

REBECCA CONNOLLY

*Something  
New*

— — — — —  
A CORNWALL  
BRIDES NOVEL



*For better, for worse...*

# *Something New*

Cornwall Brides

Book Two

REBECCA CONNOLLY

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**Rebecca Connolly**

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Something Old

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# Chapter One



Harrison, Lord Basset, was engaged to be married.

The announcement would have shocked any who knew him, and likely over half the members of polite Society, but there could be no doubt that it was true. The papers had been signed and the parties informed.

He was getting married, and soon. In four weeks, to be exact, barring any particular obstructions to the occasion. He did not foresee any, given the eager manner with which his intended's father had agreed to the terms Harrison had set out in the contract. Not to mention his own worth, being a man of great fortune who had descended from an ancient and distinguished line, and who was in possession of a grand estate in Cornwall.

And as the young lady was of a fine lineage and breeding, her refinement renowned, her reputation impeccable, there could be no objections from any other quarter.

Now he only had to meet her.

Given Harrison had no sentimental notions of affection, romance, or even companionship when it came to marriage, the entire idea of courtship hadn't seemed necessary in the endeavor. Reputation and family connections would give him a fair enough idea of the lady's nature and quality, and he knew enough people in Society to be warned off of the harridans and fortune hunters. He didn't mind spinsters, bluestockings, or those who came from reduced circumstances so long as they met his required family criteria, were fair enough in appearance, and were considered accomplished.

It was those who were greedy enough to grasp at any man with money whom he wished to avoid. It was those who would embarrass him and tarnish the family reputation whom



he needed to stay away from. It was those who wouldn't live up to the expectations and requirements of Lady Basset he could not marry.

He wouldn't claim to be completely indifferent to certain aspects of his choice of prospective bride. He would prefer a beauty, if for no other reason than it would benefit the title and family name. A plain woman might be respected, but she would have to work harder to have an equal influence.

But if the woman were too much of a beauty and did not have a certain amount of humility or graciousness in her nature, she might distract from the position of honor and respect she would gain by marrying him. This would make her the topic of gossip and conversation, and not in a way that he would like to encourage.

He had spent the last several months analyzing every detail of what he saw as his perfect candidate, isolating everything that was a requirement and anything that was only a preference. He'd procured a list of potential ladies meeting his requirements and began discreetly making inquiries as to their reputation and standing in Society. Anything that could be given to him, he got.

For several weeks, he had pored over the information, and now he had finalized every detail, giving his solicitors even more work than they anticipated in preparing the marriage contracts. Everything was perfectly tidy, and both parties were getting precisely what they wanted from the arrangement.

Well, her father was, at any rate.

The lady could surely only wish for a good match with property, fortune, and influence. And a husband that wouldn't cause a scandal.

Harrison might not have been able to promise a great deal as far as husbands went, but he could promise that much.

On paper, his prospective bride was absolute perfection. By reputation, his prospective bride was ideal. According to everyone he had spoken with, his prospective bride could not have been surpassed.

Yet Harrison was not convinced. Utter perfection did not exist.

It was too late now, he supposed, given he had signed all of the necessary papers. He would be marrying this woman in four weeks, barring some disaster or objection that should arise. None of his trusted advisors in business or Society had tried to dissuade him from her, and her father had been eager to accept the proposal between their families.

Three meetings between the men had been all that was necessary to settle things.

Ideally Harrison would only need three meetings with his prospective bride before the wedding to be able to take the vows without doubts. If he were to feel even slightly whimsical about the whole thing, which he rarely did, he would have enjoyed finding some kind of warm friendliness between them that would have him wishing to be in her company more often. But the only thing he expected was for her to be relieved that he was planning on a polite marriage, rather like any other found in London.

Surely that ought to be comfortable enough for her. For both of them.

Neat and tidy, that was how he wanted things.

And what he wanted most was for the woman he married to be as much part of the elite in Society as possible without ascribing to their overly pious ideals of themselves. Because the thing he needed most in his wife, beyond anything else, was for her to accept his sister.

Half-sister, strictly speaking.

Illegitimate half-sister, if he were being completely honest.

Poor, common, ill-mannered, illegitimate half-sister, if an outsider were giving their opinion.

He never listened to the opinions of outsiders, but he wasn't ignorant of them, either. He couldn't be. Were she not his sister, he might have paused at hearing her situation as well.

Paused, but still proceeded.

Emblyn Moyle had been a fiery addition to his life, and he was convinced his life had shortened by at least fifteen years since bringing her into things. She was the daughter of a former maid of the household, and while it had never been a secret that his father had been a profligate and scoundrel, it had been kept quiet that he had actually fathered a child. Until Harrison had inherited the title, he had not known the name of his illegitimate sibling, and the first thing he had done upon learning her identity had been to seek her out.

In his self-absorbed, arrogant, blind manner, he had presumed she would be grateful to have family of high rank willing to claim her as one of their own and raise her up from the lowly station to which she had been relegated.

He could not have been more wrong.

Emblyn was not the sort to wish her fortune, or her station, to be any more than what it was. She was content with her life and had no qualms in striving day in, day out to eke out a living for herself in Cornwall. Her mother had taught her to work hard and never accept charity that was undeserved, and Emblyn had held to that.

Not only had she laughed at Harrison's offer to bring her into his household, but she flatly refused to be acknowledged as his sister. Her father had given her nothing but her existence, so why should she think herself in any way connected to the Basset family? She was no fine lady and had no desire to become one. She had been a maid at Tehidy, and that was as close to any Basset as she cared to be.

Considering Lord de Dunsterville of Tehidy was a distant cousin, and certainly the most renowned member of the vast Basset family, Harrison found that to be ironic.

It had taken some time and persuasion, but Emblyn had softened her position just enough to allow Harrison to be her brother and to occasionally attend quiet dinners he hosted at Trevadden Park. She would not sit as mistress of the house, nor would she come to any balls he or his friends would host,

but she was not resisting being called his sister and being part of his life.

More than that, she would not budge on.

He had been exhausting himself in the attempt ever since her concessions, but Emblyn was a particularly stubborn Cornwall lass. It would take a miracle from heaven to move her, and even then, the Almighty would have to convince her, which would take even His most considerable efforts.

Maddening as it was, Harrison was delighted to have Emblyn about. She had finally begun coming to Trevadden unannounced and actually behaving like a member of the family, rather than staying belowstairs with the servants. She would never ask any of the servants to do anything for her, nor would she accept being addressed as anything other than Miss Moyle by any in his employ. Unless they would call her Emblyn, but the servants would not dare tread so far, and she knew it well.

Harrison still hoped to convince her to leave her cottage and move into Trevadden, but she insisted that the cottage had been her mother's home and her home, and she was not about to leave it for some grand estate to which she did not belong.

Some battles, Harrison was learning, were best left unfought. When all was said and done, he had a sister, and she was not doing anything for which he was ashamed or embarrassed, which was more than he could have said for his brother.

Emblyn might wish herself far away from anything remotely involving any Basset if she knew the truth about Richard. She knew he existed and that he was in London, but that was all. It was safer that way.

If one looked at his siblings on paper or by reputation, they would have been black marks against the family. Harrison, by comparison, was pristine. Firstborn, titled, wealthy, and free of tarnish or speculation. A perfect candidate for even the most conniving of matchmaking mamas.

Unless, of course, she was looking for more than one connection.

But surely every family had a black sheep. Surely most families had their secrets. It was not as likely, he feared, that they had both.

But none of that mattered anymore, he reminded himself. He had a prospective bride, contracted to him and agreed upon by her father, with a wedding date set. His character and situation were enough to convince the father of Harrison's quality and suitability for his daughter.

He was ready to take the next step in his journey as Lord Basset, and that meant marriage. However little interest he had in it.

He had never considered himself the marrying type, when he thought about it. Considering the sort of marriage he witnessed between his parents in his youth, there was little attraction about that state of relationship. It was a business transaction, and even that was not a fair comparison. In business, both parties receive something they want. In marriage, both parties agree to something.

What is received, however, may not be what the other had in mind.

Harrison's mother did not agree to be mortified and shamed by her husband's behavior and manner. She did not agree to being so completely powerless that she was akin to a prisoner in her own home. She did not agree to having no say in how her children were raised, what kind of education they would receive, or where they would be sent.

She had been stripped of any identity in her marriage, though her dowry had certainly been put to excellent use on the estate. Her person had simply been the means for producing heirs, and nothing more. She had been the mistress of Trevadden, it was true, but without any power to act as such. The greatest attention she received only came when her husband was hosting an event at Trevadden. She would be gifted a new gown and have the family jewels hung about her neck, trussed up to appear the perfect baroness for their guests.

While she received no particular affection from her husband on those occasions, she was at least acknowledged as his wife and honored by the guests as such.

There were many things that Harrison knew his mother had not told him about how her life had been and to this day would still not mention, but he knew enough to ascertain that she had suffered.

Harrison's wife would not suffer. That much he knew. He would never disrespect his wife, cut her out of the lives of her children, or strip her powerless. He was a better man than his father, a better baron, a better human being.

And he would damn well be a better husband.

He might not be able to promise his wife love or affection or happiness, but he sure as hell could promise her a lack of suffering. He could promise her respect and honor. He could promise her freedom, strange as it may seem.

But so long as his wife did not create a scandal and lived with respect for the title and position, Harrison was perfectly pleased to let her do as she liked.

Within reason, of course. He'd prefer that she not take up affairs, obviously, but he was willing to negotiate matters if certain situations arose.

"You seem rather pensive, Lord Basset. You're not having second thoughts?" The man beside him laughed jovially, as though the very idea were ludicrous.

Strange comment from his prospective father-in-law, but until the marriage was official, Harrison supposed he would endure oddities such as this.

He shook his head firmly, forcing a smile. "Of course not, my lord. I am quite set on my course."

Lord Tunbridge patted Harrison's arm awkwardly as the carriage rocked side to side on the turn in the road. "I am certain of that, Basset. Quite certain. Only joking."

"Has Miss Dyer been apprised of the situation?" Harrison asked the man, eager to move past the topic of his thoughts.

“Situation?” Tunbridge repeated, finding something amusing in the choice of word. “Your engagement, you mean?”

That particular choice of word made Harrison more uncomfortable than the carriage ride itself could ever have been. Arrangement would have suited better, or contract would have sufficed.

Engagement sounded far too personal for what this was and how it came about.

Surely he needed to meet his intended before any of this could be considered an engagement. But he couldn't tell his prospective father-in-law that he was making Harrison's upcoming marriage with his daughter too personal. It might cloud his approval of the match.

Harrison nodded once. “Yes, is she aware of it?”

“She is,” Tunbridge assured him. “Her mother and I informed her after we finalized the details yesterday. She knows that we are signing contracts today. I imagine she will be expecting us.”

That was not encouraging in the least. He had heard a great deal about Adelaide Dyer, but he could not say if he had seen her at any of the events he had attended in London. Quite simply, he hadn't been paying attention, nor had the events or the ladies in attendance held any interest for him. He could have passed her on the street and never known it.

Now he was going to marry her.

Was it better to marry a stranger, or marry a longtime acquaintance?

His friend Thomas Granger had married a woman he loved, yet it had taken the man five years to inform her of his feelings. Were those five years of anguish worth the resolution thereafter?

Surely an open, honest discussion of expectations and preferences between like-minded parties was the simplest way to conduct a marriage. Removing feelings from the scenario would also remove the risk of either person growing

disappointed in the other, or with the marriage itself. But there was no telling how a woman would feel before the marriage, or what she might expect from him as her new husband. Or how outspoken she would be.

The image of his sister came to mind, her expression one of fury, her arms tightly folded as she stood her ground in one of their more recent fights.

He shuddered. Much as he was growing to adore Emblyn, he could not marry a woman like that. Not if he wished to maintain any sanity.

“Still pensive, my lord,” Tunbridge broke in. “If it would relieve your mind to discuss what is on it, please consider me a listening ear. If, of course, you prefer reserve, please be as pensive as you like.”

Was Tunbridge entirely serious? Harrison had known him for a matter of weeks. Just because Harrison was marrying the man’s daughter, he expected Harrison to confide in him about his thoughts and impressions? He rarely confided in the friends he’d had for years, why in the world would he do so with a stranger?

They had been arranging a connection between their families, not a friendship. Harrison would be taking their daughter back to Cornwall from the wedding breakfast and only return to London when he had to. There was no notion of two families becoming one, of sharing Christmases or birthdays, of hosting each other for fortnights at a time during the summer. Tunbridge had made it clear that they were a family of polite distance, and being separated from their daughter by several counties would not be a wrench. They were a typical family of British Society in London, not some aberration of country folk who clung to each other.

That was what Harrison had thought he was binding himself to, and such feelings suited his own.

Now the man wanted Harrison to consider him a confidante? Not bloody likely.



“Only thinking of my own family,” Harrison told him evasively.

“Ah, will they join us for the wedding?” Tunbridge asked with interest. “You have a brother, yes?”

Harrison nodded, not bothering to hide what was already known and not seeing a need to offer what was not expected. “I do, but unfortunately, he will not be able to join us.”

“Must be a very busy fellow, I daresay.” He released a sigh that sounded more amused than disgruntled. “Well, with my girl, Basset, there is no hope of having this wedding be a small affair. She will have her way—she and her mother.”

That was not encouraging.

“I’ve no interest in the wedding itself,” Harrison assured him, fighting the instinct to wince at the idea of fuss and finery. “Whatever will suit them will suffice.”

“Very good of you, Basset. Very good.” Tunbridge glanced out of the window, nodding. “Ah, here we are, here we are.”

The carriage rolled to a stop, and Harrison exhaled a sudden wash of nerves in his chest. It was all well and good to discuss marriage, to arrange the details, and sign the contracts, but now he would be meeting the woman to whom he would be bound before God and man. The woman who would bear his children and stand by his side for the rest of his life.

Devil take it, what had he done? What was he doing?

This could have been the worst decision of his life, and he could regret it every day from the marriage onward. He could back out. He could tell Tunbridge that he wasn’t interested, and the contract was null and void. He wouldn’t have to go through with this.

Until the marriage was officially performed and consummated, he could change his mind.

His rational side came to the rescue as he disembarked and made his way to the house beside Tunbridge. He needed to marry, needed an heir, needed to have a woman stand as Lady Basset beside him. That was not an optional requirement for

him in his life. He had examined the details of this family to which he would bind himself, had learned all he could about the woman he had chosen, and had deemed the situation satisfactory enough to proceed.

He didn't have to love the woman. He just needed to find her acceptable. That was all.

They were let into the house swiftly, the butler practically ignoring Harrison in favor of seeing to his master's needs.

"Never mind, Taylor," Tunbridge blustered, waving the butler away. "Lord Basset and I only need to see Lady Tunbridge and Miss Adelaide."

"They are in the Blue Room, sir," Taylor recited with a pristine tone of formality. "Along with your niece, Miss Lumley-Jones."

Tunbridge tutted softly, some sound with unidentifiable emotion behind it, and nodded, continuing up the stairs of the fine London house.

No explanation was given to Harrison, nor any warnings. Also not encouraging.

They reached the first-floor landing and turned to the right, passing one door and then another before stopping.

Harrison watched as Tunbridge exhaled a deep breath, squaring his shoulders.

What in the world was this?

Tunbridge said nothing and opened the door to the room, striding in. Harrison had no choice but to follow.

An older woman in fine silks sat primly on a couch alone, pouring herself some tea, a small smile on her lips. Lady Tunbridge, he would presume.

His eyes moved to the two young ladies opposite her on another couch, and his stomach clenched.

Both young ladies were fair, and both were the picture of loveliness. Both were dressed in pale blue silks, their hair arranged nearly identically. Their cheeks were rosy, their eyes

blue, and both wore pert smiles on their lips. As far as Harrison could tell, the only notable difference between the two was that one was freckled while the other was not. They were not identical in looks, but one could hardly describe them in distinct ways from each other.

Clearly, this had been a ruse set up by the cousins for this occasion.

Had Tunbridge suspected that?

“Ladies, may I present the Right Honorable Lord Basset?”

The ladies looked at them both, the younger ones staring directly at Harrison.

The one without freckles snorted softly. “Oh look, it’s the man I’m going to marry. How exciting.”

# Chapter Two



Adelaide Dyer would not apologize for the snide note in her voice as she stared at the man beside her father. The man she had been sold to, for all intents and purposes, and would be bound to for the rest of her life. All without once being asked about her own feelings on the situation or her preferences as far as matrimony or her future went.

That was the lot of a young woman of her station and situation, she knew full well. More than that, she was not surprised to have been free from attachment one day, then engaged to a stranger the next.

It did not mean she had to like it.

Anna shifted a little beside her, either in response to Adelaide's quip or in discomfort at the ruse they had set up for her intended. It was well-known in the family that the two looked more like sisters than cousins and that Anna resembled Adelaide more than any of her own sisters, or, indeed, of Adelaide's sisters. Why not test the reaction of the man to their alike appearances and see what came of it?

Apart from a look of total surprise that was soon replaced by a calm acceptance, the man had no significant reaction.

What a disappointment.

Adelaide looked him up and down, taking in whatever she felt like seeing. Lord Harrison Basset was his name, she had been told, and he was some simple Cornish baron with plenty of land and lots of money.

How quaint.

Adelaide leaned closer to Anna but did not bother to lower her voice. "Well, at least he looks the part of a man I'd marry. I was afraid he'd be as plain as his name implied."

Her mother gave her a scolding look but said nothing. Business as usual there.

With a fleeting glance at Lord Basset, who was still standing silently next to her father, Adelaide shrugged a shoulder and reached for a cup of tea, looking down at it with as much delicacy as possible.

He was beastly handsome, she would give him that. Dark hair, dark eyes, nicely tanned skin without being coarsely brown, and his jaw seemed to be dotted with stubble, yet he clearly was clean-shaven. He was a full head taller than her father, and his shoulders were better suited to a worker in the fields than a gentleman.

Perhaps the Cornish baron worked his own fields rather than hiring the work out. Had he been elevated to his present station from a poorer one? Some simple cousin of a prodigious line who was now desperate to make a good connection to prove his worth?

And she was the perfect sacrificial lamb for such an occasion.

Her father was just the sort to give her up for an agreeable man in need of a good match. He was particular in some respects, so the man had to have a decent enough pedigree. The daughter of a viscount should never marry beneath her, but the interpretation of that particular caveat wasn't all that clear. Title, of course, was a fair marker of status, though not always of quality. Wealth would wipe away a number of Society's sins. Pedigree was significant for maintaining the integrity of bloodlines. And then there was the occasional aberration, those who were simply popular in Society, whether for heroics in His Majesty's Navy or for entertaining the matrons at Almack's.

Lord Basset had a title, if barons counted as part of the peerage, and he had money, which was enough for anyone to give him a second look. And with the man looking like that, Adelaide would certainly give him several additional looks.

She didn't want to marry him, but she wouldn't mind looking at him. And certainly, he was nothing compared to her

beloved Phillip. He never could compare. Never would.

But Phillip was not offering for her. And her father would never have agreed to his suit. Not yet, at any rate.

“Adelaide, would you greet Lord Basset properly, please?” her father asked, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

Adelaide took a long, slow sip of her tea, eventually moving her gaze back over to them. “And how would you like me to do that, Father? Curtsey? Kiss his cheek? Run and throw myself on his person in gratitude for marrying me?”

Her father formed a fist with both hands. “A curtsy will do, daughter.”

Nodding primly as though she were simply an obedient daughter, Adelaide set her teacup down and rose with as much grace as she had been trained to possess. She gave Lord Basset as thin a smile as possible and sank into the most perfect curtsy known to man.

“My lord,” she purred, pausing a moment before she rose and quirked a brow at the man. “What a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Lord Basset’s eyes narrowed slightly, the corner of his mouth twitching.

What did he mean by that?

“And you as well, Miss Dyer,” he told her as he bowed, keeping his eyes on her as he did. “A great pleasure.”

His accent was not the common Cornish one she had expected, but there was an edge to it that did not quite belong in London’s high society. And his voice... well, it was rather like a cup of warm drinking chocolate, and her throat begged for a swallow, much as it did after the first sip of that glorious beverage.

First impressions were dreadful things.

Adelaide sniffed to hide her disgruntlement. “I should hope so, my lord... Basket, was it?”

“*Basset*, Miss Dyer,” Lord Basset corrected without malice, his mouth curving in a peculiar way that tickled the smallest toe on her left foot. “As in Sir Francis Basset, Lord de Dunsterville, who is a distant family connection.”

“How fascinating,” she replied with an even blander smile than before.

The curve of Lord Basset’s mouth deepened. “Not interested?”

“It’s a title,” she snapped, sitting back down beside her cousin without the same grace she’d employed before. “That’s all I care about.”

“A shame,” Lord Basset said without an iota of concern. “I was prepared to recite my entire pedigree for your approval.”

She jerked her eyes to him, barely restraining a snarl of irritation at his blatant sarcasm.

He was still smiling in that peculiar way at her, and something about that smile set fire to another toe on her left foot, and she ground her teeth in response. So he was not polite enough to ignore her barbs, and he was impudent enough to return them.

A gentleman in name only, perhaps. Yet her father would never promise her to a man with a less than excellent reputation; he was too protective of his own to make unfortunate connections in that way. Therefore, he must have had all the requirements of a gentleman, apart from restraint in his speech.

How could he be a gentleman and speak to her like that in her own home? No one in her circle or among her acquaintance was crass enough to do so. She was the most popular debutante for two Seasons, her suitors were more numerous than anyone had predicted for her. The only reason she had not married last Season—and had not become engaged yet in this one—was because of her father’s peculiar views on each man and offer and her own overly-discerning tastes.

Apparently, her father’s views were to be relied upon more than her taste, which was why she had been cut out of the

discussion entirely for this arrangement. Not only was she to be married to her father's personal favorite of all her offering suitors, but the man to whom she would be wed was a societal hermit who almost never strayed from his quaint little Cornish hamlet. How could anyone imagine her to be that reclusive? Cornwall was *not* where she belonged, unless there was a plot to rid her of her sanity; in that case, Cornwall would be an ideal place for her.

"We've decided to have the wedding in four weeks," her father suddenly announced, as though Adelaide had begged him for an answer to the question. "Enough time for the banns to be read without wasting any time. Lady Tunbridge, would that be sufficient time to properly prepare a trousseau for your daughter?"

"Certainly, Tunbridge," came her mother's calm, unaffected reply. Adelaide watched as she smiled over at the two men in the room, though the smile did not quite reach her eyes. "I do hope you will speak with the vicar at St. George's Hanover Square. Anything else would be unthinkable."

Well, at least her mother was thinking clearly. If they were going to proceed with this farce for the sake of it, they might as well make the most of the situation. And wouldn't Adelaide look simply radiant dressed in the finest gown in the morning light at St. George's?

She looked over at Basset again, this time with more speculation. He really was a stunningly attractive man, in the most rugged, dark, and rustic sense. Perhaps lacking a little in finery, but under her influence, she could see that remedied. He would be a fair enough adornment for her arm, particularly at the church and wedding breakfast. If she could give the right impression, there would be no need for anyone to speculate about the condition of the match.

After all, no one knew that the harmless flirtation between Phillip and herself had been more than it appeared. No one would be expecting to hear their names attached to one another.



She could still be the envy of all, securing a love match with a handsome man in possession of a title and a fortune. No one would ever need to know that it was a business arrangement or that she was displeased with it. No one would have to know she wanted Phillip, not Basset.

She could take control of this situation and make it her own. She would be Adelaide, Lady Basset, and the envy surrounding her would only increase. And if she played her cards right, she could arrange for a marriage of distance to come about. Particularly if her new husband should be so miserable in his choice of bride privately that he preferred separation.

No one would suspect the true cause, given how Adelaide would portray herself in public, and would that not be a delicious bit of gossip to set against her husband?

The temptation to smile tugged at the corners of her lips, but Adelaide refused to smile in earnest while in the presence of this man. Pretending for the public would be one thing. Pretending for her soon-to-be husband was entirely unnecessary.

“Oh, I do not know if it will be enough time for the trousseau, Father,” Adelaide said, breaking into whatever conversation they had moved on to while she percolated on her marriage.

Her parents, her intended, and her cousin all looked at her then, their expressions showing varying degrees of confusion.

Adelaide glanced at Anna for half a moment, unable to keep her lips from twitching just a little. She met her father’s perplexed expression, widening her eyes for effect.

“I must have a new dress for the wedding itself, and the *en vogue* fashions are so delicate and elaborate, it will take a great deal of time to see that dress alone finished. And then there are the other gowns, at least twenty-seven in number, when one considers morning dresses, day dresses, walking dresses, ball gowns, and evening gowns. Then, it would only be right that I have a proper riding habit if I am to be Lady Basset in Cornwall. And then—”

“Are you planning on itemizing the entire imagined trousseau for us?” Basset interrupted, extending his hand a little as though it could shift aside the exact items she was mentioning.

Pressing her tongue to her teeth, Adelaide gave the man a harsh look. “If it will prove my point, *Basset*, yes, I will.”

“*Lord* Basset, daughter,” her father hissed. “Have some respect.”

“If he showed any for me, I might,” Adelaide snapped, not sparing him a look. “This is not a trivial concern. A bride is judged for her trousseau, and if any of you think for one minute that during the first three weeks of my marriage I will not be watched by all of Society with the eyes of judgment and assumption, you are sadly and pathetically mistaken.”

“Calm yourself, dearest,” her mother urged in a taut voice. “His lordship will think—”

“His lordship will think what he will think,” Basset overrode with far more gentleness than he had with Adelaide a moment before. “But I’ll not have my wife be judged harshly and without cause. So, Miss Dyer, what would allow such a trousseau to be prepared in the allotted time? I beg your pardon, but I have no wish to delay further.”

Oh, *now* he wanted to be accommodating and polite? What was he playing at?

Adelaide peered at him through partially narrowed eyes. “Money, my lord. It is a crude subject, but there is no use prevaricating. Any modiste worth using for a proper trousseau can create timely miracles if paid well enough.”

He met her daring look without flinching, which was fairly impressive, given he had only known her a few minutes at most.

“I have no qualms with paying for efficient excellence. Allow me to add to whatever has been set aside for this trousseau in order to see it done.”

Surely it could not be so easy for him to give in to such an extravagant request. Adelaide had plenty of gowns, some of

which had not even been worn in the Season she had just passed, and it would have been fully reasonable for her to include those in her trousseau.

But she was not providing that information, and neither was her mother. That seemed significant.

“A true bridegroom of status would pay the lot, sir,” Adelaide suggested without reservation. “Dowry notwithstanding.”

She heard Anna gasp, took note of her father’s eyes widening and the odd purple shade entering his face, but she ignored them both. Her mother was too far out of her periphery for her to see, but it did not take imagination to picture a semi-horrified expression there.

Basset did not react but for a small tick in his jaw. A mighty fine jaw, as it happened, perfectly chiseled like a statue Adelaide had seen recently. Probably indicated a stubbornness in the man, which she could easily imagine.

Would he say nothing? Or would he simply stare and assume she would retreat from this fight? He would be sadly mistaken if that was indeed his plan.

“Very well,” Basset replied at last, without any sighs or moans, without a single hint of regret or exasperation.

Where was the entertainment in that?

“You’ll do it?” Adelaide could not believe what she was hearing and did her best not to blink more than was necessary in her disgruntlement.

Basset nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving hers. “Yes, I will pay for the entirety of your trousseau.”

“You don’t know what will be in it,” she reminded him, an odd ticklish sensation starting at the corner of her mouth. “And therefore, how much it will cost.”

“I trust you and your mother and your cousin, if she is included, to be reasonable within the demands of appropriate fashion for a lady of wealth, status, and consequence.” He

offered the slightest of shrugs. “And, to be frank, I am able to afford such a thing.”

Anna scoffed very softly, earning herself a quick flick in the arm from Adelaide.

“You underestimate those demands, Basset. It would be inconceivable to have less than thirty gowns, with accompanying undergarments, jewelry, shoes, stockings, and the entire list you were so against hearing of before.”

“It is true,” Anna added sincerely, if a bit too eagerly. “Jane Michaels, daughter of the Earl of Rippon, had thirty-four gowns, two riding habits, and fourteen pelisses.”

“And let us not forget the wedding gown itself,” Adelaide interjected with a nod. “I must have the finest. Otherwise, it will be said that one of our families is lacking in funds, if not both of them.”

“Let it never be said that I am any such thing,” her intended replied in the driest tone known to man. “Very well, have the modiste of your choice send the bills to me. I am sure she will find a great deal to charge in her efforts. If it will satisfy you, Miss Dyer, I will see to it that the family diamonds and tiara are sent to you in the next few days. Perhaps you might wear them to the wedding, as so many of the previous Lady Bassets have done. If they suit, of course. I would hate to think of tradition standing in the way of fashion.”

Family diamonds? Tiara? What sort of family wealth was she marrying into?

She stared at the man, her chest beginning to pulse strangely, words impossible to form.

He raised a brow. “Do you object to diamonds?” He glanced over at Anna rather calmly for a man apparently concerned with his bride’s tastes. “Are diamonds no longer in fashion, Miss Lumley-Jones?”

Anna seemed to squeak at being addressed under the circumstances. “I believe they are in fashion, sir. ‘Tis the setting of them that may need alteration.”

Bless her cousin for still being in possession of her wit when Adelaide needed it most.

“Yes,” she managed to add, nodding in lieu of finding additional words. “Setting.”

Basset looked at her again, his mouth still sitting in the slightest of curves. “I cannot speak to the necklace and earrings, but I do believe the tiara may have to remain as it is. I am told it is magnificently delicate, though I have no eye for such a thing. But if you find the rest of the set to need alteration to something more modern, I shall have the jeweler do so.” He moved his attention to her mother, now smiling in truth, which did the most extraordinary things to Adelaide’s fingertips. “I trust diamonds are welcome at St. George’s.”

Adelaide’s mother sputtered in a relatively genteel, ladylike fashion. “Yes, my lord, I believe so.”

Trust her mother to miss the humor in the statement. She had never been one to detect sarcasm or irony, and that wouldn’t change in the foreseeable future.

“What if I wish for sapphires, my lord?” Adelaide asked him, raising her chin as she found the base of her spine once more.

His dark eyes returned to her, the smile retreating to the bare curve of before. “Do you?”

She scoffed delicately. “How can I know that before I have settled on the gown for the wedding, Basset? I believe that is known as putting the cart before the horse.”

“Far be it from me to presume to discuss the finer points of carts and horses with a lady,” Basset quipped, bowing toward her in acknowledgement.

Adelaide narrowed her eyes at his impudence. “I cannot possibly choose between diamonds, sapphires, or any other gem at this early stage, Basset. I have not even considered what I wish for my wedding gown, and that will be paramount, regardless of tradition.”

“A lady generally knows her preference for gems, in my limited experience,” Basset responded easily as he clasped his

hand behind his back, somehow emphasizing further still the extraordinary nature of his frame, “before any thoughts of gowns come into consideration. One might even expect such fashions to be adjusted to one’s tastes in gems, given the ease of altering one over the other.”

Something told Adelaide she was fast losing control of the situation, and that was unacceptable.

“Are you implying there are other sets of family jewels that might be available to suit my preferences?” Adelaide demanded, forgetting to inject any sweetness into her tone as she clung to the only scrap of a fight she might have had left. “I wonder why, then, you insist upon diamonds.”

“I insist upon nothing, although one might wish to avoid appearing entirely mercenary,” came his cool response, markedly without gentility in its syllables. “People will tend toward such ideas, given such behavior.”

Adelaide barely bit back a snarl, biting the inside of her lip hard to keep from lashing out entirely. No manners, no breeding, no respect for a lady of quality. This was the man her father had sold her to? This was what she would be subjected to for the remainder of her life?

May he tire of her quickly and find some better way to occupy his time within a fortnight of their marriage. Or meet an untimely death in some unfortunate accident. Although not a duel. There was such romance in a duel, though it was technically against the law.

She would not wish for such lawless heroics from him. Nor, she thought, would he be inclined toward them.

“But to answer your question, Miss Dyer,” he went on, his tone resuming an air of politeness, even if it was pretended, “there are other sets of gems that you may choose from, should diamonds offend your sensibilities or tastes. Rubies, topaz, and emerald sets, as well as a delicate amethyst arrangement that will no doubt be thought unimpressive compared to the rest. The diamonds are considered to be the most exquisite, which is why I suggested them. And if it should happen that you decide against them, there is always

the blue diamond and sapphire parure. Or perhaps you would prefer the simpler yellow diamond necklace. I am afraid its companions have been taken apart for other items, but truly, it does not require much by way of accompaniment.”

