cheek before he took her in his arms.

“Oh, what are we to do, Hector?” she uttered, sighing as she fought back the worry.

“Not interfere, that’s what I say anyway,” he replied, and she knew that he was right.

Loosening the arms that were wrapped around her tightly, she leaned back to look up at his chubby face. “You might not be the most handsome of husbands, but you are the wisest,” she told him, smiling with pride.

“Whatever can ye mean, wife?” Hector asked with a wide-eyed stare. “There’ll not be another in my clan as handsome as me,” he called out, thumping his chest.

They laughed together, knowing their bond to one another was as strong as it could ever be.

“You will always be handsome to me, husband,” Flora chuckled, leaning into him again as he hugged her with a single arm this time. “And you are right, we should not interfere, but yet—”

“Ahhh...there ye go again with ye mischief, woman,” he accused. “Why don’t ye speak to the wee lass, if ye must do anything? Try and find out what her intentions are. To be frank with you, knowing the wee lass as I do, I doubt Fergus would be her preference over Julius. It’ll all be that old battle-axe’s doing, mark my words.”

For a few moments, the couple remained silent as they stood by the snooker table, in their gentle embrace.

“No, I don’t wish to influence Olive in her choice of husband,” Flora said, deciding that it was not her business.

“Well, ye know that her mother will be doing plenty of stirring in the pot?” Hector implied.

“Hmmm...yes, she will,” Flora nodded, pulling away from her husband’s arm. “There you go again with that Scottish wisdom of yours. It’s plain to see why you were chieftain to your clan.”

“Aye, well that means nothing much anymore. I suppose, now I think on it, we should at least equal Lady Adelia’s actions,” Hector advised.

“Yes, you are absolutely right, husband,” Flora said, with relish. “Seeing as she is taking the side of Fergus, we shall take the side of Mr Burke. We will do all we can to push him into staying on longer. Then, we’ll stir the pot further by making sure they are in each other’s company, as much as we can force the situation upon them.”

Hector burst out into one of his rumbustious laughing fits and Flora loved him for it. He lit up any room with his jovial nature, how lucky she felt to be married to a man with such a happy character.

As she was about to speak, a tap on the door brought Angus into the room. Their castle butler would never disturb them unless it was necessary.

“My apologies, Laird and Lady, but there’s nothin’ but havoc in the kitchens,” he informed Lady Flora. “Ye should be gettin’ down there or you’ll be having no ball this evening.”

“Oh Lord, you’re right Angus,” Flora panicked in her forgetfulness. “What was I thinking? Cook will be in a flap by now, she hates cooking large quantities of food. I had better go, Hector, and thank you for your support. I know that you love my niece as much as I do.”

Flora left the room straight away, heading towards the kitchen stairwell at speed, when her niece stopped her.

“What is all the noise about, Aunt Flora?” Olive’s voice came to her as she passed by the drawing room.

“Oh, my dear, it’ll be the maids running away from Jessy’s lashing tongue,” Flora explained, sharing a soft smile. “Fear not, I am on my way down there now. By the way, how was your ballgown fitting?”

“It is a beautiful dress, Aunt Flora, but I fear that I have upset poor Mr Julius,” Olive told her with downturned eyes.

Flora knew she didn’t have time to comfort her niece because she was needed in the kitchen below. She needed to think something up to soothe her straight away.

“Why don’t you go and have a lay down? It’s going to be a long night after all,” she suggested. “Once I’ve made sure all is in order with the arrangements for the ball, I too will be taking a nap.”

Her niece nodded in agreement, “Yes, a rest would do me some good,” she agreed. “But if I can help lighten your burden at all, I will gladly assist you, Aunt Flora.”

“No, my dear, all it needs is a few words in the right ears, and all will be settled once again,” Flora assured her worried-looking niece. “I will arrange for a light meal to be delivered to everyone’s rooms. That way we can all have a restful afternoon. For tonight, we shall all be on our feet and will need every ounce of stamina we can muster.”

“I wonder if I should go and speak with Mr Julius first, and apologise for ___”

“Goodness me, my dear, unless you want to expose your eyes to a man in all his glory, I do suggest strongly that you stay away from his room,” Aunt Flora warned. “He is bathing, I do believe.”

Flora was delighted to see a wide-eyed stare in her niece’s eyes, followed by a chuckle on her flushed cheeks.

“Of course!” Miss Olive declared. “I am afraid that Mr Julius froze because I forced him to hide on the balcony. Mother came into the drawing room to see me,” her niece explained, and the look of resignation had returned to her lovely face.

“Ahhhh...I see...he did appear a little deflated when last I spoke with him,” Flora informed her niece.

“Oh, Aunt Flora, what will I do? He overheard Mother discussing courtship with Lord Fergus,” her niece said in a hushed voice. “And now he is convinced that I am considering a partnership with the Viscount, which I am not.”

At least that was news was good to Flora’s ears; her niece wasn’t looking for any courtship with Lord Fergus.

“All the more reason for you to go and have that nap,” Flora encouraged. “Once you are refreshed, you can approach this situation with a renewed vigour in your soul.”

Still, her niece looked melancholy, “Is something else worrying you, my dear?”

“I fear that Mr Julius will not stay on for the ball,” Miss Olive replied, her eyes downcast again, and her mood not far behind.

“Well, in that matter I can reassure you that he will be attending the ball,” Flora said cheerfully. “Your uncle and I talked him into it, and beyond that, we must work to keep him here, so that you may work your charms on him.”

Flora felt a deep satisfaction as her niece gave her a light hug and a large smile.

“Thank you, Aunt Flora, and you must thank Uncle Hector for me too, for talking Mr Julius into staying,” Miss Olive was so happy she was almost jumping up and down. “I must go now; I want to look my best for the ball.”

And with those words, Miss Olive dashed off towards her room, and Flora felt that there was hope yet. All she needed to do now was go and calm down her cook, or there would be no feast tonight.

CHAPTER 29

Julius retired to his room and took take a light meal in there. He needed time alone to think. He hoped he wouldn't regret staying for the ball, but his hosts had insisted, arguing that it would be better than being alone at the barracks. To some extent, he thought that a valid argument, although he had no problem being alone, he was used to it in his line of work. It was only because it was Christmastide that he'd decided to stay on.

What he was going to do when he saw Miss Olive in the arms of the Viscount, he didn't know. Perhaps he'd keep himself busy dancing with the other young ladies and try not to look Miss Olive's way.

The main hall for dancing, and other big events, hadn't been opened while he'd been there, so he'd never seen it. It was on the same floor as the drawing room, making it easy for guests to get to it from the main door. Guests could mill in and out of the ballroom. Some were seated in the drawing room, though the parlour room had been empty when he'd last popped his head in there. In the ballroom there were a couple of double doors that led onto a large balcony, stretching between the two doorways. The doors had been left open, allowing air to keep the hall a little fresher.

Two huge hearths burned away, containing flaming log fires, lending heat to the room too. When he entered the ballroom, he was surprised by how many guests were already present. He didn't much care for large crowds, but these were the friends of his hosts, so he would make an effort to swap pleasantries and enjoy their company.

Spotting Laird Hector, who was standing in the reception area to greet the new arrivals, he headed in his direction.

"Ah! Mr Burke, make yourself at home among our friends," Laird Hector

greeted him with a manly pat on his back. “And make the effort to dance with my niece at some point, will you?”

“I would like to Laird Hector,” he replied, ending up shaking hands with people who he’d never met before, as they passed him by. “But if she’s in the company of the Viscount, then I refuse to disturb her. I must say, Laird, I had no idea there would be so many guests, but then I hadn’t seen the size of your ballroom.”

“You know my wife and me, we don’t like to do anything small,” Laird Hector chuckled as he stopped to speak with a new arrival.

“I thought the roads were still almost impassable, how are they all getting here?” Julius asked, shivering at the chill that was coming through the open double doorway.

“Bah, lad, a bit of snow never stops a Scotsman or woman from getting out and about,” Laird Hector told him. “Most folk will have ridden their horses here. There’ll not be many carriages about in the winter months.”

“But the ladies in their gowns, how do they mount a horse?” Julius asked with added curiosity.

“Nay lad, ye don’t know how hardy we Scots can be,” Laird Hector said. “A Scotsman will never miss a party, and we learn to ride a horse as soon as we can walk.”

“Now I’m sure there you jest,” Julius said. “I had better leave you to your greetings, I can see how busy you are.”

He turned to make his way back through the crowd of guests, nodding and smiling at people as they acknowledged him. Though there was only one person that he sought out. But when he found Lady Olive, she was surrounded by other gentlemen. It was no surprise though because she was, as far as he was concerned, the Belle of the Ball in her shimmering golden gown.

He decided to watch her from a distance as he didn’t want to be part of the clamour around her. It was clear to him that she was enjoying the attention of the men. Frequently she burst into laughter, and her face had a happy glow about it. A lump in his throat caused him to swallow hard as he felt a wave of jealousy over how much she enjoyed other men’s company.

But who am I to say Lady Olive cannot enjoy the attentions of other men? With this thought, he rebuked himself for feeling so envious. If he was going to have any chance of winning her over, he had to be honest with her, and tell her how he felt.

I should take the bull by the horns and ask for her hand in marriage, that is what I should do, he told himself. But she doesn't know me well enough, how can I expect her to even consider a proposal from me? She will never want to live life in the barracks. Damn it, a woman like her needs more than that, and the Viscount can give her everything that I cannot.

His conflicting thoughts held him back. A part of him wanted Lady Olive Brent to become a part of his life. He even thought he had sensed the odd occasion when she made him feel as if she felt the same way about him. The kiss they'd almost shared; yes, she'd seemed as disappointed as he had been when it didn't happen. Their walks together were always so merry, and she never resisted when he went to stand close by her.

Are they not signs that she is fond of me too? I love her, and that is all I know, he mused as he caught her eye.

Once she'd seen him, he began to make his way through the throng toward her. Despite that she was still surrounded by other gentlemen entertaining her, he decided that he'd wade through and focus only on Lady Olive.

"May I have the next dance, Lady Olive?" he asked her the moment he arrived by her side.

"I would be honoured, Mr Julius," she replied in acceptance, and he led her toward the dance floor.

As they arrived at the floor, they took up their positions to wait for the music to begin.

"I'm surprised you haven't got a full dancing card, with so many gentlemen at your attention," he dared to mention.

"Do I detect a touch of jealousy there, Mr Julius?" she teased, though she did so with a kind smile. "Nay, we were only discussing my uncle, would you believe?" she pointed out.

They were soon moving along with the other dancers, swaying to the merry ditty played by a small orchestra.

"You dance very well, Lady Olive," he complimented her as soon as they joined up again, in the steps of the dance routine.

"And you too, Mr Julius," she replied, lending him one of her radiant smiles.

The longer the dance went on, the more confident Julius felt, and each time they came together he spoke with her. He hadn't attended many balls of late but knew enough to get by. His mother had ensured he'd received long

lessons on the dance floor as a young man, but next to Lady Olive, he felt a little clumsy. In comparison, Olive moved with such grace that it was like dancing with a swan. In his eyes, she was perfect, her movements were sublime with seemingly little effort. In such awe of her, he was blind to all that went on around them.

Finally, the dance ended, and they were breathless at all the effort the dance had demanded of them.

“That was wonderful, Mr Julius,” Lady Olive laughed as he led her away from the dance floor.

“Are you wishing to return to the same group of friends?” he asked. It was his hope that she would not want to go back to the gathering of young men who had surrounded her.

“No, no, I would like to stay in your company, Mr Julius,” she said, surprising him. “Are you enjoying the ball?”

“All the more, now that I have danced with you, Lady Olive,” he replied, and he meant it too.

“I am so glad that you decided not to leave,” she said, raising her voice above the ballroom clatter.”

“Well, the truth is that I would rather be here with you, dancing, than in the company of soldiers in a mess room,” he admitted.

“Shall we make our way into the smaller parlour, and enjoy some refreshments?” she asked, hooking her arm in his as he led her through the guests in the ballroom.

The parlour was much more peaceful, and a few of the guests were seated in there, enjoying a quiet moment.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” he asked, and she nodded in agreement.

They walked together towards a long table, where Angus was pouring glasses of wine. He handed two full glasses to them, filled with a fruity, red wine.

“Let’s sit over there,” she said, pointing to an empty small table with two chairs around it.

He nodded and led her over, taking out the chair so that she could sit.

“There, now this is nice and quiet,” she mumbled as he took the seat opposite her. “I wanted to speak with you, but not in the ballroom where one needs to shout to be heard.”

“Yes, it is a little rowdy in there,” he nodded in agreement, wondering if

this would be a good time to proclaim his love for her. “It feels much cosier in this room, but then your aunt and uncle always think of everything.”

“They are good hosts,” she agreed. “I saw my aunt earlier, going around with a tray of food. When I asked her why she was serving her guests, she said the maids were far too busy in the kitchens. She is a great mentor to me. Although I know all the ways of English etiquette, there is much to learn of the Scottish ways.”

“So, you like Scotland enough to stay here then?” he asked her, building up the courage to make his proposal.

“I adore it,” she answered with enthusiasm. “I am to stay on longer than Mother, and see out the winter here. Much the same as the Viscount, I understand he stays at the castle every winter.”

And there it was, the mention of the Viscount, it was enough to dampen his hopes. Had Lord Fergus already asked her, or was that still to come? He hadn’t heard any rumours, but then why should he? He wasn’t family, he was only a passing guest. Much the same as he was for Lady Olive, a passing acquaintance.