Sensing she was being mocked, and not entirely certain he was serious, Adelaide scowled without regard for her features. “You grow tiresome.”

“Wealth can be tiresome,” he replied without concern. “Perhaps you might inspect my signet ring for an example of my tastes.” He tugged a thick gold ring from his right hand, then held it out for her to take.

It was a dare, and she knew it. In order to reach the item, she’d have to close the distance between them, and she had no desire to do such a thing. But she could hardly back down, now that this discussion on gems and finery had gone so far. She had started the argument, and he was not going to win an argument she had begun.

With a slight lift to her chin, Adelaide took three steps forward and extended her hand, palm up.

Basset cocked his head ever so slightly, something almost fascinating entering his gaze, before dropping his ring into her grasp.

The weight of the thing startled her, but she recovered by focusing her attention on its face. The base was a rich, earthy shade of blue stone, and the engraving set into it was of gold. Against a flourishing letter B was a noble head of a unicorn with a horned mane. Etched around the outside of the stone were the words *Pro Rege et populo*.

“What is the motto?” Adelaide asked with a faint sniff, eying the stone for any signs that it might be glass.

“For King and country,” Basset recited, matching her sniff for some mischievous reason, no doubt. “And that is lapis lazuli. Not quite the fashion anymore, but hardly outside of it, I am told. And it is an heirloom, after all. I saw no need to have it reset when I inherited it.”

Perhaps it was not in fashion, but it was a stirring shade that even she could not find fault in. Were she ever to find something more delicate with such a stone set into it, she would not have any qualms in wearing such thing.

But she would not ask any favors of her husband. Not genuine ones, at any rate.

She held the ring back out to him, meeting his eyes squarely. “Trust a Cornish baron to have a mythical creature featured on his family crest. How fanciful.”

He took his signet with a faint grunt of displeasure. “I trust you would not object to a griffin or a phoenix, though they are mythical as well.”

“They are warrior creatures of inspiration, my lord,” Adelaide reminded him with all the disdain she could muster. “Not craven ones of whimsy.”

Basset nodded once, pursing his lips for a moment. The entire room seemed to hold its breath in anticipation for what he would do next.

“With all due respect to your father, and his father before him, and all the generations of Dyer forebears before them,” Basset began slowly, “one might prefer a unicorn as an emblem over a surly, stubborn, utterly useless goat.”

Adelaide’s jaw dropped in silent outrage, and her eyes darted to her father. “Father! Did you hear what he said?”

“Loudly and clearly, my dear,” came the simple reply. “Had I known you were keen on disparaging family crests, I’d have warned you about ours, but alas...” He looked at Basset with a slight smile. “For what it is worth, we also bear a lion. But I cannot argue the merits of the goat when you are quite right. Often I’ve found the goat is a truer representation of certain members of the family.”

Reeling from the sudden betrayal, she whirled to face her mother, who only blinked. “Mother!”

The impossible woman only mouthed wordlessly.



With a final act of desperation, Adelaide looked to her cousin. While not a Dyer by name, Anna's mother had been, and therefore, some outrage should be shared.

Anna stared at her with wide-eyed confusion. "What do you want me to say?" she whispered.

Adelaide returned her stare, wishing she knew what ought to be said, what rebuttal should be given, what argument she could make. What revelation could prevent this marriage.

Phillip would not be enough. They had made no promises, had shared no embraces, garnered no scandals. Her feelings were irrelevant, and the prospects of Basset were too great to contend with. Wealth and status would be a fine accompaniment to her beauty and birthright, and surely finery could grant her joy where her marriage could not.

Surely her heart could learn to love and adore Phillip from afar and wait for a more perfect moment. Adelaide bit the inside of her cheek softly, waiting for the various pieces in her mind to form a clearer picture than the one she'd known before. She would not be beaten in this.

She would not.

Forcing her expression into one of cool complacency, Adelaide turned back around, allowing her lips to curve ever so slightly. "Well played, my lord. I can see we shall make life rather interesting for one another after we wed. I shall have my modiste send you the details of my wedding gown, and you must select which family gems would suit it best. I shall wear any of them with pride."

Basset matched her bare smile and bowed. "I shall endeavor to see you splendidly arrayed, Miss Dyer, so that you may be the envy of all. Surely that is what a bride wishes for on her wedding day?"

Oh, he was a canny one, and there was no missing the arrogance in that statement.

"Quite," she replied, extending her hand out to him.

He took it without hesitation, accommodating her by kissing the back of it, though she felt nothing through the lace

glove she'd worn. He must not have actually touched her with his mouth, which was a rather bold statement to make.

"If you would oblige me, Miss Dyer," Basset said without releasing her hand. "May I have a brief word in private?"

Adelaide reared back as far as his hold on her would allow. "We may not be alone, sir, engaged to marry or not."

The man somehow had the ability to roll his eyes without actually moving them. "I do not intend to be alone, just to the side."

This could be interesting. "Very well," she grumbled, allowing him to pull her aside.

Basset glanced over at her watching family, then returned his attention to her. "I would consider it a very great favor if, during the arrangement and purchase of your trousseau, you would arrange for a gown to be commissioned for someone else."

Adelaide looked up at him in surprise, a derogatory air filling her lungs. "I will not have a gown made for your mistress while being fitted for my wedding!"

"Shh!" He frowned at her, his brow creasing slightly. "I do not have a mistress, nor have I ever had a mistress. What I do have is a very shy sister who cannot bring herself to attend our wedding, and I would like her to have a gown as if she would have been present."

He had a... "What sister?" Adelaide asked in a very low voice, sensing the rising curiosity of her family. "I've never heard of you having a sister."

"You'd never heard of *me* before any of this," he pointed out, the creases in his brow smoothing.

Impossibly, Adelaide managed a small laugh at that. "True." She leaned back, giving him a suspicious look. "Why are you asking this of me? You could have any modiste fix up a gown any way you like. You don't need me to do that."

For the first time that day, Basset looked remotely human as uncertainty entered his expression. "I know nothing of

ladies' fashions," he admitted. "And I have no idea what will suit. I hadn't even considered this until you mentioned the trousseau, or I would have asked her myself, or one of our neighbors. Please, Miss Dyer."

Oh, he had to say please, didn't he?

"Well," Adelaide murmured, twisting her lips, "I might wish to plague you, but there is no reason your sister should suffer. What is her taste? Her coloring? Her size?"

Basset looked baffled now and purely mortal. "Erm... as tall as you, fairly slender, dark hair, very pale eyes. A little tanned, a few freckles. And I think... her tastes are simple?"

Adelaide shook her head, sputtering. "Just like a man. I shall try for simple elegance. And if we are talking of a gown she might wear to our wedding, it would also be suitable for evening wear, if not a ball, yes? Why am I even asking you? Consider it done, Basset. And knowing now that you have a sister, I shall purchase her something with my own money, not yours. It would mean nothing at all if I were to give her something that you purchased."

"Whatever you think is best, Miss Dyer," Basset replied with the same detached manner he had used the whole of their previous conversation. But now he wore a smile she could actually count as a smile. And heavens, did that change the man's features for the better.

"Stop smiling at me," Adelaide spat before she could let the effect of such a thing weigh on her. "My greater favor is marrying you, I can assure you. If you'll excuse me, I must make the most of my remaining time as a free woman." She turned on her heel and tugged her hand out of his hold, belatedly recollecting he had held it.

And how comfortable that had felt.

# Chapter Three



Harrison had every reason to believe he would die before he ever took vows in a church.

The agony of anticipation was one possible cause of death; not because he was beside himself with the pains of delay, or because he was perishing by thoughts of what joys marriage would bring. It was simply because he was bored out of his mind and just wanted the thing over and done with. What point was there in having banns read three Sundays consecutively? Why not just one week and have done with it? If someone had an objection to the match and was not in the Sunday service where it was read, that should be on their own head, not the parties being wedded. Four weeks was interminable, and no one would convince him otherwise.

The other potential mode of his premature departure from mortality would be by the hands of his bride. That one, he took a little more pleasure in.

Adelaide Dyer was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his entire life—and the most venomous. Certainly the most spoiled, and without a doubt the most unpleasant. He could not give her the title of most outspoken simply because he happened to know his sister bore that mantle.

She would box his ears if she knew he had called her shy, even if it was only the simpler excuse for her absence from his wedding.

And his bride...

Well, Miss Dyer would absolutely stab him with whatever sharp object was within reach if she knew that the sister he had asked such a favor for was illegitimate, barely literate, and held no fine accomplishment that he had ever seen, unless one counted the baking of breads and pies to be such a thing.

And then there was the small matter of her despising the very sight of him, as he was frequently reminded in his biweekly calls. Not that she would ever use such frankness to express something so ill-mannered, but it did not take excellent vision to read her expressions. He fully anticipated finding a new twitch of sorts in her features when she reached the altar, given her adverse reactions to seeing him at any given time.

And yet, he had not heard one word against their match from her, even when there had been ample time and occasion to do so. She had never once told him that she would not marry him, though she also hadn't said a word about enjoying the prospect. She showed as little interest in the idea as one might have expected to find when the topic of dust was brought up for discussion.

But she had not fought it.

Not to him, at any rate. He supposed he could not say for certain that she had not done so at all. There was no telling what sort of protest she was exuding in her own home among her family, what arguments ensued when he was not present, or how she truly felt about anything regarding him, marriage, their wedding, or anything else. And he had certainly given her no reason to confide in him, to look forward to the thing, or feel in any way pleased by the arrangement.

Perhaps part of her spite was his fault.

But then, she had started it.

That was certainly a point in his favor.

And he certainly hadn't imagined seeing crushed and wilting flowers strewn on the road outside of her house yesterday. More particularly, ones that exactly matched those he had ordered to be sent to her. It hadn't been a sentimental thought, certainly hadn't been an emotional one, but, he had been told, rather a task expected of a man who was soon to be married. And such flowers were always well received, those same sources had said, particularly if they looked expensive.

She had effectively corrected his assumptions on that score.

So he would make no more attempts to appear the doting bridegroom, nor would he pretend that he was doing what thousands of men had done before, and what dozens had no doubt done just in the last several weeks as the Season wore out. He was a bridegroom in the legal sense, he supposed, but not in any other respect.

He would pay for the ridiculous trousseau, though he knew very well she was using him shamelessly on that score, and he would show up to the church when expected and the wedding breakfast following. Lord Tunbridge had seen the wisdom in not inviting him to take a meal with the family, given how Miss Dyer had behaved initially and subsequently and, unless they were both mistaken, would do so eternally.

Harrison didn't mind. The wedding was not for him, after all, but for her. He would be perfectly content with signing the register and removing to Cornwall without any fuss or attention. He'd prefer that, come to think.

But that was not the way things were done, and he had to proceed in the way things were done. He'd looked into it, and that was the universal response.

He *had* to.

He'd considered returning to Cornwall to wait out the betrothal, but that too was frowned upon, which told him that he needed to get some better advisors in his life. One might even say that Harrison needed more friends in his life, but he considered that a stretch. What friends did he need in London?

He already had business associates, and he had dined with the Grangers twice, which had been enough, given the sheer amount of adoration the two had for each other. It was stifling for a man so unused to displays of affection or emotion—or feeling emotion. It was deuced uncomfortable to be in that environment, and he wasn't about to pretend otherwise.

It wasn't scandalous, by any stretch. They were perfectly polite and respectable people, and no one would have spread

gossip about the nature of their marriage. They weren't exactly leaving anyone in any doubt about the nature of their marriage either, but that was beside the point. They were madly in love, and it did not take excellent vision to see that.

One of these days, the ardor would cool or settle, and they would be more comfortable company for a man for whom emotions were strangers.

Not the enemy, just strangers.

After all, he had a certain fondness for Emblyn, and that already surpassed what he felt for Richard. He actually had a desire to associate with Emblyn and to improve their relationship as brother and sister. He rather wished someone would tell him they found Richard at the bottom of the Thames, if it meant the troubles surrounding him would end.

Was that something he needed to reconcile with a man of the church before making vows with Miss Dyer?

He'd never been a very great student of the church, but he was rather uncomfortable with the thought of damnation. Perhaps he ought to make friends with a man of the church back in Cornwall. Such theological discussions would be useful when questions arose, and it could not hurt to improve one's standing with the church and the Almighty by good connections.

As in Society, as in heaven. If that was how things worked.

Walking past a church now, Harrison mentally crossed himself, exhaling slowly in lieu of completely abandoning his task. What point was there in trying when he knew full well it was useless? His conscience pricked at him as though it sat within his chest wielding a needle, just as it had done for the last two weeks. Much as he might try to ignore the connection, he did have a brother, and that brother lived in London.

He could not get married in London without informing Richard.

It was sheer folly, but his mind was made up.

Mostly.

There was still a chance for someone to talk him out of it, though he was not entirely sure who would do such a thing in London, let alone in this part of it. The only options were himself and Richard, and either option could have done the task creditably. It had happened before where five minutes in his brother's company had been enough to overturn a decision, and it would certainly happen again if given a chance.

Even now, Harrison could not have said if he would be inviting his brother to the wedding, informing him of its occurrence, or warning him away from the event. He simply could not leave London without his brother knowing that he had taken a wife. Wisdom might have had him inform the man after the wedding had taken place, but that cursed, determined flicker of hope that somehow still lived within him wanted to give Richard a chance.

Idiotic notion, but it was there, all the same.

Whitechapel was certainly not the worst place in the world for his brother to have lodgings, but it was hardly a respectable area. How it managed to stay just above the description of squalid was something Harrison did not understand, as one trip down any alley in the area would lead a body to the depths of such a word, but somehow it did so. The location was perfect for someone like Richard who did not want to engage often with the upper class in its finery, yet refused to be permanently reduced to the lower orders, either. Cheap bachelor rooms were there, as well as those willing to pawn the belongings of others in order to feed less than respectable habits.

Which was likely why Richard had chosen this place for his residence. No expectations, no rules, and no limits to one's depravity.

Richard was a wastrel, a rake, and a reckless gambler; a man who charmed away wives of respectable men and ruined innocent girls of a lower class to avoid being forced into marriage. He was constantly in debt and chose lodgings for himself closer to his vices than was wise. The only benefit to his present location in London was that Harrison rarely had to hunt long to find Richard when something needed to be done.



He had paid off more angry husbands and creditors over the years than anyone should have to do, but if it would save his brother the risk of a duel or debtor's prison, he could not keep from doing all possible to prevent such things.

How exactly his brother was even living without regular funds coming in, as Harrison had cut him off, he could not say. There was nothing he could do about the annuity Richard was getting, as it had been arranged in their father's will, but nine hundred pounds was an amount his brother lost in a single game, not a living. He could have earned more and lived better than that.

Harrison had tried to explain this to his brother, had reminded him that, as a younger son, he was expected to have an occupation of some kind, but Richard had only ever thrown it back into his face. He was not the type of gentleman who could possibly be expected to have an occupation, and that there was plenty of funds in the Basset vaults to set him up adequately. It was always Harrison's fault that Richard was in dire straits, always Harrison's greed that prevented Richard from achieving his potential, always Harrison who judged Richard more harshly than he deserved.

Richard was their father's favorite child, he'd said, and it was their father's chief regret that Harrison was the firstborn.

The claim wasn't unfounded, Harrison had to admit, but neither had it ever been proven. Their father had been exactly the sort of man that Richard was, though he'd also possessed a modicum of respect for his title and inheritance. The estate had done well under his care, though Harrison would not have called it flourishing, and his losses at the gaming tables had never put the estate in jeopardy.

Would Richard have found that sort of restraint if more had been expected of him?

Several of Harrison's friends had advised him to stop helping his brother, to stop saving him, to stop reacting to his brother's actions. But what more could he do, after removing all financial assistance from his own pockets? Yes, he still salvaged what he could of his brother's debts, but Richard

always seemed so ashamed of his actions, so penitent, so broken when Harrison found him.

And Harrison believed him every time.

Perhaps that was the greatest trick of them all, Richard's crowning glory in his choice of lifestyle, miserable though it was.

Harrison would always be there to drag him out of trouble and believe that he would change. Thus far, he had not.

Would he ever?

Richard knew nothing of Emblyn, and Harrison had no hesitation in keeping it that way. Should Richard ever make his way back to Trevadden, perhaps Harrison would see the half-siblings introduced. If he continued to avoid anything to do with Cornwall and the family, there would be no point in bringing a new connection into it, just as he had no plans to introduce Miss Dyer to Richard. It would not be outside of Richard's nature to take up with her in some torrid affair simply to spite Harrison, and while Miss Dyer was surely sharp enough to see through the guise of his wastrel brother, he would not underestimate Richard's ability to act the part of a proper, if roguish, gentleman.

And if Miss Dyer wasn't careful, she would be the perfect arrow for Richard's vengeful bow. Not that Harrison had any great affection for her as yet, but she was his bride. He would take a possessive interest, if not a protective one. His heart would not be so wounded as his pride, but there it was.

Miss Dyer was *his* bride, *his* woman, if he felt so barbaric; she was the one woman in the world his brother absolutely could not have.

Well, one of two, he supposed. He really ought not to have Emblyn, but as Richard knew nothing of her...

All in all, it was simply better that Richard knew nothing. Or, at least, as little as possible.

Which brought Harrison around once more to the selfsame question he had asked himself half an hour ago: why was he doing this?

Unfortunately, he still had no better answer other than because Richard was his brother. That, it seemed, was enough to keep his feet moving.

Walking this path was strangely like walking through a peculiar dream one is not particularly fond of. He knew the route without needing any reference, did not have to think about his direction or progress, and there was nothing he could see or hear that would distract him sufficiently to alter his course. Everything was as it had always been, and he was no longer even aware of the filth or unfortunate creatures around him. He didn't even hand out coins anymore, as the regulars around Richard's lodgings only used it for gin. He had walked this path in rain and in sunshine, in despair and in resignation, and he never left feeling better than when he'd arrived.

He did not anticipate any of that changing today.

It was almost noon, so his brother should be within, likely recovering from whatever vices had occupied his night, if not his morning as well. The door to the building of poorly furnished apartments was ajar, making Harrison's progress much easier.

It was not that he didn't enjoy the conversations with the landlady when she could be bothered to appear. It was that the stench of gin, combined with the woman's natural odors and that of the tobacco always to be spotted in her remaining teeth, was enough to make even the strongest of stomachs churn. And as her conversation tended toward rambling and repetitive, it was always a lengthy endeavor to get away.

The interior looked much as it had the last time Harrison had visited, and that had been a venture in the middle of the night. The light of day did not improve the state of things. Cobwebs were to be seen in every corner, though, strangely enough, not about the stairs, nor their railings. Half of the sconces on the wall bore candles, though all were more than half melted, and the ones that did not seemed to be missing a piece or two.

And this was what his brother paid twelve shillings a week for? It was not worth five.

But as it was not an opium den or a brothel, no matter what hobbies its tenants engaged in, Harrison supposed it was not the worst situation possible. Close, but not actually the worst.

Harrison marched his way up the creaking stairs, keeping his steps carefully in the narrow trail that was remarkably free of filth along their surfaces. He avoided touching the handrail, for fear of gaining some dreadful sickness. He would already feel ill enough by the end of this interview; there was no sense in truly gaining a disease.

The second flight of stairs bore fewer indications of tread, but the amount of dirt, cobwebs, and general debris seemed to match what he had just trod through. Trudging through filth to meet his brother. Would nothing ever change?

He reached the top of the stairs and proceeded down the dark, tattered corridor, hearing no sound at all from any of the rooms he passed. It was far too early in the morning for anyone living in this building to rise, given the majority of them were creatures of the night only. He could only hope his brother was alone in his rooms. It was deuced awkward when he wasn't.

He reached the fifth door in the row of them and paused, steeling himself and feeling the telltale twinge of regret in his stomach.

This was not going to end well. Or begin well. Or go well in any way.

He knocked before he could turn away, listening for any sounds from within, although he wasn't certain his brother would be conscious enough to make any noise whatsoever.

A faint, incoherent roar of indignation resounded from within, informing Harrison quite clearly that Richard was, in fact, at home and moderately conscious. Responsive was always a welcome state.

He tried the door, which was fortunately unlocked, though there was some concern for the location of his brother's residence without the security of a lock in place, and he entered the room.

The first thing he noticed was the lack of furniture in the room. The last time he had been in this place, there had been at least one chair by the fire and a clock on the mantle, and he was positive some unremarkable artwork had hung about the room. None of that was there now, and even the fireplace seemed remarkably empty. Dark and empty.

Apart from the curtains, which had enough wear in them that holes were allowing sunlight through them—certainly irritating his brother on the occasions that he appeared from his bedchamber in the daylight hours. Nothing in this room indicated life, let alone inhabitants.

Harrison moved to the adjoining door of the bedchamber, presently ajar, and knocked again as he pushed the door open further still. The light in this room was worse than the anteroom, but Harrison's eyes had adjusted enough to take in plenty of details: the four-poster bed with tattered hangings, the blanket hanging over the window in addition to the curtains to increase the room's darkness, and the prone figure in a stained linen shirt splayed on the rumpled bed, barely moving. Its dark, sprawling curls hid any facial features, but the half-groaning breaths it took were decidedly familiar.

“Are you conscious?” Harrison asked in as loud a voice as he felt necessary to wake his brother from any deep sleep he might have been in.

The barely coherent response from his brother was too vile for anyone of manners, and Harrison could only shake his head.

“What happened to your furnishings?” he inquired as he moved farther into the room, glancing at the open bureau of relatively fine clothing, though a number of its contents had been strewn across the floor before it.

“Sold ‘em,” Richard grumbled, turning on the bed and glaring blearily at Harrison. “Run of bad luck, and I had debts.”

Harrison grunted once. “Are you solvent now?”

“Settled up, more like. Why? You offering to give me money?” Richard laughed before groaning and burying his face in his bed.

“I see your morning routine has not altered much,” Harrison mused, coming closer to the bed. “How’s your head?”

Again came the vulgar response, this time bringing a faint smile to Harrison’s lips.

“Ordinary people don’t have to wake up like this, you know,” Harrison told him as though it were helpful. “They actually feel rested and don’t have much pain.”

“Ordinary people,” Richard repeated, turning his head to the side again, making his words clearer. “What the devil would you know about ordinary people, Lord Pretentious Basset? Visiting your precious mines doesn’t help, not if you keep your hands clean and don’t scrape for bread.”

“You’ve never scraped for bread a day in your life,” Harrison retorted. “Your problems are self-inflicted, not due to poor wages, a poor harvest, or a failing mine that cannot pay out. Don’t pretend to possess some nobility of spirit simply because you are in want. You will garner no sympathy from me.”

Richard laughed once, a sound rife with spite. “Trust me, brother. I know full well where I stand with you, which begs the question, why are you here?”

Harrison pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth, debating the wisdom of sharing anything with Richard after all. But when Richard was in the throes of recovering from a night’s drinking and opium, he was less irritating and more pitiful. Perhaps that would help his cause.

“I’m getting married,” Harrison said flatly. “Thought you should know.”

Richard coughed, the sound actually painful to hear. “The hell, you say. Who’s the poor lass saddled with the heartless, hollow man?”

Harrison let the insult pass unremarked. “You do not need to know. I’ve not come to invite you to the wedding.”

“Aw, and I was so looking forward to going to church with you.” Richard pouted like a child. “What a spectacle you’ll make. You do know you’ll need to appear pleased with the arrangement, don’t you, Harry? Or have any kind of expression? Emotion? You know the word?”

“Don’t come, Richard,” Harrison warned sternly. “I’m not telling you the date, I’m not naming my bride, and I’m not giving you a choice. Do not interfere. Please.”

“He even says please like a good little boy should.” Richard coughed again, then, with great effort, pushed himself up to a position on all fours, which seemed to pain him further. “Don’t worry, Harry. I have no interest in the mouse you’re marrying, or that you are marrying, or anything remotely related to you, really. I’ve more fascinating things to see on my breakfast plate.”

Harrison pointedly looked around the room. “You have a breakfast plate? Must have missed that one among all your other belongings on my way in.”

Richard raised his head just enough to scowl at him. “Only a villain mocks those in an unfortunate state.”

“You are unfortunate, and that might have been redeemable once.” Harrison shrugged. “Now it’s just a fact.”

“Be careful, Harry,” Richard warned, his voice dropping deeper. “Saying please is not a binding commitment. Just because I don’t care about your impending marriage does not mean I have to respect it, either. What if I were to object, hmm? Embarrass you in front of your bride, her relations, anyone you’ve paid to be your friend on that day... after all, mate, I’m your brother. That doesn’t go away.”

“I’m not about to bribe you to stay away,” Harrison told him, trying to ignore how the barb set his nerves on end. “I’ll count on your memory-afflicting habits and distaste for polite company to rein in your interfering impulse, as you have no better nature to appeal to. I’ll be returning to Cornwall with

my wife shortly after our wedding, so you need not worry about seeing me further here.”

Richard snorted softly and pushed back to a more upright position on his knees, brushing his unruly curls from his unshaven face. “Back to the backwater, eh? Tell the ragamuffin locals to remember me fondly. And give my warmest regards to Julia. I’d wager she’s a fine view for any appreciative eyes. I’d have enjoyed a taste of that.”

Harrison bit the inside of his lip to keep from striking his brother in defense of one of his oldest friends, though he knew full well he was being baited. He gave his brother a clipped nod. “Goodbye, Richard.”

He started out of the room, fuming, which was not improved by his brother calling after him. “Take care, Harry. I hope your bride shows on the day of!”

All things considered, the interview was not the worst one he’d had. His disgust was the same, his irritation was the same, his feeling of general hopelessness was the same, but the behavior of his brother had been remarkably tame, considering the life he lived. Harrison had managed to keep a more civil tongue in his head and had avoided showing obvious signs of temper. It was not often that his ire was piqued, but Richard had a knack for bringing that about, which was unrivaled in all other creatures.

Still, duty was done, and now he could move forward. The wedding would soon be upon them, the banns were being read, and he could honestly say that all living members of his family were aware of his actions. Emblyn had written her congratulations in response to the note he had sent of Miss Dyer’s identity and had included with those warm wishes the suggestion of listening to his bride rather than only hearing her.

It was sound advice, and her favorite bit of it to give him. She often accused him of hearing her, but not listening. He’d been making an effort there, and it had been some time since she had made the argument.



What he wouldn't give to confide in her before the wedding, perhaps with warm milk before a fire in the sitting room, and truly reveal all he was feeling in anticipation of his marriage. It might have been nothing, but he felt tied up in knots rather than settled. It was not nerves, he had ascertained that, and it was not reluctance. It seemed, rather, to be a conglomeration of various bits and pieces of emotions rather than an excess of anything in particular.

Emblyn had a clarity in vision and thought that might have been able to help him there, and she would not mince her words. That was what he needed, but he dared not go to Cornwall and back before the wedding just to have such a talk.

He would have to make do on his own until they returned to Trevadden. Perhaps by then, he might have figured a few things out, and then that conversation might be more engaging.

It was not lost on him that his conversation with one sibling had led him to wish for one with another. Where Richard was lost, Emblyn had been found; where he was forever abusing Harrison, she was timidly accepting him; where he was wicked, she was wholesome.

Outspoken, but wholesome.

Should any of his family have attended his wedding, Harrison would have wanted Emblyn. But he would stand alone on that coming day and occasion and do the deed adequately enough. If Richard managed to avoid attempts at ruining it all, he would count the day a success. Perhaps even victorious.

Would he regret having told his brother about the wedding at all, despite everything? Only time would tell, and time had never endeared itself to Harrison in the past.

All he could do was hope; and hope he would.

# Chapter Four



“I don’t even like weddings. Can’t abide anything about them. What is the point in all of this?”

“It is a celebration of your marriage, dear. And you do love celebrations, do you not?”

Adelaide rolled her eyes and sighed heavily at her mother’s patronizing attempts at soothing her. “What is there to celebrate in my marrying a man who has only succeeded in courting Father’s opinion of him and not my own?”

Her mother gave her a disparaging look that was mingled with desperation and pleading. “Darling, this is the way things are. Marriage offers women freedom they do not otherwise have, and that is something to be celebrated. You will marry Lord Basset next week, and then you may do as you choose without respect to anyone else.”

“I know that, Mother,” Adelaide snapped as Madame Hubert placed another pin in the back of what would be her wedding gown. “Every girl knows that. From the moment we are presented at court, we are nothing but ornaments in Society, whose sole purpose is to marry and thereafter produce offspring. However that is managed, not that anyone has excelled in informing us of its process.”

Madame Hubert coughed a noise that sounded more like a laugh than anything else, while Adelaide’s mother merely blanched and sniffed once. “Never mind that, Adelaide. It can be rather unpleasant. Just close your eyes and think of the coast.”

Adelaide frowned at that, but her mother looked away and busied herself with some nearby lace. What in the world was that about? How could Madame Hubert laugh about something that her mother could not even discuss? Was the disparity in

classes so great that even topics of discussion were viewed differently? And what would picturing the coast do anything about it?

The ignorance relegated to young ladies of her station had never perturbed her before, but with her wedding fast approaching, she found the thing quite maddening.

Her docile mother did not help matters.

It had often been said that no one knew where Adelaide's willfulness of spirit had come from, and Adelaide could see why. Her father bowed and scraped to almost anyone of influence, and her mother seemed to merely exist in a state of ambivalence. Her siblings had been raised with the same almost dismissive mothering as Adelaide, though their father had been dotting enough, and the flaws in their personalities were more than compensated by their accomplishments and charm.

None of them could be considered a mouse, Adelaide could say that for certain, but they were a variety of shades along the socially inclined and opinionated gamut, at the top of which Adelaide alone proudly sat.

She thought, perhaps, it could be due to her being the youngest of her siblings, and thus needed to ensure her voice was heard, or it could have been her nature from the beginning. Whichever it was, her parents had long given up on managing Adelaide and manipulating her to their own wishes. Apart from this marriage arrangement, Adelaide got what she wanted at any given time, within moderate reason. She knew better than to try for extremes in her demands, as her father did have a modicum of restraint and wisdom with his finances and abilities.

And he'd always held the power when it came to her marriage, just as he had for her sisters. Her brother had been given some leeway, being a man, but their father's approval of the bride-to-be had been paramount. As Charles was almost entirely their father reborn, it had been a simple enough affair, and his sweet mouse of a wife had given him three strapping sons already.

Heaven help her if he wished for a fourth.

“Apparently, it is customary for a bride to be naive as well as innocent,” Adelaide muttered as Madame Hubert arranged and folded the fabric at her bodice, pinning gently. “No doubt to ensure the husband does not look a fool. Or perhaps to avoid disappointing his bride.”

“Really, Adelaide,” her mother hissed, showing a sign of backbone Adelaide had not seen in years.

Would wonders never cease?

“I was the same before I married, my lady,” Madame Hubert insisted in a thick French accent that Adelaide suspected was false and well-practiced. “A spiteful cat, my father called me.”

Adelaide glanced down at the woman with mild interest. “And what did your husband call you?”

Madame met her eyes, looking almost mischievous. “Something far more vulgar. He did not care for me, either. It made for some rather interesting evenings. Passion, you know. Great energy.”

Her mother cleared her throat loudly as Adelaide tried to navigate her way through that particular riddle and came back over to them, her eyes fixed on her daughter earnestly. “Lord Basset has been very generous, and he will not disappoint you.”

“He will not disappoint Father, you mean,” Adelaide told her firmly. “Lord Basset has no care for me other than my name and connections. Even Mary Smith in Cheapside can marry for affection, but not the youngest daughter of Lord Tunbridge, who already has three sons-in-law to rival any in the *ton*. No, she must marry where he pleases, and all without complaint.”

“Affection?” her mother repeated, her face wreathed in confusion, if not horror. “When have you ever wished to marry for affection?”

Adelaide caught how Madame Hubert looked away at the moment and sensed her earlier claim had not been entirely

accurate. It only reinforced Adelaide's suspicions that the rest of the world married for the heart, not the head. Or the paper, as it were.

"Does it matter?" Adelaide asked as the image of her darling, perfect, charming Phillip rose in her mind. "Even if I had placed my affections in a particular quarter, it would be Father's decision in the end."

"And there is nothing you or I can do to alter that." Her mother's jaw was set, her fair eyes bright with some new light in them. "I did not marry your father for affection or anything of the sort, and our marriage has been a good one. A happy one, I dare say. I have everything I'd hoped for in a marriage."

And what had her mother wished for? Had she wanted affection? Friendship? Romance? A comfortable home? What did wanting something in a marriage have to do with anything?

Adelaide wasn't foolish enough to marry beneath her station, and she doubted she had the fortitude to endure such a state anyway. Phillip would not be enough for a viscount's daughter for some years, being still in remainder for his grandfather's title, and the family name was only fair. New money, his father called it, though it was an antiquated notion. And Phillip, bless him, lacked ambition to become more than he was at present if it required too much of him.

Being an elder son, he could not be expected to find an occupation, and Adelaide did not know how else a man gained a great fortune. She would never have been able to marry Phillip unless her father were content to wait beyond the grave for the match. It did not stop her wishing that fair Phillip would be her groom rather than the dark and nettlesome Basset, but it was at least a glance at reality.

Perhaps he was not so perfect, then.

But he was a good deal closer to it than Basset, and no one could argue there.

"I think you will be well pleased with the lavender taffeta, Miss Dyer," Madame Hubert assured her in what was

undoubtedly supposed to be a bright change of topic. “Particularly with the deeper purple accents at the waist, sleeves, and hem. And your neckline will be so elegant. What gems will you wear?”

“Diamonds,” Adelaide replied absently, not truly caring if she were to be dressed in black crepe and draped in matching lace. “His lordship has family heirlooms.”

“Ah, it will complement your coloring so well,” Madame said with a sigh, nodding in delight. “And where will the wedding be?”

“St. George’s Hanover Square,” her mother answered, her tone almost haughty with her pride.

Madame Hubert paused, looking up at Adelaide with some speculation. “Indeed? Such a lovely place. Exquisite, really. And I think, perhaps, I may need a word with Miss Dyer privately to discuss a particular detail.” She gave Adelaide’s mother a sympathetic look. “I trust your ladyship will not object. It is a tradition for all of my brides. Very special.”

Adelaide bit the inside of her cheek a little as her mother looked bewildered, her face wreathed in consternation. She could not very well refuse to go in the shop of the best modiste in London, but to be intentionally excluded from her daughter’s fitting and any particular detail of the wedding would grate her nerves like nothing else would.

But to have a moment away from her...

That would be a wedding present in itself.

“I suppose,” Adelaide’s mother murmured, still looking rather put out for an appointment she was so looking forward to. Her brow puckered, her lips pinched, and she moved to the front of the shop to look at fabrics.

Adelaide heaved a sigh at her departure. “Thank you, Madame. It is as though no one understands what it must be like to not be pleased with a marriage to a stranger, and a moment alone to indulge in my misery is so very welcome.”

“Misery will flee when you hear what I have to say,” Madame told her in a lower voice, the accent much less

pronounced now, her eyes bright. “Is your Lord Basset a handsome man?”

Bitterness rose in Adelaide’s mouth. “Yes, unfortunately.”

“Proud?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Rich?”

Adelaide’s eyes narrowed. “Yes... very. He is paying for my trousseau, as you know.”

“Then let us give him a bride worth parading in St. George’s Hanover Square,” Madame Hubert urged with a sly smile. “You are a beautiful woman, Miss Dyer, and I have no doubt the man knows it. But he cannot imagine how you will look on the day of your wedding, and it would be all too delicious to leave him speechless, would it not? This fine arrangement of your father’s in which you had no say... why not say something now?”

There was something in the idea that relaxed a coiled tension within her, and Adelaide could not help but to smile in return. “I do enjoy having the last word, Madame.”

Madame’s smile turned into an all-out grin. “If you and I arrange things well enough, you shall have the only word, Miss Dyer.”

Oh, the taste of victory was there upon her lips, and nothing had been said or done yet. She might be powerless to stop the wedding, might be a pawn in this whole scheme, but she had already turned one thing to her advantage in his purchasing her trousseau. Why not do a good deal more that would declare emphatically to her husband that she was not voiceless in this arrangement, nor would she be so in the future?

“What did you have in mind, Madame?” Adelaide inquired, her eyes flicking to her mother’s position, eyeing them still, but far out of earshot.

“Gauze, Miss Dyer,” Madame said in a hushed tone, as though she were speaking of gold. “White gauze. Here.” She

moved to a stack of fabric squares on a small table nearby, flicking through them until a neat square of the aforementioned sheer white fabric was before her. She plucked it out and came back to Adelaide, laying it across the lavender taffeta at her bodice. “An overlay of the entire gown, following the exact folds and patterns of what lies beneath. Perhaps cutting away at the skirts in front, draping like exquisite curtains. And gathering a collection of flowers to shape the bodice like so...”

Adelaide nodded in thought. “Why gauze, Madame? Surely lace would—”

“Because,” the modiste overrode eagerly, “the details of lace would be lost. I intend to embroider the gauze with deep purple flowers. A shower of blossoms, Miss Dyer, cascading along the length of you, perhaps gathering at the hem. And if I were to entwine the flowers with gold wire throughout...”

“Oh,” Adelaide breathed, the vision of it appearing in her mind. “The windows at St. George’s would catch the gold in the light.”

Madame nodded slowly, still wearing her broad grin. “Indeed, miss. You will be shimmering without any help from Lord Basset’s diamonds. But with those as well? Angelic and ethereal.”

“He does have amethysts,” Adelaide felt the need to point out, the coloring of the ensemble reminding her. “If that would suit better.”

“Amethysts are for dinners and concerts, my dear,” Madame told her firmly, eyes sharp. “Not for weddings. Gold and amethyst pins in your hair, perhaps, but not as your wedding gems. And if you will allow me to get, perhaps, a little carried away, I should like to add a cape to your gown.”

Adelaide blinked at that. The rest of it had all sounded quite lovely up to that point, but a cape? She would look more ridiculous than elegant if this went too far.

“I see your doubts,” Madame said with a chuckle. “Allow me to allay those fears. The cape, Miss Dyer, would be part of



the dress. It would start at the shoulders.” She moved around Adelaide, setting her hands just inside the sleeves at each shoulder. “White satin, Miss Dyer. A great length of it to fall behind you in waves. Delicate and elegant, lined with gold only on the inside. And your lace veil, pinned with combs into your tresses, disappears into its depths.”

It was a vision that even Adelaide had never dreamed of, and that was saying a very great deal. When she had managed to scheme Basset into paying for her trousseau, and insisting on having the finest wedding gown, she hadn’t imagined anything in particular except for making him pay. She’d had no doubt that ideas would come to her as she considered her tastes and styles for the day, and extravagance would certainly come into the design.

But this...

“Can you really do that?” Adelaide whispered, as though someone were standing close and might tell her intended what they were planning.

Madame Hubert came around to her front once more and nodded very firmly. “Not only can I, Miss Dyer, but I will. It will be my most extraordinary creation, and only you can wear it.”

Excitement welled within Adelaide’s chest, which was the first she could claim since her engagement, and the idea of walking down the aisle of the church to a dumbfounded Basset was the most entertaining image she’d conjured in some time.

“Oh, Madame!” Adelaide took her hands, squeezing tightly. “There will be nothing like it! Your shop will be flooded with business for weeks and months after the wedding, which, I hope, will be a small way I might repay your kindness.”

“It will be magnificent, miss,” Madame assured her, “for us both. And we shall see if you must think of the coast after all of that.”

The reference made Adelaide frown, not holding any more answers now than it did before.

Madame must have seen her confusion and ignorance on her face, for she cleared her throat and turned to call for Adelaide's mother.

Adelaide caught her hand before she could do so, thoughts of her future husband reminding her of the task he'd asked after. "Madame, a moment."

Instantly, her attention was back on Adelaide. "You have a question?"

"A favor," Adelaide corrected, wondering what question the lady thought Adelaide bold enough to ask. "And... it is not just for me. It is for Lord Basset."

Madame Hubert snorted softly. "You do not care for your intended, yet you are doing a favor for him? What kind of favor can a man ask of his bride when he is already getting the woman herself?"

"Just so," Adelaide murmured a bit awkwardly, flashing a hesitant smile. "Believe me, if it were only for him, I'd have tossed the request back in his face. But it seems his lordship has a sister. One who is quite shy and has remained behind in Cornwall rather than come to London for the wedding. He would like a dress made for her and asked me to look after it, as he knows nothing of such matters. Something she might have worn to our wedding, had she felt the courage."

The request took the modiste by surprise, and a sheen of speculation fell across her features. "I'd have said it sounds like a mistress, only I cannot think why a man would want a gown fit for a wedding made for such a woman."

"How do you mean?" Adelaide asked, tilting her head in curiosity. "What sort of gown would be more appropriate?"

Madame's eyes widened before she averted them, muttering incoherently under her breath. "This sister of his lordship," she said hastily, "did he give an age?"

Adelaide shook her head. "Not precisely. I'd say several years younger, though not a young girl. He says she is about my height and rather thin, has dark hair like his, which is truly a rich color, and her eyes are a palest blue. A little tanned, and

a few freckles.” She smiled now at the description. “I confess, I have imagined a very sweet thing of perhaps eighteen, undoubtedly shy because of her overbearing brother, and yet... when he asked it of me, he seemed so sincere, when before he had been so cool. I think it must pain him that she is not in London. Which is, perhaps, the only redeeming quality I have found in him besides excellent teeth.”

“One must never overlook a fine set of teeth,” Madame agreed with a nod. “And a man who procures fine things for a sister is no villain to me.” She paused, glancing at Adelaide a little. “However unwelcome the marriage might be.”

There was nothing to do but scowl at that. “Steady on, Madame,” she grumbled sourly. “I do not mean to paint him so gloriously. All I ask is that we put as much care into Miss Basset’s gown as we do into mine. Not quite so elaborate, naturally, but the same detail. I thought, perhaps, a pale blue with white sprigs. Something to enhance her already-beautiful eyes. Her tastes are simple, but I see no reason why simple cannot be exquisite.”

Madame’s smile was filled with a pride and delight that Adelaide had never seen on the face of any shopkeeper or craftsman before. “Miss Dyer has beauty, wisdom, and vision, I see.” She stepped back, looking over Adelaide as though she were Miss Basset, and the partially-pinned beginnings of her gown something else entirely. “Yes... blue would be lovely. Perhaps with lace... a few rosettes or ribbons just for emphasis...” Her eyes cleared and she focused on Adelaide once more, smiling fondly. “Yes, Miss Dyer, it shall be a lovely gift from his lordship to his sister. I trust he will give you the credit you will rightfully deserve for the thing.”

“I have no notion that he will do any such thing, Madame.” Adelaide did her best to shrug without lifting her shoulders, as the pinning there had not been completed. “What I know of his lordship is enough to make me spiteful and irritated, but I believe he is reputed to be a gentleman.”

There was no telling how many people Basset had needed to pay in order to pass as such a thing, but there was no sense in spreading more gossip about the man when she was about to

marry him. She would be spending her entire life trying to improve on the name he was giving her, and she ought not to make the task more difficult for herself. And everyone knew that a modiste could gossip better than the elderly ladies who continue to attend balls.

Madame Hubert could easily tell the world everything Adelaide had just related. What would Basset say to that?

Adelaide looked at the woman carefully, wondering just how far her spite for her impending marriage and insufferable intended would take her.

If she were truly to make this situation her own, to take power she had never been offered, she would need the opinion of Society behind her. She would need to be as unaffected by her feelings for the man she was marrying as she was by her feelings for every dandy vying for a dance with her. She would rise above such things and make the world believe her facade, just as she had been doing ever since she had been presented at Court.

Not only would her wedding be a triumph, but her marriage would be also. Lord and Lady Basset of wherever it was he was from would be the envy of any society they embarked upon, be it London, Cornwall, or Paris. They would be most agreeable spouses, even flirtatious, if must be, so that the world might witness their union and yearn for one akin to it.

No one would need to know that they could not abide one another. That there was no affection in their relationship. That Adelaide would wish to claw his eyes out, and he might wish her forever silent. There would be nothing to see in any public realm that would ever raise an eyebrow or a question. Unless the eyebrows were due to blatant flirtation, and the question one of their adoration for one another.

All others would be forbidden. Adelaide would not have it. And what Adelaide wanted, Adelaide received.

Within reason.

She could not now change and claim to adore her husband, which meant that the next few weeks would be crucial. She must lay the groundwork for her plot, show herself to be amenable to the idea of wedding Basset and to the personage of him. She must cease her tempers and displays of disgust, must receive his flowers, should he deign to send any more after her ceremonial dismembering of them. She must be moderately docile, though not untrue to the nature she had spent so very long cultivating. She must become the wife of a baron she would shortly be named in truth and begin her schemes to further her own ends.

Miss Adelaide Dyer held no power in her hands.

Lady Adelaide Basset would hold a great deal.

And if Adelaide could persuade Basset to go along with the facade for the world, she might hold a great deal more.

She bit her lip in thought as Madame Hubert returned to working with the taffeta at her bodice. “Madame, do you happen to know of a reputable watchmaker near here?”

“*Oui*, Miss Dyer,” came the easy reply, the practiced accent returning once more. “Just a few shops down.”

Adelaide nodded, her mind made up, and she turned her head toward her ever-curious mother. “Mama! We must visit the watchmaker when we are done here. I must have a watch made for Lord Basset for the wedding. I will not be seen as ungenerous toward my husband-to-be.”

# Chapter Five



The bells were tolling ominously, and it was giving him a headache. Perhaps that ought to have been a warning.

Too late now.

“Are you sure about this, Basset? You barely know her.”

Harrison flicked his eyes to his right where his groomsman stood, ready to support him. Or, it seemed, offer him a way out.

“As sure as I am going to be, Granger,” Harrison replied, barely moving his lips. “We are in the church, and my bride will be here at any moment.”

“Until the vows are made, nothing is legally binding.” Granger leaned closer, whispering, “I checked.”

Harrison coughed a very soft laugh, praying it would not be noticed. “And you consider yourself a happily married man?”

“I am,” Granger retorted. “Very happily. I love my wife. Unless I am very much mistaken, you don’t even like your bride.”

“Not particularly, no.” Harrison had no trouble admitting that; it could hardly be a secret. Anybody who had seen the two of them together over the last four weeks would know of their mutual distaste for each other, which was why they had not been seen together at any events outside of her home.

The only thing Harrison could safely admit was that provoking her was an inordinate amount of fun simply because he did not rise to her own provocation, but he could always garner a reaction from her. It was clear that no one had withstood Miss Dyer’s strong will or opinions, perhaps in her

entire life, and the resistance she found in Harrison did not sit well.

He had no intention of browbeating her in their marriage, but neither could he let her think she would have her own way in all things. He'd give her what liberty and independence he could, but if she willfully acted against him, he would have to intercede against what ought to have been a rather simple thing.

He could have chosen a more docile wife, he supposed. That might have been easier, all things considered, but the most important items had been addressed in the person of Miss Dyer. Differences in personality and temper could be adjusted to on both sides once the newness of the marriage had worn off.

“And you don't see a problem with that?” Granger scoffed very softly beside him, bringing him back to his present situation and their previous topic. “If you are struck down by the Almighty in the next few minutes, Basset, so help me—”

“If the Almighty is that particular about the feelings of those joining in marriage before Him,” Harrison grumbled with another sidelong look at his friend, “then over half of London will be struck down at the exact same time I am. I do hope you will enjoy the spectacle.”

Granger laughed softly before exhaling a half groan. “Basset, there are other ways. Easier ways.”

Harrison shook his head. “Nothing could be easier than selecting a young lady who meets the important criteria for a man in my position and taking all emotion out of the idea. I don't know why you're objecting more than I am.”

“Because of the two of us,” Granger told him, taking his voice even lower in volume, “I have been married. I know the manner of it, the things that no one discusses, and I am telling you that this is not the way.”

“No, this is not *your* way,” Harrison snapped, tired of the pretense and opinions. He cleared his throat, composing his features. “Apologies. I am ill at ease today.”

Granger was silent for a moment. “Well, in that respect, you are rather like every other bridegroom. No man wants to stand here waiting for their bride. Much better just to have the thing over with and done, eh?”

Harrison nodded, relieved to have the debate of the nature of his impending marriage lie at last. He’d have to discuss the thing with Emblyn when he was back in Cornwall, and that was a fight he was not looking forward to in the least. He did not need a preliminary glimpse into how that would go from his groomsman as he prepared to make his vows.

“If you are prepared to do this, in spite of my commentary, I’ll not say another word.” Granger squared his shoulders, turning his attention toward the ceiling of the church. “They had to choose St. George’s, eh? Knowing full well your side of the church would have no one in it?”

Harrison smirked a little. “Your wife sits there, does she not?”

Granger glanced over his shoulder briefly. “She does, yes. And so does Julia Roskelley and her husband. Nice of them to make the journey. And no Trembath, the blighter. How dare he abandon you to this. And no Miss Moyle?”

The mention of Emblyn tightened Harrison’s throat, and he shook his head very faintly. “She wouldn’t. It was not surprising, but I would have liked to have her here all the same.”

“And is...?”

Again, Harrison shook his head. “No, I think. Thank God.”

Granger nodded, though even he could not know the extent of the relief Harrison felt in not seeing Richard here this morning. There was no certainty that he would not creep in and take a seat in the back, or somehow appear later despite Harrison giving him no details. If he had put forth any effort into discovering the name of the bride, the date of the wedding, or its location, Richard could have done so without much difficulty.



It was only by a stroke of luck that, thus far, his own poor habits had allowed him to follow Harrison's wishes. Time would tell if it continued as such throughout the day.

And if Harrison's sense of time was in any way accurate, his wedding should have already begun by now.

"Is it always annoying?" Harrison asked aloud. "Waiting for your bride."

"Always," Granger affirmed without hesitation. "But not this annoying. You grow accustomed to it."

Harrison sniffed, more miffed than truly annoyed by the situation. After all, he reminded himself, the wedding was for the bride's pleasure, not the bridegroom's.

And it seemed it was his bride's pleasure that this marriage begin on her terms regardless of how it would affect or impact anyone else. Especially him.

Well played, Miss Dyer.

Harrison shook his head, smiling to himself.

"What?" Granger demanded, catching the smile. "What is so amusing?"

"She's been quiet the last two weeks," Harrison told him softly, the humor in the situation growing by the moment. "Not softer in attitude or spirit, only quiet. Less venomous in her spite. I wondered if she had come round to the idea of this marriage, perhaps even of me. But no, she's simply been biding her time and learning a better way to provoke me. I have no doubt she will be a beautiful bride, and I will pay dearly for it, but no one in this church will ever suspect that she is anything less than pleased with what is about to take place."

"And that is amusing because...?"

Harrison looked at him, smiling fully now. "Because nothing has changed. She's still angry, still venomous, still stubborn, and now the only one who knows that will be me. Or, at least, the one who knows it best."

Granger's brow creased, his expression bewildered. "Still not finding the amusement."

"Don't you see? She's all but ensuring this marriage will be a success. She has decided that the show she so loves to put on must now be one of contentment and satisfaction." Harrison chuckled, looking back toward the front of the church and shaking his head. "She's going to be the perfect Lady Basset if it kills her."

"She might kill you," Granger pointed out. "If her spite is the same as it ever was and now only for your eyes and ears, you may suffer a very great deal."

Harrison shrugged a little, his cravat rubbing lightly against his throat. "What of it? I'm hardy enough, and it is easy enough to spend more time at the mines. She'll not want me present often, so the moments of true viciousness should be few and far between. I'm actually feeling rather hopeful at the moment."

Granger muttered under his breath, shaking his head slowly.

It was no use trying to explain matters to him further. Granger was a man in a loving marriage without any specific requirements for his heritage, estate, or legacy, so he had been free to do as he liked. His financial needs had precipitated his marriage, it was true, but it had all evened out in the end, and he was apparently swimming in bliss.

There was no history of bliss in the Basset line, as far as Harrison could tell, and he had no anticipation of bliss in his future. No need of it, no concern about it. Satisfaction and comfort were what he wanted, and he was now quite certain he would get it. A wife of spirit would serve his children well if she wished to mother them in an active way. If she did not, then at least those aspects of her personality might lend themselves to energy and determination in their children. There were far more marriages made in England that were full of discontent and resentment than ones of joy and delirium, so being somewhere in the comfortable middle ground was an improvement from the status quo.

He would not make his wife miserable, and he could only pray she would feel the same about him. They didn't have to make each other happy, but avoiding making the other unhappy was essential.

Surely that would not be so difficult.

The organ at the church struck up then, the familiar strains of "Largo from Xerxes" reverberating around the place, echoing faintly in the splendid architecture.

"Finally," Harrison muttered, still smiling with amusement at his soon-to-be wife's antics.

"The most common word uttered by every bridegroom in existence," Granger replied, turning to glance at the bride, as was his right. He paused a moment, then spoke hastily. "Quick question, Basset."

"Now?"

Granger nodded once. "I realize I defy tradition by being a married man as your groomsman, but I wonder if you might not be defying tradition more by actually marrying a queen."

Harrison barely avoided jerking to look at him and somehow only managed to shift his eyes. "What?"

Granger clamped down on his lips hard, seemingly restraining laughter. "She is beautiful, there is no question. But she is arrayed like the Queen of Sheba, man. Your fortunes are undoubtedly lost on this gown alone. Whatever happened to wearing one's best dress that might then be worn on other occasions? She might only be permitted at Court in such a gown."

"But it is Miss Dyer, is it not?" Harrison demanded, wondering if he had underestimated the machinations of his bride-to-be, and she was sending an imposter in her place. "She has tried to confuse me with her cousin before."

"Considering the man on her arm is Lord Tunbridge, and he is smiling proudly, I think you may have the correct bride." Granger's mouth tightened on another choked laugh. "Some modiste in London is having a very good day, I'd wager."

Harrison's heart finally settled into a less panicked rhythm in his chest. That was all he would need, for some other woman to replace Miss Dyer as his bride and make him a laughingstock. Whatever his amusement before, he was now rather fixed that he would need this wedding over and done with as soon as possible, if for no other reason than to avoid comment and to see the legalities done.

He inhaled slowly, then exhaled the same. "Is it ridiculous?" he whispered.

"No, actually," Granger assured him in a low tone. "She is of the ethereal nature in looks, and such extravagance suits her. Nothing simple in this, but she is certainly the envy of nearly every eye in the church."

"Nearly?"

Granger smirked at him a little. "My wife and Mrs. Roskelley both seem to be having trouble believing what they are seeing."

Harrison groaned softly, flicking his eyes heavenward. "Lord, if I have ever done a worthy thing in Thine eyes—"

"Bit late to be asking the Almighty for favors," Granger hissed. "Here she is."

Swallowing a sudden wash of nerves, Harrison looked to his left, and his throat tightened.

Beautiful, Granger said? The man needed to expand his vocabulary.

Adelaide was breathtaking. Luminous. Exquisite. Eclipsed the sun, moon, and stars in one, leaving no light in any quarter but what she herself radiated. Whatever he was paying the modiste for such an ensemble, it was worth the fortune. He had never seen such a creation, something like a frost-covered field of lavender, sprinkled with glittering gold from the sun itself. Her golden hair bore ribbons and roses, folding and weaving together through her tresses, all gathered back into a splendor of curls that her veil seemed born from. The diamond tiara he had offered was rendered almost irrelevant where it sat, yet there was no denying the touch of regality it added. A

length of white satin, entwined with gold, fell from her shoulders and extended out behind her, almost angelic in its display, and strangely, not the least bit ridiculous.

None of it was.

The Basset diamonds adorned her throat and her ears, finding the most perfect placement known to man therein. It was as though they had been created with her exact person in mind and could not have been more suited to any other figure. A thrill of pride shot through both of Harrison's legs as he saw them, nearly as much a claiming of her as these vows were about to be.

This was *his* bride. Soon to be *his* wife.

There was something rather stirring in that.

In one hand, Adelaide held a relatively simple bouquet, considering the extent of her other adornments. White roses, lavender, some miniscule white blossoms, and sprigs of green that he could not identify, all in perfect harmony with the rest of her.

His bride. His Adelaide. For Adelaide she would ever be, now.

There could be no other name for her.

"Dearly beloved," the clergyman intoned, bringing Harrison back to the moment, though his eyes refused to remove themselves from his bride.

"Stop gawking, Basset," Adelaide hissed, widening her eyes a little. "One will grow self-conscious."

Ah, so she was still as she ever was. There was some comfort in that amidst the tumult of other emotions and sensations. Harrison smiled, feeling more himself at receiving such a barb. "I cannot think anyone would accuse you of such a thing. Rather a detail for mere mortals, is it not?"

"Don't be so droll," she snapped softly, her voice almost without venom. "Do pay attention."

"And therefore," the clergyman went on, not giving them any direct attention, "is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken

in hand, unadvisedly, lightly...”

“Not lightly, yes, yes, I understand,” Harrison whispered. “Nothing light in this. Nor, I daresay, in that entrance you made. Handel was an excellent choice. Rather grand, I imagine, when you are so arrayed.”

Adelaide’s careful smile tightened. “It could not be helped. I will not have my wedding viewed as anything lacking. Surely you do not object.”

“Oh, no,” he replied easily. “Nothing I object to in this day whatsoever. I’m quite at my leisure.”

“Congratulations.”

He stifled a laugh as the clergyman came to the causes for matrimony, reciting them with great emphasis for all gathered.

“Your chance to object is imminent,” Harrison suggested softly. “A natural opening, should you wish for it.”

“Basset,” Adelaide said through her teeth, her voice barely above a whisper, “if you think I am about to jilt you after all I have done leading up to this moment, you are gravely mistaken. In fact, I have taken the liberty of procuring a ring for you, just as you procured one for me. If I am to be bound to you for the rest of my life shortly, I wish to make it clear that you are just as bound to me. Agreed?”

Harrison was silent for a moment, just as all others in the church were when asked for objections.

Not at her lack of escape at that part of the ceremony, as he had teased, but at her emphasis on the thing itself. She would be bound to him, but it had never quite occurred to him that he would be equally bound. The law gave the husband far more freedom than the wife, as the natural way of things in the world, but the vows were hardly different between man and woman. Subtle differences, but the idea was the same.

He would be bound to her.

There was something quite humbling in that.

“Basset?” Adelaide asked again.

He looked at her, feeling somehow expanded and diminished at the same time.

“Harrison Edward Pascoe Basset, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

Swallowing once, Harrison dipped his chin in a nod, answering both her and the clergyman together when he replied, “I will.”

Adelaide nodded very briefly, looking at the clergyman now.

“Adelaide Elizabeth Mary, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?”

“I will,” she intoned in a clear, yet not defiant voice.

The clergyman nodded at them both.

“Please do not take this compliment as a truce,” Harrison whispered as the question about the giving of the woman was announced, “but you look absolutely beautiful. Quite radiant, in fact.”

Adelaide stilled as her hand was taken from her father’s and placed atop Harrison’s, where it trembled slightly. “Thank you,” she breathed.

Harrison dipped his chin, brushing his thumb against her hand just once in confirmation of the moment.

The clergyman looked between them both, brows raised. “Now, Lord Basset, repeat after me. I, Harrison Edward Pascoe Basset, take thee Adelaide Elizabeth Mary...”

# Chapter Six



It was, without a doubt, the finest wedding breakfast Adelaide had ever seen or heard of, and she could find herself quite proud of that despite the fact it had all been the doing of her parents.

It would reflect well on her, and that was all she needed from it. Besides the fare itself.

She was famished. She had barely managed a morsel the day before, what with her nerves and attempts to see every detail of her trousseau packed and prepared. She and Basset were likely leaving shortly after this breakfast ended, and she had no idea if he were inclined to drive straight through to Cornwall without stopping, or if he would have a care for her comfort. They hadn't discussed the thing in the least, other than that they would not be remaining in London.

As the Season had concluded, she could hardly protest, but it did seem a trifle brutish to rush immediately to the wilds of Cornwall and leave civilization so soon. But, in accordance with her new manner of outward docility, she had said nothing about it in the presence of her family.

Basset would hear about it the moment they were removed from this company, however.

It was a relief beyond all reliefs to have the wedding itself done with. Though she had been preparing for weeks, though she had planned it all perfectly, rather like a game, the moment she had set foot in the church on her father's arm, her stomach had begun to swarm with nerves. The music she had specifically requested for its grandeur and solemnity had thundered in her ears as though she stood directly beside the organ itself. Her heart had begun to dance a reel against her



ribs, and she wondered if her father might have to carry her the rest of the way when she would inevitably swoon.

Where had her confidence gone? What had been in her possession all this time had fled the moment when she'd needed it most, and she was left as a scared little girl stepping into a great unknown.

Thankfully, she had found her tongue as Basset had stared when she'd reached him, though there had been no helping the blush on her cheeks. Given he did not stare so frankly, it could not be helped that he had done so at that precise moment. And his banter had been a blessed relief, though it had almost certainly not been intended to put her at ease.

And then, of all things, he had told her she was beautiful and radiant.

No matter her feelings about the man, he was shamefully handsome, and his complimenting her person in such raw, honest terms had been something she could not be unmoved by.

The rest of the ceremony had been a bit of a blur, though there had been a moment of smug satisfaction when he allowed her to place a ring on his own finger without complaint. It was a strange way for her to claim victory, but a victory it was all the same. He had been in a most accommodating mood, likely given the solemnity of the occasion and their place before a man of God in a church.

He was bound to her now. Yes, she was bound to him as well, and legally speaking, that was all that mattered, but Basset was a man of principle, she was learning. He would not take this lightly any more than he would take anything else of import lightly.

They might not be on equal footing in this marriage, but at least it was more equal than it might have been otherwise.

“You should eat something.”

Adelaide jerked and looked at Basset beside her. He still looked the part of a splendid groom, his dark cutaway perfectly enhancing his broad shoulders and chest, a gold

waistcoat almost eerily matching the gold hints of her gown, and the pristine white linen of his shirt and cravat would find no fault from anyone.

Least of all her.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” she muttered, more out of habit than anything else.

He raised a brow. “I did not. I said you *should* eat something. It was a suggestion. If you are not hungry, then, by all means, do not eat.” He shrugged as if it did not matter to him, then smiled with due politeness at some guest or other.

“I am a little hungry,” Adelaide murmured when the person passed. “It is a good suggestion.”

“Is that an apology for snapping at me?” Basset asked without looking at her.

Her mouth quirked just a little. “No.”

“I thought not. Oh well.” He glanced at her once more. “Shall I play dutiful husband and fetch you a plate?”

“I do not trust you to fetch me anything that I will enjoy,” she replied through a smile. “You may spit in my drinking chocolate.”

“A gentleman does not spit in a lady’s drink.”

“Is that written on the walls at White’s?”

“At Oxford, actually. I wrote it there myself in my school days.”

“Ah, so a gentleman does not spit in a lady’s drink, but he does vandalize.”

“Well, we could hardly have a rule for everything. Otherwise, there would be no distinguishing one from another.” He cast a half smile at her, and Adelaide could not help but give him one in return.

No matter how this marriage came about, or how they disliked one another on principle, they were quite matched in their bantering. Could one sustain a marriage on banter alone?

“Do you know the Grangers?” Basset asked rather suddenly, gesturing at an approaching handsome couple.

Adelaide put a perfect smile on display. “Only in name. And I know their story.”

“You *think* you know their story,” he corrected. “Everybody does. Even I did, until I really knew them. They are our neighbors in Cornwall, of a sort, so we will see much of them.”

Were they, indeed? Adelaide took a better look at the dark beauty that was Mrs. Granger, taking in the noticeably rounded stomach. Clearly happily married, or at least dutifully so, and elegant as well. Could such a fine lady really endure the harshness one heard about Cornwall?

“Lord Basset,” Mrs. Granger greeted, curtsying and offering a warm smile to them both. “My very best wishes. What a beautiful wedding!”

Basset bowed in return. “Thank you, Mrs. Granger. May I present my wife?”

Mrs. Granger beamed. “He said it so easily, and it’s barely been an hour. How do you do?”

Adelaide curtsyed in what she hoped was as graceful a manner. “Mrs. Granger. I am well, thank you.”

She smiled in response. “Lady Basset, we are to be neighbors and friends. I believe you may tell me the truth. I believe that you are well, by all means, and you are the loveliest bride I have ever seen. But in being well, you are also...?”

“Tired,” Adelaide admitted, her smile turning far more natural. “And hungry.”

“Basset!” Mrs. Granger playfully glared at him. “Why have you not fetched your bride something to eat?”

“I offered,” Basset replied lamely. “But she said—”

“Oh, never mind. Come, Lady Basset, we’ll do it ourselves.” Mrs. Granger took her arm and steered her away without another word to the men, a smile on her lips.

Adelaide looked at the woman in surprised delight. "I have never liked someone so instantly in my entire life, Mrs. Granger."