Then he recalled the words of Laird Hector and Lady Flora, encouraging him to stay on and dance with their niece. Such conflict was he suffering, that now he’d decided that he would not give up all hope. He would tell Lady Olive of his love for her. And then, he would ask for her hand in marriage, and all while they sat in this room. Why not?

It was a celebratory time of year, and he felt most content in the company of Lady Olive. It had not taken long for him to fall in love with her. And now it was up to him to make sure he didn’t let the opportunity of being with her forever, pass him by.

CHAPTER 30

“I wanted to speak with you, Mr Julius,” Lady Olive said to him, her tone animated. “As I have already mentioned, I am thrilled that you stayed on for the ball.”

The blazing fire in the hearth lent a cosiness to the parlour room. A few people were sitting around chatting, in much the same manner as they were. Julius guided them to a small settee in a secluded corner, that no one had yet taken. It was a small one, forcing them to sit close to one another, side by side.

He thought that Lady Olive looked excited over something, so decided that he’d better let her speak first.

“I too would like to speak with you over a certain matter,” he said, looking at her as his stomach rolled over. “Being a gentleman, I will allow a lady to go first.”

Once Lady Olive finished with what she had to say, he had every intention of proposing to her, but he always practised patience. It was something he’d learned to do when working with animals.

“You look as if you have mischief in your eyes,” she chuckled at him. “Yes, it is true that I am a lady, and would allow a gentleman to go first if circumstances were normal.”

“And you feel that circumstances are not normal?” he asked, a little dismayed at her statement as if something was troubling her. “Know that you call upon me if you need to, Lady Olive. I would not have you vexed in any way.”

“No, no, you misunderstand, Mr Julius. I am not vexed, but what I have to say is important for me, for us, I mean...well, it is significant enough to

warrant my going first.”

Julius did not think that she appeared upset over anything, so he nodded back at her, taking a sip from his glass of wine. It was clear that she needed to say her piece, but soon, very soon, he hoped his question would change both their lives, and for the better.

Then again, would she consider herself as *marrying down*? Certainly, Lady Adelia would think so. Julius found his mind jumping around in confusion. But yes, he would still go through with it because it was Christmastide, a time of joy, not misery.

“Very well, Mr Julius,” she began, her hands crossed on her knee as she looked up at him. “I felt it necessary to let you know that I will not be accepting any marriage proposals whatsoever at this moment in time.”

What? His eyes went wide as his heart fluttered inside his chest. Did she know of my intentions all along? Is she hinting to me that I should not waste my time or embarrass myself?

He couldn’t help the look of utter disappointment fall upon his face. Lady Olive had just battered his heart and shattered his hopes.

“You are not ready to marry again then?” he asked, his voice hoarse as he pushed out the words.

“I have told Mother of this, many times over I should add, but alas she still goes off in her own little world,” Lady Olive replied.

He watched as she glanced around the room, taking in all the celebrations that were happening around them. Others were laughing and enjoying themselves, but he had no stomach for it anymore. As he paused in his thoughts, he believed that a Christmastide in a soldier’s mess hall might not be that bad after all.

I’ve misinterpreted her behaviour towards me altogether. I was so wrong, so very wrong in my judgement, he panicked inside his mind.

When he recalled the image of her in the dance hall, she had looked quite content with the attentions from all the gentlemen surrounding her. She was telling him that she wanted no commitments, no shackles to tie her down. Lady Olive wanted the freedom to meet other gentlemen, many gentlemen, so that she could pick and choose at leisure.

What a fool I’ve been, he thought to himself.

“Do you understand what I am saying, Mr Julius?” her voice came to him, and she was looking his way with a questioning smile.

“Erm...yes...of course...” he confirmed, *harrumphing* with a cough at

the back of his throat as it felt tight, choking him.

Julius felt that there was no more to say, and he went to stand up, wondering what he was doing attending the ball in the first place. Why had he ever thought that a lady such as she would be interested in marrying him anyway?

But before he stood up all the way, he felt that he needed to have his say too. He couldn't leave without letting her know how he felt.

"It has been a great pleasure spending time with you, Lady Olive," he said, not looking at her as he too watched the others in the room. "I am only too sorry that I was not the kind of man to come up to the standards that Lady Adelia seeks for you. And it is only right that you marry a man equal to your status, if not better. Forgive me for being presumptuous, it was selfish of me."

With his last statement, he went to stand up, but Lady Olive grabbed his arm.

"No, Mr Julius, you misunderstand," she said, looking at him in confusion. "It is not because of Mother that I am not marrying again. I consider myself a woman of independence, and I came to the decision by myself."

"And I respect your decision, Lady Olive. You are a woman who knows her mind, and it is positive strength that you have," he said, trying to appear confident. Yet, inside, he felt utterly broken. "If you will excuse me. I was thinking that if all these guests could make it to the ball, then I should be able to get through too. Good evening to you, Lady Olive."

He didn't give her the opportunity to reply, once standing he marched away, leaving her seated on the settee.

What could I do anyway? All the reasons I had about not being a man of means were true. Such thoughts spiralled through his mind once again. It isn't that I don't have the confidence to ask you, it's more that I have nothing to offer you, but love. What is the point of that when you have men falling at your feet?

He would return to his bachelor lifestyle where he felt at ease with life. As a Yorkshire man, he was built more like a farm labourer than an athletic gentleman. That was why he'd always felt clumsy when around the gentry.

The more he mulled over his thoughts as he headed towards his room, he realised that he'd never even considered marriage before meeting Lady Olive. It hadn't been something he'd toyed with much, being among men all the

time. It was time to return to his life and stop dallying with people he wasn't suited to.

Though, if he was honest with himself, he'd only stayed on at the ball to ask her to marry him. What a blockhead he'd been. He might as well be on his way. She'd made it more than obvious that she wanted no proposals of marriage getting in her way.

At least he could console himself with the thought she wouldn't be marrying the Viscount, though it was small consolation. His mind was so churned up with the turnaround of his situation, that he marched right on up the stairway to his room without a glance at anyone. Consumed with his disappointment, he was in no mood for any farewells.

"I'm not trudging around the ballroom to find my hosts," he mumbled to himself, charging into his room. He was half-packed already and finished it off by throwing the rest of his belongings into the canvas bag.

Before he left the room, an idea occurred to him as he spotted the ink pot on the desk. Taking a few moments, he sat down to pen a letter to his hosts. It was only fair that he thank them for their generosity and kindness towards him.

He recalled that the Laird had mentioned how none of the locals used carriages in this weather. But he shook off the words, feeling confident his steeds would manage the coach anyway. Although it was nightfall, he convinced himself that if he went slow enough, they should make some headway on the roads.

Soon, he found himself in the familiar surroundings of the stables. Yes, this was where he belonged, not prancing around a ballroom with ladies and lords.

"Mr Burke?" a male voice called out, sounding surprised. "Surely you'll not be leaving us this night?" the stableboy asked as he rubbed his eyes from being disturbed in his sleep.

"Sorry lad, have I woken you?" Julius asked, feeling guilty at disturbing the servant's rest time. "Take yourself back to your bed. I can get things ready by myself. Oh, hang on," he paused, taking the folded letter from his pocket. "Can you do me a small favour and hand this to your Laird in the morning? It's only a short note thanking him because he's too busy for me to be bothering at this time of night."

"I'll be happy to help you, sir," the boy offered as he accepted the letter. "And I mean with the reining up of horses to the coach too. It's not an easy

task for a man on his own. Not even one of your mighty build.”

“No, no, back to your bed you go,” Julius laughed. “It doesn’t take strength. I can do this routine in my sleep, I’ve done it that many times before.”

The boy looked pleased to be returning to his hayloft where he slept, and he went to clamber back up the rickety ladder. “Bye then, Mr Burke, I hope you find plenty of animals to care for,” the boy called down from the loft.

As Julius began the process of gathering his horses and setting them to the coach, he smiled to himself.

“At least the animals appreciate me”, He said softly. “More than I can say for the women.”

He turned to each of his horses, speaking to them with a soft voice, promising good dry hay at the other side of their journey.

It took but an hour to be ready for the journey. Each horse wore a heavy blanket over their backs to keep out the chill from their injuries.

“The night is still young,” he mumbled, shuffling onto the high seat to drive the coach. “Perhaps the moon will be generous enough and light our way.”

In a way, it felt good to have the reins in his hands again and be setting off on his way. All he had to do now, was to convince himself to forget that he’d ever met the lovely Lady Olive. It was time to put the experience behind him altogether. He was about to begin a new life, and he needed to persuade himself that he’d made the right decision.

Of course, there were always risks when one travelled in the dark, but he brushed them aside. He had to get away from the castle and leave behind all thoughts of Lady Olive in his trail.

CHAPTER 31

Adelia had at last seen her daughter surrounded by many young gentlemen, clearly enjoying herself. Laughter had emanated from her group of admirers, and she had been all smiles. But having been busy gossiping with a group of ladies, she'd taken her eyes away from Olive for only a moment, and now she couldn't find her. Excusing herself from the ladies, she went in search of her.

As luck had it, she spotted Olive standing by the parlour door. She looked in a bit of a daze, no doubt from too much dancing, or so Adelia presumed. At the same time, she spotted the Viscount coming out of the drawing-room, and a thought came to her head.

Approaching the Viscount, he shared a huge grin with her, showing that he was pleased to see her.

"Are you having a wonderful time, Lady Adelia?" he asked. "I am glad that I found you because I was going to ask you to—"

Adelia interrupted him in her usual manner. "Lady Olive is alone and looking quite forlorn," she said, pointing to her daughter. "Do be a gentleman, Viscount, and ask her for a dance, would you?"

"Well, I was going to ask—"

"It would cheer her up, no end, I am sure," Adelia added, still disregarding the Viscount's efforts to speak.

When he didn't give her an answer, only then did she turn to look his way and give him her attention.

"Very well," he said as he also looked Lady Olive's way. "I am not one to see a lady looking so sullen. But I do have one condition, Lady Adelia," he added, raising a finger in the air at her.

“What?” Adelia declared, staring at the Viscount in annoyance. “There are no provisos to be set when dancing with a lady, what can you mean?”

The Viscount shifted uneasily on his feet. “I mean only that if I am to dance with Lady Olive, then you must take a glass of sherry with me when we are done. Besides, there is something I wish to discuss with you. Are you in agreement, Lady Adelia?”

Adelia was a little taken aback, and almost refused, but then she thought that, at last, he was going to ask about courting Olive.

“Is it not enough to be dancing with an English rose?” Adelia frowned back at him. “But I suppose we can take sherry together, that would be agreeable. Now do please go, and waste no more time.”

With a nod of his head and a welcoming smile, the Viscount set off to speak with Lady Olive. Adelia watched on, and it pleased her to see the Viscount leading her daughter toward the ballroom. She followed in their trail and was soon shocked to see Olive walking off in a different direction.

Adelia made her way over to the Viscount again. Once again he greeted her with a radiant smile. “Every time I see you, Lady Adelia, my life is alight with pleasure.”

“Yes, yes...but what happened about the dance with my daughter?” she questioned, unsure whether to apologise for her daughter’s behaviour, or be cross with the Viscount for allowing Olivia to refuse.

“Alas, Lady Olive is unwell with a headache,” the Viscount explained. To his credit, he wore a heavy look of concern in his eyes, as he turned to watch Lady Olive walk away. “She supposes it is from too much dancing, and I did not wish to press on with the matter.”

They both stood watching Lady Olive as she headed for the stairwell that would take her to her bedchamber. Adelia was frustrated that all her attempts thus far, to bring her daughter and the Viscount together, had amounted to nought.

“Will you excuse me, Lord Fergus?” Adelia asked, her voice unsure as she was at odds with what to do for the best. She didn’t want the Viscount to think her daughter was brushing him off, not when she was so sure that he was on the verge of proposing to her. “I should go and see what ailment is causing her such discomfort.”

“Ah, but do you not agree that a quiet rest in her room will be the best cure for a young lady who is exhausted from a ball?” the Viscount put to her. “Why not have that sherry with me first, so I may discuss a pressing matter

with you?”

Adelia caught his last few words, and they pleased her very much. She was curious to see what the discussion entailed. Was he to seek her permission to approach Olive with a proposal of marriage at last?

“Why...thank you, Lord Fergus,” she said, lending him her best smile. “A glass of sherry is exactly what I need to calm my nerves.”

Again, with an enthusiastic smile, he bowed his head at her as he took her hand and placed it on his arm. Now that he had her attention, he led her towards the parlour, where they could sit and talk quietly.

By coincidence, though they did not know it, they sat upon the same couch that Lady Olive and Mr Burke had taken up not so long ago. The Viscount first ensured that Lady Adelia was seated comfortably, and then he went to obtain two glasses of a fine amber sherry. On returning, only moments later, he handed one of the glasses to Adelia. She accepted it with a smile, anticipating a proposal for her daughter, at long last.

“This should not come as a shock to you, Lady Adelia,” the Viscount began, and Adelia thought that she noted a slight quiver in his voice.

This excited her, a man could not ask for a lady’s hand without some skittishness in his tone. She waited with great enthusiasm for him to request to court her daughter. To which she’d already decided that she would insist the courtship begin immediately. She looked upon his gentle face, thinking how lucky any woman would be to gain such a kind husband.

“I mean...you have shown me what it is that you want, so my request should be an expected one,” he said, speaking in riddles as he hesitated with nervous banter.

“I do believe that I know what your request is to be, Lord Fergus,” she replied, hoping to put him at ease.

“Very well...what I mean to say is...erm, ask is... Lady Adelia, will you marry me?” he announced, leaning back to show relief on his face, now that he’d finally said what he wanted to say.