Mrs. Granger tossed her head back in a laugh. "Why, thank you, Lady Basset. I hope you do not mind being extricated from your new husband, but I wanted to take a moment with you. I remember my own wedding day, and all I wanted to do was sit in the quiet and eat something. I do not flatter myself that we share a similar nature, but you seemed ready for a reprieve."

There was something in the sweet explanation that made Adelaide feel like weeping, which she absolutely would not do in her parents' home or among such company. Not when she had done so spectacularly at the church and throughout the service. But she felt so fatigued now that all was said and done, and keeping up her composed, satisfied facade was wearing on her.

"Yes," Adelaide told her new friend, "I was. I am. So much care has been taken for the wedding preparations, down to the smallest details. Now all those details are playing out, beautifully so, but no one tells you what to do when it happens. We have the cake there in the middle of the table, just as hundreds of other wedding breakfasts have had before, and it is much admired, as it should be. We have the food for those in attendance and the well-wishers. We have drinking chocolate, which, I confess, I could use at least two cups of at the moment. My husband and I are receiving congratulations and being perfectly agreeable."

"Everything is according to plan," Mrs. Granger added, nodding in apparent understanding. "Your mother cried a little, your father is proud, your sisters will give you advice on marital happiness—"

"Oh, I doubt that very much," Adelaide interrupted, scoffing slightly. "None of them particularly enjoy their marriages. Their husbands are fine enough and good company, but the only thing that any of them can agree on is the children. Which, I suppose, is better than nothing at all, but I

don't believe they can give me guidance on how to make my marriage a successful one."

Mrs. Granger smiled a little, something almost wistful crossing her features. "Every marriage is a little different, and sometimes the only way one manages is to press on and discover how in the process."

Adelaide tilted her head curiously as they reached the breakfast fare. "Is that how it was for you, Mrs. Granger?"

"Please, call me Lily, if you do not object." Mrs. Granger's smile spread further before settling back into the gentle one of before. "In a way, yes. I was very fond of my husband when we married, and he was very fond of me, but we weren't particularly open about our feelings with one another. We had known each other for several years, so there was already familiarity between us, and yet... marriage is still an adjustment. I am not sure there is anyone who can truly give guidance that is certain to work, and my husband tried to gather as much as possible without much avail."

"Well, there were certain vows made only a few hours ago, Lily," Adelaide said with a laugh. "Perhaps that might be a worthy place to start."

Lily seemed to consider that. "Yes, I suppose, though I hardly think love, cherish, obey, and serve are necessarily a given from that moment. It is easy enough to consider honor, comfort, and keep, but..." Her pale brow furrowed, and she looked at Adelaide intently. "Might I offer a piece of unsolicited advice, knowing that I barely know you and I have only known Basset for a year and a half?"

Adelaide blinked but found herself nodding. "If you think it might help."

"I cannot say for certain," Lily admitted with a small laugh. "Someday, I will tell you more about my marriage, and you will understand why. But I think it would do a great deal for you to listen to your husband and for him to listen to you. I have no doubt my husband is telling Basset something of the sort while they converse, so you need not think this advice is for you alone."

There was some relief in that, given how Adelaide's irritation rose at the very idea of listening to her husband. If they would both be advised to listen to each other, perhaps the advice was sound enough.

"What makes you think he will listen to me?" Adelaide asked, not bothering to take the stinging note from her voice. "Or I to him, for that matter."

"I don't know that either of you will," Lily said at once, her tone entirely unchanged. "I simply think it helps a marriage for the couple to listen to each other. A small matter of respect for one another, if there can be nothing else in the relationship. Now you will both have the same goals, having your family and your name succeed. It ought to become a sort of partnership between you, though the world and the law does not quite see our position as wives in that way. In the walls of your own home, however, your marriage is your own business."

Adelaide pressed her tongue to her teeth in thought, still rankling at the idea of having to do anything that might give Basset leverage over her so soon. But she could not deny that they would have the same aims now, that she would want Lady Basset to be as respected in circles as Lord Basset was, and that they should both be envied and admired. His home would become hers, and it ought to be a place of finery and dignity.

And comfort, if she could find any there.

Still, Lily Granger and her husband were friends and neighbors of Basset already. They knew and liked him, which meant they might not think so well of Adelaide, if they'd heard of her.

She managed a smile she did not quite feel. "Is this where you tell me that my husband is a wonderful man and that I am fortunate to be his wife? That I will be much blessed, and I can wish for nothing more?"

Lily's brows rose, and she did not answer immediately. "I respect Lord Basset a great deal, and he has been a good friend to us. Certainly, I admire him. But I know nothing of how this

marriage came to be, other than that it is not one of emotional attachment. I do not know your feelings on the subject, nor do I know his. I do not share his confidence, though my husband might. Basset is, as I understand it, rather reserved where his opinions are concerned and is not prone to confiding much. I think you may rest easy on any preconceived opinions of yourself, should that comfort you at all.”

“I rather thought you would sing his praises,” Adelaide admitted with a sheepish laugh, feeling more comfortable now than she had a moment ago. “I have... not made it particularly easy for him to enjoy our engagement. It was my father’s arrangement, you see.”

“Ah.” Lily nodded slowly, her smile turning sad. “As was mine. Then, may I suggest that when you depart from here and go on your way to Cornwall, perhaps you, and certainly he, should leave all other parties behind when you do. Your marriage is yours, not theirs. I am sure that you both will find qualities in the other to admire.”

“You think so?” Adelaide looked across the room to her husband who stood with Mr. Granger still, oblivious to her observation. From appearances only, he was everything one could wish for in a husband. Handsome and noble in appearance, dressed impeccably, and comfortable in the society about him. But he had not provided her much to admire beyond such things thus far.

She had not truly given him the opportunity to.

“I think so, yes.”

She looked back at Lily, still smiling at her. “You surprise me, Lily. I am known to be rather strong in my opinions, and it is not often that someone overlooks flowers being tossed from a window out of spite.”

Lily coughed a surprised laugh. “Is that what you did?”

Adelaide nodded, her cheeks flushing. “I was not keen on the idea of our engagement. It was... not a good reflection on me, I will admit.”

“Well,” Lily said slowly, “I am of the opinion that there are two versions of every story, and both must be heard and understood for the truth to emerge. I do not believe in heroes and villains in a marriage, barring a few exceptions. I believe marriages are made by people, all of whom are flawed, and all of whom are trying their best to become as they wish to be. And, in the best cases, to give the other person all that they can to help *them* be the best version of themselves.”

There was something admirable, honest, and lovely in what she'd just said. And something hopelessly naive, in Adelaide's mind.

How could anything be stripped down to such simple ideas? People were complex, their motivations and reasoning diverse, and the attempts at improving oneself could go in many directions and avenues. Only the most noble of souls would truly be able to put the good of another above their own wants and desires, and Adelaide had never met such a person.

Not that all people were selfish or self-absorbed, but there was an innate determination to see that one was as satisfied as could be with their life and situation. In a truly equal partnership, such as Lily had been describing, surely there would be a similar motivation to see the other party as satisfied as one's self.

But to truly be so invested in the success, satisfaction, pleasure, and progress of someone else... it would take a saint and nothing less.

Adelaide was no saint, and she was certain Basset was not either.

Perhaps they could come to an understanding where the other was concerned, and their mutual success could benefit each other. It would allow them to reach the same ends as Lily was suggesting without half-hearted attempts to be so chivalrous.

That seemed far more realistic.

Mindlessly, Adelaide moved down the selection of foods, taking what she wished and leaving what she did not, then



retrieving a cup of the blessed chocolate with a grateful nod at the footman stationed there. Lily was at her side in a moment, a cup in her hand as well.

“Let us go over there by the window,” Lily suggested. “There is someone I would like you to meet.”

Adelaide allowed Lily to lead, following without taking much trouble to adjust her face into her perfectly polite mask. There was no point in pretending she was eager to meet someone else whom she did not know at her own wedding breakfast. It would mean the individual was a friend of Basset’s, and it was difficult enough to act her pleasantly satisfied bride persona with those who knew nothing of the man.

Attempting the same with those who knew exactly what she had gotten herself into, and approved of him, would be worse. Although, if she were honest, her father had gotten her into this.

As he had not married Lord Basset this morning, one wondered why it had mattered so very much to him, but that was a discussion for another time and would address an entire generation.

Best to stick with what was imminent and more personal.

Exhaling slowly, Adelaide approached the copper-haired woman toward whom Lily had gone. She seemed a pleasant, warm sort of woman, not mingling with the other guests, but not exactly remaining outside of their circles. She was elegantly dressed, just as Lily had been, which spoke well of status, but there was something far more natural and simple in her features than one usually saw in London Society.

She greeted Lily with a friendly smile and a slight wave, her rich blue eyes made even more so by the perfect shade of her gown. Then those eyes fell on Adelaide, and the brows slowly rose. That was not encouraging.

But Adelaide was not one of the most accomplished and composed young ladies in Society without cause. She lifted

her chin a touch higher and strode forward with all the grace she could manage.

The copper-haired woman rose from her seat, and, to her credit, offered Adelaide a smile just a shade dimmer than the one she had given Lily.

“Lady Basset, might I present Mrs. Julia Roskelley?” Lily intoned with more kindness and warmth than any majordomo in the world. “Julia is a friend and neighbor from Cornwall.”

Adelaide curtsied politely, swallowing the sting of bitterness at another reference to Basset’s past and ranks where she had none. “Mrs. Roskelley.”

“Julia, please,” Mrs. Roskelley said with a light laugh. “I’ve known Basset since we were children. I can hardly start being Mrs. Roskelley now.”

“Ah,” Adelaide replied without any laughter whatsoever, “so you are the one to tell me how wonderful my husband is and how fortunate my new married state is. Very well, I am ready for the lecture when you are prepared to give it.”

Mrs. Roskelley and Lily exchanged a look, then returned their attention to Adelaide. “I don’t know that any new married state is fortunate,” Mrs. Roskelley admitted with an uncertain smile. “It’s all nerves and adjustment and a flurry of activity that no one speaks of until it is upon you.”

Well, at least the woman understood that.

Adelaide did her the courtesy of nodding, feeling good manners ought to outweigh preconceived notions. “I would agree.”

“And as for Basset...” Mrs. Roskelley scoffed softly, looking across the room at him. “He is wonderful, I grant you. He is an excellent man, a fine master, an attentive landlord, but he is also maddening, stubborn, dense as a barn, and in desperate need of a laugh or two.” Her eyes returned to Adelaide, her smile more mischievous. “How is that for the impression of an old friend?”

There was no helping Adelaide’s slightly gaping mouth, nor the complete and utter lack of words for the space of four

heartbeats. It was truly beyond anything she had anticipated.

And then, when she had gathered herself, all she could do was laugh.

“I did not...” she managed between helpless giggles. “I had not...”

“You expected praises to be sung,” Mrs. Roskelley answered for her. “I completely understand. The nature of your engagement was not one to allow for true introductions of each other, I gather. No doubt Basset was all business and formality?” At Adelaide’s nod, Mrs. Roskelley gave one of her own, sighing. “I advised him that was not wise, and his sister did as well, but he will do as he pleases, that one.”

“His sister?” Adelaide seized on the topic at once, wondering if these ladies might give her the information Basset had not. “I’ve heard of her. In a manner, I mean. Basset asked that I have a dress made for her, as she was too shy to come to the wedding. Tell me, is she very sweet?”

Again, the ladies shared a look, and Adelaide could not have deciphered it for the world.

“She is,” Mrs. Roskelley said slowly. “And very honest. She will tell you exactly what she thinks, if she is comfortable enough with you to do so. No airs or artifice.”

“Strange, given Basset is all airs and artifice,” Adelaide quipped without restraint, clamping down on her lips hard when she realized the words she had uttered in this particular company.

Blessedly, the two ladies only laughed.

“Yes, I daresay he was with you,” Lily said as she sat, situating her plate and her cup of chocolate neatly. “He has a very practiced manner at times, usually when he is less than comfortable.”

Adelaide sat as well, pursing her lips. “Well, he was comfortable enough to toss barbs at me when I was less than accommodating to his wishes.”

Mrs. Roskelley coughed a loud laugh. “Well, I hope you gave as good as you got, Lady Basset. I did not train him to be disparaging without a fair rival.” She grinned at Adelaide as she, too, took her seat. “I trust you might call me Julia now that you know that.”

“I do my best to return fire, Julia, rest assured,” Adelaide told her, indulging the familiarity, now she knew she might be among future allies. She could not yet count them as such in truth. Everyone was more likely to be agreeable to the bride on her wedding day.

Time alone would be her ally, and she could be quite patient when it would be in her favor.

“Tell me,” Adelaide asked her companions, smiling fondly, “what did you think of the cake?”

# Chapter Seven



Harrison's new wife did not travel well. She was perfectly fine, as far as her health was concerned.

It was her manner and temperament that suffered.

And his, as a result.

He'd had relatively high hopes after their wedding that she would have grown more accommodating, given her less frequent vitriols and more becoming tone of voice in the days leading up to it. Even her wedding day antics, which still showed a stubborn streak, were admissible, as he would never have wished for her spirit to change entirely from who she'd always been. He simply wanted a less contentious spouse.

Clearly, that had not happened.

Adelaide was just as antagonistic as she ever was; she simply saved every instance of that display for him now.

How blessed a wedding gift for him.

Although she had given him a very fine watch, which was unnervingly situated to his tastes and had not been equipped with any gunpowder, as he had suspected.

He'd checked the item rather thoroughly.

Between her disgruntled mutterings about leaving civilization and removing to the wild, and the uninhibited disapproval about leaving London so soon after the wedding rather than making an appearance in Society, Harrison had rather a clear impression of his wife's feelings toward this journey. And the style of the coach. As well as the condition of the roads. Not to mention the safety of her trunks, and the many items packed within.

He'd typically have no issue with sleeping part of the way, but her frequent inquiries as to the remaining length of time for that day's travels neatly kept him from any sort of slumber. Were he alone, he would have avoided stopping at inns and paid a driver to push on through to shorten the journey as much as possible. But with a bride, he would be more lenient on the pacing.

He needed sleep, and separate rooms with adequate beds allowed for such things.

It was clear his wife had not anticipated the simpler establishments of coaching inns on her journey to Cornwall, and her expression upon realizing her present accommodations brought him more joy than a great many things in his life.

Her cantankerous attitude that first morning had been well worth contending with.

It was an odd sort of fun, toying with his wife's extreme emotions. He did not flatter himself that she hated him already, but that she simply could not bear the thought of his refusing to bow to her demands and wishes. He was no lapdog, and she had only ever known those in men. Having a contender for her strong will was unfamiliar, and being at odds with the circumstances made her rather reactionary, which was a riotous amount of fun when one was travelling great distances and had little else to engage with.

He'd tried ignoring her, and that hadn't gotten him anything but a bruised shin.

Baiting her was becoming a favorite pastime, and he was getting rather good at it.

Still, by the time they resumed travel after luncheon on the third day of this, even he was wondering when they would be arriving at Trevadden.

"Basset," his wife suddenly began, the silence between her last vocalization and this one a blessed relief, "I hadn't thought to ask before now, but what is the family name?"

Harrison blinked and turned his attention from the window, where he had been studiously seeing nothing, to the entirely

earnest and humor-free expression of his wife, which gave him concern that therein there might also be nothing. “I beg your pardon?”

“The family name,” Adelaide said again. “The name our children will be known by. Surely you cannot think that a baron would share his title with the children, even if he is the lowest ranking peer.” She giggled at the thought, clearly ridiculous in her mind.

A more perfect opening for his greatest baiting ever, he could not have wished for.

“No, of course not,” he replied carefully, smiling just a little. “But, in this case, they do happen to be one and the same.”

Her laughter stopped, but the smile that had accompanied it remained. “What does?”

“The name and the title.” Harrison gestured briefly with his hand, as though he needed to illustrate. “They are the same. Basset.”

Now the smile vanished as well. “You cannot be serious.”

He spread his hands out slightly, palms up, and shrugged. “I am. Did you not listen to the vows? Or read my name on the register?”

Adelaide’s eyes went wide, and she gaped for a moment. “I was... I was a trifle occupied. I thought...”

“You thought Mr. Keyes did not know the way of performing a marriage ceremony of a peer and used the title as my surname?” Harrison smiled with some sympathy, though his left knee seemed to tingle with laughter that began to roll up the length of him.

“It never occurred to me that...” Adelaide sputtered as though an insect had flown in her face. “Well, is the name at least significant?”

“Basset?” Harrison asked mildly, inferring there could be some confusion there. “Oh, yes. It’s an ancient name. From the Norman times, as it happens. Proudly English, and we’ve

made our mark. There have been many, many Bassets out of Cornwall and Devon and Staffordshire and Wiltshire. There is a line that emigrated to Ireland, another to America, one to Canada, and we even have some convicted relatives sent to Australia. Really, the whole world is full of Bassets who are distantly related to me.”

A sound emitted from his wife that was somehow a cry, a whimper, a cough, and a gag all at once, with a hint of shrillness at its end. “Basset! How could you do this to me?”

Harrison blinked at the accusation. “Me? I didn’t create the title, I only inherited it.”

If she heard him, she gave no sign. “It is worse than being common!” she spat, her lip curling in disgust and horror. “What is the point of marrying a title if my children will have my same name?”

“I did tell you about Lord de Dunsterville,” Harrison reminded her, wincing slightly. “But you didn’t want to hear. It’s his name, too.”

“And the name of your brother,” Adelaide retorted, catching his defense and glaring as though this had all been some plot. “And likely some Cornish vicar. And we may as well share a name with the blacksmith.”

Harrison nodded at each suggestion, taking great care not to laugh or look remotely irritated. “Don’t forget the Bassets down in Penzance. They are actors.”

Could his wife have breathed fire, he’d have been thoroughly cooked. “That is not funny!”

“No, but they are hilarious,” he assured her, sitting back more comfortably against the cushion. “Excellent company.”

Wordless shrieks had never sounded more musical, and he watched as she warred within herself, her mouth moving without forming any specific words whatsoever. Whatever battle she was engaged in, he was clearly not required to participate any further.

So naturally, he did. “Perhaps I should write to the king and ask for an improvement to the title. Would that help



matters?"

A leather glove flew at his face then, thankfully without a hand in it, and the coach resumed its previously shared silence.

Just as he liked it.

As a man with some control over his emotions, and restraint within those emotions, Harrison had never experienced the roaring fury his wife seemed so close to at any given time. Truly, it must have been an exhausting enterprise. But did such extremes there also lend themselves to other emotions? Was she delirious when she was pleased? Distraught with every moment of sadness? Incoherent when feeling amused? At death's door whenever she was unwell?

It would be an interesting study to make, the more he got to know her and the more familiar her ways and nature he became. Although at this rate, he might never see her in any other emotion but anger.

The image of spending thirty years with a constantly angry wife who never adjusted to such a thing sprang into his mind, and it was a harrowing one.

He'd send her back to London after five years, if that was the case. Living apart might raise some eyebrows, but if it saved his sanity and health...

She'd likely despise Cornwall as it was. Hearing her speak of it, one might think Harrison was taking her to the ends of the earth rather than an ancient, well established, rich county in England. He'd no wish to see her truly miserable, no matter how he might provoke her, so if the time came that no happiness or pleasure could be found in her surroundings, he'd not argue her desire to live apart if it was suggested. If there were children by that time, there would, naturally, be complications, as he would not wish to be parted from them, but parents who were united in the care and comfort of their children ought to be able to meet on safe grounds for them, no matter how their own natures clashed.

Five years. He could endure that.

The only question was whether his wife could.

Or would.

And if he would be alive by the end of them.

“Heavens... is that the coast?”

His wife’s almost breathless question caught him off guard, bringing him out of his imagined funeral planning, and forcing him to look at her, then out the window.

They had entered Cornwall some time ago, but the road did not bring them in view of the coast until much later. Harrison was accustomed to the sight and rarely peered out of the window of the carriage until they were pulling into the drive of Trevadden.

But for Adelaide, this was all new.

“Yes,” Harrison told her simply, not sure which direction the conversation would take once he decided to participate. “Welcome to Cornwall.”

Adelaide did not react, though he did not quite get the impression that she was ignoring him. Her eyes were wide as they stared out the window, and she clung to the carriage door like an eager child. “I’ve never seen the coastline... Father never liked the sea. When other girls were going to Brighton, my parents took us to Bath or to the Lakes.” She blinked, then glanced at Harrison, all evidence of their previous argument gone. “Do we live near the shore, Basset?”

*We.*

Such a simple word, and yet it carried such weight, which now settled upon Harrison’s chest.

“We do, as it happens,” he told her, avoiding placing emphasis on any of the words, despite how his mind caught them. “We have our own beach and cove on Trevadden lands. It’s not too far of a walk, but I prefer to ride down. I give our tenants permission to use it for the pilchards when they come in each year, given its easy landings.”

Adelaide had already turned back to the view, seeming to barely breathe. “Is the water cold?”

The innocent question made Harrison laugh. “Sometimes. Depending on the time of year and the weather at hand. Other times, it’s quite pleasant.”

He could have said it was frigid and littered with ice, and she would have looked just as intrigued. Nothing he said disrupted her experience, and he doubted anything would. But soon, the view would shift, and the coast would disappear. Almost the entire remaining journey to Trevadden would be the rolling hills and moors of Cornwall rather than her seaside.

He doubted Adelaide would find that in any way attractive when she had been so drawn to the coast. Perhaps if she had seen it first, the wildness might have appealed to her, but for someone with her innocence of the world outside of London, nothing would compare with the beaches until she became bored with it.

If she ever did.

But this wide-eyed, fascinated, childlike Adelaide was too charming a spectacle to have gone away so soon. Not when a lifetime of her irritated form loomed so prevalently.

Smiling for himself alone, Harrison pounded the roof of the carriage, signaling a stop to the driver.

Adelaide looked at him in surprise. “Why are we stopping? I thought you were in haste to reach Trevadden Park.”

“I am,” he assured her. “But there is more than one way to get there.” He dropped the window and leaned out of the window slightly. “Hughes, take the coastal route home, please.”

“Sir,” the driver called back in the affirmative, snapping the reins.

The carriage jolted forward and a few moments later, turned toward the coast rather than taking the more direct route through the moors.

Harrison sat back against his seat, sighing to himself. “I prefer the coastal route anyway,” he mused to no one in particular. “The roads are infinitely better for driving, and the

sea breeze is invigorating. We can leave the windows lowered, if you will not be chilled.”

“Why did you change the course, Basset?” Adelaide asked in a surprisingly serious tone. “Surely getting to your home is the most important thing to you now, especially after a long journey.”

“I should very much like to get to Trevadden, yes,” Harrison assured her, folding his hands over one knee. “But this is your first time to Cornwall, and it would not be fair to take you away from the wonders of the coast so soon after first glimpsing them. A few additional minutes to indulge in natural beauties will not upset my aims in returning home. The traditional route would have us away from the sight in a few minutes, and you’d be back to being mad at me. This way, we might both have peace and something beautiful to look at while we head for home.”

Unlikely as it might have been, Adelaide smiled at him without spite, without guile, and without any pretense at all, which was beautiful in the extreme and quite made his stomach curl.

Odd sensation, that. Not unpleasant, just odd.

“Thank you, Basset,” Adelaide murmured in the softest voice he had ever heard from her.

He did not know how to respond to such a sweet statement, nor what to make of it. He nodded once and resumed looking out of the window as though he had not seen the view a hundred times over.

He could only assume his wife did the same. Her faint gasps and unintelligible murmurings told him enough of the story and her feelings, which was enough to keep him smiling to himself. And, if he were to be truthful, there was something rather invigorating about returning to the coast and breathing in the air of Cornwall after being away for so many weeks.

There was nothing like it anywhere else in the world.

It was only a few hours until they had to pull away from the coastline down the drive to Trevadden, and by then,

Adelaide seemed quite content with resigning herself to the other natural beauties of Cornwall.

The only remaining question, really, would be what she would make of Trevadden Park itself.

It had not changed overly much since his father had died, and when his mother had left to live with her sister in Dorset, she had taken nothing of significance with her. Harrison had modified a few things here and there to his own tastes and had certainly altered the study to rid the room of any trace of his father, but all else was fairly straightforward.

Time would tell if Adelaide's tastes coincided with his own, where Trevadden was concerned. Although he was quite sure her initial impression would tell him quite enough. It would likely tell everyone quite enough.

Harrison cleared his throat and gestured toward the window. "This is likely the best view of Trevadden on first looks. Just there."

Adelaide looked as directed, and Harrison was pleased to see a smile crossing her lips. "What a pleasant picture. A country estate, to be sure, and yet something grand about it as well. And so many windows! One must hope they are not full west; that would be uncomfortable in the afternoons. The ivy is well kept, I see. Does it also produce wisteria?"

"Not in the front," Harrison told her, hiding a smile himself, "though the rear of the house and garden certainly does."

"How lovely. I shall have to see it when in bloom." Her eyes cast over the entire facade of the place, and he had a sense she did not miss any details. "Yes, this is a fine place, indeed. Much better than the comfortable shack I was anticipating."

Harrison gave her a playfully outraged look. "You thought I lived in a shack in Cornwall?"

She shrugged a shoulder without looking at him. "I did say it was comfortable."

“I see I shall have to take better care with my reputation in London if such falsehoods are making a nuisance of themselves.” He shook his head, sighing heavily. “What good is the knowledge of my fortune if rumors of my estate are lacking?”

“I am quite sure you will get over it,” Adelaide replied without concern. “And what do you care of rumors anyway? Now, you have a wife. And no one will expect me to live in a shack.”

Well, that was undoubtedly true, but there was no need to comment further on it. Provocation involving that of his wife’s spoiled nature would not end well.

And they were having such a lovely, contention-free conversation at the present.

The carriage pulled around the circular drive, and, as he’d hoped, the staff all proceeded out in a line to greet them.

“Ah,” Adelaide murmured upon seeing them, “a full staff. As I should hope for a house this immense. Well done, Basset.”

Well done? How was he to take that, as a form of praise? As though he oversaw the numbers of his staff per square meter of his estate.

Ignoring it, Harrison only allowed himself an indulgent smile as the carriage came to a stop. He was home. At long last, after all the trouble, he was home. If he never saw London again, it would be too soon.

He opened the carriage door, stepping out and placing his hat on his head, though it was only a few steps into the house. His wife would undoubtedly appreciate the formality.

“Welcome home, my lord,” Mervyn greeted, bowing his almost-polished head, his chest puffing out like a far more pompous butler.

Harrison nodded. “Mervyn.” He turned and held out a hand for Adelaide, whose leather glove had returned to her hand and now gripped him for balance. Her ensemble was formal and simple, yet it probably cost more than the salary of half of the

staff combined. Yet it suited her brilliantly, the deep blue pulling exquisite shades to her eyes and giving her already rosy complexion a more luminous light.

Quite an impression his bride would make upon the staff.

“Lady Basset,” Harrison intoned, steering her towards the staff and the house, “might I introduce the butler at Trevadden, Mr. Mervyn? And our housekeeper, Mrs. Elsom.”

Both greeted Adelaide accordingly, Mrs. Elsom beaming as though she were her own daughter. “My lady, it is a delight to welcome you to Trevadden. I trust your lady’s maid follows with my lord’s valet?”

Adelaide inclined her head almost regally. “Yes, Faust follows. If she is troublesome with the staff, do let me know. We must be accommodating to our new home and staff.”

Mrs. Elsom waved a quick hand. “No matter, madam, no matter. There is plenty of time for us all to adjust to one another’s ways. Would her ladyship care for some tea after her journey?”

“Yes,” Adelaide gushed, losing her airs in a way that made Harrison smile. “Please, Mrs. Elsom.”

The housekeeper nodded, bobbing a curtsey as Harrison and Adelaide moved past her into the house.

“Ah,” Adelaide said as they entered, peering up into the entryway, “the windows do make this rather lovely, indeed.”

“I’ve always thought so.” Harrison lowered her hand and gestured toward the drawing room on the right. “Mrs. Elsom may bring your tea in there. Once Faust and Watts arrive, she may assist you with changing out of your things and refreshing yourself. Feel free to explore the house at your leisure; there is no part of it limited to you. Perhaps we might dine together this evening? Should you wish it, naturally.” He inclined his head, then turned to the room to his left, moving directly to the sideboard, desperate for a drink.

He was not one to overindulge, but a bit of port after a journey such as the one he’d just had might make his head

ache less and his eyes cease their twitching. If not, he might be required to douse his head in something a bit stronger.

He had barely begun sipping his port when he heard a soft clearing of a throat behind him. Turning, he saw his wife standing there almost expectantly.

What in the world could she want now?

“Port, my lady?” he offered with an impertinent tilt to his head. He chuckled to himself, taking another long drink.

“I rather like port, as it happens, though only after six,” Adelaide quipped, surprising him. “I just wondered, Basset, if you might let me know when this marriage of ours is consummated.”

The port Harrison had been preparing to swallow suddenly came spewing out of his mouth in a stream of burning mist. He wiped his mouth and looked at his wife in horror. “What?”

“Consummated,” Adelaide repeated without batting an eye, giving his reaction a disgusted look. “I’m told a marriage is not valid until it is consummated. So let me know when it is. I do not like to be left wondering.”

Of all the things they were to discuss upon their arrival to Trevadden, this was what she had selected?

His ears began to burn like the fires of hell. “Adelaide... do you know what consummation is?”

She reared back, either at his use of her given name or of the question itself. “Obviously not, or I would not need you to tell me when it is done.”

“Of all the bedeviled, addlepatated...” Harrison trailed off, muttering under his breath as he set his port down and ran a hand over his face.

“Mother told me it is unpleasant and to think of the coast,” Adelaide went on, oblivious to Harrison’s agony. “I have no idea why I would need to, but I will endeavor to do so. Particularly now that I have actually seen the coast, so thinking of it will be all the more accurate.”

“Right...”



Oh, gads, what was he going to do about this? Of course, he planned on consummating the marriage eventually, but he'd rather expected... he'd rather planned on...

Dammit, he barely knew the woman! And she could not stand him! And here she was, discussing when consummation would be completed?

The blessed innocent did not even know of what she spoke.

"If you wish to... engage in the consummation so that our marriage might be valid," Harrison ground out, forcing his tone to stay even and composed, "we need only settle on when would be convenient."

If she had any idea, surely she would tell him the long side of never, but seeing how she did not...

"As soon as possible, I think," she told him, speaking his fears aloud.

Harrison wasn't given to blasphemy, but he certainly did his best in that moment. "This is not happening," he muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"It must happen, Basset," Adelaide insisted, as though she knew anything at all. "I will not have my marriage invalid! What will people think?"

"Why would people need to know?" Harrison asked of the painting on the wall opposite, his head swimming. "When would that come up in conversation?"

Ignoring him, Adelaide continued to rattle on. "I know consummation occurs between married parties. I presume it involves a kiss, so you have my permission to do so if you must."

Clamping his eyes shut, Harrison nodded. "I think it will go better for you if I do."

"Don't pretend to care about my welfare," she retorted with a soft snort. "Do what must be done and get on with it."

This was never going to end if he did not stop her, and the only way to stop her was to end her ignorance on the matter.

Which meant consummation.

“Very well,” Harrison said slowly, turning to face her at last. “I will come to your rooms tonight.”

Adelaide gave him a bewildered look. “Tonight? Why not now?”

Would the woman never stop talking?

“It’s... it’s better to consummate at the end of the day,” he sputtered.

She frowned. “I never heard that.”

She’d never heard of the thing itself, and she was questioning this?

“Trust me, Adelaide,” he begged, ready to cross the room and take her hands to plead for a cessation. “I will explain anything you want tonight. And... I will endeavor to make your experience satisfactory.”

“How gallant.” She rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “Ignorance is so maddening.”

Harrison grunted once. “That will be resolved tonight as well.”

Adelaide nodded, the matter seemingly settled in her mind, and turned from the room.

Alone at last, Harrison’s knees gave out, and he sank onto the nearest piece of furniture, which happened to be a table.

“Hell,” he whispered to the silence. Then he downed the rest of his port, barely feeling the burn as he swallowed it.

# Chapter Eight



Adelaide was confused. It was no wonder, given the total ignorance with which she had entered the night before, and the fact that she quite agreed it was not a matter to be discussed among young ladies, but... surely her mother could have given her better information than to think of the coast.

Indeed, the only thing remotely coastal about any of it was the wave of sensation that had crashed across her.

And as for it being unpleasant... well, it hadn't been.

Which was why she was confused.

Basset had been rather conscientious about her ignorance regarding the whole thing, and never once made her feel like an idiot. He had seemed quite impatient with all of her questions when he'd entered her bedchamber. He'd been quite testy in fact, but all of her questions died on her tongue when he...

Well, it was best she not rethink it all in great detail right now. She'd be red as a beet when the housekeeper came in to speak to her, just as she'd been mortified when her breakfast tray was brought in.

Everyone in the house would know what had transpired. And likely, they all knew exactly how it was supposed to go. But her mother had said it would be unpleasant. That was the most confounding thing of all. Adelaide was not entirely sure how else the thing would go besides what had occurred, and she'd enjoyed it, in spite of her nerves.

She was not overly fond of her husband, and yet what had transpired seemed rather intimate. Nothing of that sort was ever mentioned, and the word consummation sounded a bit like some orderly ceremony of sorts. She was not sure what

she expected, but what had happened had certainly never entered her mind.

Something so intimate with her husband, the very idea that she should enjoy it was laughable. But she had. She certainly did not need to look at her husband with any fondness because of it, and even the thought of seeing him this morning made her want to hide her face beneath her sheets, but it had been a curious experience.

Enjoyable and curious.

Odd, enjoyable, and curious.

And she wondered if there might be more.

More could very well make it unpleasant, she supposed, and it had not been that. But more could also make it better, and she would not mind finding the experience more than enjoyable.

If that was possible.

One did not discuss such things, and she was all but stranded here in Cornwall, so there were no great acquaintances she could ask, even if she did feel comfortable broaching the subject.

And that was how children were made? Remarkable. Would she now become with child herself? Was it instantaneous? She would never look at a woman with child in the same way again.

What had their experiences been?

So many questions, and none of them could be asked aloud. She highly doubted she should even be thinking them, but her ignorance had been lifted and her education had begun. Was there more to learn? Or was that all there was to the thing?

What she would not give to momentarily belong to another station and to another family with less restraint on their tongues.

But only momentarily.

She munched on her toast, frowning as she thought on the subject. If she could not ask the questions, then the only thing she could do to lessen her continuing ignorance would be to repeat the experience. But she did not wish to have more than one child at a time, and surely repeating the thing would produce more than one child.

Basset had not seemed to mind it last night, and his attentions had been almost pleasing. If she had not known that kissing was to be involved before they began, she might have thought he actually meant them. She had never been kissed before, but Basset seemed to do it well enough. It was not distasteful, and it had not been in any way dramatic or overwhelming.

Until the end, that is. That was rather remarkable, and Basset's blessed restraint had fallen away. But then he had returned to himself, asked after her welfare, and, once she had assured him she was very well, he had informed her that consummation was completed. He'd taken her hand and kissed it, which seemed rather sweet yet formal after all that had transpired, and then he'd dressed himself and bid her good night.

And that had been that.

Not a lot of fuss, consummation. A mere matter of bodies and clothing. And yet, such things could not be discussed.

Should Adelaide have any daughters throughout this marriage with Basset, she would ensure that, upon the event of their marriage, they would not be so wholly ignorant.

It was simply not fair.

But perhaps she would produce a son and heir first, and then in a few years, a spare. And then there would need to be no more, unless Basset wished for a daughter. Most men did not, but she was beginning to wonder if Basset qualified for the description of "most men." He was rather fond of his sister, from what she had gathered, so it was possible.

And Adelaide might like having a daughter. Especially now as she knew the way daughters and sons were created.

After a fashion.

She leaned her head back against her stacked pillows, looking up at the embroidered canopy above her bed. Now that she was here at Trevadden, her journey completed, and all haste and scheduled events done, she might settle into being Lady Basset in truth.

Whatever that might entail.

She had been trained how to run a household her entire life, but the particular responsibilities of her title and station were unclear. They could only be made clear by her investigation, growing familiar with the house, and showing her face in the village and to the tenants. Basset would certainly be expected to host an event for her, something to introduce his wife to his neighbors and friends, though he might not be aware such a responsibility was his.

She'd be happy to enlighten him and even to plan the affair herself.

Though he would need to provide the list of guests. She hadn't the faintest idea who was in the vicinity, let alone who was important. Perhaps if she focused on her tasks and setting a routine for her new day-to-day life, she would not feel so self-conscious. So awkward. So vulnerable.

She would have to face her husband soon if she wished for answers before nightfall. There was no telling what his tasks might be for the day, what business he might engage in, or if he would hide himself away from her all day due to his own discomfort.

After all, he did not like her any more than she liked him. And that was not likely to change after one night of attentions, no matter how enjoyable.

She would much rather not stew in her thoughts and apprehensions all day, and she hardly thought Basset would wish for such a conversation over their evening meal.

Now would undoubtedly be best.

She nodded in her sudden firmness of thought, setting aside her breakfast tray and climbing from the bed. She could

not go down in her dressing gown, not this early in her time as Lady Basset, nor when she knew the servants and the lay of the house so little. One day, she would not care as much, she was certain, but impressions were important, and she intended to maintain the impression she hoped she had left upon her arrival the day before. Especially since they would likely all know what had transpired that night.

Heavens, how did anybody face anyone who might have an inkling of such a thing? The whole world would be blushing from head to toe at any given time!

Adelaide shook her head as she fumbled her way into a simple morning gown, not seeing a need to ring for Faust when she fully intended to return to her rooms once she had spoken with her husband. If the conversation took a mortifying turn, as was entirely possible, she would require several hours in her rooms hiding from the world as an appropriate retreat and recovery.

Fumbling with the buttons at her back, straining her arms to reach what they could, she slipped her feet into the nearest slippers, and made her way through her private sitting room. She paused at the door, running her fingers through her hair to rid it of the sleep-tousled nature, then moved out into the corridor, quickly plaiting the hair over her shoulder.

The stairs were easy to manage, but once she was down, her direction became less clear. She knew where the dining room was, but not the breakfast room. If they had a breakfast room. But perhaps Basset would be in his study at this hour, and she had even less of an idea where that was. Her exploration of Trevadden the day before had been minimal, the essentials only, and she had fully intended to be more thorough today.

She might still accomplish that. Perhaps.

“Good morning, Lady Basset,” Mrs. Elsom’s voice floated to her from somewhere nearby.

Adelaide turned about, the location of her housekeeper unclear. Then she spotted the woman, coming forward from the rear of the house with a vase of flowers and a warm smile.

Her dark hair was pulled back into the same tight bun from the day before, yet a few stray strands lay behind her ears, which made the woman somehow more approachable.

Perfect.

“Good morning, Mrs. Elsom,” she greeted, coming over to her as she finished her plait and tossed it back over her shoulder. “I am looking for Lord Basset, do you know where I might find him?”

Mrs. Elsom nodded, a hint of mischief or understanding in her eyes, which made Adelaide blush. “Aye, he’s in the breakfast room, my lady, reading his newssheets, as he usually does. It’s just beyond the stairs there, as though you were going through to the gardens. Wonderful glimpse of morning light without being overpowered by it.”

Adelaide nodded, turning back the way she had come and hurrying toward the stairs. “Thank you, Mrs. Elsom! We must take tea later; I want to know everything!”

“Of course, my lady,” the housekeeper called back, laughter in her voice.

Adelaide couldn’t comprehend that now, not if she wished to keep her composure for her husband. She could be as embarrassed as she liked in a few moments, but not before.

She rounded the staircase and moved straight through to the few rooms beyond, stopping as she caught sight of Basset nearly lounging in a chair at the breakfast table, his plate sporting a few crumbs, but no remnants of food, and a newssheet in his hands. He wore no jacket, and in just his shirtsleeves, he looked much more like the man in her rooms last night than the man she married, which made her skin tingle in several places where he had kissed it then.

She cleared her throat softly, more to interrupt her echoes of sensation than to call attention to herself, but Basset glanced over all the same.

He looked almost boyish in such a position, and it was oddly charming, particularly with the small smile that appeared before he collected himself.



“Good morning, my lady,” he greeted, straightening and pushing to his feet.

“Oh, do sit down, Basset,” Adelaide said quickly, praying her voice held no edge to it. “That is hardly necessary.”

He shrugged and resumed his seat. “As you wish.” He shook out his newssheet and smiled with all politeness, though there was something almost soft in his eyes. “How did you sleep?”

Her cheeks flamed at once. “Well, thank you. The bed was rather comfortable.” Which he would know, as he had been there a moment or two.

Her neck seemed to burn at that thought. “And you? After such journeying, did you sleep well?”

After their excursion in consummation, had he been as fatigued as she?

“Yes, in fact,” he replied, apparently without concern for the undertones she was catching. “Rather well.”

Was it possible for one’s entire torso to flush with embarrassment?

“Good,” she murmured, wishing the fire of her skin would stop before it reached her toes. “Excellent.”

And no other words came.

Basset stared at her, his polite smile remaining, no hint of burning anywhere in his face or neck.

Fortunate man.

“Would you care to sit down?” he asked when she said nothing more. “One of the footmen will fetch you a plate if you wish.”

Adelaide shook her head, swallowing somehow amid her burning throat. “No, I thank you. I have a breakfast tray. Or I have had one. A tray, that is. I haven’t finished yet, though it would certainly appear that way, and perhaps I won’t finish if everything has gone cold...”

Why could she not stop talking? What was happening to her?

“Indeed,” Basset said slowly when she fell silent, his expression turning a little bemused. “Nothing worse than a cold breakfast.”

Was he humoring her? Mocking her? Feeling as stilted as she was?

Oh, what did it matter anyway?

“Basset,” Adelaide began in a rush, stepping forward to grip the nearest chair, “I realize last evening was not the preferred time for you to answer all of my questions, but I wonder if you might indulge me now.”

His eyes widened and he leaned an elbow on the table, rubbing at his brow. “Adelaide, it is far too early for me to imbibe spirits, and this conversation will make me drink.”

“But you are the only one I can ask!” she cried, her knuckles turning white. “Please, Basset.”

He sighed, looking over at her, his own discomfort now painfully evident. She watched him swallow, then fold the newssheet, nodding. “Very well. Proceed.”

Adelaide nodded once, a knot forming somewhere within her. “After what... transpired, will I now be with child?”

Basset wet his lips. “Perhaps, but that is not certain.”

“So it takes more than once?”

“It can.”

“And it is expressly for making children?”

“Not... entirely,” he answered, straightening a little, his brow creasing, “but I believe it is primarily for such things.”

“Not entirely?” she repeated in confusion.

He averted his eyes, looking at the tablecloth with some focus. “It can also be for... pleasure, I suppose. Connection. And this may shock you, but it is not confined to matrimony. In my view, it ought to be, but that is not universal.”

Adelaide let that sink in a moment, her grip on the chair loosening just slightly. “So those who are caught in compromising situations and marry quickly, this is what they were doing?”

Basset nodded, swallowing again. “Or leading to it. Yes.”

“I see. That makes a great deal more sense.”

“Good. I know how you hate being ignorant.” He looked over at her, smiling at last.

“Indeed. So...” She bit her lip, tilting her head a bit. “Does this... thing, this consummation—”

“You don’t have to keep calling it that,” Basset interrupted easily, waving his hand in a quick gesture. “Consummation happens once. After that, you can call it whatever you like. Create a name for it. A euphemism. Everyone else does.”

Adelaide flashed a tight smile. “I shall think of something. Does it... this thing... happen every night?”

Basset paused, and continued to pause, before saying, “No, unless it is wished. It can occur as the parties are so inclined.”

The tight knot began to unravel in Adelaide’s chest, unlocking a certain tension in her knees and freeing her fingers entirely from their hold on the chair. She drummed those fingers against the wood in thought, processing all she had learned, not entirely certain what she felt.

“Do you have any other questions?” Basset inquired, turning toward her a little more. “I apologize for not indulging them last night, I simply thought it would be best—”

“It was, you were quite right,” Adelaide overrode, not wishing to relive any of the details with him by the light of day. She could only take so much mortification.

She swallowed, pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth, then exhaled slowly. “Last night was... satisfactory on my side, thank you. You were a generous tutor, of sorts. I am... available for any additional nights of such things as you see fit. I have no plans tonight, if you are agreeable.”

A room had never been more silent, she was sure of it. Basset's dark eyes were wide, and his tanned complexion seemed markedly less so, particularly with his jaw so slackened.

That was not at all encouraging.

"Unless it was disagreeable for you," Adelaide heard herself say, wishing she had maintained more decorum in the moment of her suggestion. "In which case, pay me no heed."

Basset cleared his throat, straightening entirely. "It was not disagreeable. I am... only startled by the offer."

"Because it is me?" she quipped, smiling with what she hoped was encouragement.

"Not especially," came his hesitant reply, "though that does play a part. I rather didn't expect you would wish to after the first. Unless we were trying for children. Not that I would object to children, should you fall in that way. I simply..." He laughed once, the sound a little unsteady. "Gads, Adelaide, I don't bloody know what to say."

The man of collected nature and cool reserve was fumbling for words? Well, well. She was not the only one stewing in awkwardness and vulnerability. There was something oddly thrilling in that.

Perhaps there would be more in these marital activities to her benefit than she previously thought.

"Say yes," she suggested with more confidence than she had felt all morning. "Or no, if you'd prefer otherwise."

"Yes."

There was no hesitation, and a thrill of pride jolted through Adelaide at hearing it.

Odd, enjoyable, and curious.

She dipped her chin in a prim nod, trying desperately not to smile. "Very well, then. I shall see you later, perhaps. I am not at all properly dressed for the day, and there is so much to do." She turned on her heel and all but skipped out of the room, the image of her husband's set, determined features

upon his acceptance one that felt rather ticklish somewhere beneath her ribs.

She might not enjoy her husband's company on usual circumstances, such as during the day, but she was mightily curious if she might enjoy it a little by night.

Her heart lighter, her embarrassment lessening by the heartbeat, Adelaide moved back to the stairs, pausing as she caught sight of the distinguished butler.

“Oh, Mervyn!” she called, one foot on a step.

He turned to her, bowing. “Yes, my lady?”

Adelaide grinned. “Do send in a glass of port to Lord Basset in the breakfast room. It is a little early, but I've a feeling he might need it.”

“Port, my lady?” Mervyn inquired, his high brow furrowing.

“Yes, Mervyn,” she confirmed, wanting to laugh at the abject confusion. “Port.”

Mervyn bowed once more. “Very good, my lady. I shall see to it at once.”

“Thank you, Mervyn. His lordship will greatly appreciate it.” She nodded, then continued up the staircase, humming to herself and drumming her fingers along the railing in a burst of girlish delight.

Lady Basset had found her footing, and a greater battle would soon be waged now that she had.

# Chapter Nine



“BASSET!”

There was no need to reply to the bellow that echoed throughout the halls of Trevadden any more than there had been a need to reply to the previous three calls. Harrison had not moved, and he had no intention of moving for the next hour. Testing the particular acoustics of Trevadden’s corridors was useful, though, given the tradition of inviting local carolers to sing within every Christmas.

They would sound marvelous, if the present reverberations were any indication.

“BASSET!”

Harrison winced, the echoing sounds growing rather shrill. Still, it had no impact on the contents of his ledger, which really did need to be updated before his next meeting with the estate agent.

Priorities were all that a landowner had, really. If those were compromised, the whole estate could fall into ruin.

“BASS—For the love of all heaven, Basset, could you not hear me?”

Harrison nodded once, catching a glimpse of his wife in the doorway of his study as he continued to scan his ledger. “Of course I heard you, my lady. I believe they heard you in Sussex.”

His wife huffed loudly, striding into the room. “And you did not think I required a response?”

He glanced up. “To what?”

Her chin lowered, her bright blue eyes piercing into him like an icy fire. “I was calling your name.”

“Yes, I gathered,” he replied, pleased that he did not feel the least bit uncomfortable under her stare, unless one counted the slight twinge in the smallest toe on his right foot. “But there was no question associated with it, so how was I to reply?”

The sound she made was delightfully guttural for being so high in pitch. Rather like a snarling canary, really.

“You are impossible,” Adelaide snapped.

“So I have been told.” Harrison nodded without concern. “Is there something I can help you with, Lady Basset?”

Her upper lip twitched as though she would actually snarl at him. “Yes, as it happens. I would like to know why your sister is not on the list of guests for our party.”

Harrison’s brow snapped together. “She is. I am certain of it.”

Adelaide waved the guest list pointedly in the air. “No, Basset, she is not! There is no Miss Basset anywhere on your list! I recognize she must be allowing us time to ourselves in Trevadden after the wedding, but at some point, she will return here to her home, and as far as I am concerned, that could be now. Surely our party would be the perfect time to welcome her back, and yet she is not on this list! Have you two fought?”

It was not immediately evident to him what his wife was talking about, but after a moment’s replaying of her rant, it became abundantly clear. He had yet to inform Adelaide of the nature of his relationship with Emblyn, or of her birth, or of their arrangements. And it would appear that now he must do so.

He prayed the walls of Trevadden might withstand the fallout.

“No,” Harrison told her with a slow exhale, the muscles of his back beginning to tense in apprehension. “We have not fought. And yes, she is on the list. Her name is Emblyn Moyle. Not Basset.”

Adelaide blinked, the corners of her mouth pinching. “Why is her surname not Basset?”

Harrison rested his elbow on his desk, gesturing faintly with his fingers. “Her mother is not my mother.”

“Which does not explain the differing surnames,” Adelaide said, narrowing her eyes. “Unless...”

There was nothing to do but wait for the connections to be made. Harrison smiled very tightly as he waited.

His wife’s eyes widened to an almost alarming degree. “Basset, is your sister illegitimate?” she asked in a hushed voice, as though someone in the house might not be aware of it. “Your half-sister... your father’s daughter... your—”

“Emblyn’s mother,” Harrison overrode before Adelaide could grow more derogatory with her remarks, “was a maid in this house. My father was a known profligate, and maids were disappearing from our employ all the time. I learned that one of the maids bore a daughter when I was fifteen. It was never spoken of, and no provisions or help were given to them. I made it a priority to search them out the moment I inherited. It was too late to help the former maid, as she had passed on, but her daughter was employed at Tehidy.”

“Then she was better off than most girls in her situation,” Adelaide pointed out, her tone crisp. “Why could you not leave it at that?”

Harrison glared without hesitation. “Because she is my sister.”

Adelaide raised a brow. “Barely. Only half.”

“Does it matter?” he snapped, flattening his hand against the desk.

“It does if she is constantly coming to us for charity!” Adelaide scoffed loudly, shaking her head. “Basset, have you no sense?”

“Have you no compassion?” he asked in return. “Believe me, Emblyn was not looking to be rescued. She enjoys her simple life and will take nothing from me, apart from occasionally sending her game and salt. She does not live here, nor does she wish to. I have only just gotten her comfortable enough to come to Trevadden unannounced.”



Adelaide's lips pursed, her expression that of tasting something sour. "I don't like it."

It was now Harrison's turn to scoff. "You don't have to like it. You only have to accept it. Emblyn is my sister, as much as if she had been born to my mother rather than her own. She will be invited to every event hosted here, and she is permitted to send her regrets."

"No, she is not!" Adelaide looked horrified by the idea and shook her head insistently. "I will not have anyone sending their regrets. We ought to be turning people away at our doors, not allowing them to remain comfortable at home!"

"You do whatever you would like with friends and neighbors," Harrison told her firmly. "Leave Emblyn to her own devices."

She met his eyes coldly, almost like a stubborn child who was not getting her way. "You had me arrange for an exquisite gown for an illegitimate child."

He straightened in his chair, fighting for control. He did not usually struggle with such things, but where Emblyn was concerned, he was growing rather protective. And that was impossible to completely control.

"I paid for that gown," he ground out. "You can have no complaints about it."

"I purchased a present for her," Adelaide cried, completely ignoring his statement. "A very fine one, and to hear this—"

Harrison pushed to his feet, planting his fists into the surface of the desk. "I do not give a damn what you do with what you purchased for whatever sister of mine you imagined up. Emblyn is my sister, and that is that. She will always be welcome here, no matter the circumstances. And you will allow her into your company and treat her with the respect a sister of mine deserves."

Adelaide stared silently, her fine jaw tensing and relaxing in an almost comical pattern.

Would the irregularity of the situation be too much for her refined principles? Would his vision for the family he created

at Trevadden be forced to adjust to the discontent of his wife for the sake of his sister's happiness? Would he be able to keep his sister in his life in the capacity he wished in spite of Adelaide's distaste?

"At least she will fit in among the guests if she wears that gown," Adelaide finally grumbled, her sigh as heavy as the weight in Harrison's stomach. "Lord only knows what she might wear of her own accord."

"Try to avoid insulting her with every breath," Harrison suggested, tasting his own spite. "You'll only earn yourself worse in return."

"From you?" Adelaide laughed a hard, disparaging laugh.

Harrison grinned slowly, shaking his head. "No, my lady. From her."

That sobered her into a wariness he rather enjoyed. "You said she was shy."

"And she is. In company. Among family, however..." He shrugged, still grinning. "She speaks her mind and speaks it freely. It's utterly refreshing."

Adelaide gaped in shock. "You would let your sister insult your wife in her own home?"

Harrison raised a brow. "I'd let you both insult each other, to a degree. Not in public, of course, but in private. I'd intervene when tears began to flow."

"I never shed tears," Adelaide protested, outrage streaming from every facet of her features. "It would go on for ages!"

"Then you'd best be sure to leave the battle before it goes too far," he suggested. "I doubt Emblyn is one to back down."

Her jaw shifted as though she ground her teeth together. "Then invite her to dine with us before the party. We will just get our insults out of the way before we can be expected to behave like a proper family before company." She paused, snorting softly. "Proper. What a joke."

Shaking her head, Adelaide turned for the door and stormed out of the room.

Harrison waited a moment, then sank back into his chair with a groan. Despite what he had said, he did not wish for Emblyn and Adelaide to spar with words. He rather hoped they could form a friendship, as unlikely as it may have seemed. From where he stood, the two of them would either become the greatest of friends or the worst of enemies.

If Adelaide could overcome her ideas of convention and propriety, there really was nothing to object to in Emblyn's character or person. But his wife did bear the opinions of general high society. There was no telling if she was capable of setting them aside.

He was asking a great deal of her, he could acknowledge. Anyone in Society might have felt the same. But the idea of his sister being rejected had never been one he had been comfortable with, and he grew less and less rational about it the closer to his sister he became.

He hoped that one day his wife would be just as valiant a defender for her. It was a foolish hope, but there it was.

Ironically, the world might have accepted Richard as proper, even with his behaviors, while they spurned Emblyn for her birth.

The injustice was not lost on Harrison.

But he would send word to his sister that she was invited to dine, and he would not be easy until that meal was over, one way or the other. And seeing what family remained when it was.

Life with Adelaide thus far had not been boring, he could say that for certain. Her tempers were high and her will was strong, which gave him a never-ending battering for this mistake or that, this annoyance or that, this inconvenience or that. She had taken over Trevadden with an enthusiasm and determination that impressed him, even if he could never say so. Rooms that had never bothered him were suddenly more comfortable, more refined, more suited for their purpose, and flowed rather perfectly from one to the next.

A uniformity of elegance, he'd thought just that morning as he had made the walk from the breakfast room to his study. The artwork was in the process of being switched out, some returning to the gallery, some being donated to local exhibits, some disappearing altogether. Adelaide had been considerate enough to ask him if there were any paintings, furnishings, or antiques that held any particular meaning or appealed to his tastes before rearranging anything.

He hadn't had preferences, but her acknowledgment of the place as his home as well had not gone unnoticed.

She was a curious one, his wife.

From the moment they'd met, she'd bristled against him. Tossed barbs directly in his face. Held nothing but contempt and coolness for him. It softened in public, in the presence of nearly anyone else, but it always lay beneath the surface. She was powerful, regal, aloof. She did not suffer patronizing, dismissal, or being ignored. It must not only be noted when she entered a room but appreciated. No matter the weather, his mood, or her interest, her confident composure never once faltered.

Until it was night.

Two weeks of living at Trevadden, and she was still tentative at night, no matter how vibrant she had been during the day about this thing or that. She was never vulnerable until he saw her within the walls of her chambers. Yet she welcomed him still.

Invited him.

Expected him.

They had not been together every night, but there had certainly been several instances in the past fortnight. She was shy, uncertain, but not retreating. She was responsive, sweetly so, and was growing still more encouraging.

He could not help but be exceedingly attentive each time. He had made it a point to never force himself or claim authority, always letting her decide when she wished and if she wished. It was too much in the man's favor as it was; there

was no need to steal the entire experience. He might be annoyed by her at every moment of the waking hours, but at night, when they were like that...

He could only have the utmost respect and care.

And in doing so, he felt more comfortable himself.

And somehow uncomfortable, too.

Vulnerable. Exposed. Even awkward.

And yet... connected.

That first night, the one she had insisted upon, he had seen the fear and nerves and apprehension in her eyes, especially once the nature and reality of the situation became clear, and it had guided his actions and treatment of her. She had given him permission to continue, and so he had, praying he would not ruin the experience for her.

He had seen all too well how selfish men could be where women are concerned, and he refused to succumb to such depths. He was not a saint, but he would not sin against a woman either.

Particularly not his wife.

If any of these intimate interactions made her uneasy, gave her pain, kept her from enjoyment, he would consider it a gross failure on his part. It was far too significant a thing to have only one party benefit, and if they were ever to have children, he would wish them to be conceived from pleasure, not from duty.

Adelaide did not express her feelings on the subject aloud, so he could not be entirely certain of her experiences, but when they were abed...

His wife had a gentle touch despite her towering strength of character and a particular smile that never failed to move him. They never spoke of the bedroom outside of it, nor allowed much by way of familiarity, but there was something intangible in their time together there that he was beginning to like very much.

Which made her morning tirades all the more aggravating.

And, in part, hilarious.

It was as though she had to compensate for the sweet creature of the night by turning gorgon with the sunrise.

But it did keep Harrison from growing sentimental over his wife, which he might have been at risk for with continued sweetness at her hand. His emotions remained exactly where he liked them to be: perfectly in check and not impacting any particular aspect of his life. He much preferred to use wisdom, knowledge, and instinct to guide him, along with a healthy dose of good manners and decent humor.

His wife had more than enough emotion for both of them.

And Emblyn...

Well, Emblyn was evidence that somewhere within Harrison, emotions did, in fact, live and breathe, and that it was possible for a Basset to feel more than selfishness.

Between Richard and his father, Harrison had begun to wonder.

He had spent his entire life forcing himself to be different from them, to separate himself from their habits and behaviors, to improve the family reputation. Perhaps in that, there was selfishness, but it could not be helped.

Emblyn had no selfishness, though she certainly bore enough stubbornness and pride.

That was almost certainly from her Basset line.

Shaking his head, Harrison pulled a sheet of paper from his desk and jotted a quick note to his sister, extending the invitation to dine and praying he would survive it.



Miss Moyle was stunning.

Adelaide had only known her for twenty minutes, and it was still the prevailing thought in her mind. Her eyes were captivating in their paleness, particularly with the luxurious

depth of color in her dark tresses. It was the same shade as her brother's, and while her complexion was not quite so tanned, it was a healthy, robust one, just as he had.

She had expected a plain, average, unassuming miss with freckles dressed in overworn cotton, bearing a passing resemblance to the description Basset had given her upon their first meeting. No manners, gaunt in appearance, roughly kept, and in possession of any number of poor habits and even poorer language. A beggar, perhaps, or a kitchen maid.

This was vastly different.

If one looked at Miss Moyle and had no idea of her birth, one would never suspect that her upbringing had been a poor one. She was clean in appearance, surprisingly composed, and perfectly formed in figure. Apart from her eyes, there was nothing shocking about Miss Moyle at all. She was the most ideal portrait of Basset's sister imaginable.

Until she opened her mouth.

Such a picture of loveliness ought not to speak in so harsh an accent, nor with such a common nature. She seemed a very good sort, and certainly did not present as a scheming, manipulative woman, but the discrepancy between her appearance and her speech made Adelaide doubt everything else. And, to Adelaide's surprise, Miss Moyle was indeed rather shy, just as her brother had said from the start.

But, if he was to be believed, she would grow rather bold and sharp upon better acquaintance, to the point of freely insulting her.

It was difficult to believe anything of the sort was possible from the beauty before her. Then again, Adelaide was considered a beauty as well, and her tongue could be sharper than any dagger in the world.

If she were to continue her plan to master her new life as Lady Basset, to turn this circumstance to her advantage, it might behoove her to make an ally of Emblyn Moyle. Particularly when the girl was so important to Basset.

Illegitimate or not, it would seem she was a fixture at Trevadden.

But how could women so very far apart find any sort of common ground, let alone form an alliance?

Mervyn entered the room then, clasping his hands behind his back.

“Be that dinner, then, Mervyn?” Miss Moyle called with a grin for the butler, a few dark tendrils escaping from her simple knot.

Mervyn, shockingly, smiled rather freely back. “It is, Miss Emblyn. At your convenience, of course.”

Adelaide’s eyes narrowed. So Miss Moyle had won over the Trevadden staff and softened them in a way Adelaide had yet to even witness in her time there. There was no indication that the stately and capable Mervyn could become so congenial and warm. He was not the picture of formality, but he was teasing Miss Moyle in return.

Teasing! From a butler!

If this was another game she had to master, she was starting ten paces behind.

She had never excelled at games, but she could not afford to fail now.

“Shall we?” Harrison asked the ladies, rising and gesturing toward the dining room.

Adelaide nodded, making sure to rise as gracefully as possible even as Miss Moyle shot to her feet with all the grace of a hound.

She could not help smirking at that and turned to take her husband’s arm.

Only it was not there.

Adelaide blinked, glancing around for him. “Basset?”

He stopped at the dining room door. “Yes?”

She frowned. “Are you not going to escort me in?”



Miss Moyle snorted loudly and without manners. “E’s against wha’s proper when it’s jus’ us. E’en wi’ friends, ’e’s not.”

Adelaide glanced at her coolly. “I believe you dropped several of the consonants in your general pronunciation, Miss Moyle, but I shall try to understand you.” She exhaled as though it was a trial and tilted her head. “He, meaning Basset, is against propriety for a simple meal among family and friends?”

Miss Moyle’s cheeks were almost glowing red, and she merely dipped her chin in a nod.

“I see.” Adelaide turned back to her husband, raising a brow. “Why?”

Basset was glaring at her as though she’d committed a crime. “Because I despise vanity and imperiousness, that is why. We are all perfectly capable of walking to the table ourselves. I would appreciate you sitting in your usual place at the opposite end of the table. Emblyn, sit wherever you like. Sit on the floor if you’d like. Or upon the table. Right in the middle.”

Adelaide hissed softly through her teeth, preparing for the most combative meal of her life.

“Ee be steamin’ like a crock, Harry,” Miss Moyle pointed out from behind Adelaide, the use of such a childish name making Adelaide choke a little. “I ‘ave some manners, no need for ee to pretend naw.”

“Clearly, she expects you to be something feral,” Basset snapped, flinging a hand toward Adelaide. “Why not show her what that would look like?”

“Haud ee bal!” Miss Moyle barked, pushing past Adelaide almost roughly as she marched to her brother. “Ee be puttin’ words in ‘er mouth she never said. If she dislike me, let her dislike me. On her own, Harry. Not in yer own head. We know wha’ I am, and all the shining in the world won’ make a penny gold.”

Basset stared at his sister, his jaw tightening, but then, eventually, he nodded once. "Fine. Dinner." He turned toward the dining room again, putting his hand at his sister's back and guiding her in beside him.

Adelaide exhaled very slowly, curious about the rise her words had suddenly brought about in her husband. The man was more collected than any she had ever known, even when he was insulting her, yet there, he had been in a proper temper.

So. He could feel emotions with a certain strength and energy, despite his better nature and best attempts.

And he'd thought his sister would be Adelaide's most lively opposition?

As his sister had said, not bleeding likely.

Adelaide followed them into the dining room, lifting her chin just a touch as she moved to her chair. Her husband's dark look met her across the table, and he shook his head just a little, either in warning or disbelief. Or perhaps with a threat for her.

What bound these half-siblings together with such strength that it transformed her husband? Adelaide had several siblings, and she had never felt anything of the sort despite being passionate in her emotions. If she were to be perfectly honest, in the rawest manner, she was envious.

No one would have defended her that way. Not even Phillip.

Her heart fluttered weakly at the thought of him, but she brushed thoughts of him away and focused on the plate of food before her. "We hope to see you at our party, Miss Moyle," Adelaide announced as though there had been no incident prior to the meal. She cut into her lamb neatly. "I understand you are not fond of formal gatherings."

"Nay, my lady," Miss Moyle replied in a very careful attempt at finer language. "'Tis not a proper sort of gatherin' for the likes of me."