“Are you out of your mind?” she called out, a little louder than she meant to, nonetheless, she was dumbfounded at his question.

The Viscount looked back at her, and for the first time, she saw genuine confusion in his gentle eyes.

“Have I offended you, Lady Adelia?” he asked, moving away a little as he shifted in his seat. “I thought that with all the encouragement you have given me, you would be as thrilled as I am, at the thought of marriage?” he

questioned.

“Whatever gave you such a hair-brained idea as that?” she asked, her eyes wide as she stared back at him.

“The...the letter you sent me,” he said as he pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket. “I have hung on to it, reading it many times over so that I would not mistake its intent. But it seems that I have.”

She took the letter from him, reading its contents with a frown knitted in her brows. “Sir, this is not my writing,” she informed him, still glaring at him with a stern expression. “Why ever did you assume it was from me?”

“Because I... I thought... I mean... I hoped that you felt the same as I do for you,” the Viscount stuttered. He was utterly taken aback by the outcome of his efforts.

“Let me look closer at that writing,” she added, pulling out a one-eye-looking glass, and moving her face nearer to the page. “I know that handwriting!” she declared. “It is on the menu plan. My goodness, Lord Fergus. You have been duped by a servant.”

It was the Viscount’s turn to raise his brows as he burst into a fit of laughter, “How cork-brained of me.”

Adelia couldn’t understand his sense of humour, “Then why do you laugh?”

“Do you know of the great writer, William Shakespeare?” he asked, chuckling with watery eyes.

“I fail to see what he has to do with anything?” she asked, puzzlement creating crows-feet around her eyes.

“Tis the Twelfth Night,” he chortled, unable to keep his merriment at bay. “A servant forges a love letter that goes on to cause mayhem among the nobility. I find it all rather amusing because that is exactly what has happened here.”

She watched him wondering why he was happy at being made a fool of. Surely, he would not put up with such mutinous servants? Adelia had every intention of reprimanding them, the lot of them.

“Tell me, Lord Fergus, are you never angry at anything? This is most unacceptable behaviour and I, for one, will not allow it to go unpunished,” she decried.

“No, no...I do not wish to do anything of the sort, Lady Adelia,” he grinned at her. “Life is far too short, well...it is for me anyway. We cannot go around getting angry at every prank played upon us. It is Christmastide, a

time for jollity and a time for forgiveness too.”

“But Lord Fergus, you cannot allow them to get away with this...it is—”

“It is what, Lady Adelia? It is a hoax, I grant you that, but it has served my needs,” he told her, taking hold of her hand in his. “You are, indeed, a nonsense kind of woman, and I have the humour to balance with a woman such as yourself. Can you not see that together, we are perfect? Shall we not still wed and enjoy the rest of our lives keeping each other company?”

Adelia was completely flummoxed and was, for probably the first time in her life, lost for words. All along it was she who the Viscount had been swooning over. And all that time she’d thought it had been her beautiful daughter. “But I am old, and set in my ways,” she tried.

“As am I. Though my ways are a little softer than yours. We are, my Lady, as different as chalk and cheese, you and I. That is why we are perfect to keep each other on our toes, do you not agree?” he asked, determined to see his proposal through.

Adelia was still a little stunned. Never had she believed that anyone would ever want to marry her? She had thought that she would die a widower. And how different the Viscount was from her late husband. Yes, she could see herself having a life with him, even with his strange sense of humour. He was a kind man and someone willing to take care of her.

“Would you kindly get us a second sherry, Lord Fergus?” she requested of him. “I find my throat is parched, and my head in a muddle.”

“I will do anything for you, Lady Adelia,” he answered, standing up to see to her needs, something he hoped he would be able to do for the rest of their lives together.

CHAPTER 32

Leaving the Viscount standing alone in the hall and giving him an excuse of having a headache, was a lie. Olive had to find Julius because she knew that she'd upset him. His whole demeanour had confused her; what had he meant when he'd said that *he had been too presumptuous*? Whatever it meant, it had made him angry with her, and she had to find him to ask why.

Her line of thought had been to tell him that she wouldn't be accepting any proposals so that it would put his mind at rest. She'd wanted to hint to him that she wouldn't be marrying the Viscount. She'd hoped that if he heard those words from her, then he might propose to her instead. Why had her announcement not pleased him?

Making her way through the castle corridors, in search of him, her head was a jumble of thoughts. Olive arrived at his bedchamber to find the door slightly ajar. She knocked a few times, and when there was no answer, she pushed the squeaky door open. Peeking her head around it, she called out his name. But a glance around the room had told her that he wasn't there. To make matters worse, she couldn't see any of his possessions either.

For a moment, she thought she'd got the wrong room. Though in her heart, she knew that wasn't the case. He'd gone. Julius had walked out of her life, and she would never see him again.

"This is all Mother's doing!" she cried out as she sat on the end of the bed. In her mind, she visioned seeing her mother with the Viscount downstairs. "Good Lord, she even ordered him to ask me to dance. Is there nothing sacred from her?"

Standing up again, she groaned at the frustration of her situation.

"That is it, Mother. I have had enough of your interference and

manipulating ways,” she growled between her teeth.

Flinging open the door, she marched out of the room to make her way back down the spiralling stone stairwell.

There was no sign of her mother or the Viscount, so she searched in the drawing room, but still nothing. She scoured the ballroom but couldn't stand the noise in there, and was quick to come back out again. Finally, she went to look in the smaller parlour, and there she found them huddled up together in a corner. They were on the same settee where she'd sat with Julius earlier.

Were they busy plotting her marriage plans, huddled up like that? Deep in conversation, they were unaware of her presence, so she headed in their direction.

As she was almost upon them, she heard the Viscount's voice. “I prefer a straightforward, no-nonsense woman who knows what she wants in life, and makes no attempt to hide her character.”

It infuriated her that he perceived her in such a way. *How dare he call me a no-nonsense woman? He knows nothing about me to make such an assumption.*

Arriving at their table, she placed herself in front of him with folded arms and anger on her face as she confronted him.

“My Lord, with all respect, I must inform you that I am not interested in any marriage proposal from you. Nor will I ever be,” she huffed. “So, you and Mother can stop all your plotting because it is not going to happen, do you understand?”

She looked from the Viscount to her mother's face, and they both looked up at her, puzzled at her outburst.

The Viscount smiled up at her as he uttered, “What makes you think I want you to marry me, young lady?”

Olive was surprised by his words; the Viscount was never one to speak so curtly.

“If I have done something to mislead you, then I sincerely apologise,” he continued, despite the dismay on her face. “You see, Lady Olive, any thoughts of marrying were not with yourself, but rather with your mother. I would hope to spend the rest of my living days with her.”

Olive was speechless. She looked from the Viscount to her mother in utter disbelief, but the smile on her mother's face told her it was true. She had never been aware that the Viscount and her mother were even in any relationship.

“How long have you two been planning this?” she asked as she started to see that she had been wrong all along.

“Oh, Lady Adelia had no idea,” the Viscount said. “She was as shocked as you are.”

In a numbed state, she once again glanced at her mother who shrugged her shoulders at her. Olive was about to ask another question when a hullabaloo out in the corridor caught her attention. Glancing at others in the parlour, all eyes were staring over at the open doorway. As she turned hers to the door, Uncle Hector came dashing into the parlour with an older man whose face was pallid.

“Give this poor man a brandy,” Laird Hector called over to a maid, as he helped the man to sit in a chair. “Now take a sip of this, and when you feel ready, tell us what it is you have seen, man.”

Her uncle’s concern for the poor man, who looked in shock, was genuine. Olive made her way to stand by her uncle’s side and see if she could help.

“I tell ye, I’ve had the scare of me life,” he began. “I was riding to the castle on old Nell when this devilish apparition appeared outta nowhere. My poor old horse, she’ll never be the same,” he said as the glass of brandy shook with his trembling hand. “At first, I thought I was having one of those illusions that you can have in the brightness of the snow, but nay, it was real enough. Four huge horses, they came outta nowhere, bearing down on me. I couldna see them too well in the dark, but I swear they were all covered in red scars like they were beasts from hell.”

“Uncle Hector, they sound like Mr Julius’s horses,” Olive called out, panic set into her voice. “What is it, what has happened to them?”

“Well, the horses galloped passed me, and that’s when I realised it was pulling a big, square coach. It went flying past so fast I could only see its shape. Then I heard an almighty crash, and when I looked back it was careening off the road. They must have hit a patch of ice because the whole caboodle went over,” the old man paused before continuing. “Conditions are bleak out there. No one should be out with a carriage. Ye cannie see the road proper, under all that snow. The coach, the horses, the entire lot ran into a ditch, a big one at that. I went back to see if there was anythin’ I could do, but what could I do on my own? That’s when I decided to ride here as fast as old Nell could carry me.”

“I wasn’t even aware that Mr Burke had left the castle. I donna understand it,” Laird Hector said, looking puzzled at his niece. “Are ye sure

that he was the rider of the coach, Olive?”

“His belongings are gone from his room,” she replied, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. “Look around you, Uncle, he is not here, or we would know. I am sure that I have upset him too.”

“I see,” her uncle replied as he seemed to grasp the situation. Taking charge, he called out for everyone’s attention. “I want all the menfolk to grab their coats. It could be that we’ll be needed urgently outside, to dig out our friend and his horses.”

“I need to help, Uncle Hector,” Olive pleaded. “I must be there for Julius.”

“If the carriage has slipped on the ice, it will need brute strength to sort it out,” her uncle explained, looking at her with pity in his eyes. “That is not something a woman can offer, now, is it?”

“Come, my dear,” her aunt’s voice echoed in her head. She felt gentle arms take hold of her shoulders and lead her out of the parlour and into the drawing room.

In the corridor was a hype of activity as people rushed around all around her. Men were going out into the hall to grab their coats, while the ladies gathered in the ballroom.

“The drawing room’s much quieter, dear, you can rest in there,” her aunt’s voice said soothingly. “Let your uncle go and organise the rescue. He’s had plenty of experience at this type of thing, so don’t you be worrying so much. I’ll go down to the kitchen and get us warm drinks.”

Olive felt utter despair as her aunt left her in the drawing room, her mother and the Viscount settling down on a settee. But it took only a few moments for Olive to come to her senses. Turning around, she decided that there was no way she was sitting around while Julius was facing such danger. He was the one who had rescued her from an accident, and now she would help rescue him.

With that thought in mind, she quickly left the room. All she needed to do was follow the men as they trudged towards the accident in the cold chill of the night.

CHAPTER 33

Adelia watched the disarray around her unfold, as men prepared to leave on a rescue mission. Coupled with the proposal she had received from the Viscount; her head was spinning.

She didn't recall when she had moved from the parlour to the drawing room. but she could vaguely remember someone guiding her. Now, she was sitting alone with Lord Fergus, in the drawing room, and feeling a little overwhelmed.

"Do not worry yourself so, Lady Adelia," the Viscount's soothing voice reassured her. Turning, she looked upon his friendly face which was smiling back at her. "The young men will help to rescue Mr Burke; I am sure that he will be fine."

Mr Burke? The name echoed in her mind. The young man whose company my daughter enjoys. And all I do is persist in coming between them.

"Speak to me, Lady Adelia," the Viscount said, taking her hand and gently kissing the back of it. "I'm not used to seeing you appear to be so quiet. Tell me what it is that's on your mind so that I can help."

Her hand, which the Viscount had kissed, trembled. Not because of the kiss, but more at her confusion over the dawning reality of how she had tried to rule her daughter's life; and all for her own advantage.

"I... I am finally coming to realise what a selfish person I can be," she stuttered.

The Viscount's light, hazel eyes sought out hers. It surprised her at how soft they were, unlike hers which were an icy blue in comparison. Did her cold eyes reflect her chilly nature? How could she have been so heartless and

cruel to Olive, all these years? Always trying to force her daughter into marrying someone, simply based on their social standing. Always fearing that her daughter might end up in a debtor's prison as she had with her late husband. It had been a place that she still had nightmares over.

"I was so intent on you marrying off to my daughter. You see, I thought that you were someone who could care for her and secure her future," Adelia tried to explain. Her eyes evaded the Viscount's because she felt so ashamed of herself. "I... It never occurred to me that I should be the one to marry and let her live her life as she wished to. You see, I never dreamed that a man..."

Pulling her hand away from the Viscount's, she sat twisting her fingers together as she thought of so many regrets.

"You were blinded, Lady Adelia," Lord Fergus spoke with his soft, Irish lilt. She had become so very fond of the sound of his voice over the last week. "You never dreamed that a man would be interested in you, is that it?"

Adelia shook her head, "I am an old woman, and very set in my ways," she replied, still unable to look the Viscount in the eyes. "I wanted good things for Olive, and I knew we would have to fight for it because the gentry, well, they are a hard lot to crack. It made me pushy and—"

"Ssshhh... Do not put yourself down, my Lady," the Viscount said. He took her two small hands in his large palms, and she felt his warmth, along with a strength that surprised her for a man of his age. "That's what I adore about you, Adelia, you are a strong-minded woman. One who knows what she wants, and will go the extra mile to get it. In this case, it was your daughter's security, and that is a good thing. But now, I do believe that your daughter may have found love in our young Mr Burke. It is time for you to let her go. It will be difficult, I know, but I will be here to support you, I will be your pillar of strength, the man who you can lean on."

"My poor daughter, I would never allow her to feel the love of a man. It was my fault, was it not, that Mr Burke left the castle on this dreadful night?" she conjectured. "You see, I felt that I had to approve of any man who showed an interest in her. I had to make sure he had wealth and could take care of her and any children that she might have."