"I don't see why not," Adelaide retorted, taking a small bite and looking over at her. "Basset is your brother, and he

claims you. Surely that counts for something.”

Miss Moyle gave her a confused look, her fair brow wrinkling. “It does not erase my birth, ma’am. And there are some only too pleased to remind me of it.”

“Well, we must have you.” Adelaide nodded as though it settled things. “Surely you would wish to celebrate our marriage.”

“Will ee be celebratin’ yer marriage, ma’am? Or simply gainin’ a title, a fortune, and Trevadden?”

There wasn’t much of an edge to Miss Moyle’s words, but there was certainly a lack of tact.

Basset coughed, likely to hide a laugh, but Adelaide did not spare a look for him.

She smiled a little at Miss Moyle, more for her directness than anything else. “Ah, there is the honesty Mrs. Roskelley told me about, and the spirit your brother warned me about. Touché, Miss Moyle. As you can see, this is a marriage of relative convenience.”

“Very relative,” Basset muttered as he sipped his drink.

“I warned my brother against tha’,” Miss Moyle told her, placing her hands in her lap. “I did not think t’would be right, nor fair.”

Adelaide made a small sound of acknowledgement at that, if not appreciation. “Well, my father did not see it that way either, so here we are. But I am well aware it could be worse. I could be married to a villain rather than a toad.”

Miss Moyle released another snort of laughter, but this one did not irk Adelaide in the least.

“Thank you, Emblyn, for defending me so staunchly,” Basset grumbled, shaking his head. “Really, it is too much.”

“Look,” Adelaide said, ignoring her husband again and turning toward Miss Moyle more fully. “I can understand feeling embarrassed in such company. You were once serving such people, and now you stand among them. It must be difficult to reconcile in your mind.”

Miss Moyle nodded slowly, looking almost wary now. “Aye, ‘tis. And not all mind their tongues.”

“I suffer from the same.” Adelaide shrugged, the closest thing to an apology she would manage for now. “But we are talking about your brother’s marriage. Like it or not, we are all bound together now. We do not have to like each other so much as... need to present a united front. Stand together and be the prominent family in the area. You need not come to anything else if you wish it, but for this one thing, I must ask that you do. Your brother had no family at his wedding.”

Miss Moyle looked at Basset then, some understanding passing between them when Basset barely shook his head. “I did not think... did not even your mother come, Harry?”

“She is not well,” he murmured, his voice turning stiff, his eyes averting. “She sent a lovely note with her regrets.” He raised his eyes to Adelaide, no longer so murderous, but hardly warm. “And Emblyn does not have to come.”

Adelaide gave him an exasperated look. “And what will people say when your sister is not there, even for this? One cannot swim in a pond and dip toes in a lake all at once.”

Basset’s mouth curved in an almost smile, causing her stomach to turn precisely one quarter. “I shall leave the expertise of swimming ponds and lakes to you, my dear. I’ve no knowledge of such things.”

Impossible man, he knew full well she did not either.

Still, it was banter and not an insult.

Progress.

“I will come.”

Both Basset and Adelaide looked at Miss Moyle in shock. “You will?”

She nodded, looking rather miserable about it. “‘Tis only right. I shall do me best to not shame ee.”

“That won’t happen,” Basset assured her, reaching out to take her hand. “Short of rallying the miners to burn the house down, nothing you do could.”

Adelaide gawked at his statement, having yet to even see a mine, let alone a miner. “Is that likely?”

The siblings laughed together. “Nay, ma’am,” Miss Moyle said with a smile. “Harry is much liked in the area, by miners and by other folk. And I’d never.”

“Good,” Adelaide managed, swallowing the sudden panic that had jolted at the idea. She had never been in the vicinity of any common people at all, and one could never be sure what the feelings of them were toward their betters.

Miss Moyle being among them could either work in their favor or to their detriment. What a terrifying thought.

Adelaide cleared her throat. “We’ve the perfect gown for you to wear, haven’t we, Basset? And I am sure you will want to learn the dance steps, so I will arrange lessons before the date. And I think my maid might do wonders with your hair...”

# Chapter Ten



“I feel ridiculous.”

“Everybody feels ridiculous at these things, Emblyn. At least you’re not wearing a cravat.”

Emblyn glared at Gage Trembath, Harrison’s oldest friend, currently standing between the two of them. “I’d take that if it would free my arms. I be trapped in this like a bleeding chicken!”

Harrison bit back a laugh and smiled at his sister. “But a very pretty chicken, Emblyn. The finest in the room.”

Her look would have murdered him if it had come with blades. “Because that is what matters.”

“It is to my wife.” He shrugged and all three of them looked across the ballroom.

Adelaide was conversing with Mrs. Elsom about last-minute arrangements of the place, and their conversation seemed rather intense. One could only hope it was going well, but Adelaide’s back was to them, and Mrs. Elsom was as unflappable as ever. She listened, nodded, smiled, and relayed something that had Adelaide putting a hand on her arm.

Harrison could not imagine there was anything to be found lacking in the Trevadden ballroom or anywhere else. He had never seen the place so alight, so elegant, or so inviting, and he could only attribute that to Adelaide’s taste and skills and vision. He’d hosted several events at Trevadden without it ever looking so lovely.

Nothing had seemed lacking before, but seeing it now...

And there weren’t even any guests yet, unless one counted the scowling Emblyn and Gage, snickering like a younger

brother.

Gage had come early and without ceremony, as he was inclined to do, and his introduction to Adelaide had been brief but polite. What exactly he thought about her had yet to be made clear, as Emblyn had joined them shortly thereafter. But Gage was a man of opinions, so Harrison had no doubt he would discover his impressions the moment they were safe and free to do so.

Adelaide suddenly turned from Mrs. Elsom, a formal and polite smile on her face, and gestured for Harrison to come to her.

He did not immediately do so.

“Is she summoning me?” Gage asked aloud.

Emblyn snorted beside him. “Ee could only wish so.”

“That would be for me,” Harrison said on a heavy sigh. “Lord only knows what I’ve done now.”

“Are you not going to do as you are bid?” Gage pressed, laughter in his voice.

“Eventually.” Harrison sipped the rest of the drink in his hands, staring at his wife as she stared at him, watching as her expression tried to hide irritation behind her polite, pleasant facade. “I do enjoy testing her, though.”

Gage heaved a dramatic exhale and turned to Emblyn. “When your brother dies at the hand of his new wife, Emblyn, I do hope you will allow me to care for you in his place.”

Rolling his eyes, Harrison strode away from them before he could catch his sister’s response. If they were going to tease and mock him, he might as well go see what Adelaide wanted. He knew she would mock him if given the chance, but it was also her first event as mistress of Trevadden.

It was possible, however improbable, that she might have some fears or anxieties about that, which he might be able to help soothe.

She looked beautiful, he was honest enough to admit that, and he would not pretend his heart did not speed up or his

stomach did not catch fire for a brief moment or two. Her gown was a rich cream color with a darker overlay, embroidered with a peach shade of flowers on a vine, some metallic in them catching the light. Her right shoulder was draped with an earthy, rose-colored fabric, something sheer and near a shade to her embroidered skirts, giving the entire ensemble a regal air that suited her. About her small waist, a thick lavender ribbon was tied.

Her golden hair was rather loosely piled and pinned, mauve and pale purple ribbons crossing this way and that, pearl pins highlighting the rest and matching the strands of pearls at her throat.

His wife was a beauty that simply had to be appreciated.

“Don’t think your delay was not noted,” Adelaide hissed through her tight smile. “Have you no compassion for my anxieties this evening?”

Perhaps she was better appreciated from a distance.

“I was not aware you were having anxieties, my lady,” Harrison said carefully, not seeing the need to provoke her if she was already feeling on edge. “You present such a confident facade, it is not easily discernible.”

She waved a hand in brisk, dismissive gestures. “I am not prone to displaying discernable failings to the public.”

“I don’t think anxieties would be a failing,” he mused, more to himself than to anyone else, “but I will do my best to anticipate anything of the sort in the future.”

“Basset, stop talking,” Adelaide ordered without any hint she had heard his near-apology or felt any gratitude toward him. “I must speak to you about the image we present to our guests.”

Of course she did. After the effort she had made in the days leading up to their marriage and the wedding itself, she would never put forth less effort with the local society of her new home.

“I realize,” she went on before he could comment, “that I have not done as I ought with your sister, but I do aim to do



better by her. If I can ignore everything against her.” She rolled her eyes heavenward and exhaled heavily. “Thank heavens she looks a picture this evening. It will help soften every fault.”

“Your aiming is truly admirable,” Harrison muttered in derision.

Adelaide glanced up at him, missing the sarcasm. “I think we must present an idealistic front to Society. No one will doubt that we married for convenience, but there must be no hint that convenience is all there is. We are a very comfortable, warm, affectionate couple. Do you understand?”

Harrison reared back in surprise. “You want me to pretend we do not fight like cats and dogs? I don’t know if I can manage that far.”

Her glare was truly potent. “Basset, I will not have anybody thinking my marriage is lacking in any respect. We must be envied. I must be envied. Do you understand?”

He stared at her, waiting for some hint of laughter or amusement to prove her somehow more sensible than her statement implied. But there was no laughter, no teasing, no indication of any notion regarding how ridiculous she sounded. On the contrary, he could now see the anxieties she had previously mentioned swimming in the rich blue color of her eyes.

She needed him to cooperate for her plan to work, and she evidently feared his response.

But he did not wish for his marriage to be a topic of discussion among the general public, in one way or another, so if being overly attentive to her would keep her happy as his wife and prevent gossip, he had no reluctance in doing so.

Still, he could not make such a thing easy for her.

He raised a brow at her. “So I am to adore you publicly, then?”

Adelaide’s eyes narrowed, her jaw tightening in a way he knew well, and it bolstered him. “You are to act as though you

privately adore me, but restrain yourself for the sake of appearances, yet do not quite manage to hide your feelings.”

He did not need to act in appearing befuddled by that. “Care to write all that down for me? I may forget the specifics.”

Now Adelaide rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “Just pretend you like me a great deal, all right? I will do you the same courtesy, though I shall probably flirt with your neighbors in an attempt to be agreeable. Do not go to the extreme of claiming jealousy.”

“I shall do my best.” Harrison smiled a little, something about his appearance-obsessed wife amusing him in spite of the insipid nature of it all. “And may I say, Lady Basset, in all sincerity, that you look beautiful this evening. It will be lovely to have you sitting across from me at dinner as the hostess of Trevadden.”

To his surprise, her cheeks flushed a pale pink, beyond the natural rosiness of her complexion, and her smile was small, like the woman he knew in only their most private moments rather than the grand figure she presented to the world.

Which was the true Adelaide? he wondered. Or was she both at once?

“Thank you, Basset,” Adelaide murmured, the smile spreading just enough to blind him with its beauty. “I’ll not insist that you dance with me this evening, but I would very much like to. If you can bear dancing.”

Was that a shy request at the hands of his wife? Not a demand, but a request?

Harrison smiled at her, truly and freely. “I think I could bear to. We ought to open the evening with a dance, I think, for our guests, as we do celebrate our wedding. But then later, perhaps, a cotillion?”

Adelaide’s surprised widening of her already perfect smile softened his resident resentment for the time being. “I would enjoy that.” She exhaled slowly, seeming to recollect their surroundings and the impending arrival of further guests. “Is

there anything I should know about any of our neighbors or associates before I meet them?"

"I don't think so," Harrison said with a thoughtful shake of his head, hiding a smile. "I would not wish to prejudice you in any way or prevent you from making your own judgments."

"You would throw me to the wolves, then?"

He looked down at her in surprise. "I haven't the faintest idea what you mean. I'll be standing beside you the entire time you greet them, and by the time you have made your opinions, I rather think you will be the one playing the wolf."

Her smile was sly, smug, and a touch proud. "I had no idea you knew me so well already, Basset."

"Oh, I am very familiar with your tactics and ways, my lady," he assured her, finding himself smiling in response. "And I am greatly looking forward to not being the recipient of them for a moment or two."

"I'll get back to you eventually. It will not likely be much of a respite." She lifted a brow, daring him to push further.

He nodded, enjoying the easy banter about their frequent sparring almost as much as he enjoyed the sparring itself. "By which time, I will have vacated my position here and gone to entertain Mr. Trembath there. He needs a wife, too, you know. And being a married man myself, I must advise him well."

Adelaide glanced over at Gage with interest, perfect lips curving further. "Does he, indeed? Well, once I know him better, I'll be sure to offer my advice as well. There is nothing like a married woman to make a match."

He would pay a great deal of money to see the sort of woman Adelaide would choose for Gage, and he was not feeling particularly keen on saving his friend from his wife's machinations on that score. It would be far too enjoyable to watch the man squirm to think of intervening.

"Dance the second dance with your sister," Adelaide told Harrison quickly as Mervyn nodded at them, indicating the arrival of guests. "We only had time to practice the one, and

she will want to have it done with. I've already arranged it with the musicians and will call it myself."

Harrison gave her a sidelong look, offering his arm as they moved to the entrance of the ballroom. "That is very good of you to think of her."

"Then I won't have to worry about her while I am trying to navigate the rest of the evening," she huffed, shaking her head in irritation. "Lord only knows what kind of a hash we could expect if she danced any other. And she'll bite the head off any man who tries to dance with her except you."

He could only nod in resignation. "And that is very you to think so little of her. I see we are not improving much."

"I thought she was marginally improved this evening." Adelaide glanced over her shoulder toward Emblyn and Gage. "She looks better, and her speech was less coarse. There may yet be hope."

"Never mind," Harrison muttered, looking away.

Someday, he would make her see Emblyn clearly. But it was not going to happen in one night. Or perhaps in one year.

Someday was not this day, that was for certain.

Adelaide twisted her lips, her eyes narrowing slightly. "I think I might be able to press your sister into joining us for dinner once a week if I do promise to not constantly invite her to our events. The sight of her coming and going at frequent intervals will send a message to those around us and emphasize her place in this family, even if she chooses not to attend all that we host. Though she really does look lovely in the gown I selected for her, and she could be quite the beauty for anyone to see, not just to us, if she would try a little, as I suggested."

"Your fortitude is astounding," he grumbled, standing beside her as they waited for their guests.

"I know," came the rather satisfied reply.

Harrison sighed heavily. "Please, I beg you, do not push my sister away in your attempts to make her something she is

not.”

“You are the one who wants her to be something, Basset,” Adelaide insisted, turning a suddenly severe look upon him. “You want her to be your sister in truth, and then get ruffled to the extreme when others do not see her the way you do. But she is common-born, illegitimate, and rather ill-mannered. That does not mean she cannot also be charming in her own way, it is simply the fact.”

He’d had this argument in his mind so often, he knew every rebuttal, but there was something about hearing it in the voice of another that irked him. Yet he knew it was true, and he could not very well pretend otherwise.

“I just want her to...” he trailed off, unsure what he was going to admit, unsure quite what he wanted.

“To like you,” Adelaide finished simply, no hint of recrimination, superiority, or condescension in her tone. “To claim you as her brother, as you have claimed her your sister. To come to love you, perhaps.”

Harrison stared at his wife, startled that she had cut to the center of him so easily and with only a handful of meetings with his sister, let alone to see the siblings together. How could she have possibly seen something so close to his heart, so private, when he hadn’t even felt vulnerable enough to admit the thing to himself?

“Yes,” he said in a soft, almost reverent voice. “Exactly. Is that a ridiculous notion?”

Again, she surprised him, this time with her immediate response of, “Not at all.”

He stared at her, wondering if this version of his wife was an apparition. “Truly?”

Adelaide nodded. “I know you’ve a brother, but you never speak of him, so you cannot be close. You speak of Emblyn all the time, so you have great affection for her already. The distance between the stations in which you were both raised is great, and were you speaking of marriage, I would disagree most ardently, but we are speaking of family. It is not quite the

same thing. And I do not think one should be ashamed of wishing for affection in one's family. I rather wish we'd had more of that."

Her voice trailed off, and her expression became almost whimsical, though anyone looking at her might not have caught it beneath the facade of her hostess expression. Having seen many shades of her face already in this marriage, Harrison knew the subtle changes she could draw out, and the almost childlike air about her made him take her hand in spite of himself.

She jerked, glancing down at their hands, then up at him. "What was that for?"

He smiled at the genuine confusion. "You sounded a little lost just then. I thought I'd remind you that you are not."

It was a simple enough statement without venturing into the overly personal, but there was something soft that appeared in her eyes as he said it.

Strange how he could say more than he spoke, mean more than he related, and not be embarrassed by a bit of it. This unspoken depth to conversation needed to not be addressed directly but only to be understood. It was something rather profound, a little thrilling, and undeniably humbling.

After all, this was his wife. If he could not have such moments with her, then who could?

The moment was broken by the sound of voices, their approaching guests, and Adelaide's perfect-Society expression returned.

But he didn't mind that so much. This time.

The Roskelleys were first, and Julia greeted Adelaide warmly, despite only becoming acquainted at the wedding. Adelaide was polite and gracious, but still seemed stiff to Harrison's eyes. Whether that was nerves or a natural feeling toward Julia as a person, he couldn't say. He could not imagine anyone finding fault in Julia, given she was one of his oldest friends and universally adored, but Adelaide was peculiar in her tastes and opinions on people.

John Roskelley, Julia's husband, was as affable as ever, and was expeditious in sweeping his wife away to allow further guests to greet them.

Suddenly, Adelaide was in her element.

Harrison introduced her to every person entering, but she was the one to converse and set them at ease. She welcomed them with grace and warmth, even humor, and despite every one of these individuals knowing Harrison, in some cases for several years, he was not the Basset they were impressed by.

Adelaide was.

He could see it in every expression that passed him after being so perfectly greeted by her, in every eye that cast on him with new appreciation after Adelaide met them, in every smile that moved away from them.

How in the world had he married a woman so perfect for his life at Trevadden?

He reined in the overwhelming assumption that had taken over his thoughts, forcing it to tuck back into a corner of his mind. She was perfect for this night, for this ball, for these people, but he could hardly consider this as life at Trevadden entirely. She had barely settled into that life, hadn't even seen the mines, the village, or their tenants. She had been rearranging and redecorating Trevadden, but that could not be considered as truly living in it.

And she despised Emblyn.

Time was what was needed to see how perfect Adelaide was for Trevadden, or for him, far more than one evening.

But the power in this one evening was undeniable, and it was encouraging.

"Basset," Adelaide hissed, her elbow gently nudging his side.

He focused on the task at hand rather than on his thoughts and smiled easily. "Mr. Bodville. Mine captain at Wheal Lidden, our largest and most prosperous mine. Excellent man, we owe him immensely."

She nodded once and beamed. “Mr. Bodville, what a pleasure to finally meet you!”

Bodville bowed, smiling warmly. “My lady, the pleasure is mine. You certainly add a note of refinement to Trevadden, if I may say so.”

“You may,” Adelaide quipped, the flattery turning her cheeks a little pink. “I don’t think Basset will argue the point.”

On cue, Harrison shook his head. “I will not, as she most certainly has.”

“Wise man.” Adelaide smiled almost smugly at the statement.

“I am glad you have returned when you have, my lord,” Bodville said, turning his attention to Harrison. “It is my honor to tell you that Miss Jenna Verran has consented to marry me.”

Harrison grinned and extended his hand to the man. “Congratulations, Bodville. I am very happy to hear that. She’s a lovely young lady; I wish you both every happiness.”

“Thank you, my lord.” Bodville continued to smile, clearly delighted by his circumstances and prospects.

“Where is Miss Verran this evening, Mr. Bodville?” Adelaide asked, looking about him, knowing she had not met the woman yet. “I should dearly love to meet her.”

“She did not accompany me this evening, ma’am,” Bodville told her, looking a little hesitant. “She is a mine captain’s daughter from Redruth and did not feel particularly suitable for the gathering.”

Harrison bit the inside of his cheek in anticipation of his wife’s response. It was true that Jenna Verran was a mine captain’s daughter, formerly a miner’s daughter, and their life was relatively simple. Above the common poor in the area, perhaps, but hardly elegant.

Rather like Emblyn, Jenna represented Cornwall in a way that Adelaide might never see or understand.

“Nonsense!” Adelaide cried with real insistence. “She would have been more than welcome! If Redruth were any



nearer to us, I would have you fetch her at this moment!”

Bodville looked as startled as Harrison felt, and they both stared at Adelaide in abject wonder. “You would?” Bodville asked before Harrison could manage it.

Adelaide nodded eagerly. “Yes! After all you have done and continue to do for Wheal Lidden, I could not do anything less than to welcome your bride-to-be with open arms and offer my friendship. We mine wives must stick together, mustn’t we?”

Harrison wondered if she had any idea how extraordinary her words were, or if she could even imagine what actual mine wives looked like, sounded like, or endured. Granted, he did go down into his mines several times a season, but he was hardly putting himself in the same danger that his miners were. There was almost no risk with what he did when he went down, and he came home to finery and a hot meal that his staff prepared.

But her innocent suggestion was more than he had hoped to hear from her, and he was impressed, nonetheless.

“I would love to have her call upon me here,” Adelaide insisted, furthering his astonishment. “Or, if she prefers, we might meet at Wheal Lidden and walk together.”

“I will inform her, my lady,” Bodville replied unsteadily. He blinked, glancing at Harrison as though he could somehow provide a steadying influence. “Would you... would you both honor us by attending the wedding? It will be a rather small, simple affair, but we will celebrate with many of our friends and neighbors as a proper Cornish wedding should.”

Adelaide looked at Harrison, smiling with what seemed to be true delight, though he seemed to have lost his sense of interpretation where her features were concerned. “I’ve never seen a true Cornish wedding celebration. Surely we can attend.”

Magnificent creature, did she have any idea what influence and status her attendance would bring? Would she find it all too quaint and beneath her dignity? Or might she find a greater

freedom to life in Cornwall than could be had in London, just as Harrison had?

“I think we can,” Harrison told her, smiling without reservation and with real fondness. “More than that, I think we should.”

“I quite agree.” She turned to Bodville with a bright smile. “We would be delighted to attend, Mr. Bodville. Do let us know the details when you have them.”

“Of course, ma’am. Thank you.” Bodville nodded and bowed in combination, no doubt still reeling from the exchange and revelations, and moved away from them toward the other guests.

Harrison looked after him, feeling rather rueful. “Poor Bodville.”

“What?” Adelaide asked in a low voice, leaning closer. “Why poor Bodville? Is something amiss with Miss Verran?”

“Not at all, she’s perfectly respectable and amiable. I think he’s feeling rather dazzled at the moment.” Harrison glanced back at her with a raised brow.

“Why?” Her fair eyes sought his and understanding belatedly dawned. “Oh, nonsense. I was extending hospitable politeness, and the sort of graciousness a woman in my position ought. Hardly remarkable.”

Harrison shook his head slowly. “On the contrary, my dear, it was entirely remarkable. You settled fears he did not know he had and confirmed a certain status for his bride in a few brief words.”

Adelaide scoffed a little. “You said he was our mine captain and we owed him greatly. Why should his bride not benefit from our appreciation?”

“You elevated a girl you knew nothing about for her own sake, despite the difference in status, and yet Emblyn cannot receive any such attentions from you.” His mouth curved in a smile. “I’ve never felt quite so hopeful that you and she might someday meet on equal footing.”

“You are being sentimental,” Adelaide grumbled, averting her eyes.

“Perhaps.” He took her hand, squeezing a little. “Even so, the statement stands.”

Adelaide did not tug away, which he felt meant something, even if it only meant tolerance of his person. “I am perfectly capable of seeing potential and adjusting my opinions and aims accordingly.”

“I know,” Harrison told her, running his thumb over her gloved knuckles. “But I wonder if you understand what potential I see in you, and the adjustments I am having to make because of it.”

His wife reared back, her eyes wide, her lips parting.

He brought her hand to his lips briefly, just a perfunctory kiss for his wife, but his heart pounded a single thunderous beat as he did so.

Odd, that.

“We’d best open the dancing, yes?” Harrison suggested quickly before his heart could do any other strange things in his wife’s presence.

Adelaide nodded, swallowing.

His heart moved in the exact pattern of her throat.

He nearly groaned as they turned to move out onto the dance floor in front of their guests. He could only hope that his wife had suggested a reel for their first dance; something to keep him actively moving rather than slowly drifting towards her and away from her in regular intervals and patterns. Particularly since he had just promised her a cotillion later on.

There was no telling how a dance more sedate would affect him before he had a chance to put proper distance between them.

# Chapter Eleven



Something was dreadfully wrong.

It had to be.

She had never been unwell first thing in the morning in her entire life, but this morning, she had barely set her feet upon the floor before she had been running for her chamber pot.

After a night of dancing and playing the hostess rather splendidly, if she dared flatter herself, she ought to have been fatigued, perhaps even sore in her ankles and feet, but certainly never unwell. She had not taken in any strong spirits, had not eaten anything unappealing, and had not been feeling in any way imperfect.

Yet she had been kneeling on the floor over her chamber pot after being sick, wondering if she dared stand up again.

It had taken several minutes, but when it was clear there was nothing more to come, she had gradually pushed to her feet without any hint that any sickness had occurred. She had returned to her bed, taken her breakfast tray, and only consumed the dry toast and tea, after which she had felt perfectly well.

A little wobbly, but perfectly well.

Until she had realized that she ought to have had her monthly courses the week before and had no sign of them.

At all.

Once she had dressed, she had dashed to her drawing room for her diary and flipped back several days. She was not an exceptional journal keeper, but she had made it a habit to record brief details or plans for her days. If she was wrong on

her calculations for her courses, her diary would correct her misapprehension.

Running was not a problem, did not agitate her stomach or her head, and did not make her feel the least bit wobbly. How could she have momentary moments of being unwell but generally be well and whole otherwise?

And what, if she were correct, could make her courses stop?

Her feet skidded to a halt as she reached her drawing room, her eyes going wide.

Her courses had stopped.

That could mean...

Her hands flew to her stomach, looking down at the flat surface as though a child would be waving up at her.

A child...

But it was entirely possible that she was not with child. That she was only ill or some such, and her courses had suffered because of it. She had never experienced such a thing before, but she was a healthy and hale girl, so she could hardly rule out the possibility. Perhaps there was some sickness particular to Cornwall that she had been unfortunate enough to contract.

Basset would pay for that if it were the case.

But how could she know? Who could tell her?

When should she grow concerned?

Panic rising only in her chest, Adelaide moved at a carefully sedate pace to her writing desk, her diary sitting atop its surface. She flipped several pages, starting in the days leading up to her marriage. She had indicated the days of her courses and her irritation with how such things complicated her life and schedule.

She counted each of the noted days after the fact, taking great care to not miss a single one, no matter how short the entry.

Thirty-three... thirty-four... thirty-five... thirty-six days since her last courses.

She had been married for twenty-six days.

Her courses had never been parted by more than twenty-nine days.

Oh heavens.

She had so many questions, and she would wish for her mother to be in the vicinity for her to call upon and interrogate, only she highly doubted her mother would be particularly forthcoming. She could not, would not, ask her husband, as he would hopefully be more ignorant than she was on the subject.

She shook her head and moved to the bell, ringing for the housekeeper. She had no idea if Mrs. Elsom was a mother, but she had nowhere else to turn.

Adelaide paced the room while she waited for her. Pacing kept her grounded, gave her activity to occupy her mind while nothing else about her seemed to make sense. Motion was preferable, actually. She felt clearheaded and like herself. It was when she stopped that her thoughts turned to her condition, or potential condition, and fear licked at her heels.

She could not stop and indulge in it. She needed answers. Logic. Anything to combat the turmoil of ignorant notions and concerns flooding her mind.

What if she wasn't with child? What could it mean that she had missed her courses? Could it mean anything? She had never done much thinking about her courses since the day they had made their first appearance when she was aged thirteen. They came with their accompanying annoyances, but one simply adjusted to them and went on with things.

No one spoke of what one did when they stopped.

And what if she *was* with child? The idea of motherhood was figured into every young woman's education and training, though the details were unclear, but pregnancy was certainly not discussed, alluded to, or brought up in conversation. At least no conversations Adelaide had been privy to.

Perhaps married women discussed such things. She would need to find women to have such conversations with rather quickly if she was indeed with child.

Heavens, what was she going to tell Basset?

“Good morning, my lady.”

Adelaide turned on her heel in the middle of her pacing, smiling too brightly for her nerves. “Mrs. Elsom, good morning. Please, do come in.”

The housekeeper did so, coming forward and clasping her hands before her. “Is there something I can help you with, my lady?”

“Yes.” Adelaide bit her lip, twisting her fingers together and moving toward the chairs in the center of the room. “Er... will you sit down?”

“If you like, of course.” Mrs. Elsom walked to the chairs herself and waited for Adelaide to sit before doing so herself.

This might have been worse than facing her husband after their first night together. Well, perhaps not worse... but the awkwardness and vulnerability were certainly on a level with each other.

Anything mortifying was.

“Do you have children, Mrs. Elsom?” Adelaide asked softly, folding her hands in her lap to keep from wringing her hands together.

“Yes, ma’am. Three of them. A boy and two girls.” Mrs. Elsom smiled a gentle, sentimental smile that caused a strange twitching in Adelaide’s heart. “They are my pride and joy.”

She wasn’t sure how to respond to that, given she had never known such feelings about anything. She could not have smiled such a smile and meant it. She did not feel so warm and loving about any particular topic or idea. Nothing softened her in such a way; not Phillip, not her cousin, not her wedding day...

Adelaide was not one to be softened. But she would want that if she had children. She would want to feel connected to

them, as though her own life meant something because they had blessed it.

“I must confide in you, Mrs. Elsom,” Adelaide said in a rush of air, her cheeks heating. “I have realized this morning that I missed my courses.”

Mrs. Elsom’s eyes widened, her mouth forming a thin line for just a moment. “All right... how long has it been?”

“Thirty-six days.” She tried for a smile. “And I was unwell this morning.”

“Hmm.” The housekeeper slowly rubbed her hands together in thought. “Well, it is a little early to be certain, ma’am, but I think it likely that you could be with child.”

Adelaide exhaled in a rush. “I was afraid of that.”

“Afraid, ma’am?”

“Concerned,” Adelaide corrected with a slight smile. “Curious. I don’t know how I feel about the possibility. I recognize that certain... activities bring about such consequences and that I will one day be a mother, but I have never truly considered what that would be like. I thought... I thought—”

“That you would have more time, ma’am?”

Adelaide raised her eyes to meet those of the kind housekeeper, whose smile showed a surprising degree of understanding. “Yes. Exactly. But there was so much I didn’t know, and so much... well, I knew enough that continuing to go to bed with his lordship would increase the likelihood of such things—”

Mrs. Elsom cleared her throat gently, cutting her off. “Indeed, ma’am.”

They said nothing else for a moment, Adelaide clamping down on her lips hard to keep herself from rambling on the subject further.

“What do I do now, Mrs. Elsom?” Adelaide asked in a very small voice. “My mother never spoke of carrying children or the nature of such things; she found the subject indelicate.”



“Oh, my lady.” Mrs. Elsom reached over, placing a hand on Adelaide’s arm. “There is nothing to do at this point. Now we must wait until a little more time has passed and see if your courses resume or not. In a few months, barring that, you will feel the quickening. That is, the child beginning to move within you. That is when we might send for the doctor to have him ensure all is well. Of course, we could certainly send for him sooner, if you wish it. Dr. Royce is an excellent physician and very kind.”

Adelaide nodded slowly, her panic beginning to settle in the face of such calm logic, which was all she could have wished for.

“I cannot think I would need Dr. Royce’s services as yet,” Adelaide murmured, her fingers plucking at her sprigged skirts lightly. “Being unwell this morning was unpleasant, but it does not seem to be continuing. Should that change, I may require him.”

“I was dreadfully ill for weeks with my children, my lady,” Mrs. Elsom told her, returning her hand to her own lap. “If you should fall in that way, I will do my best to help you alleviate such unpleasantness.”

Adelaide shuddered with as much delicacy as possible. “Do most women fall so unwell when with child?”

Mrs. Elsom exhaled gently. “I find it varies, ma’am. My sister was barely able to leave her bed when she was with child. Yet my daughter has never felt better than when she was carrying a child. Other women feel weak, but not unwell. I have heard of others who swoon frequently for the first three months or so. This being your first child, my lady, there is no telling how your time will be.”

If there was any place for willpower in all of this, Adelaide would be as unaffected as possible. She would not spend her time lying about in her bed being fussy and unwell, she would not allow the inconvenience of carrying a child to alter her plans and schedule, and she would not indulge in any sort of feminine weakness simply because she would have an excuse.

No hint of distress or discomfort would be permitted.