"You acted as her protector, Adelia. There is nothing wrong with that because you are her mother," the Viscount said, and his voice soothed her.

Yet still, she couldn't accept what she had done to drive Mr Burke away. How could anyone ever love her when she treated people so cruelly? How could Lord Fergus think she was a good woman when all the time she was

scheming to marry him off to Olive?

“I... I have to confess to you Lord Fergus, that I am not the good woman that you seek,” she said. As she spoke her voice trembled and she tried to stand up, unsteady on her feet. The Viscount stood immediately to help her balance. He was such a considerate man, and for that, she had to be honest with him.

“I must tell you, Lord Fergus,” she spoke again, her voice still quivering as she felt that her entire life was crumbling around her. “I... I come from a very poor background, which I never told my daughter about.”

“Adelia, you do not have to do this, not now anyway,” the Viscount told her.

“I do, Lord Fergus, yes I do,” she countered, wanting the world to know that she was about to admit to her shameful life. “You see...as a child I lived in a debtor’s prison with my father. I never even knew my mother. I was determined to rescue him, so I went out to work in a factory, but he died in there. It was my husband who rescued me with an offer of marriage. He pitied me but we never loved one another.”

Her body wavered where she was standing, but strong arms were soon at her back. Yes, the Viscount was still there, still listening to her words, and still making sure she didn’t fall.

“I never knew love until I became a mother,” she continued as her mind remained deep in the memories of her past. “Olive was such a pretty little thing, and I wanted to protect her so much. I thought that I had been successful, in marrying a rich merchant. But then he too lost everything, and there we were, as a family, back in a debtor’s prison.”

“Listen to me, Adelia,” Lord Fergus’s voice broke into her thoughts. “You don’t have to tell me this, not if it hurts you to do so. But know this, my lovely, adorable Adelia, it changes nothing. I am here to lift you when you are down. Let me care for you,” he pleaded as he squeezed her hand.

But Adelia knew that her memories were too vivid to let go. Whenever they took a hold of her mind, she had to see them through to the very end. She was forced to relive it all, and admit to herself that she was a poor woman disguising herself as someone better than she actually was.

“In truth, I was relieved when Lady Flora took my Olive away from the debtor’s prison. That was not a place for my precious daughter,” she continued, and the Viscount stayed silent, letting her get it off her chest.

“Will you not at least sit down again,” the Viscount tried, but his words

only brushed over her mind.

“But then I allowed the worry to overtake my life,” she persisted. “I did not want my daughter to ever be poor, and so I did all I could to match her with a man of wealth and good social standing. After my husband passed from this world, I blamed him. Even to the point of despising him, making me all the more determined never to be poor again.”

“And you shall not be, my love. I have enough wealth for you to bathe in milk every day of your life if you so wish it,” he chuckled. Taking Lady Adelia into his arms, she finally relaxed, allowing him to embrace her.

“And wow look at me, I have found a man who...who...”

“Who loves you,” he finished her sentence. Moving back a little to take both her hands in his so he could kiss them again, he looked into her eyes.

But Adelia couldn't look at him, because she felt too embarrassed, and looked away. “Anyway, my Olive will not be with me for much longer. I know that she yearns for her independence,” Adelia admitted, but it was more to herself than to the Viscount who was now leading her back to sit down again. “I cannot allow myself to be happy until I am confident that she is content too.”

“Then I will wait until you are ready,” he said, taking a seat by her side. “We shall play the characters in the Taming of the Shrew.”

“Is that another Shakespearean play too?” she chuckled, finally looking up at him. “I have to confess that I know little about them, and therefore have no idea what you mean?”

The Viscount smiled at her. “Well, you see, it is a play that shows how some people will only marry for wealth, and that they never consider love,” he began. His words caused her to cringe because she knew that it sounded like herself. “I knew that your reasons for acting that way would be good ones, and I want to be the one to help you overcome your past. I am a patient man, Adelia, my love, and I intend on courting you until you feel ready, even if it takes forever.”

“Love? Her voice strained as she squeaked the word through her lips. “You offer me love, Lord Fergus? What if I tell you that I like the sound of that offer?”

The Viscount placed his hand over his heart in a dramatic show. “Then my heart will overflow with joy. Why don't we talk more about this another time? But soon I might add. For now, let's see how the young ones prevail. I'll go and find a servant who can tell us how things go with the rescue.”

As the Viscount stood up to leave the room, Adelia found herself smiling. Not only in her tired eyes, but in her aching heart too. “Love indeed” she whispered to herself. “Who would have thought that I would be the one to find love, and in Scotland as well?”

CHAPTER 34

Olive shivered from the chill in the air, her heat turning into a cloud of steam. One of the men approached her, placing his overcoat over her shoulders. She thanked him but felt useless as she stood around waiting for someone to call out and confirm that Mr Julius was still alive.

Men clambered down into the ditch, including her uncle who was in the lead. It wasn't a pretty sight or sound. The dark shape of the coach was on its side, looking battered. The horses screeched out as they attempted to get away from it, but they were still harnessed to the vehicle.

Olive wanted to climb down there too but her golden, dancing shoes would cause her to slide around. Over the course of the next hour, each of the huge horses was pulled out of the ditch with relative ease.

Her aunt came to her side, giving her a lamp with a burning candle inside.

"They can hardly see a thing in that ditch," Lady Flora said. "It's pitch black. Keep this lamp so you don't fall when you walk back. I have to get back to make sure all's well for the waiting women in there. Will you not join me?"

"Not until they find him, Aunt Flora," Olive muttered as she shivered when she said his name.

"He will be fine, I am sure of it," Lady Flora said, patting Olive's shoulders with her hands.

"If he's underneath that coach, he will be dead, Aunt, from the weight," Olive gasped, a tiny sob escaping her throat. "And if he's alive, why isn't he calling out?"

"Stop thinking such thoughts, Olive," Lady Flora said. "And come inside where it's warm and dry."

Olive nodded; she wasn't shifting until Mr Burke was found. She didn't notice when her aunt had left her, she was so intent on focusing on the search party in the ditch. The stablehands, who knew Mr Burke's horses well, led them away and it pleased her to know that they were in safe hands.

But what of Julius? Where are you? She thought over and over.

She had asked everyone who emerged from the ditch if they'd found the driver yet. Each one shook their head, and their looks told her that they feared the worse.

The consensus appeared to be that he was most likely trapped underneath the broken coach. And she stared at it, in the hope that he was still alive, as the men discussed how to move it.

But then, there was a sudden frantic movement among the men, as a voice called out, "Over here! We've found him!"

The men who had shouted out were not standing by the coach, they were a short distance away from it. She could see her uncle with them, and he was waving over to her.

Olive made her way along the road so that she could speak with her uncle, albeit over the ditch.

"You're lookin' a bit peaky over there, lass, are ye alright?" her uncle called over.

"Tell me how Mr Julius is, and I will soon look happier," she replied with a half-smile

"It's lookin' like he was thrown reet off the seat," her uncle called back.

Not far from them was the large, overturned coach. Its black silhouette looked gloomy, and she was grateful that Mr Burke hadn't been buried underneath it.

"How is he, Uncle Hector?" she called out as she could now see a group of men rescuing Mr Burke. They were creating a makeshift stretcher with a large coat.

"He's talking so that's something', her uncle told her. "He's askin' about his horses, would ye believe?"

She watched as the men in the rescue party started to move her way. There were four of them, and each held on to a corner of the coat. Laird Hector assisted them to climb back up the incline, and she rushed to get to his side. As she looked down at him, she could see that his eyes were open. Unable to stop herself, she grabbed hold of his hand, so relieved was she to see that he was conscious.

“Every horse is accounted for,” she said, breathless as she tried to speak. “They will receive plenty of good care, I am sure of it, Mr Julius,” she added, half laughing in her eagerness to give him the good news.

As they continued to carry him, she walked by his side. “I am so pleased to see that you are unhurt too,” she told him, still not letting go of his hand. “But how could you have left me like that Julius, I was in such a panic?”

He winced, his eyes screwing up as he tried to lift his head. But it wasn’t easy to move around in such a soft stretcher. Olive only thought that if she couldn’t see any blood, then it boded well.

“You...made it clear...to me...that you didn’t want...to marry,” he said to her, in a broken voice.

Someone had laid another coat over him, to keep him warm. It prevented her from seeing the extent of any injuries he might have received. The darkness didn’t help but she held up her canded lamp to help the men see their way. All she could do was hope that his injuries were light enough for him to make a full recovery, as she and her mother had done.

It was a long and slow process getting Mr Burke to a waiting carriage that would carry him most of the way back to the castle. The conditions were still icy and men were sliding around underfoot. Carefully, they placed him inside the carriage and Olive sat with him on the journey back.

She held onto Mr Burke’s hand, squeezing it every time he winced at the carriage jolting on the uneven road. “Where does it hurt the most?” she asked.

He pulled the coat to one side, showing his ripped trousers and a bloodied knee.

“Oh, goodness, I must tend to that Mr Julius, or you’ll bleed out before we get back.”

She lifted the hemline of her ball gown and wasted no time in ripping a strip of fabric from it. Deftly, she wrapped it around the gash in his knee. She didn’t think it looked too serious, but it was hard to tell in the darkness.”

“That should help a little with the flow of blood, and I’m sure we’ll soon be back at the castle where you can get warmed up.”

“You shouldn’t have ruined your beautiful gown,” Julius said between gritted teeth as he cringed from the pain.

“I will do whatever I can for you, Mr Julius,” she said, aware that she was babbling but she didn’t care. “I am only thankful that the ice stopped you from running away from me. Though I would rather it hadn’t all been so

dramatic.”

“You know me and my love for drama,” Mr Burke mumbled back at her as he closed his eyes for but a moment.

“Yes, you can be very rash, Mr Julius?” Olive said, keeping him talking while they returned to the castle.

“I do understand Miss Olive,” he spoke with a strained, hoarse voice. “I mean...why you wouldn’t want to marry me. You deserve someone like the Viscount, who can offer you more comfort than I could. Not that I am poor, but nor am I a wealthy landowner, that all went to my brother.”

Olive leaned over and touched his face with her fingertips. “Oh, Mr Julius, you are the finest man I have ever known. I did not mean that I would not accept your proposal. Quite the opposite. I was trying to tell you that I would not accept the Viscount’s proposal in the hope that you would ask me to marry you.”

“Hah!” Mr Burke called out. “Why do women always have to be so complicated?”

“But is it not obvious how much I have fallen in love with you, Mr Julius Burke?” she said, squeezing his hand again.

He squeezed her fingers back, “No. Well...yes, I thought you liked me but then I became confused. I am a helpless fool.”

“A fool, maybe, but not a helpless one,” Olive said. “You have rescued war horses from the frontline of battles. You saved my driver and his horse, and let’s not forget that you assisted and retrieved Mother and I from the freezing snow. You tended to my injury and it’s so much better. Now, I will tend to yours, with love from deep within my heart.”

Finally, they arrived back at the castle. Men who were on foot were already back, being able to travel faster on foot, and some on horseback. Before getting out of the carriage, Mr Julius insisted on walking instead of being carried. Laird Hector was assisted him with a strong shoulder to lean on, as he climbed through the carriage door.

“Do you want to visit the stable first, before you settle down?” Olive asked of Mr Burke, knowing that he couldn’t hobble back down the steps this evening. “We are entering through the courtyard anyway, so it will not be difficult to visit the stables.”

Mr Burke nodded his agreement, and with the help of the Laird, he hobbled towards the stables. Though Olive noticed the occasional grimace on his face, from the pain of his wound.

The gate had been opened for the return party and those on horseback used it too. As they had almost passed through it, a frantic neighing emanated from the stables. Within seconds, Caesar came galloping through the stable doors. He ran straight towards Mr Burke, nudging his large head on the man's chest.

"Hey there, old boy, glad to see that you're fine," Mr Burke said, chuckling with pleasure at seeing the horses all safe.

All the while, her uncle kept a firm hold of him.

"I'm fine now, Laird Hector. You can let me go," he told his host. "It was the initial shock that made me so shaky, but all I have is a bloodied knee. My horses are well and..." With his last word he turned to face Olive, "...and I have the love of my life to lend me all the strength I will ever need."

"Aye lad, I'm sure you are feeling a wee bit stronger, but I'll be sticking by your side to help ye back into the castle," Laird Hector insisted.

Olive watched as Mr Burke limped off into the stable to check his other three horses, and it made for a moving moment. She could see how much love he had for them, and she hoped he would love her with as much fervour. Going to enter the stable, she continued to observe him as he fussed over the horses.

"You don't seem as wary of them anymore?" Mr Burke said as he spotted her watching him.

"I fear nothing when I am with you, Mr Julius, and I will come to love your animals as much as you do, I promise," she replied with a loving smile.

"Well, this was not quite how I expected it to go," he said. "The two of us standing around a smelly stable, both of us dishevelled and your beautiful gown ruined. But nothing could make me happier than if you will agree to be my wife."

"Oh, Julius I want nothing more than that—"

"Alright, you two lovebirds, enough of the shenanigans," Laird Hector interrupted them. "Let's be getting Mr Burke inside the castle, that knee needs tending to before it goes septic and his leg drops off."

Olive felt overcome with happiness as they made their way back indoors. Mr Burke had appeared a little apprehensive as if had expected her to refuse his proposal. But she wanted to be with him for the rest of her life and was never going to refuse him.

CHAPTER 35

“**Y**ou have a strong set of arms about you, Laird,” Julius said as he rested his weight, with an arm on the Laird’s shoulders.

“Aye, I’ll be needin’ it lad,” Laird Hector chuckled. “The cows in my fields don’t fend for themselves.”

“But you have tenants, don’t you, to do the work for you?” Julius asked, wondering if it worked the same as it did in England.

“I do, lad, but we have a home farm too,” Laird Hector told him. “Now come on, into the drawing room with ye, lad. The womenfolk are waiting on ye, so brace yerself.”

No sooner had the Laird sat him on one of the settees, Olive was busy giving out her orders.

“Sheena, fetch a large jug of hot water, and a bowl, along with some clean towels,” she ordered.

Julius hadn’t seen this side of Lady Olive; she wasn’t one to be pushy with the servants, at least not like her mother was anyway.

“I will be tending to Mr Julius’ injury,” she stated as if she was warning off the other women in the room, including her mother and aunt.

“You would make a good nurse,” he told her as he observed her unusual behaviour.

It amused him when her cheeks flushed pink. “I only wish to care for you, Mr Julius. I wouldn’t wish to care for any other man.”

“That gladdens my heart,” Julius said with a huge grin lighting up his eyes. “To know that out on a battlefield full of injured men, you would only save me.”

“Are you mocking me? Julius Burke,” Olive asked, hands on hips as if

she was ready to clip him one over his ear.

“Never would I make fun of you, Lady Olive. At least not until we know one another better,” he said with another cheeky smile that went all the way into his dark eyes.

Sheena soon returned with a steaming bowl of hot water; it was something they kept on the stove to boil in the kitchen at all times.

Julius watched on as Lady Olive went about her work. She tore the towel up as if she knew exactly what she was doing. With one strip, she dabbed at his knee to which he couldn't help but wince in pain.

“Do not think that I will be feeling sorry for you, Mr Julius. I must ignore your cries and get on with cleaning your wound?” she stated, making no effort to stop cleaning the dirt out of the wound.

“Where did you learn such cruelty?” Julius asked though he was grateful to see the deep gash looking a lot cleaner.

“My friend, the Duchess, Lady Vera, has young children. If you know children, they are always having little accidents,” she said, looking proud of herself. “It was quicker to learn to deal with their wounds than it was to wait for the nurse to do it because she was not always with us. And then, when Lady Vera was heavy with her second child, she became a little squeamish over blood, so I stood in and tended to her first child often. I am of the opinion that it helps to build a bond when you care for someone's needs.”

Julius wasn't used to anyone tending to his needs but as he watched Lady Olive dabbing the wet cloth over his wound, he appreciated her attention.

His mind was so focused on Lady Olive that he hadn't noticed Lady Adelia approaching them. Her arrival even caught Lady Olive unawares, and she stood up to confront her mother.

“Mother, I have to tell you, I will not be marrying any Lord that you choose for me, whether they make a kindly husband or not. The man I marry will be one who I choose, and who I can love with all my heart.”

It surprised Julius at how out of character this was for Olive, especially with her mother, but he felt proud of her that she was referring to him.

“Daughter, the time has come for you to make your own decisions,” Lady Adelia answered with a smile on her face as she went to stand next to her daughter. “And I must make mine too.”

Olive looked a little flabbergasted, and before she could reply the Viscount approached them too. “If you have finished seeing to Mr Burke, there is an urgent matter that I must put to you, Lady Olive.”

Julius had a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach, was the Viscount going to insist that she marry him, right there and then? But then, the Viscount's gentle smile reminded him that he wasn't the kind of man to be so forceful.

"As Lady Adelia's only child, I would ask your permission that I may officially propose marriage to her?" The Viscount announced, and for a moment Julius thought he had heard him wrong.

But when Lady Olive began to dance around with glee, he was assured that he had understood the Viscount's request correctly.

Lady Olive rubbed both hands on her face, covering her laughter. "I cannot believe it. All this time you were seeking to court my mother."

"That is the truth of things, Lady Olive, although I hasten to add that Lady Adelia has not yet given me an answer. But I thought it best to make my proposal official," the Viscount said, looking over at Julius. "Should my proposition be accepted, and yours too, young man, then I will soon become your father-in-law. And that is a prospect that I will accept with the greatest of honour. Rest assured, I will support you both with anything that you might need."

Julius glanced at Lady Olive, who made his heart beat faster as she smiled back at him, nodding.

"That is generous of you, Lord Fergus," Julius answered the Viscount. "But I do not make the presumption that Lady Olive would be willing to live the life of a veterinarian's wife, and the hardships that will go with that. It is not a life that money can change." He then turned to Lady Olive and took her hand in his. "Though I would like to officially ask you, in front of your family, if you will be my wife?"

Lady Olive appeared speechless, but she managed to nod silently back at him, and then looked over at her mother as if in afterthought.

"It is fine, daughter dear," Lady Adelia said, smiling back at her. "You are free to marry your farmer, I... I mean soldier, vet...or whatever it is that he does."

Laird Hector stepped forward to have his say. "What is more, my beautiful niece, if ye don't agree to marry this lad here, then I can only say that you are not in your right mind. He is a fine catch and worthy to take the hand of my niece."

Julius felt an overwhelming sense of joy at the Laird's encouraging words, and as he went to stand up and shake his hand, he almost fell over.

“I am not finished yet,” Laird Hector told him as he helped him stand by placing his arm over his shoulder once again. “I want to add further to this celebratory mood. As my wedding present to you and my niece, I wish to make you my heir, young man. I have no other and can think of no one else I would rather have to care for my estate when I am gone.”

“Oh, my word, Uncle, are you sure? That is such a generous proposition. Even though, I have not even said yes yet!” Lady Olive paused, while everyone looked on in anticipation before she turned to a worried-looking Julius. “I think that now is the time to tell you, Mr Julius, that I want nothing more than to be your wife, so yes, I will marry you so that we can be together forever.”

The tension in the room dissipated as everyone clapped and cheered with delight.

Olive went to hug a relieved-looking Mr Burke. “Now, if you will all excuse me, my future husband still needs further attention,” she said, helping him to sit back down. “I must finish bandaging your knee before you drip blood all over this lovely rug.”

Laughter sang out all around them, as Julius put his leg up on the settee. While Lady Olive wrapped the torn strip of the towel around his leg, he watched her with joy in every beat of his heart. The others in the room were now talking among each other, leaving the couple to themselves.

“Is this not the most joyous of days, Mr Julius?” Lady Olive said as she tied a knot in the makeshift bandage.

“Well, you have managed to make me the happiest man alive” Julius replied as she secured the bandage in place. “Now that we are no longer the centre of attention, I would like to tell you, Lady Olive, how deeply I have fallen in love with you.”

Lady Olive looked at Julius as she leaned in to kiss him on the cheek. “And I am madly in love with you too, Mr Julius. I cannot wait to be your bride and become Mrs Burke. You can teach me how to tend to your horses, and I will learn to cook and clean. What is more, I will live with you at the base. Our home will be warm and cosy as we snuggle up together at the end of every single day.”

Julius was surprised at how much Lady Olive was willing to change for him, he knew that it was most likely she had never cooked a meal in her life. His fingers stroked at her soft cheek, and he glared into her deep green eyes.

“We will buy a house, and we will have servants, so your life does not

need to change as much as you envisage,” he assured her. “As it happens, I do have some wealth from my inheritance, but I have never touched it because I’ve lived a simple life. Now that I have you, what is mine is yours, and we will live in a fine house if that is what makes you happy.”

“No, no, I do not need that, Julius,” Lady Olive declared. “I only want a home that we both love. It does not need to be grand, and we should have a home farm too so that we have our own little kingdom.”

Julius sat up and patted the settee by his side, indicating that she sit by his side.

“Let us marry first,” he said, taking her hands in his as she leaned her head on his shoulder. “And everything else can follow at a pace that suits our needs. With you by my side, Olive, I am happy to live in a barn if necessary.”

Olive sat upright and her face changed from a smile to a scowl. “I will not live in a draft, old barn, thank you very much,” she insisted, but then chuckled. “But I would if that was what you wanted,” she relented.

“No, we will buy ourselves a nice home, and so long as we are together, it will be a happy one,” he told her.

They settled into quiet contentment as they sat side by side, watching the people around them. Lady Adelia chatted with Lady Flora, and he could hear the Laird’s booming voice as he spoke with the Viscount. Other people that he didn’t know were in the room too, and from the music he could hear, he assumed the ball had continued on too.

But he was content to sit by Olive’s side and watch the world go by. At long last, he had met a woman who he could love for the rest of his life. He had everything he needed, and they would have a wonderful life together, of that he was sure.

CHAPTER 36

Three weeks later

“Well, Mother, my journey from England was without mishap this time,” Lady Olive said as she disembarked from the carriage. Adelia had come to greet her as the carriage arrived at the castle.

“Thank goodness for that, my dear,” Adelia said, hugging her daughter for the first time in three weeks. “You would have had no night in shining armour to rescue you this time, should you have had a mishap along the way.”

The two women climbed the stairs to the main castle door, as the servant carried the luggage.

“I know that you will not have had time to miss me, given how busy you must have been visiting your house,” Lady Olive guessed.

“Well, it felt strange not having you there with me when I arrived home, Mother. The house felt rather empty without your erm...company, I must admit. When I thought of it, I realised that we haven’t been apart for many years, have we?”

“Yes, that is true,” Adelia answered as they entered through the door to the castle, and into the large reception hallway. “It is good practice, for when I go and live in Ireland, I will be in another country.”

“It is still a part of Britain, Mother, though I admit, it will be a fair journey to make,” Lady Olive said, looking around the hallway. “I have missed this place too. So, how are the wedding arrangements coming along?”

“As you know, we have decided to marry at the castle because that is where we met,” Adelia explained, puffing out of breath from the strain of the

climb. “Although the marriage laws are different in Scotland, the date is still a few weeks away. Fergus seems to have so many friends that it makes my head dizzy looking at the list of guests.”

“I cannot believe you are to marry before I do,” Lady Olive said with an excited smile. “We have much to discuss and I have brought all the things that you asked me for.”

“If you had chosen to marry in Scotland, my dear, we could have enjoyed a double wedding,” Adelia mentioned, as she had suggested so many times before.

“You know very well why I could not marry in Scotland, Mother,” Lady Olive replied, with a roll of her eyes at her mother bringing up the subject yet again. “I want the Duchess and her family to attend my wedding and I am not asking them to travel all this way with the children. Anyway, it is better that you have your special day, and I have mine.”

“I do believe it will be a very special day too, your aunt has been a blessing in helping with all the arrangements. She has all but taken over everything and tells me that I must rest until you return,” Adelia said with furrowed brows. “Though secretly, I do not mind one bit. My head was in a spin even thinking about it all, so I am grateful for what she does. And for letting me stay on at the castle, it has been a perfect opportunity to get closer to your aunt. Lady Flora is a very generous, kind person, and I have much to be thankful for.”

“Oh Mother, there are so many changes in you. You are becoming a completely different person. One supposes that we have the Viscount to thank for it, but I do like the new you,” Lady Olive admitted. As she turned around, she was met by Lady Flora who was coming out of the parlour room.”

“Here she is, my favourite niece in all the world,” Lady Flora said as she kissed Lady Olive’s cheeks in greeting. “Have you heard from Mr Julius?”

“I received a letter from him that arrived at the house at the same time as I did. He tells me that he has made arrangements for a temporary cottage that is situated close to the barracks,” Lady Olive explained. “I cannot wait to see Inverness. Julius says that it is a beautiful city with grand buildings that are built from local granite stone.”

“I admit that I have not travelled there,” Lady Flora said. “But then I have heard that all of Scotland is quite spectacular.”

They entered the parlour together, to enjoy the tea and cakes already laid

out for them. Before too long, they were joined by Laird Hector and Lord Fergus. Adelia felt content to have her daughter back again, but she had accepted that their lives were to change most dramatically very soon.

While her daughter travelled to England, Adelia and Lord Fergus stayed on at the castle. They were to marry there, and then they would travel to England with Olive, and stay in her house until after the wedding. After which, she and Julius would go and live in Inverness. Only then would Adelia travel to her new home in Ireland, which Lord Fergus had assured her that it was every bit as stunning as Scotland.

“Everyone is looking forward to the upcoming wedding, and there’s still much left to organise.” Lady Flora disclosed, “There’ll be fifty guests altogether, although if Lord Fergus had his way there would be many more! He has many friends but I have told him that we cannot go wild.”

Adelia listened, but for once in her life, she didn’t have much to say. Ever since she’d accepted the proposal of marriage from the Viscount, she’d been swept from her feet. Lord Fergus was such a romantic, that he’d taken her to visit many local places once the snow started to clear away. She’d seen Scottish lochs aplenty, and even more of the mountains. They’d stayed at a couple of inns on their short trips, and meanwhile, Lady Flora had been seeing to all the wedding arrangements.

“In two days, Mother, you will become a married woman once again. And then you can take up the title of Countess Adelia,” Lady Olive said with delight. “I am so happy for you.”



The day of Adelia’s wedding was soon upon her, and she felt as nervous as any younger bride would be.

“I am pleased that you decided to wear the pale blue dress, Mother,” Lady Olive said as she watched the maid add the finishing touches to her dress. “It suits you well. You look so lovely.”

“Yes, but how do I stop myself from shaking?” Adelia asked, wishing it was all over with.

“All you need to do is remember that you have a fine man by your side,” Lady Flora suggested. “And should you faint, he will be there to catch you.”

“Goodness, Mother!” Lady Olive called out. “Please do not faint on your

wedding day.”