“Thank you for your frankness, Mrs. Elsom.” Adelaide smiled with genuine gratitude, though her ignorance had only lessened slightly. At least she had someone in whom she could confide and ask for advice on the subject, and she had no doubt Mrs. Elsom would respect her privacy on the subject.

Mrs. Elsom seemed almost surprised by the thanks. “Of course, ma’am. I am at your service, should any other questions or concerns arise.”

Adelaide nodded at the offer. “I shall keep that in mind.” She rose, as did Mrs. Elsom. “I think I’d best be about informing his lordship as to the situation. No doubt, he would be most anxious for an heir to be born.”

“I think his lordship would welcome any child, boy or girl, if I may say so, my lady.” Mrs. Elsom smiled rather fondly. “Being the heir himself, he understands the pressures there and how it can divide siblings.”

“Divide them?” Adelaide repeated. She frowned at the notion. “Was Lord Basset divided from his brother?”

Mrs. Elsom’s warm expression turned a trifle uncomfortable. “Forgive me, ma’am, I should not have said so.”

“Oh, please.” Adelaide stepped forward, expression earnest. “Lord Basset does not speak of his family, and I know so little. Is there great strain between the brothers?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Elsom confessed on a sad sigh. “I fear so. Mr. Richard was so bitter at the favor Lord Basset received in being their father’s heir. He was never permitted the same honors, nor was he able to forget that he was the spare, in their father’s eyes. He has become very wild, and it pains Lord Basset greatly. He does what he can to offset the damages, but Mr. Richard continues to live outside of his means and fall into greater debt. One would suspect he aims to bring down his brother, but his lordship would never say so.”

It was unlike anything Adelaide had heard about any sibling, let alone Basset’s. She had not even known the brother’s name, let alone of the strain between them. Basset

was so very private about such matters, and his attention on family was entirely upon Emblyn. Was that because Richard had lost favor? Was it residual from being so divided as children?

It was the sort of thing Basset would never discuss, but exactly the sort of thing that Adelaide would like to know everything about.

She and Basset were not close enough, or respectful enough, to discuss anything so personal as yet. Perhaps someday, she would understand the nature of the relationship between the brothers and the strain that kept them apart.

“Again, thank you, Mrs. Elsom,” Adelaide told her, nodding thoughtfully. “Lord Basset is fortunate to have you as the housekeeper at Trevadden.”

Mrs. Elsom beamed at her, her cheeks flushing a little. “Bless you, ma’am. Do ring for me if you need anything else.” She bobbed quickly and left the room, leaving Adelaide smiling after her.

Then Adelaide took a moment for herself, exhaling slowly.

She could wait to tell Basset she could be with child until she was certain, but that hardly seemed appropriate, and it would not be fair. After all, he had been participating actively in the means by which a child would come about, so the outcomes of such things ought to affect him as well.

Much as he tried her patience, he was her husband, and the child would be his. And she needed to know how involved he would wish to be in raising a child, if he were in any way interested in her progression, and just how he would feel about the prospect, now it was likely upon them. They had yet to fully settle into the routine of life at Trevadden together, and now even the time to do that was limited.

Unless they settled on absent parenting, having the child raised by nannies, tutors, and governesses. Adelaide had endured such a childhood, and though her parents had taken the time to greet her daily and share their affection, the

distance had prevented significant attachment for her, and her parents were merely the figures in her home.

Perhaps if she had formed a better connection with her father, he might have cared more about her feelings with regard to her marriage.

It still would not have given her Phillip, but it might have spared her the pain of Basset. Although... he was not so dreadful as she'd originally imagined. She could not venture further, as she had never suspected him of being a villain, but he was not so bad.

Yet.

Not even a month of marriage had passed. He could still be on his best behavior.

If that was his best, it was not especially encouraging.

Adelaide shook her head, confused about her husband, of all things, when she ought to have been confused about the child potentially growing within her.

It was unseemly to be confused about too many things at once.

She moved from the room and descended the stairs to the main floor of the house, knowing better now than to bellow for her husband. He would ignore every attempt to locate him, give her no response at all, and expect her to hunt for him throughout the entire house. Which, naturally, made her want to bellow just to see if it would irk him in the least.

But for this...

This did not seem like something one ought to bellow for.

It was still relatively early, but Basset had not given her any indication as to his schedule. He never did, and she did not particularly care from day to day.

Until this moment, of course.

When she needed him.

Searching for him took some time, but eventually, she discovered him in his study, standing over his desk.

Her heart suddenly bounced from the bottom of her stomach to her throat and back down again, bringing with it a faint wave of nausea she could have done without.

“Basset,” she called softly, knocking on the door.

He looked up at once, slight smile appearing. “Good morning, my lady. I trust you slept well after the success of the evening.”

Adelaide nodded, smiling in return. “Quite. I expect to be receiving compliments from our guests all morning.”

Basset chuckled a little. “I have no doubt you will, as it was your first. But you are not likely to receive any callers, as you might in London. It is not personal, it is simply the way of things here.”

“That’s just as well, I have far too much to accomplish today as it is,” she informed him dismissively.

“As do I.” He nodded, looking down at the papers and ledgers on his desk. “I have yet to visit either of our mines since returning from London, and both deserve my attention. I doubt I can see both in a single day and do a decent enough job with it, so it may be that...” He paused, glancing up at her, still smiling slightly. “You don’t care about this, do you?”

A sheepish smile crossed her lips. “Not especially, but I would greatly appreciate a general idea of your daily schedule so as to find you more readily if needed.”

“Or to rearrange my rooms when I am out so I can say nothing about it.” He gave her a look, daring her to protest the idea as a possibility.

She hadn’t thought of that one yet, but if he was imagining her capable of it, why should she not indulge him?

She shrugged without answering, which had him shaking his head.

“Very well, I will take the time this evening to work out a general idea of my routine for you, and give you notice of any adjustments therein. Fair enough?” He closed his ledger and

tucked it beneath his arm, then looked at her again, surprised she had not left. “Was there something you wanted?”

Adelaide nodded unsteadily, feeling suddenly shaky in a way that had nothing to do with her condition. “It is just that... well...” The wringing of her fingers resumed, and she splayed them quickly, forcing the action to stop.

She could mention unmentionable things to her husband. She could.

She must.

Lifting her chin a touch, Adelaide rested her hands against her skirts and met his eyes. “It seems that I have missed my monthly courses, Basset.”

Confusion and polite uncertainty abounded in his features. “Oh?” Then his expression went slack, his eyes round. “Oh!”

“Yes, Basset,” Adelaide muttered. “Oh, indeed.”

He wet his lips carefully, pressing one hand into the surface of the desk. “I didn’t... I hadn’t—”

“Rather a shock, I quite agree.” Adelaide exhaled in a rush, her fingers beginning to grip at her skirts. “I was unwell this morning, which I understand is perfectly normal. It will be some time before we can be certain, but I thought you ought to be made aware.”

“Indeed,” he replied in a low tone, still looking as though something had hit him over the head. “That is to say, thank you. Are you... well now?”

“Perfectly, as it happens.” Adelaide forced a perfect smile on her lips, hoping to convey the confidence she did not yet feel. “I am always well, even when I am unwell.”

Basset blinked, which seemed to shake him from his stupor and make him human once more. “I don’t doubt it.” He cocked his head at her, brow creasing with some consideration. “We haven’t talked about children or parenting, have we?”

Adelaide snorted softly. “We haven’t talked about anything, really.”

“Perhaps we should.” His mouth twisted for a moment. “Dinner this evening?”

“If you like. There will be plenty of time.”

He nodded at that. “I suppose it should not be as much of a surprise as it is. Given that we—”

“Yes,” Adelaide interrupted, her cheeks warming. “Quite. My mother told me I must endure it until my courses have stopped. At which time, I would be with child, and there will be no need for such things until he, that is you, want another.”

“Endure,” he repeated, before giving her a rueful smile and raising a brow. “Pardon my frankness, Lady Basset, but I hardly think you are merely enduring what we do. But perhaps I flatter myself.”

Her entire face seemed to flame, and flashes of nights past lit up her mind here and there. “Be that as it may,” she went on hastily, “until we know for certain, there will be no need to continue.”

Basset shrugged without much concern. “As you wish. I await your instructions.”

Adelaide propped her hands on her hips, his nonchalance provoking, given the mutual engagement such activities had produced. “Oh, so this is about what I wish?”

“You are the one who told me you were available if I was agreeable. I am happy to comply when you wish it.” He shrugged again, still smiling in that maddening way. Attractive, but maddening. Why could he rarely be more unsettled than she was?

“Impossible man,” she grumbled, folding her arms almost moodily.

“I know,” her husband replied. He came around the corner of his desk toward her, looking mildly sympathetic. “Are you pleased about this, Adelaide?”

She met his eyes, any use of her given name from him tickling something at the base of her throat. “I hardly know,”

she admitted softly. "I am not... displeased. But I cannot say more than that."

Basset nodded, closing the distance between them. "I understand. I *am* pleased, however. I know I don't show it well, but I am. If there is anything you need of me during this time, anything at all, you need only ask."

It was a generous offer, if he meant it, though the words could very well have been empty. He was correct; it was not entirely evident that he was pleased by the news. She might have thought him indifferent to the thing, had he not said so.

But to then offer what she might require?

That was a dangerous thing, and he ought to know that.

"Anything?" she repeated, her mouth curving to one side. "In that case..."

He chuckled softly, surprising her by leaning toward her and kissing her brow. "I take it back. But if your condition renders you more unwell, I would like to know. And when you would like Dr. Royce called for, I will send for him."

She struggled to swallow as the tingling of her skin from his lips took her back to their last time together. Her favorite so far. He had been so attentive, so focused, so warm, and she had caught some delicious fire in her veins throughout the whole of it.

Heavens, she truly did need distance from him.

"You are not going to lock me in my room and force me to be examined regularly until your heir is born?" she asked, trying for an edge to her voice that failed miserably.

He reared back, giving her a strange look. "What do you take me for? In case you weren't aware, Henry VIII is dead. And I care more about your health and the health of the child than I do about its gender. At least give me that much credit."

Adelaide's throat tightened in relief and some other emotion less easily defined. "Then, I will," she said. A more sincere smile formed on her lips. "But don't ask me to give you any other credit."



“I would never.” His smile quirked slightly, then faded back into his usual impassiveness as he nodded. “I’ll see you this evening.”

She stepped back as he moved by her and nodded to herself when she was alone in the study.

News delivered, his opinion noted, and her embarrassment relatively minimal. All told, it was not nearly as bad as she feared it would be, and they had both kept civil tongues in their heads.

Perhaps she could manage a polite marriage with the impossible man after all.

# Chapter Twelve



If his wife were truly with child, he would think twice before he got her in that condition again.

The woman he had left this morning was not the same one who sat across from him now at dinner, and he fervently wished to be back at the mine rather than here. Down in the mine. Working and toiling with his bare hands alongside other men. Sweating and growing caked in dirt and dust, in relative danger he could see at every moment.

He was in danger here as well, though it was less evident, and he had no idea what he could have done to irk the woman when he had been away all day. She had said nothing when he'd met her, nothing as they'd gone in, nothing as they'd sat, which he had been overly polite and solicitous about, given her condition, and nothing as the meal had proceeded. But she glared at him. Fiercely and darkly at sporadic intervals.

It was almost enough to turn his mutton sour, but he was not about to be deprived of a good meal by her moods. Particularly when they were so changeable.

He would never eat if he did.

The only question he really had was how far he dared push her in such an irritated state. It was clear they were not about to get any rational conversing done, so what exactly her views on motherhood and child-rearing were would remain a mystery for now. And possibly for quite some time. However long it took until she was recovered enough to enlighten him without throwing something.

He already knew her aim was quite good at close range, and he'd rather not test the distances of her skills as yet.

Her silverware clattered to her plate with an accompanying huff blended with a screech in the key of F, or some such. “For pity’s sake, Basset.”

Harrison looked up in mild surprise. “What?”

Adelaide gave him a blatant expression of disgust. “Aren’t you going to ask what is wrong?”

“No,” he replied slowly, chewing his food. “Should I?”

“A gentleman would ask after his wife if he saw she was upset,” Adelaide retorted, snatching her glass from the table and taking an irritated sip.

Harrison made a sound of consideration. “I didn’t know that. I’ve never spoken with a gentleman about how he responds to his wife being upset. I defer to your understanding.” He returned his attention to his food.

The only sounds were that of his cutlery clicking against the plate as he continued his meal.

“Basset!”

“My lady?” He glanced up again, forcing his expression to one of polite expectation while he cut his meat.

Her glower was dark and deep. “I am greatly peeved.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.” He stabbed a piece of mutton and brought it to his mouth.

Adelaide’s jaw shifted as though she ground her teeth from side to side.

Harrison inserted the meat into his mouth, chewing. “Would it help you to...” he paused, gesturing with his fork, “to speak of the cause of your great peeving?”

“Yes.” She straightened, tossing her fair, golden hair in the candlelight of the room, the sheen of ribbons within catching the light particularly well. “I received a letter this morning from Anna. My cousin.”

“Ah.” He nodded and began to work at the potatoes on his plate. “The one you colluded with to confuse me on our first meeting. How is she?”

“Full of gossip,” Adelaide spat.

Harrison shrugged a shoulder. “Most young ladies of her age are. I am sure it can be cured.”

A child’s imitation of thunder rolling met his ears, and it was all he could do not to smile. “That she gossips is not the issue! It is *what* she gossips about that is!”

“Tell her to be more prudent, then, if it irks you so.”

“Shut up!”

He gestured with his cutlery for her to continue, chewing pointedly. He’d have to double-lock the door to his chambers tonight if he wished to see the dawn. Or sleep elsewhere.

Adelaide huffed loudly, shaking her head. “Anna tells me that Phillip is courting Eloise Markham now that I am gone.”

If Harrison was supposed to gasp in horror or groan in sympathetic distress, he was unaware of it.

He blinked. “Who is Phillip?”

She grumbled incoherently. “Mr. Phillip Evans. Surely you must have seen him about in London. He resembles Adonis in every possible way.”

The whimsical note in her description was grating, but he heard the sharp undertones well enough to know he was being baited.

“I never met Adonis, so I cannot have met his likeness,” Harrison told her with some apology. “Friend of yours?”

“You might say that.” Adelaide smiled with smugness, looking more arrogant than he had seen her yet. “He wanted to marry me.”

Harrison paused the chewing of his potato, his tongue pressing against his teeth briefly. “Not badly enough, it would seem, considering...” He flicked his fork tip toward the ceiling to indicate Trevadden.

Her smile hardened. “He did not have your fortune, nor my father’s approval.”

“That would be his problem, I believe.”

“I wanted to marry him, Basset.”

“And yet...”

She slammed a hand on the table with surprising force. “Have you no sympathy?” she cried. “I am breaking my heart over this!”

“I suggest you cease doing so,” he said calmly. He swallowed his potato and gave her as direct a look as he dared, his amusement at provoking her fading fast. “What did you expect, my lady? That he would continue to pine over you for the rest of his days while you were married to me? That life as you knew it would freeze in place, ready for you to pluck it up again when you return to London from time to time?”

Adelaide gaped at him, outrage and horror warring across her lovely features and distorting them into an almost childlike mask.

He took a breath, willing his irritation to wane. “I am not unfeeling. If you truly felt for him, then this must be hard. But fighting with me, resenting me, for securing your hand when he could not be bothered to even try to do the same is a waste of your considerable energy. Had he truly wished to marry you, he could have done so. There are ways and means.”

“I did not want to be a scandal,” she whispered harshly.

He could have shrugged again, but he resisted the urge. “Then you ought not to have laid your affections where they could never grow. Were you planning on taking up with him when enough time in our marriage had passed?”

Her eyes went wide, her earbobs clapping silently against her neck. “Do you mean...?”

“Becoming his mistress,” Harrison elaborated, belatedly recalling just how innocent she still was in so many things. “Taking him to your bed as we have done here.”

“I hadn’t thought...” She shook her head, her cheeks a little paler. “I don’t know.”

Harrison grunted. “Well, I have no doubt Phillip Evans does know, and has thought. I realize your bitterness may never fully fade where I am concerned, but I would ask that you not engage in infidelity, no matter how your heart yearns for anybody else. I can only take so much mortification from members of my family.” He nodded as though that should settle matters and went back to his meal.

“And you?” she demanded, her voice pitching higher and growing almost shrill. “If I am forbidden to be with who I love, will you agree to the same?”

He dropped his cutlery on his plate and stared her down, wondering why the length of the table was so great; it felt like a jousting match. “I will never stray from the bonds of our marriage, my lady. Not once. I respect you enough to avoid doing so, though we have little affection between us. I am not holding you to unreasonable standards. I live them myself. Save your indignation for causes more worth the effort.”

A muscle ticked along her delicate throat, drawing his attention there even as footsteps approached. He dragged his eyes along the length of her neck, tracing each feature of her face until he met her eyes once more. Suddenly, the distance between them seemed far less than he’d previously thought, and the tension that was coiling in his core and throughout his frame seemed almost inexplicable. Almost.

“Miss Moyle,” Mervyn intoned, a smile evident in his voice.

Harrison didn’t look away from his wife, who was just as intent on him.

Something had happened, or was happening, and it was impossible to say if it was for good or for ill. She had wanted someone else when she had married him. Why hadn’t she ever said so? It explained so much about her resentment toward him and her resistance toward the match.

How deep had her feelings for the man been? He was far too familiar with Phillip Evans—or at least had encountered him several times in his ventures to fetch Richard back from his favorite depravities in London.

There was no need to disillusion Adelaide of her favorite's perfection when it would serve no purpose. She was in pain enough as it was, even if it was mostly superficial. And it was entirely possible that it was not superficial at all. He might never know.

“Ee be ‘avin’ a starin’ contest, or wha?” Emblyn asked in her usual boisterous manner.

Adelaide blinked and looked at Emblyn then, severing the connection between them. “Was there something you wanted?”

Harrison rose without a word and went to his sister, pulling her into his side and kissing the top of her head. “Evening, Em. Hungry?”

He felt Emblyn nod against him, though she avoided actually tucking into his side. “Starved.”

“I did not know you were expected,” Adelaide grumped, fidgeting with her cutlery. “We would have waited and set a place.”

“Emblyn is free to come and go as she wishes,” Harrison reminded her firmly, the tension in him growing ever more taut, “without announcement or invitation. This is as much her home as yours.”

Adelaide's mouth puckered as with a sour taste. “Apart from my living in it.”

“She does not wish to.”

“I do not have that luxury.”

Emblyn looked between them in outright bewilderment. “Be ee fightin’ about me, or—?”

“Of course you do,” Harrison snapped, moving back to his end of the table and placing his palms upon it. “But since you've not mentioned leaving, I presumed you to be comfortable.”

“You know nothing about me.”

“We've established this.”

“I can go,” Emblyn tried again, gesturing for the door.

“Stay,” Harrison barked.

“Go!” Adelaide said at the same time, shooting to her feet. “Go and be as poor as you like, you raggedy ingrate, and may your pride wallow in the desperate generosity showered on you by your half-brother while you insist on keeping him at a distance!” She shoved her chair back and marched out of the dining room without another word, her napkin fluttering to the ground after her.

Odd tremors itched at Harrison’s legs as he exhaled very slowly, very carefully.

What in the world was wrong with his wife?

“I am sorry, Emblyn,” he murmured after taking in another slow breath. “Adelaide is...” He shook his head, laughing once without humor. “I don’t even know what she is, but she has no right to speak to you that way.”

“She does.” Emblyn came to him and put a hand on his arms. “Can ee not see, Harry? Yer wife is no’ any different from t’other ladies in this. Ee can wrap me up in as fine a blanket as ee like, but it don’t change wha’ I am. I’ll not take much offense off ‘er, knowin’ it’s only how she was raised. It’s her right to an opinion, no matter how ee like it.”

Harrison shook his head, swallowing hard and looking at his sister. “I don’t like it. I don’t like how she sees you. I don’t like how hard this is, how angry she is, how—”

“How much ee care?” Emblyn finished, folding her arms and giving him a look he knew all too well.

It was a look he had given all too often.

He scowled. “It’s only because she is my wife, and I wish she would behave with more decorum.”

“More reserve, ee mean.” Emblyn snorted loudly and sat in the chair nearest him. “She has all decorum one could ask, then speaks freely among kin. Don’t ee do the same, Harry?”

“Not that freely,” he pointed out taking his seat with a groan. “She’s always in high dudgeon, it seems.”



Emblyn shrugged a shoulder, her simple pink calico rustling against the back of the chair. “Why shouldn’t dudgeon be high? I’ve a strong will and temper, too, yet ee didn’t send me away when I lashed.”

“You’re my sister. She is my wife.”

“Ee chose her, Harry,” Emblyn reminded him firmly. “I read yer letters, and she weren’t a wiltin’ flower when ee met.”

That was undeniably true.

He slumped back in his chair, eyeing his sister suspiciously. “Why are you defending her? She can’t stand you.”

Emblyn barked a laugh that made him smile. “I’m not fond of her either, but she don’t know me as ee do. And besides, she was defendin’ you in the same breath she taunted me.”

Harrison jerked upright, frowning. “She did what? I didn’t hear that.”

“Ee weren’t *listenin’*.” His sister smiled and settled back in the chair without any of the graces a young lady of station would. “Ee heard her, for certain, but ee weren’t listenin’. She called me an ingrate. Not a mongrel. I may not be much educated, but I know the difference.”

His jaw went slack as he replayed her words. “She said—”

“And,” Emblyn went on, overriding whatever he’d been preparing to say, “she said ee were bestowing generosity, which I know well, and I be keepin’ ee at a distance. Ungrateful, she called me. Not anything worse.” She laughed softly. “Seems she be mad at me for your sake, Harry.”

“I don’t know that I’d go that far,” he murmured, feeling as though he’d stepped into the Cornish waves unexpectedly and was now caught in the tide. “She was furious because a man she fancied in London is now looking elsewhere to place his affections.”

His sister made some sound of sympathetic understanding he didn’t understand, and he looked over at her. “What?”

Emblyn's smile turned sad. "The poor can marry for love, Harry. The rich marry where they be told. I come 'ere when I choose and because I choose, and ee let me. I be claimed by ee, and yet I'm held to no standards or rules. She be bound her entire life and still is now. She be jealous, Harry, and rightly so. I choose to be poorer than I must with ee as my brother because I be stubborn and used to the life. She didn't choose anything. Likely never has. 'Tis a sad thing, and no doubt she's feelin' that too."

Harrison stared at his sister in outright astonishment, the beat of his heart barely noticeable within his chest. How in the world could his fairly uneducated sister see, know, and understand so much where he was so completely blind? Not only had he not caught the same things she had in Adelaide's words, but he had failed to comprehend anything in the fight that had preceded it.

Adelaide was feeling a great many things, it would seem, not the least of which was the burden of carrying his child, though the days were early yet. He considered the manner of their marriage to be orderly and commonplace, a simple affair without emotional entanglements.

He'd never considered that she might secretly harbor feelings for someone that she would have to put aside for his simple, straightforward, uncomplicated match with her. He'd never considered her at all, beyond what her person and name could bring to his life.

How selfish could he be?

Even when he had met Adelaide, he hadn't imagined that she would have opened her heart to anyone. Didn't think she was capable of that. Didn't think she had a heart at all.

How wrong could he be?

He leaned forward, putting his face into his hands with an irritated groan, a knot forming in his stomach. "Oh, Em..."

In an unusual show of affection, Emblyn put a hand on his back and slowly rubbed. "Ee misjudge her, Harry. Just as she

misjudges me. And ee both be messy-y-mazy round each other while ee learn to be wedded.”

“I certainly am making a hash of it.” He lowered his hands and met her pale blue eyes. “How do you have the temper of fire and a heart of gold all at once?”

Emblyn grinned rather cheekily. “Even gold can get in a proper boil when it suits. I be fitty enough for most folk, leastways.”

“You’re fitty enough for me,” he assured her with a wink, the Cornish word feeling amusing on his tongue. Though he’d been born and raised in Cornwall, the common dialect had never been permitted in the home, apparently being too coarse for his parents.

With Emblyn, however, it seemed more like music.

“What do I do, Em?” he asked, sighing and folding his arms on the table. “She’s miserable. I’m less miserable, but hardly cheery, and we’re either bickering like children or we’re bringing the roof down.”

“And ee be abed a’times.”

His eyes shot to hers. “How do you know about that?”

One trim brow rose. “I’m no iggit. Ee be married proper, and t’ain’t no mistake.”

He had no intention of pressing the issue, nor of inquiring just how his sister might even know such details, let alone what they meant. “Yes, occasionally. But she’s so different there, and I...” He trailed off, looking down at his hands. “I take better care of her there.”

“‘Tis no mumchance, that.” She patted one of his hands fondly. “Ee need to find sommat to enjoy together. Do ee like music?”

“Of course.” He slid back in his chair, relaxing as much as he dared. “I think she does as well. I’ve no idea of her accomplishments, but I certainly cannot play.”

“Have ee ever tried?”

He shook his head. "Father did not believe gentlemen played or sang, though it did not stop his drunken tunes."

"Faather," Emblyn spat, drawing the word out in the Cornish way, "be dead. Ee should learn to play. And them tunes be jaunty 'nough, asides."

Harrison playfully glared in her direction. "You should not know them."

"I know more than ee'd care to think!" she shot back. "Ask Julia to teach ee both to play, Harry. An' when Lily returns in the spring, she can teach ee too. Playin' duets might be what ee need."

The idea made him smile just a little. "In life? Or being forced to sit next to each other and play together?"

"Whichever fills your desh o' tay," Emblyn said, shrugging her shoulders. "Per'aps both."

He nodded at the wisdom, though he'd no idea how his wife would take to the idea. It did make him wonder something, however, and he looked at his sister again. "Do you play, Emblyn?"

Her look made him laugh out loud. "Now where'd ee think I'd be learnin' such a thing?"

He reached for her hand, relieved when she set it in his. "Do you want to learn with us? Separately, but if we're doing this, you might as well join. If you'd like to."

Emblyn smiled slowly, and he'd never seen his sister look quite so shy. "Ee mean it?"

"Of course I mean it." He squeezed her hand, his heart warming. "Would you like to?"

"Aye," she quipped, nodding eagerly. "But if ee 'bandon yer wife to play with me, she be like to crown ee proper, and I'll not save ee then."

"Duly noted. I'll do better by her. You have my word."

# Chapter Thirteen



“Go for a ride, he said. Take the air. What a wondrous idea, if only I had any idea where I was!”

The empty abyss of moors about her did not respond to Adelaide’s irritated rant, though the gust of wind did tug at her carefully set hair.

It was partially her own fault, she’d have to admit, even if begrudgingly. She had assured him that she knew the way, more to keep him from being superior and appearing accommodating, not thinking it could be so very difficult to ride about the countryside.

And now here she was, riding along without a single landmark to note and not a familiar patch of ground to be seen.

Had she taken the time to explore her new home and taken in the surroundings, she might not have gotten herself into this mess, but she had spent the entirety of her time rearranging Trevadden Park and reveling in being mistress of her own home rather than only dreaming of it. She had walked the gardens, of course, but she had not ventured down to the beach, to the mines, or to the village, which meant that the only familiar sights would be that of Trevadden.

She had ridden a solid twenty minutes away from Trevadden before recalling that she did not know the way back, and by that time, it was too late.

Now she was a full hour into the mess and so turned about, she could not know one direction from another.

She would never have had this problem in London.

Her horse had no trouble in going wherever she steered him, even when the terrain had turned rocky. The ground beneath them felt almost soft between the massive

protuberances of stone, and as far as the eye could see was a sea of green and gray, offset only by the paler gray of the overcast skies. It was a haunting sort of beauty, a desolation that was strangely peaceful, and the wind whipped about as though she stood on a cliff by the coastline. She caught sight of sheep, wandering at their leisure, and a few yards beyond them another pair. A highland cow plodded along and gave her a doleful look as she and her horse trotted by.

No shepherd was in sight, no wrangler of cattle, no human being who might have been minding the animals at all. The creatures simply moved about as though out for a country stroll, and the sight of them baffled her. What was this strange place snatched out of time without a single sign of civilization at all?

And what was she doing stuck out in it?

As much as she would have loved to blame Basset for this, her heart would not allow it, no matter how stubbornly she tried. He might have been guilty of other things, but not this.

She had barely been able to look at him since that horrid dinner the week before. She had been entirely out of control, her emotions without boundaries and her indignation great. She had not anticipated that a letter from Anna would have affected her to such a degree, but hearing about Phillip, about his new flirtations, about his failure to inquire after her...

Anna knew how Adelaide felt about him, and she was undoubtedly trying to do right by Adelaide in relaying what she knew, but it only caused her pain and deepened the wounds her engagement and marriage had created. She wanted to rage at Phillip, she wanted to cry in his arms, she wanted to storm into a ballroom and silence each of the girls who were now part of his collection of candidates. But she could do none of those things, so she had done the only thing within her power.

She raged at her husband.

Basset had countered as only Basset could, with droll wit and intentional aloofness, which had only fed the flames of her fury.

Which was what she had wanted.

She craved a reason to reach extreme heights of emotion, to roar at the injustice of it all, to release the building tensions the last several days and weeks had caused, and Basset had allowed her to do so. And to then have Miss Moyle arrive unannounced, so free of entanglement and expectation, able to come and go as she pleased, to love whomever she would, marry as she chose, and be adored simply for being who she was...

Adelaide had snapped at her, furious that such a young woman could be so cavalier with her life and the affection of her wealthy and influential brother. That she would choose to be free rather than have refinement was an option that created too much discord for Adelaide to bear.

She'd known her words were harsh, just as she knew they always were, but there were none others to be had at the moment.

She had no true qualms about Emblyn Moyle, when she looked at it in retrospect. She was pretty, she was quick, she was warm, she brought out a side of Basset that Adelaide might never manage to. Yes, she was coarse and simple in many respects, but those were not permanent faults.

Would everything in this new life of hers be a challenge? Would nothing come easily?

She longed for the familiarity of London, the comfort of knowing her place and position, of feeling valued wherever she went, and being accustomed to the way of things. She did not particularly miss her family or her home, though she did miss her cousin fiercely, but she did miss her life as she had known it.

Every step she made here seemed to be a false one.

Her horse suddenly snuffled, stiffening beneath her, and Adelaide gripped the reins tightly in anticipation, looking around them for any sign of danger.

The only thing she could see was a small pony, shaggy in appearance, copper in shade, and no bigger than a goat. It

stared at her and her horse as if to disapprove of their trespassing, and the horse did not appreciate it.

But Adelaide had had enough of being a stranger and pulled them to a halt, grunting softly in determination. She dismounted with surprising ease, considering she had not ridden in some time, and shook out the skirts of her blue riding habit before striding toward the pony.

“Here, sweeting,” she cooed, holding her hand out, palm up. “Come see me. That’s a good love.”

The pony continued to stare at her, lowering its head slightly and inching its nose toward her.

Adelaide smiled at the timid gesture and crooked her fingers. “Come on. It’s all right.”

Her horse snuffled behind her, and the pony darted away on skittish hooves, cantering off into the distance.

“Lovely,” Adelaide grumbled, shaking her head and turning back for her horse.

Only to find that he, too, had departed.

She could see him clearly as he galloped away, unsure if he were heading for home or simply enjoying a ride for his own pleasure. Given her complete lack of orientation to her surroundings and any directions at all, it was impossible to guess one way or the other.

Had the stablemaster said anything in particular about that horse when she’d said she wanted to go for a ride? Any warnings about his being prone to bolting or easily startled? She knew she could not be wholly to blame in this, as she had not insisted on that particular horse for any reason, but if she had been warned, no other parties could be blamed either.

What use was blame anyway?

Basset would have her head if the horse did not return home. It was a fine animal and likely had cost a fortune. But she had no authority to call the creature back, and even if she had, it would not help her to return home any easier.

Now she would have to manage that on foot.



Better and better.

She exhaled heavily, half tempted to simply crumple in a heap where she stood. It all felt so pointless when everything around her looked the same, and the worn paths she could see might have led anywhere. She could not hear the sea, nor could she smell it in the air, and unless she was mistaken, it would rain in the next few hours.

What could she do now? If she moved in any direction, it could be leading farther from home. If she stayed put, she'd make no progress at all. The day was brisk, and her habit was warm, but even that would not stop her from growing chilled if she were out here for ages.

How long would it take Basset to consider her lost? Or would he think she had run away? She'd certainly given him enough reason to suspect that, and with what she had confessed about Phillip...