Within an hour, Lady Olive and Lady Flora had joined the guests in the large hall of the castle. Adelia and Lord Fergus were standing by a small podium at the front, where Lady Flora had arranged an archway adorned with colourful flowers. It was a most romantic setting, and Adelia could see that her daughter was a little tearful as she and Lord Fergus each took their vows.

Adelia’s small hands were shaking, and her intended wrapped his palms around them. He whispered to her as he leaned in closer.

“The ceremony was soon over, my love. After the signing of the register, we will make our way to the dining room,” Lord Fergus told her, and it calmed her to know that someone knew what they were doing.

As the maids served the breakfast feast, Adelia stood up from her chair. She proceeded to tap a piece of silver cutlery on a large glass. The tinging noise soon attracted everyone’s attention, as she had hoped it would.

“I know it is not traditional for the bride to make a speech, but this is not a normal kind of wedding,” she began. She could feel all eyes upon her, and now that the ceremony was over, she felt much more herself again. “I wanted your attention because I have something to say to the servants of this castle.”

All the maids stopped what they were doing and looked over at her, trepidation written on their faces.

“It is most important that I thank you for all your mischief,” Adelia announced, looking over at the puzzled faces of the servants. “If it was not for the letter that one of you wrote, Sheena, then the Viscount might never have approached me for my hand in marriage.”

Adelia hadn’t expected the loud cheers that erupted, and hands were clapping all around her. “One more thing,” she called out to hush them. “I have learned an important lesson through my visit to Scotland, and that is how dear it is to have people around you who care. And I care very much for everyone in this castle, servants included, so please, join us in our celebration feast as soon as you are able. And what a feast it is that you have prepared for my wedding day. Thank you, one and all.”

Again, loud applause rang out, and Sheena was the first to approach her, wrapping her arms around the lady and thanking her.

“You have a great kindness in your heart, Countess Adelia,” Sheena said.

“Oh, yes, I am a countess am I not?” Adelia laughed. “I completely forgot all about that part, what with all the excitement.”

For the rest of the morning, there was plenty more laughter and much

revelry. The breakfast feast was enjoyed by every single person within the castle walls.

The afternoon was taken as a time to rest and reflect, and by the evening the merriment had started up again. Lady Flora had arranged for all the guests to go outside where they were greeted by the sound of bagpipes. As the music stopped, a display of fireworks exploded all around the castle, and then the bagpipes started up again.

“Oh, my, Lady Flora, you have exceeded all my expectations, thank you,” Adelia called out. Soon, her new husband was standing by her side, and there he stayed for every remaining moment of the celebrations.

A small orchestra played for the rest of the evening, in the ballroom. Along with a table full of extravagant foods, set out for all to enjoy. They danced into the early hours of the morning, the final part of the marriage day of the Viscount and Countess of Stormont.

EPILOGUE

Two Months later

“I am so pleased that Julius has agreed to have the wedding in England,” Olive said to her best friend Lady Vera.

She was sitting by her dresser as her lady’s maid, Laura, put the finishing touches to her hair.

“He is fine man, Olive,” Lady Vera said, watching the guests arrive through the window. “It pleases me very much to know that you have found happiness and that you’re marrying a man who you love.”

“And I, for one, am glad that you haven’t yet sold your home,” Laura said, standing back for Lady Olive to approve of her hair. “It means that my husband and I won’t be homeless yet, anyway.”

Lady Olive looked back at her image in the dressing table mirror. She then walked over to look in the full-length mirror to see her gown.

“You have, as always, done wonderful things with my hair, Laura,” Lady Olive praised her maid.

“I can’t get used to you not calling me Perkins anymore,” Laura giggled. “I keep thinking that you’re talking to someone else.”

“Yes, well, I don’t wish to call anyone by their surname ever again,” Lady Olive said. “I want my servants to be my friends.”

“Ooh... I’ll bet Lady Adelia won’t be liking that then,” Laura remarked. “Although she’s a changed woman since she married the fine Irish Viscount. It’s been a pleasure to serve her while they’re staying at the manor house.”

“I will still be selling the house though, Laura, but you can come and join me in Scotland when we find our new home. That is if you wish to remain in

my employ?" Olive offered. "Think about it."

The Duchess came to stand by her friend's side, as Laura nodded with great enthusiasm at her mistress's suggestion.

"You look beautiful, Olive, the perfect bride," Lady Vera remarked, looking her friend up and down.

"Thank you, Vera," Olive said, admiring the simple cream-coloured silk gown. "It is an exquisite dress that you have gifted me with, Vera."

"Nay, Oscar and I both feel privileged that you chose to marry at Welwick Hall," the Duchess told her. "I am only too sorry that we could not make it to Scotland for Lady Adelia's wedding."

"They were in such a rush, so do not fret over that matter," Olive explained. "It was a whirlwind of a romance. Who would have thought Mother capable of that?"

"Your intended is arriving with the carriage, my Lady," Laura called over from the window. "Are you ready?" she asked as she glanced through the window at the grand carriage, with the four beastly horses.

"Yes, I have never been more ready and more certain in my life. Let us not keep anyone waiting," Olive replied, heading for the door.

Ten minutes later, Olive was standing at the side of an open carriage, drawn by four very special horses. Her fiancé approached her to assist her in getting into it.

"Are you ready to marry me then, Lady Olive?" Julius asked her as he went to lift her. "You do know they're all going to throw rice over us when we come out of the church? If you don't want that, then now's the time to change your mind."

Olive looked at Julius as she held her arms around his shoulder. "You are unbelievable," she said, grinning. "My answer is still yes whether we get rice thrown all over us or not."

"You asked for it," he chuckled, lifting her to put her feet down on the carriage floor. "My goodness, Lady Olive, you are a beautiful sight for my eyes, are you by any chance getting married today?"

"Oh, so funny, Mr Burke," she said, poking at his arm as he sat by her side to drive the carriage to church. "A lady might start to think that you were the one getting cold feet."

"Never," he said with a firm voice.

"They are rather large horses, are they not?" Lady Vera called up as she stood back with her children.

“You need not be scared of them, I promise you that much,” Olive remarked. “They are well trained, and might look terrifying with their battle scars, but each one has a remarkable character.”

“We will see you at the church then,” Lady Vera replied, still looking unsure at Julius’s horses.

Soon, a parade of carriages arrived at the church, which had only been a ten-minute journey away. Julius jumped down from his carriage, to help Olive climb out.

“I’ll settle the horses before I join you inside,” he said to her. “See you in there, my love.”

“I must admit that I am a little nervous,” she said apprehensively.

Julius kissed her fingers, “I will be by your side all the way, and for the rest of your life, I might add.”

That was all the reassurance Olive needed and she felt more at ease. Lady Vera arrived, and they walked towards the church with the children.

Olive entered the church and felt a little overwhelmed when she could see that all the pews were full. The smell of beeswax hit her senses, but also the scent of flowers. Lady Vera had arranged an array of cut flowers all over the church and it brightened the dark place up a bit.

They made their way to the front where Father Brown had told the wedding party to sit. As she walked down the middle row, she looked up at a huge stained-glass window. It had been her local church for many years, but suddenly she felt very small standing in front of the altar as she waited to get married.

The congregations murmured among themselves, and an organ played out hymns in the background.

Next to arrive was her mother, and they embraced in greeting. “Did you see Julius out there? He is taking a long time settling the horses.”

“I did, and he is busy tying ribbons and things to the carriage,” Lady Adelia chuckled. Fergus and our uncle are all helping him with his mischief.”

Olive smiled to herself, how she loved Julius and his silly ways.

The church ceremony was only attended by a few special guests, as it was a small parish church. Lord Oscar gave her away, in place of her deceased father, and Lady Vera and her children were her bridesmaids. Julius’ best man was a soldier, Jock Wilkins, a huge bear of a man who had, or so Olive thought, at first glance looked intimidating. But like the huge horses, he was a gentle beast once she got to know him.

Once the ceremony was underway, she felt relaxed knowing that she was with the people she loved, and who loved her in return. It seemed to go so fast and before she knew it, they were promising their vows. They carried out the signing of the register and then Julius led her back through the church.

Outside, as expected, they were bombarded with an uproar of cheers as the villagers threw rice all over them. Laughter rang out as Julius led her to the waiting carriage and there, she saw his handiwork. The giant horses all had ribbons in their mains and tails, and flowers had been tied to every part of the carriage where it was possible.

“Oh, it looks wonderful, Julius,” she remarked. “I cannot believe that you did all this so fast,” she said as he picked her up to put her back into the carriage.

“I had lots of help,” he laughed.

As he pulled the carriage away at a slow pace, the villagers waved at them, enjoying the spectacle of the huge beasts looking glorified with ribbons.

The breakfast feast at Welwick Hall was attended by more people, those who had been unable to be at the church ceremony. Julius had invited some of his army colleagues who had served with him.

Another special guest was Silas, Lady Vera’s twin brother. As Olive spotted him in the crowd of guests and waved him over.

“Silas, I am so thankful that you could make it?” Lady Olive said as she greeted him with a kiss on each cheek. “And might I ask, where in the world have you arrived from?”

“I’m not long returned from India,” he replied, bowing his head to Julius in respect.

“Where do you go next, on your worldly adventure?” she asked, pushing him to tell her more.

“Africa,” he announced. “I wish to see the big game animals there and sketch them as I travel. When I come home next, you will all get to see what they look like too.”

The breakfast feast was a joyous affair with everyone enjoying the wonderful feast. But that wasn’t the end of the celebrations as a ball in honour of Olive and Julius would be held that very evening. And as the ball played through, Olive watched the Duke and Duchess dancing on the floor.

How things have changed since the masquerade ball I attended in this very room, all those years ago, she pondered. And now she was a married

woman, and she knew that the next few months would be busy ones.

In a few days, they would travel back to Scotland with her mother and the Viscount. Soon after their arrival, her mother would finally travel on to her new home in Ireland. While Olive and Julius lived a simpler life in Inverness. But Olive didn't care where she lived, so long as Julius was by her side.

Olive and Julius lived happily ever after... Meanwhile Silas Atkins is travelling the world looking for his own future... Is he going to find it at last?

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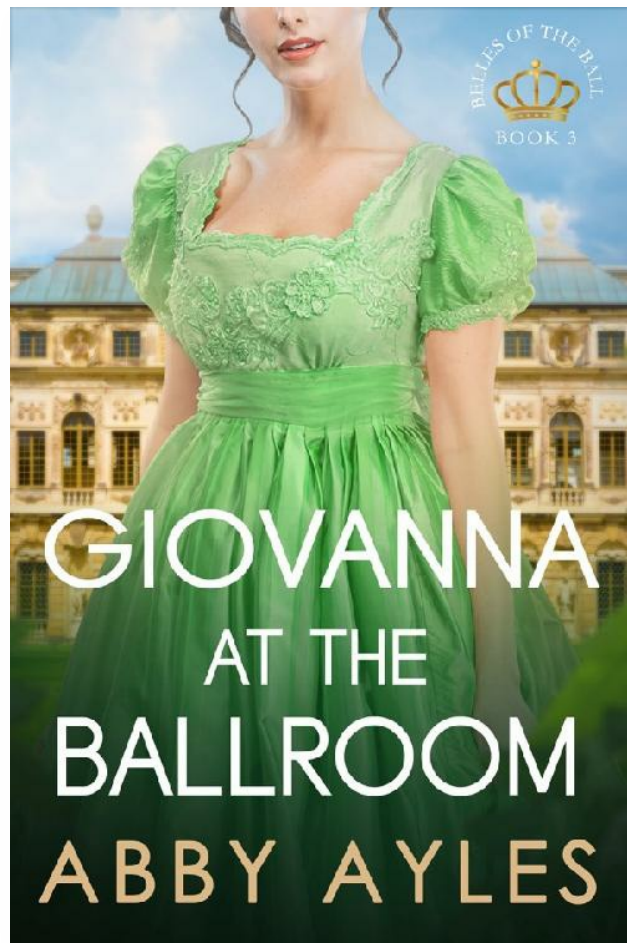
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GIOVANNA AT THE
BALLROOM

PREVIEW



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She is a lady of determination. He is a man of duty. When business and love collide, sparks fly!

Silas has worked hard to become a successful businessman himself and the most trusted advisor of the Duke. Consumed with his new duties, Silas has to sacrifice his former sweetheart and focus on his new role.

Everything will change when he will meet Giovanna. She is a proficient businesswoman who works tirelessly to support her father in their everyday life and his business.

Giovanna lost her mother at a young age, and since then, she has taken it upon herself to run her family's vineyards. But her broken heart refuses to fall in love again, despite her father's encouragement.

As they work together and their relationship deepens, their growing attraction to each other is threatened by their different views on love and marriage.

When her past comes back to haunt her, threatening everything she has worked so hard for, she must decide.

Will she overcome her fears and trust in love again, or will she lose everything

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CHAPTER I

All around Silas, sailors bantered between themselves, going about their business of loading cargo on and off the sailing ships. A salty, sea breeze wafted his way, reminding him of the journey he'd now completed.

Silas had turned into a veteran traveller over the last few years. Although born the son of a servant, it was only thanks to his sister's husband, the Duke of Cornwall, that he'd managed to reach greater things.

A servant marrying a duke of such standing had caused a bit of a scandal some years ago, but as they'd all grown up together, they'd got through it by supporting one another. He'd always been close friends with the duke, and his bond with his twin sister was unbreakable. But Silas wasn't a romantic, he had his eye on adventure, and that's what he'd been doing most of his adult life.

Although now a wealthy merchant and a seasoned traveller, it didn't make him immune from suffering sea legs syndrome after spending twelve hours on a rocking ship. As he walked away from the dock, he wavered a little in his stride.

The winds had been in their favour as his ship had set sail. But the weather was unpredictable, and after an hour or so, things had changed drastically, causing the ship to creak and groan as it battled the high waves. Only three hours later, the passengers were allowed back on deck as the seas had calmed. With a belly full of sea biscuits, Silas was pleased that once again he was setting foot on English soil.

He knew the crossing was nowhere near as treacherous as the Atlantic could be, and one day he would take that very journey. But with so much social unrest everywhere, since the Napoleonic war had ended, he was glad to

arrive in the port of Dover and thus leave his travels behind. England had its own set of problems too, but at least he was familiar with the language, making him happy to be home. Ironically, it was that exact same war that was now encouraging the English nobility to invest abroad.

The Duke of Cornwall had sent a carriage to collect him, as Silas had been carrying out overseas investments on the duke's behalf. On this trip, Silas had been securing many deals for the import of wines and brandy, among other goods. At the moment it was a good deal, bringing goods in from Europe and selling them for a good profit in Britain. Content with the many business dealings he'd secured, he was looking forward to seeing his sister, the Duchess of Cornwall. It was time to enjoy what remained of the festive season.

Seagulls squawked above his head, circling the fishing boats at the other end of the dock, in the hope of stealing a fish or two. Paying them no mind, Silas clambered into the carriage so he could leave behind the salty smell of the sea. His driver weaved in and out of the bustling streets of Dover, and soon they were headed towards the highway that would take him to Cornwall.

In a sleepy haze, Silas recalled some of his dealings, which had been mostly in Italy. He'd stayed a few weeks in Tuscany, a trip hosted by one of the largest vineyards, and made many friends. Silas found the Italians very friendly, despite all the political changes. He'd even invited one of the smaller vineyard owners to join him in England. Even though Conte Marco Romano of Polesine had been an old man, he'd shown much interest in exporting his wines, explaining he needed to expand, and soon.

Silas met the Italian count at a social event, preferring, in the future to deal with the smaller, family vineyards than the larger ones. But then the old man had been taken ill, so they never completed their deal, which had been a shame as he'd liked the count very much.

Still, he'd managed to organise the first shipment at a higher cost from a larger vineyard, which would get them started. Should the old man take up his offer of visiting England, they could start negotiations up again and he'd happily move the contract over to him.

After two days, and many stops later, Silas finally arrived at Welwick Hall, on the Bodmin Estate. Feeling weary, his mood soon lifted once he saw the duke and the duchess, his sister Vera, awaiting his arrival in the courtyard. Even better, the twins, their children, were there to greet him too.

It had always fascinated him how his sister had given birth to twins,

seeing as he and his sister were also twins. He knew what a special bond twins shared, and it pleased him that his niece and nephew shared that same bond that he and his twin sister Vera did.

First to greet him were the children, who ran up to him as soon as he stepped out of the carriage.

“Uncle Silas, did you bring us gifts from your travels“ his little niece begged as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Livy!“ her mother chastised, using her daughter’s nickname, though she did it with a smile. They had called her after Lady Olivia, but somehow her name had become shortened in fondness to Livy. “Give Uncle Silas some space, he’s barely out of the carriage.“

Livy’s twin brother, Lord Owen, took a more reserved greeting than his sister, and shook his uncle’s hand.

“It is good to see you home, Uncle Silas,“ Lord Owen said in greeting, and Silas could see how much he took after his father, the duke.

“Ah, give your uncle a hug, little Lord,“ Silas said, taking the boy in his arms and patting his shoulders.

Next came his sister, Lady Vera Wald, the Duchess of Cornwall. As they hugged tightly, she shed a little tear of joy at her twin brother returning home.

“I do worry about you every time to go on your trips, brother,“ the duchess said quietly in his ear.

“And every time I return, I have many a tale for the children,“ he reminded her as he pulled away, stroking the tear from his sister’s cheek. “You look well, Vera.“

“And you look tired and underweight,“ she answered. “Let us fatten you up before you disappear yet again.“

Silas turned to shake the duke’s hand, “I’m glad to be home,“ he said to his friend and brother-in-law, the Duke of Cornwall, Lord Oscar Wald.

“By god, Silas, it is good to see you back,“ the duke replied. “I worried you might not make it for the Twelfth Night Masquerade Ball, but I am mighty pleased that you have.“

“You have no idea how pleased I am to know that I’ll be enjoying your Christmastide ball this year,“ Silas replied. “Oh, and little Lady Livy, as it happens, I do have gifts. Most of them are all the way from Africa. I went there first, for another quick safari tour,“ he told his niece as they all turned to walk up the stone steps to the front door.

“Did you bring me an elephant, Uncle Silas?“ Lady Livy asked giddily. “I

do hope so, I would love to have an elephant.“

“Well...as it happens, I have brought you an elephant, a lion, and a giraffe plus many more. But there is a catch,” Silas joked as he followed his sister into a parlour room. “They are handcrafted from wood, by the natives.“

“I did not think you could bring me a real elephant, Uncle Silas,” Lady Livy said very matter-of-factly. “But I cannot wait to see the one that you have brought home. Have you brought something for my brother, Owen, too? He’ll take a terrible sulk if you have forgotten him,” she added, knowing her twin brother better than anyone else did.

“Let Uncle Silas unpack his things first, dear,” the duchess suggested, smiling at her daughter’s eagerness. “What I would like to know, brother, is why you haven’t managed to bring a lady back with you?“

“Why would Uncle Silas want to bring a lady back with him?“ Lady Livy blurted out, covering her mouth as she giggled at the thought.

“Because your mamma wants your uncle to marry,” Silas answered, glaring his sister’s way. “But Uncle Silas doesn’t wish to marry, ever.“

The duchess tutted back at him, “Silas, if you keep up all this adventuring, sooner or later...well...never mind. It is not something I wish to discuss in front of the children.“

Silas noticed Lady Livy staring at him with an inquisitive look on her face, no doubt trying to work out what her mother meant. He smiled at her, and winked, watching as a smile blossomed on her pretty face. He’d brought the travelling box in with him that contained all the gifts and took out a little key to unlock the padlock, keeping it secure. Holding it up, he handed it to his niece.

“There you are, let’s see what’s in Pandora’s Box shall we,” he said, looking at the box in question.

“Can I open it, Uncle Silas?“ Lady Livy called out; her eyes wide with delight.

Silas nodded and the children rushed to the box. Inside were rolls of cloth containing items wrapped in even more fabric, and the children took turns unravelling the smaller gifts. As they did, Silas explained the adventure he was having when he purchased each gift.

“Ah, now that one is a giraffe. He has the longest neck you will ever see,” he explained as the children gasped at all the wooden figurines of beasts from Africa.

“Look Mamma,” Lady Livy cried out as she unravelled a monkey.

The duchess smiled and soon the adults were having their own conversation while the children played with their gifts.

“My only interest when I’m abroad, is focusing on Oscar’s business dealings,” Silas said as he sipped on a fancy China cup containing tea. “Oh, and I’ve brought you some tea and coffee back that I picked up along the way.”

“Thank you. But when will you bring yourself a wife back with you?” the duchess persisted with the topic. “There will come a time when you tire of your travels, and only wish for a warm fire and a good woman to care for you.”

“This is true, Silas, old boy,” the duke joined in. “I never regretted marrying your sister. Vera has a wise head on her shoulders.”

“Oh, that reminds me, Lady Olive and her husband will be arriving later today,” the duchess told him. “She’s enjoying married life in Scotland. You see, you can live anywhere and still get married.”

“Enough, Sister,” Silas said, with faux laughter. “Perhaps Lucy will have me back, now that I’m returned?” His sister went quiet, which was unusual for her, “What is it that you aren’t telling me?”

“She did the sensible thing,” the duchess replied, but hesitated for a moment before breaking the news to her brother. “I think young Lucy finally gave up all hope of ever pinning you down and she found herself a husband. A man who promises to stay in one place and provide for her.”

“My Lucy is wed?” he asked, raising his brows in surprise. He paused, thinking what this loss meant to him because he was more than fond of his childhood sweetheart. “Well, good for her, I say,” he added, knowing he’d miss her, but her happiness was important to him.

The duchess looked disappointed at his reaction, “You could at least show a little regret.”

“I would never stop her from finding happiness,” Silas replied. Though he did feel a little sadness at losing her, he wasn’t going to let his feelings be known. Not wanting to discuss the matter any further, he purposely changed to the topic of conversation. “Shall we go to your study and discuss business, Oscar? I have much news to share with you. I’ve even invited an Italian Conte to join us for the special ball. Though he’s quite an elderly gentleman so I can’t guarantee that he’ll arrive. But he produces a fine wine, that much I can guarantee, and at a cheaper cost than the larger vineyards.”

“Must you men talk of such things in here?” the duchess complained. “It

is crude to speak of business in front of the children.“

“Come along, Silas,” the duke said as he stood up to leave. “We can take ourselves to my study, and you can tell me what you have spent all that money on.“

The two men left the parlour, leaving behind two very happy children at play. The duchess opened up a book to read, so Silas knew that she must have forgiven him. He hadn't admitted to her that he'd been pining to come home, but he knew there may be some truth in her warning. Sooner or later, he supposed, he'd need to find a wife and settle down. But then again, he still enjoyed his travels, and it could be that he simply wasn't destined to marry.

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CHAPTER 2

Silas and the duke were on their way to discuss business when they were approached by Barker, the old butler, in the main hallway.

“A carriage is coming up the driveway, Your Grace,” the butler informed the duke.

“Ah, that should be Olive and her husband, Julius. I will go and fetch the children and Vera,” the duke said, turning back to the parlour. “We can talk later, Silas, you should go and rest a while after your journey. I want you on top form for tomorrow’s ball.”

As it happened, Silas did feel a little weary and so took the duke’s advice, turning to head for his room.

“It is good to see you home, young Silas,” the old butler said before he took the step on the grand stairway.

Silas realised he hadn’t greeted his old friend, Barker, yet.

“By Jove, Barker, my apologies, I am a little over tired and wasn’t thinking. It is always good to see you again,” he said, taking a step towards the butler and leaning in to hug him briefly, patting his shoulders.

Barker had always been like a father to him and his twin sister, Vera, albeit a strict one. The old man had always played a strong and stable role in their lives, most especially after their mother passed away.

“Every time I return home, it surprises me that you are still hard at work,” Silas said to the old man, as they remained standing in the hallway. “A man in his late sixties should be living a life of ease. Most especially after a lifetime of serving others.”

“This is my home, Silas,” Barker replied. “I could never see myself living anywhere else.”

As they stood talking, the young twins could be heard approaching. They ran through the hallway, dashing to greet Lady Olive, and no doubt collecting their next set of gifts.

“Children, slow down!” The duchess called after them. “Silas? Are you coming?”

“Please inform Lady Olive that I will catch up later,” he told his sister as she too passed him by. “For now, I’m going to my room to rest awhile from all this madness,”

“Good idea, brother, I will see you later,” the duchess nodded and soon disappeared out through the front door.

“Do you have ten minutes to spare, Barker?” Silas asked as he made to go up the stairway to the bedrooms. “Come and escape the bedlam so we can catch up,” he invited. “Oh, and bring a tray of brandy, will you?”

Barker nodded his agreement as Silas climbed the stairway, heading towards his usual bedchamber. As he entered, a maid was unpacking his clothing and hanging it in the wardrobe, so he left the door open.

“Ah, Moira, isn’t it? Silas asked the maid, recognising her because she was one of the prettier servants in the upstairs household.

“Yes, sir, I be Moira,” she replied, sharing a warm smile. “I almost be done here.”

“Tell me Moira, is Lucy still a maid here?” Silas enquired, unsure if his childhood sweetheart was still around.

“No, sir, not if she be the one who married our regular meat seller,” Moira informed him. “She be-”

“Off you go then, Moira,” Barker instructed as he entered the room, interrupting the conversation. “You can finish off later, my girl.”

“Yes, Mr Barker,” she said, and with a swift curtsy she was soon gone.

Silas went to sit in an armchair by the blazing fire. The hearths in the bedchambers were not large ones, nonetheless, it made the room cosy and warm, with the orange glow of burning coals.

“Come and sit with me awhile, if can spare the time, Barker,” Silas said, pointing his arm to the armchair opposite his. The butler carried a tray with a crystal glass goblet containing the amber liquid of brandy. “Are you not partaking in a drink with an old friend?” Silas asked him.

“Not when on duty, young Silas, you know that,” Barker said, though he did go seat himself in the warm chair by the fire. “It is the Twelfth Night of Christmas tomorrow, our busiest night of the entire year. But I will take the

opportunity to speak with you awhile. Tell me how you fair from your last journey?"

Silas took a sip of the liquid and felt it warm his belly as it glided down his throat.

"Well, there's much unrest with the ending of French wars," Silas began. "But it's also a time of great opportunity, and I mean to make the most of that."

Barker smiled back at Silas, looking pleased, "I'm proud of you, young man. You've pulled yourself up from the level of servitude. You and your sister have both done well, so I can now grow old in peace."

"Well... I won't be marrying anyone of nobility like my sister did, Barker. Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Silas said, knowing he'd never climb the social ladder as high as his sister had managed. A cook marrying a duke was unheard of, but then, they had been childhood sweethearts too.

"Are you saddened over losing Lucy?" Barker asked, leaning back to enjoy a few puffs on his pipe.

"I was never the marrying type, she knew that," Silas admitted, though it did sadden him that she wasn't to be around for him anymore.

"Your sister wishes that you'd find a good woman to be by your side, and she'll be at you for it, I'm sure," Barker warned.

"She's already been at me, Barker," he said with a smile. "Besides, she knows I crave adventure."

"Aye, it's funny how the quietest of children turn out to be the most adventurous," Barker chuckled.

"I enjoy having respect and status, Barker. Every man should have the opportunity to better himself, is that not so?" Silas asked though he knew what Barker thought of it all.

"You know my beliefs, Silas. A person belongs in the status they were born to, and yours was servitude," Barker answered as expected. "But, given that your sister's now a duchess, you could never have remained a servant. What the duke has done for you two is nothing short of a miracle. Though gossip is still ripe among many lords and ladies. Or at least those of the opinion that their marriage should never have been permitted."

"Damnation to the lot of them," Silas remarked. "They've been happily married for around eight years now, and as for the twins, they're adorable. How can anyone still gossip after all this time?"

"Those who believe the duke should have married their daughters, no

doubt,” Barker remarked. “Though I’ve heard tell that on one occasion, Queen Charlotte became over tired of the gossip over the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall. So, she declared that she never wished to hear about them again. That’s as good as ending the wagging tongues once and for all, don’t you think?”

“I, for one, am thankful to Oscar, erm... I mean the duke,” Silas admitted. “If not for him, I would never have been the successful businessman I am today. Oh, that reminds me, can you make room for more guests?”

“We have opened every wing in the manor house with each room made ready for guests,” the butler replied. “Why? Have you got yourself a good woman after all?”

“No, no, Barker, it’s nothing of the sort,” Silas said, brushing such a remark aside. “I’ve invited the Conte Marco Romano of Polesine, in Italy, to join us for the special ball that the duke throws. He was an interesting old man I met along my travels, and his wines are most excellent.” Barker looked a little disappointed and Silas supposed he, like his sister, would like to see him married. “Don’t be so disheartened, Barker, it will be a good business connection for the duke. It will be good for the Bodmin Estate to become involved in the wine trade.”

“I do not doubt that, but can you think of nothing but business during the festive season?” Barker complained. “Christmas is not a time for inviting business guests.”

“Christmas is all but done and I spent much of it travelling,” Silas replied.

“Hmmm, that is what I mean. You need to enjoy life too,” Barker said, tapping his pipe and readying himself to leave. “Well, young man, it’s time this butler returned to his duties. The Twelfth Night Christmastide Masquerade Ball won’t organise itself. You know how much the duke and duchess love this time of year, so I’d better go and make sure the servants are behaving themselves.”

Silas stood up to shake Barker’s hand. “I thank you for taking the time out to speak with me, Barker, but I don’t wish to keep you from your duties.”

“You’re a good man, Silas Atkins. I know you’d do anything for the duke and this estate but do start to think about your own life too,” Barker advised. “Or you’ll end up a lonely old man like me.”

After a brief handshake, the butler left his room and Silas was left alone. Tiredness was starting to catch up with him, so he went to lie on the top of his bed.

Whilst Christmas had come and gone while he was overseas, he always tried to return home for the Twelfth Night Masquerade Ball. It was at that very ball where his sister had disguised herself behind a mask and worn Lady Olive's ballgown. The two of them had planned it so that Vera could dance with the duke without anyone knowing. Hah! The duke knew exactly who she was, and that very night he proposed to her at the ball.

It all seemed a lifetime ago and so much had happened since then. He looked forward to seeing Lady Olive again, she had been a real inspiration to him many years ago, and a good family friend. But first, he needed to shut his eyes for a while.

His thoughts soon returned to business, and he hoped that the Italian count would arrive, but the invitation had been an open one. The present arrangement he'd made for the wine imports was with a larger vineyard in Italy, but it was only a temporary one. A more permanent deal with a smaller vineyard would yield higher profits, and that would be perfect.

"Here I go again, always searching for the highest profit margins," he said out loud, tutting at himself.

Closing his eyes, he thought of his childhood sweetheart, Lucy, who was once an upstairs maid at Welwick Hall. They'd enjoyed many a roll in the hay and he'd always adored her freckled, pretty face. In his youth, when he'd thought his life was mapped out, he was certain that they would marry. But then he'd discovered travel and had ignorantly assumed that Lucy would wait for him. She was always the one person he really missed on his travels, and many times he'd asked her to join him, but always she'd refused. Lucy had preferred the security of home, and for him, she'd represented home. Now, his home wouldn't feel the same without her there.

He'd also been friends with Jeffrey, the man who his Lucy had ended up marrying. He was a big fellow, but a kindly one too, considering how he butchered farm animals and then made pies out of them.

At least Lucy had married a man with a solid trade, and one who could provide for her. That pleased him because he knew that he would never have got around to proposing to her because he wasn't ready to settle, and she deserved some happiness.

No; marriage wasn't for him; he was sure of it. He was too consumed with his business dealings, with no time for courting and wooing young ladies. Even though he worked for the duke, he was paid generously and had set plenty of savings aside. Savings that he rarely spent, given that all he did

was work most of the time. Though his safari in Africa had been of his own doing. Perhaps he might consider visiting the Americas next, that would be a worthy adventure.

Travelling for days on end had made him weary and within ten minutes of Barker leaving, Silas soon drifted off to sleep.

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CHAPTER 3

The last few days had been chaotic, with guests arriving, and all the excitement of the ball building up. That was how Silas preferred things, busy and buzzing, so he had no regrets about coming home.

At last, the ball was underway, but it was only early in the evening, so even the children had been allowed to attend for an hour.

“Mother wanted to come,” Lady Olive was explaining to his sister, as the three of them stood in a small group chatting. “Her health is not too good at the moment, so the viscount insisted that she stay in Ireland and not travel such a lengthy journey.”

“That sounds like a wise decision,” the duchess replied, nodding her head in agreement.

“And you, Lady Olive, how are you finding married life?” Silas asked out of curiosity. “Way up there, in the Scottish Highlands.”

Silas knew Lady Olive’s background well because she was a good friend of many years. For a while, after her husband’s death, she had felt she would never be ready to marry again. Lady Olive hadn’t been married to her first husband for long before he died. And it had been a marriage she’d been forced into, so she’d been in no rush to remarry. That was until she met her present husband, Mr Julius Burke, and he’d witnessed the obvious love between the couple. Silas felt pleased for her, she’d played an important role in his life, and he was very fond of her.

“Bah, Scotland is cold, but beautiful. On top of that I am surrounded by the smell of horse dung on most days,” Lady Olive said, smiling with fondness as she spoke. “Being married to a veterinary surgeon means my husband is called out many times day and night, so I keep myself busy with

the other military wives. I am very lucky and very happy.”

“Uncle Silas,” a little voice called out behind him as someone tugged on his jacket. “Can you tell that it is me?” His little niece asked, holding a sparkling mask over her eyes.

“My oh my... it is a princess, I am sure of it,” he declared in faux shock.

Little Lady Livy pulled her mask away giggling, “No silly, it is only me,” she said, loving every moment that she had been allowed to stay at the ball.

“Livy, remember I said not to be a nuisance,” the duchess said firmly to her daughter. “Where is Nanny? You should be to your bed by now.”

Lady Livy looked disappointed at her mother’s orders, so Silas went to cheer her.

“Come along little one, let us go and find her,” he suggested, taking hold of his niece’s little hand.

“Do I really look like a princess, Uncle Silas?” Lady Livy asked, with longing in her voice.

“You had me fooled,” Silas nodded as he went to pick her up because she was fast becoming buried among all the adults milling around the ballroom.

“Lady Livy!” Silas heard a voice call out. “Where have you been?” Nanny said as she rushed over to take her charge away. “My apologies Mr Silas, the girl has been so giddy.”

“Worry not, Nanny, this little princess has delighted many of the guests, so she has played her part,” Silas replied to the old woman.

Nanny had been the duke’s nursemaid when he was a young one, and so had often taken care of Silas and his sister. She was a much loved and trusted part of Welwick Hall.

“Time for your bed, little Princess,” Nanny said, with young Lord Owen in tow. “Say goodnight to Uncle Silas, children.”

Both gave him cuddles and kisses aplenty, and he watched as Nanny led them up the main stairway to their bedchambers. He smiled, recalling how much trouble he, Vera, and the duke used to give Nanny when they were little. She had much patience, and it was touching to know that she now cared for his sister’s children.

Turning around to return to the ballroom, Silas wasn’t in the mood for dancing. Instead, his thoughts wandered to Lucy; he’d missed her on this trip, not wanting to visit her now that she was wed. In the past, she’d always been his lover on his home visits, but that had come to an abrupt end.

Silas entered back into the ballroom, walking around the outer ring of the

dancehall. He felt a little regret that his Italian guest hadn't managed to join them in England. It was a contract he was keen on obtaining and would perhaps return to Italy later in the year to visit the smaller vineyard.

"Ah... there you are brother," the duchess's voice called over to him as she approached with another lady by her side. "This is Lady Maria, daughter of Lord Parker, the Baron of Craigland. I made her promise to leave an opening so that she could dance with you, and that happens to the next dance."

"The pleasure is all mine, Lady Maria," Silas said with a bow of his head, though it wasn't what he felt.

Holding out his arm he led her to the dance floor. It was so typical of his sister to set him up, she seemed more than determined to see him married off.

His partner was a flimsy, young lady and spoke very little, for which he was most grateful. When he did speak to her, she seemed only to answer with a horsy laugh through her nose, which was most off-putting. Eventually, he stopped trying to converse with the woman and looked forward to the dance ending.

As the music stopped, he accompanied her back to where she said her mother was seated. He didn't linger and once he'd left them, he made his way to the games room. That might be the safest place before his sister brought another of her offerings.

There he found the duke, who'd also managed to escape the ballroom.

"Silas, come and join the game," the duke said, offering him an empty chair. "How did you manage to escape your sister?"

"Oh, so you know about all the matchmaking she's doing, do you?" Silas asked, raising his brows.

The duke laughed, "I protested, but she would not listen to me I am afraid," the duke replied, taking a sip from his brandy glass. "I told her not to interfere. But you know Vera, she's convinced that you're heartbroken over your childhood sweetheart marrying herself off to another man."

"Well, she is wrong. I'm not in the least heartbroken," Silas said, unwilling to share the truth. He picked up the hand of cards that the dealer had dealt him at the table. "I wish her well because I'm not yet ready to marry."

For the next hour, Silas enjoyed his brother-in-law's company. But eventually, the duke stood to leave, explaining he couldn't hide in the games room for much longer. The gentlemen at the table laughed, but the truth was

that each of them was most likely doing the same. They'd all need to return to their wives in the ballroom at some point.

After the duke left the game, so too did Silas. He got up to walk around the room and chat with many of his acquaintances. The games room was always a good place to discuss business. Silas thought it would be interesting to discover what investments others were making, now that the French war was ended.

Many complained that they'd had to close their tin mines because their workers were going abroad for better pay. Silas couldn't empathise with the mine owners when they were known for treating their workers harshly.

Indeed, the duke owned several mines, but at least he gave his workers a fair deal. Though Silas had little to do with the business dealing on home territory. He knew that mining wasn't profitable, which was why the duke had sent him abroad to find better agreements. Silas had relished the challenge and risen to it, bringing in plenty of profitable business since he'd started.

Sauntering around the games room, he even engaged in a card game with the Dowager Countess, Lady Graytham, making sure he lost to her. She was a sweet woman, and he was aware that she'd been supportive of his sister's marriage to the duke.

There'd been much gossip and talk of scandals when, at one of these very balls, the Duke of Cornwall had proposed to his sister, a mere servant. But many of the older ladies rallied around. They said that what went on in Cornwall was nothing to do with the pompous lords and ladies of London.

Thanks to people like the dowager, his sister had soon settled into becoming a duchess, and now she thrived in the position. It had helped that they'd grown up with the duke, receiving a very similar education to him. For most of the time, they'd both attended many of the young duke's lessons with his past governess, Miss Martha.

Now that his sister was married, she expected him to follow suit. But Silas enjoyed a bachelor's life, and the many ventures he was having. He wasn't considering settling down yet because he had so little to offer a wife, not being a lord of anything. Thanks to the duke, though, he'd built up some personal wealth and might consider buying some land one day in the future.

Mulling over his thoughts, laughter at the other end of the room distracted him. He was sure that he'd heard someone speaking in Italian, between hearty laughs. Curiosity got the better of him, and made his way through the

room, eager to find out who was causing such merriment.

That was when he saw her... the most beautiful woman he'd ever set his eyes upon... and he'd met many lovely ladies. Mesmerised, he watched on, captivated by the alluring Italian woman who had a laugh that sang out to his soul.

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A MESSAGE FROM ABBY

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed every page and I would love to hear your thoughts whether it be a review online or you contact me via my website. I am eternally grateful for you and none of this would be possible without our shared love of romance.

I pray that someday I will get to meet each of you and thank you in person, but in the meantime, all I can do is tell you how amazing you are.

As I prepare my next love story for you, keep believing in your dreams and know that mine would not be possible without you.

With Love, Abby Ayles

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ABOUT ABBY AYLES

Abby Ayles was born in the northern city of Manchester, England, but currently lives in Charleston, South Carolina, with her husband and their three cats. She holds a Master's degree in History and Arts and worked as a history teacher in middle school.

Her greatest interest lies in the era of Regency and Victorian England and Abby shares her love and knowledge of these periods with many readers in her newsletter.

In addition to this, she has also written her first romantic novel, *The Duke's Secrets*, which is set in the era and is available for free on her website. As one reader commented, "*Abby's writing makes you travel back in time!*"

When she has time to herself, Abby enjoys going to the theatre, reading, and watching documentaries about Regency and Victorian England.

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