She scoffed to herself, not bothering to keep the sound delicate when there wasn't a soul for miles. Letting go of Phillip was proving necessary, but it was rather akin to letting go of dreams and childhood, of imagination and fancy. Yet none of those particular things reminded her of Phillip. He was all charm and flirtation, a ticklish version of romance that had brightened the dull and vapid life she had been living, but nothing he had stirred in her could compare with what she had experienced in the nights she shared with Basset.

But was that innate in the act alone? Or was Basset a factor himself?

She could barely stand the man, could be driven mad by his adept provocation, and yet sigh dreamily in contentment while wrapped in his arms those few moments before he left her bed.

There was something of that man in the eyes of the one she saw by day, but his reserve kept her at a distance. As did her own walls she'd built up in response to the raw vulnerability only he had ever seen in her. They had shared so much and yet so little, and every step felt a little less certain with him.

What a wretched, confusing beginning they had made of this marriage.

What a state she found herself in now.

Adelaide exhaled noisily to herself and took a moment to turn slowly about, looking in every direction for any sign of promise, any instinct of home, any possible course she might take.

Everything looked exactly the same: green, lush, rocky, and empty.

Cornwall was beautiful. And she was lost in it.

She was not one to weep, but this seemed like a moment one might do so. But until she had truly given up hope, she could not let herself lean entirely into despair. After all, it was entirely possible that she would stumble upon the correct path and manage to navigate the terrain sufficiently. It would not garner her any accolades with her husband, but it would at least show her stamina and resourcefulness, which surely must be admired when one lived in a remote place like Cornwall.

She started walking toward some of the paths worn in the ground, likely from miners or villagers over the years, and took the one that seemed most travelled. Surely if it had been so travelled, it had to lead somewhere that might help her.

Unless it was a path that led one to the coast.

She would find no help or comfort there. She could not swim, and much as she wished to see the beauty of such a place again, this was not the time to do so. Perhaps in the company of her husband or others who had lived in the area longer, but certainly never alone.

She did not even want to walk the moors alone and had only gone out for a ride alone because Basset had suggested it without any sort of malice.

As though he truly were trying to be helpful.

He had done so on occasion since their last fight, which had immediately made her suspicious, but when nothing had come of it to make her cross, she had stopped snapping at his

every suggestion. He did not smile any more than he usually had, but he was hardly a jovial sort on his best days, so she could not read anything changed there. They had not fought since that dinner, which seemed a small miracle, but she had been taking care to avoid him as much as possible, and, if her information had been correct, he had been spending a great deal of time at one of the mines.

Which one, she could not have said.

She had yet to take an interest in the matters that kept Trevadden and the Basset family afloat in wealth and consequence.

She might never take an interest.

But then again...

As though to taunt her for maintaining her London ways, the path she walked turned on an incline and revealed its ultimate destination.

A mine.

An abandoned one, if the lack of people and activity were any indication.

She had been walking for several minutes down a well-worn path that quite literally led to nowhere of significance.

Perfect.

Grumbling to herself, Adelaide turned on her heel and marched back up the incline, then along the path she'd just walked. If that direction would not work, she would try another. She would have to see a person of some sort at some time, and surely they would recognize Lady Basset of Trevadden.

Or would they? Would it have been better to try for Basset's cousin, Lord de Dunsterville? She had yet to meet him, as the families were not close, but if he were a man of greater influence, she might find would-be rescuers more eager to offer her aid. And she did know that Tehidy was considered to be a very fine house indeed.

How far Tehidy was from Trevadden was still a question to her, let alone how far it might have been from her present position.

So really, everything was just a little bit hopeless.

A gust of wind whipped across her, slapping her skirts against her shins and nearly dislodging her hat, which had once been so carefully pinned into her hair. She shivered against the sudden chill, slipping her gloved hands into the pockets of her skirts in an attempt to warm them.

Something crinkled loudly against the gloves, and Adelaide frowned, pulling out whatever it was. Her frown cleared into a curious smile as she saw the letter Mrs. Elsom had given her before she had left Trevadden. She had not given her any indication who the sender might have been, and the handwriting was unfamiliar to Adelaide.

Well, if she was destined to be walking for a while, she might as well read.

The seal on the back had no distinct markings, nothing to give her any indication of the sender's identity, which only heightened her interest. Anna had a flower stamp she was prone to using, Phillip had a ring, her parents had the family seal, and no one else would have sent her a letter.

Although, apparently, someone had.

She broke the seal and began to read the neat, if scrawling, hand.

*My dear Lady Basset—*

*My warmest felicitations on the occasion of your recent nuptials. While it was certainly not a love match, I believe you may find true pleasure and satisfaction in the marriage all the same. If there is any person alive who knows and appreciates the qualities of your husband, as well as his flaws, it is myself, and I hope you will take this letter to heart.*

*My name is Richard Basset. I am Harrison's unfortunate younger brother and have regularly sinned against his*

*goodness and honor. He informed me of your impending wedding when he was in London, taking the time and effort to find me in person to relay the news. It was not a promising exchange for either of us, as I was not at my best, and in no state to properly congratulate him. He wisely did not inform me of your identity, knowing it is well within my nature to scheme and flirt, so it was as much a protection for you as a punishment for me. He begged me not to attend the wedding, and I, in such a state, had no qualms in agreeing to his wishes. Being a man of honor, he gave me no inducement to stay away, no bribery or coercion, trusting that somewhere inside, I still bore some semblance of honor myself.*

*I wish I could say he was correct. I fear I forgot myself entirely after his visit and was quite insensible of anything until far after the marriage had taken place. Had he properly invited me, I would still not have recollected the event, so we would likely still have never met. I have never had a sister, and you are the only one I shall know, and it grieves me that my own sins have kept me from making your acquaintance. I trust I do not betray any sensibilities in writing to you, in lieu of this fact.*

*Harrison will likely not have spoken of me, and I cannot blame him for this. I have abused him grossly over the years, estranged myself from all of my family, and left nothing redeemable for my poor brother to value. He has always been the better man and always shall be. He will be a true and faithful husband to you, though he may not show his emotions outwardly.*

*Still water runs deep, my lady. I beg you to remember that.*

*I shall not take up more of your time. I am presently staying with friends, in the hopes that their company might have a better influence upon me than my own. If it should fall within your graces to reply, you may send word to me there. I do hope, one day, to call you my sister in person, but for now, this will suffice.*

*I am, madam,*

*Yours, etc.*

*Richard Basset*

Adelaide found herself smiling at such a succinct, kind, well-worded letter, particularly from someone she had never met and knew so little about. And for him to speak so well of his brother, after all the strife he had given him, could have spoken of some regret the man might have felt. He did not shy away from his villainous ways, though he had not given her much indication of the specifics.

If he could see his own behavior in a true light, perhaps there might be hope for him after all. And for a reconciliation between brothers.

She would have to consider his words, and his advice, when she had returned to the comfort of home. It was likely she would reply, if for no other reason than to act in politeness, but what exactly she would say to the man was far less clear. The estranged brother of her husband? She could barely countenance the idea, had he not written first and in such a way.

Basset would never hear of her writing to his brother; there was no need to give him such pains. It may all yet be that a response to Richard Basset would go unanswered, and if indeed a return letter did arrive, there was no promise that it would contain the same compelling words and feeling. She may discover that he was just as unpleasant as he claimed his brother did, and then there would be nothing lost.

*Still water runs deep*, he had said of Basset. Could that be true? Her feelings were so close to the surface at any given time and sank into her core regardless of their shade. Basset had barely shown any emotion but irritation, anger, and occasionally amusement, but there was that more demonstrative, affectionate side she only knew when all pretense was stripped from them both.

And he did care so very much about his half-sister. Why should he not, at one time, have felt so strongly about his brother? And to then have that love, that care, that trust thrown

back into his face? It would crush a man who valued family and honor as Basset did.

It was no wonder Miss Moyle had become so favored so quickly, why he did not press her in anything, why her freedoms were what they were.

He could not lose another sibling.

Something in her chest seemed to give way as she thought of Basset in such terms, and she could almost feel his yearning for family, and the agony of seeing it die before his eyes. What pain he must hide behind his reserve! What restraint and strength he must have mastered to maintain his calm manner when so much else raged about and within him.

It was no wonder his sister's common ways did not perturb him. It was far and away preferable to shame and villainy.

If only she had known. If only she could have seen.

But Basset was a private man, and she had given him little reason to confide his personal pains to her. He had been so gentle when she'd told him about their child, so careful in his response, so guarded as he confessed to being pleased while taking care to understand her own feelings.

Surely such a man could not be as heartless as she had been believing. And if she could find out more about Richard Basset from others who might know, she might have a better understanding of where to rank her husband insofar as callousness was concerned. Or goodness, for that matter.

She had determined once to take her marriage by the reins and turn it to her advantage, but she had only thought of doing so for the sake of appearances. What if she could do more with her marriage itself, and find something in it worth celebrating?

Something worth treasuring.

Believing.

Something to believe in. Yes, that was it.

She wanted to believe in her marriage, not simply endure in it. That would not require love or romance, fancy or flirtation. It would simply require understanding, respect, trust,

and determination to succeed, along with a smattering of kindness.

Rather like one of Basset's business ventures.

Although there were definitely some benefits to this being a marriage and not a business venture.

Her cheeks flushed with heat, which contrasted sharply with the brisk wind lashing against her now. She refolded the letter and replaced it into her pocket, taking a moment to see where her wandering-while-reading had taken her.

Nothing appeared familiar, not even the path beneath her feet.

She threw up her hands with an irritated rush of an exhale, dislodging her hat completely. She stared at it without emotion, watching as the Cornish wind turned it about on the ground, then sent it rolling away across the moors.

She made no attempt to chase after it. What would be the point? When she was inevitably found and returned to her husband, whether dead or alive, he was not going to be asking about the location of her hat. And if she kept the blasted thing, it would only remind her of this ill-fated excursion and its utter futility along the way.

A long, curling tendril of hair brushed across her face and seemed to signal to the rest of her that hope was fading fast. Her eyes began to water, and her next exhale was more of a sob as she again placed one foot in front of the other. She could not stop; the moment she stopped, she would find herself giving up entirely. She had no business being out on these moors alone, and had she been less stubborn, less prideful, she might have told her husband that she did not know the area and ask for his guidance. Or assistance. Or company.

If he was the man his brother thought he was, Basset would have given it.

But no, she'd had to maintain her puffed up dignity and superiority in all things, even where she was ignorant.

And this was where that had led.



Her eyelids closed on tears, causing a few to fall, splashing their heat against the chilled surfaces of her cheeks.

“Madam?”

Adelaide’s eyes shot open as she gasped, whirling madly toward the voice.

Emblyn Moyle stood not ten feet from her. Her dark hair was free of covering and plaited back, though several tresses had escaped and now framed her face, her bright eyes looking concerned. Her gown was simple, as it ever was, but seemed sturdy enough despite being coated with at least three inches of mud at the hem. Her cloak was fraying at the seams but appeared well lined and many times mended, and she held a basket against one hip, its contents hidden by some fabric.

“Emblyn,” Adelaide managed, trying for a smile, forgetting that she had yet to call the girl by her given name. This was no time for such formalities. “I have never been so pleased to see any person in my entire life as I am to see you.”

Emblyn smiled a little. “Be ee lost, then?”

Adelaide nodded frantically. “Very. I was out riding and lost my way. Then I got off my horse to see a wild pony, and the horse took off. I’ve been wandering paths and found an abandoned mine—”

“Did ee go in?” Emblyn interrupted sharply, her eyes widening.

“No, I turned right back around, stomping like a petulant child.” She smiled sheepishly. “I haven’t stopped walking this particular path since.”

She watched as Emblyn took a deep breath. “That would likely be Wheal Jannus. Ee be fortunate, madam, not to have falled down one of the abandoned shafts. More’n one soul has been lost to them.”

Adelaide sobered at once, her heart lurching to her throat as she considered the danger she had not even been aware of. “I doubt I would feel more lost there than I do now,” she eventually murmured, her voice breaking.

Emblyn's smile returned, and she came to Adelaide's side, hefting her basket a little higher. "Then ee best come 'ome with me. 'Tis not so far, if ee can walk a bit more. I'll send word to my brother to fetch ee back."

"I have lost his horse," Adelaide said quietly as she began to walk beside the girl. "I cannot imagine where he would go, and I don't know how I shall face Basset..."

"Harry'll not favor a horse above ee, madam. Besides, folk 'round here know each other well. They'll see the horse returned." Emblyn blew a few strands of her hair from her face rather like Adelaide had seen children do. "Ee picked a sour day for adventuring, madam. This land be glorious on a fair day, but like this..."

Emblyn continued to speak freely while they walked together, apparently as at ease as she might have been with a friend. She talked about the land, the neighbors, the gossip of the mines, all as though Adelaide would have any idea about any of it. There was no hesitation, no stilted care of words or speech, no hint that Adelaide had ever insulted her at any point in time. No resentment, no sharpness, nothing but warmth and companionship.

Adelaide's tears threatened to return, this time in shame and gratitude.

"Emblyn," she managed through a clogged throat, "I owe you a very great apology."

The girl looked at her in surprise. "I don't think ee do, madam."

"Please." Adelaide shook her head and took Emblyn's free hand in her own. "Please, call me Adelaide. And I do. I... I have been horrid to you. You have every right to hate me."

She shook her head. "I've no likin' for hatin' people, no matter what their cause. 'Tis a weight on the heart. I know ee've no love of me, but that can change, I hope."

"I hope so too." Adelaide smiled more genuinely than she had done in quite some time, a small light of hope flickering in

her chest. Perhaps the day would not be a complete loss after all.

If Emblyn's grin was anything to go by, the hope would not be in vain.

Emblyn's cottage was before them, only a few minutes more of walking, and Adelaide was impressed by its quaint, comfortable appearance. It was whitewashed and bore a thatched roof, the pathway to it lined with cornflowers and brush, which only added to its rustic appearance. Smoke coiled out of a small chimney at the back, and the windows at the front were entirely free of dirt or shadow.

Emblyn approached the neat white door and unlatched it, waving Adelaide in. "Come sit by the fire, Adelaide. I'll brew us a dish o' tay."

Now finding the accent endearing rather than grating, Adelaide followed and smiled at the interior of the place. "Isn't this lovely? So comfortable, and tasteful as well."

Something in the comment made Emblyn bark an almost hoarse laugh as she built up the fire. "Nay, 'tis only simple. I don't need much. 'Twas only ever 'ome to Mam and me, still have her room and my own jus' there, and the chairs were gifted by Lord de Dunsterville when he and his lady refurbished Tehidy. Do sit."

Adelaide did so, settling into a chair while Emblyn prepared the tea. Soon, the entire cottage seemed filled with light and warmth, removing any remaining chill from Adelaide's frame. Safe and comfortable, and finding herself so at ease, she dozed off for a moment or two.

She was woken by the door to the cottage bursting open, slamming back against the wall.

Basset stood in the door, his cravat limp and loose, his hair in complete disarray, his dark eyes almost wild as he scanned the room. He saw Adelaide, and his chest heaved, his throat working. "You're safe," he growled. "Thank God." He slumped ever so slightly against the frame of the door, exhaling audibly.

“I did tell ee she was well, Harry,” Emblyn said from the chair across her, folding a flannel wrap about her as she straightened from a lounging position.

Adelaide glanced at her, taking in the tea before them and Emblyn’s repaired appearance. “How long have I slept, Emblyn?”

The girl smiled, winking at her. “Enow’ to take yer ease and get my brother here from Trevadden.”

“I’m sorry,” Adelaide whispered. “I intended...” She bit her lip, then looked back at Basset, who had straightened and closed the cottage door. “Could we stay a moment more, Basset? To take tea with Emblyn?”

Basset’s eyes were fixed on her, the wildness still lingering in his eyes, his expression shockingly open. He came to her and held his hand out, palm down. When Adelaide took it, she could feel the skittering of his pulse, which, paired with the power in his hold, cracked something deep within her chest.

“Of course,” her husband murmured, his tone rumbling and low. “Whatever you wish.”

# Chapter Fourteen



Harrison had endured nightmares that were less terrifying than discovering his wife had been lost on the moors. He'd barely managed to read the rest of the note from his sister before he was tearing about Trevadden, ordering his horse be readied, and riding hell-bent for her cottage without even a proper coat.

He'd thought only of Adelaide.

When he'd suggested she go for a ride, he'd never imagined that she would not know her way, and she had never said...

But he had never offered to show her the area or give her any tours. He had not introduced her to anyone that had not been invited to Trevadden for their ball. Had not shown her the village. Had not taken her down to the beach. Had not explained the way of life for so many here.

Had not given her anything that would make Cornwall feel like home.

Trevadden was all well and good, and she had certainly made herself comfortable enough there. But outside of its walls, everything would have been as foreign as though she had arrived in America. Or Africa, perhaps. Any place where she might have been at a complete loss as to the way of life or her location, where dangers could lurk in places she would never suspect them, and she would be left ill-equipped to manage anything at all.

The fault lay squarely with him, and no assurances from his sister would convince him otherwise.

It had been all he could do to leave Adelaide at the door of her rooms after supper, knowing how fatigued she was and

abiding by her wishes to cease their time together at night, now she was with child. It was not that he wanted to take her to bed, not in that sense. He simply wanted to watch over her, assure himself that she was safe and well, that he had not lost her due to his own pride and folly, his utter blindness to the situation, feelings, and reality of anyone else around him.

He'd have been perfectly happy to hold her in his arms the entire night if she had asked it of him. But she had not. And his night had passed slowly because of the separation. Painfully so.

This morning, he was little better, anxious to see her, to apologize, to talk, to do anything that would assuage his concerns.

Had everything he'd done in this marriage thus far been a misstep? Or was he simply having a stroke of extraordinarily bad luck?

He paced in the breakfast room, his food untouched on the plate, half tempted to send a maid upstairs to inquire if Lady Basset would be coming to the breakfast room, or if she had requested a tray. He had purposefully delayed his breakfast in an attempt to wait for her, but she was rather prone to taking a tray in the mornings, so it might all have been in vain. He had so many questions to ask her, some of which he could not even put words to yet.

And if he waited too long to ask them, he might turn coward entirely and retreat into his own ventures and interests, which were safer avenues for his folly.

“What in the world are you doing?”

Harrison stopped and turned for the door, clasping his hands behind him as he managed a true smile for the sight of his wife. “I... erm, waiting for you, as it happens.”

Adelaide quirked a brow, looking rather fetching in a plain morning dress and wrap, her hair loosely arranged in a low chignon. “And what if I had remained upstairs?”

“Then I would have worn a path in the rug, and we'd have had to replace it.” He shrugged, still smiling. “I was prepared

for the outcome.”

Her mouth curved just a little, and she nodded, moving to her usual place at the opposite end of the table. “How fortunate for you that I wished to dine outside the walls of my chambers this morning.”

“Indeed.” He laughed a little uncertainly and returned to his seat, waiting for her to sit before he did so. “Did you sleep well?”

“Very,” she said primly, nodding at the footman extending a plate for her approval. “It would appear that wandering the moors is good for one’s quality of sleep.”

Something sharp lanced though Harrison’s chest and he straightened, inhaling carefully. “Adelaide, I’m sorry...”

Her brow creased as she took a small bite of eggs. “For what?”

He spread his hands out, gesturing with his cutlery. “Yesterday. For our fighting lately. For everything, really.”

“You cannot apologize for everything,” Adelaide retorted without sharpness. “You are not responsible for everything. And you are not to blame for yesterday. Had I allowed myself even a moment of logical reflection, I should have asked for direction or guidance before I rode. How were you to know I had no idea of the area?”

“If I had taken the time to show you anything, to introduce you to the area,” he told her, shaking his head, “you might have known enough to not become lost. I did not think of it, and I should have.”

Adelaide gave him a pitying look. “And if I had been less of a shrew, you might have wished to, rather than take delight in avoiding me. The fault is mine, and I own it. I am sorry to have given you such worry and trouble. If not for Emblyn...”

Harrison shuddered at the thought but managed a smile at the mention of his sister. “Yes, thank God for her.”

“I did, thank you.” Adelaide smiled back and continued to eat her breakfast. “I did apologize to her, by the by. And I’ll

admit to being wholly mistaken where she was concerned. I think—I believe I had been so conditioned by the thoughts and impressions of Society in London that I never took a moment to consider my own thoughts and feelings on the subject. That a person might be more than the circumstances of their birth. And I envied such freedom be given to someone born less fortunate than I. It is a selfish way of thinking, but there it is.”

It warmed his heart to hear her speak so, but there was something she held back, some question that still lingered in his mind, and he suspected she knew the answer. “Had you such freedom, would you have married Mr. Evans?”

She stilled at her end of the table, swallowing slowly before raising her eyes to his. “If he had asked?”

Harrison nodded.

“Yes, I think I would have.” She set her fork down, her hands lowering to her lap. “In all the time we knew each other, he brightened my days and seemed to see me in a way that no one else did or could. I did not feel as though I were only one of the eligible girls in Society—I felt like Adelaide. I think he would have made me very happy.”

“Happy,” Harrison repeated. “Are you sure?”

Her chin lifted a little. “Absolutely. Phillip loves me more than life, and there is no other woman he could ever want.” The fire left her eyes, and she seemed to slump without her posture altering a jot. “At least, that is what I was led to believe. Anna says he is seeking out others now, and I suppose that is as it must be.”

Harrison bit the inside of his cheek, debating within himself. “Adelaide, I think there is something I must tell you, and it will likely cause you pain, but I say it without malice or ill intent. I only wish to help.”

“This sounds promising,” she muttered, tilting her head as she plucked up her fork again. “About Phillip?”

He nodded. “I do not know that he would have made you as happy as he led you to believe. Phillip Evans has a regular membership and frequent patronage of a well-known



establishment with less than reputable ladies, which would have affected that happiness.”

The fork clattered loudly against the plate. “He what?”

“He is quite appreciated there.”

“How would you know that?” She inhaled an unsteady breath, shaking her head firmly. “Even if it is true, which I cannot believe, it only means that you were there yourself, does it not? You must see I cannot judge him if I do not judge you for the same. Men are men, as they say.”

Harrison gave her a steady, serious look. “No, Adelaide, men are not men, in that respect, and such excuses should not be made for them. As for me, I have had to descend upon that place far too often to pluck my younger brother out of his messes. I crossed paths with your Phillip more than once, years before I had any arrangement set with you. Believe me, his identity was thrown about, so there was no mistaking it.”

Adelaide’s hand reached out to grip the handle of her fork so tightly, her knuckles turned brilliant white. “I cannot pretend to not be disturbed by this. But are not wives meant to ignore the wandering attentions of their husbands and do their best besides? Surely there are no paragons among them.”

“Perhaps not,” Harrison allowed, hating the way such behaviors were accepted by high society as the way of men rather than holding any to a higher standard. “But I do not believe wandering attentions ought to be ignored. I had my own misspent youth, to be sure, but that was not one of the sins committed therein. If you doubt that, you should know that our wedding night was the first time that I have been with any woman, and that is no easy thing to admit. And I am no adulterer, so you should have no fear of such things in the future. Whatever that is worth to you.”

His wife had no response for him but to release the clenching hold on her fork, her eyes still on him.

He had not meant to give speeches this morning, but here they were, and at least one secret was now freed from him.

“Perhaps you would have been happy with him,” Harrison added quietly, returning his attention to his plate under the influence of her piercing stare. “Perhaps such things would have been more tastefully handled once you were wed. I do not know the man’s heart, only the character I have seen. But it pained me to hear you mourn the loss of a man who may not have been worth such things. You deserve a husband who will have eyes only for you.”

“Would that man be you, then?”

He froze, the question one he would have expected to be harsh, critical, delivered with sarcasm and derision. Yet it had come with genuine curiosity, a natural hesitancy, and an innocence that unmanned him far more than he expected any question of his wife to be capable of.

He looked up at her, heat screeching to the center of his chest. “In that respect, I suppose the answer is... yes.”

Her full lips curved into a sweet smile that prompted one of his own. “Very well, then,” she replied. She took up her cutlery yet again, shockingly at ease for the blow he had just delivered. “Thank you, Basset, for telling me all of this. I trust you will not mind if I take some time to consider it? I do not disbelieve you. I simply must reconcile what I have known with what you have said.”

The reasonable nature of her statement was unsettling, given their history, and Harrison had no idea what to do with it other than nod in response and stammer, “Of course.”

After which, he stared at his wife while she resumed her meal, fully anticipating her imminent roaring into high dudgeon and towering fury at any moment.

But it did not come.

He knew better than to expect that one instance of being lost on the moors was enough to alter her so permanently, but it was clear that some change had occurred. He would have to take advantage before her condition affected her mood once more.

He cleared his throat as he returned to his breakfast. “Any improvement on your condition?”

“Not particularly,” came the quick reply. “I am not as obviously unwell, but until I have some sustenance in the morning, I feel quite unfortunate. And I grow quite tired early in the afternoon.”

“That must be trying.” He made a face at the thought. “We must see that you have proper rest each day so you might accomplish all you wish regardless of your condition.”

Adelaide smiled a little, looking particularly amused. “Yes, I rather thought so. I find that after breakfast, I am at my most productive. It seems to get a little worse from then on, apart from what energy I find after the afternoon rest.”

“Well,” he began, swallowing a bite of food, “have you any interest in seeing some of Cornwall this morning while you feel well? I could take you to the mines, if you like. Ones that are properly working, not abandoned and treacherous.”

She huffed impatiently, making him laugh. “I was not aware that Wheal Jannus was there, let alone that it was abandoned. I told Emblyn so. I was quite safely away and turned about the moment I saw the path was a fruitless one.”

Harrison chuckled and waved a condoling hand. “Yes, so she said. Forgive me, I had to get one in before I forgot. And if you’ve no interest in the mine, I could take you into Halparva or Beatreath. They are about the same distance from here. Or Portreath, if you’ve an interest in our shipping ventures.”

“I think I would like to see the mines,” Adelaide admitted after a moment’s thought. “As your wife, I should pay an official visit and greet all those who work there. And I did promise Mr. Bodville I would meet his intended before the wedding. I heard the banns on Sunday, so we’ve not much time for that.”

“Very true.” He hid a smile as he cut into his ham. “I’ll have word sent that we will come to Wheal Lidden today, and I will take care to point out anything that might help you with directions, should you become lost again.”

Adelaide hummed in disgruntlement, swallowing her food. “I beg you, do not treat me like a child in this. I will learn my way, and I will not go out alone again until I am comfortable in doing so. Believe me, I have no confidence to pretend there. Guide me, by all means, but do not be excessive. Pride is not always a failing, you know.”

The hints of his wife’s stubborn spirit was oddly encouraging, and Harrison nodded as sagely as he could without being patronizing. “Yes, I am well aware, having a healthy dose of the thing myself.”

“Ah, I am so pleased you have noticed.” She fluttered her eyelashes, smiling playfully.

Harrison toasted her with his drink. “I own each of my faults, madam, and will not pretend there are none. Indeed, should we ever run out of topics of conversation, we could catalogue them for our own amusement.”

“I shall begin a list in my unoccupied time to aid us in such an endeavor.” She lifted a glass of her own and returned his toast, drawing a smile from him that would take a great deal to wipe away.



Adelaide had not seen anything like this in her life before, not even in London. A busy, bustling enterprise that seemed to possess an endless number of workers that moved in and out of the mine with all the efficiency of ants from a hill. And more of them worked beneath the ground? It was unfathomable to say the least.

All she could do was stare at the expanse from her position on the horse, awed by such a feat of man.

“It may not be a thing of beauty,” Basset told her with some note of apology, misreading her silence. “But it represents a great deal. Employment for those who work in it. Survival for the villages in the area. Funds for our own estate and our other ventures. The prosperity of Cornwall, even.”

“It’s impressive,” Adelaide said with a slight shake of her head. “Not beautiful, but still majestic. I would like to see more.” She looked over at Basset for confirmation, suddenly quite intrigued by the whole thing.

His smile bore something of awe and wonder, and it tickled something in the center of her spine. “Truly?”

Adelaide laughed a little, her cheeks warming beneath the stirring power of his dark eyes. “Well, I don’t exactly want to go down into the mine with the workers, but I would like to see more so that I might become more familiar with Cornwall and its people.”

“As you wish, my lady,” Basset murmured, the warmth in his voice curling her toes. He nudged his head toward the path leading down. “Let us go and see them.”

The horses had an easy time of it, the way simple for such well-trained creatures, and Adelaide, returned to the horse she had lost at her insistence, had to smile at the irony. Emblyn had been right; the neighbors had found the horse and returned it to Trevadden without hesitation. The horse had seemed appropriately apologetic for leaving Adelaide on the moors, nudging her hand and nickering sweetly in the stables.

Only that convinced Adelaide to trust the creature again, and he had been as docile as any mouse on earth.

One could only hope he would continue to be so, under the watchful eyes of his master.

They followed Basset and his mount in a careful line and arrived at the grounds of Wheal Lidden shortly thereafter. A few children giggled and darted about as the horses stopped, and Adelaide looked after them with some concern.

“Children?” she asked, gesturing toward them. “At a mine? Is that not dangerous?”

Basset hopped down from the horse, shaking his head. “Not those children. They know the dangers. When the boys are old enough, they go down and begin to learn the trade, while the girls become bal maidens. They don’t go down the

shafts, but they do help with the preparation of the ore for smelting.”

Adelaide nodded, pretending that she understood what smelting meant. “And the younger ones?”

“They carry messages, run errands for Bodville, and the like.” Basset came to her, placing his hands at her waist and helping her down from the saddle. “It’s really all very straightforward.”

“One would hope,” she murmured, patting his arms in thanks. She looked around at the people watching them, some smiling at the sight of them. “I believe the smiles are for you, my lord.”

Basset looked around, grinning easily. “They know me well enough, and it is no pleasure for them. The smiles are for you. They are not accustomed to seeing a woman of such grace and beauty among them. It must be like a visit from an angel.”

Adelaide looked up at him dubiously. “Flattery does not suit, Basset. I am no angel, and you know it well.” She looked down at her appearance, frowning a little. “Perhaps I have dressed too finely for this. I do not wish to be unapproachable.”

“It is not as though you wear silks, Adelaide. You look very well, exactly the part of the mine owner’s wife.” He put a hand on her arm. “There are no formal introductions here. You already know Bodville, but, if you like, I can reacquaint you.”

“No, that is not necessary.” Adelaide straightened up, folding her hands before her calmly. “If there is anything that I consider a strength in my being and character, it is being able to adapt my demeanor and protocol adequately for any people or circumstance.”

“Yes, I was going to ask you about that,” Basset mused. He nodded at a young man who saw to the horses, walking with Adelaide toward the mine. “I witnessed your skills at such things the night of our ball. I wonder, why have I not been the beneficiary of your talents?”

Adelaide scoffed very softly. “You have, my lord. Why else would I return fire for fire when you so skillfully send your barbs in my direction?” She laughed once and moved for the group of ladies standing nearby, grinning to herself at hearing her husband’s laughter behind her.

He laughed so rarely in truth, naught but a wry chuckle here and there, yet what she heard was full-bodied laughter, and the sound of it was glorious indeed. Why did she never try to make him laugh before this, only seeking to spite him and garner some kind of reaction from him?

Giving him cause to laugh provided so much more satisfaction.

She thought to raise her chin for a moment, until she recollected the simple, hard life of these people, and no composure or finery would impress them. “Good afternoon, ladies. What a lovely day this is!”

The group of them bobbed curtseys, their ages varying. “My lady,” they all murmured as one, still smiling at her with more warmth than she had ever received from a group of ladies in London.

She smiled in return, oddly comfortable in their company. “What are your names, then? This is my first time to Wheal Lidden, and I don’t know a thing about mining.”

They made quick work of the introductions, and soon, she had her very own guides to every aspect of the operation above ground. The ladies knew everything, it seemed, and were able to explain it to her in a way that actually made sense. How smelting was the means by which metal was obtained from ore, and the process by which they worked as bal maidens. How their husbands, brothers, and sons worked below ground, and the struggles of life when a mine was not profitable. She had never imagined that any lives could hinge so heavily upon the success of anything, let alone a mine, but they were the embodiment of such a thing.

Walking about the works with these women was more of an education than anything she had known in her entire life and far more entertaining than what she had expected.

It did not seem like much time had passed at all before Basset and Mr. Bodville joined them, Mr. Bodville sweeping his hat off to bow to her in greeting. “My lady, it is a pleasure to see you again. I hope you do not mind, but when I heard that you and your husband were coming to the mine, I wrote to Miss Verran to ask her to come. If you still have no objection to meeting her.”

Adelaide brightened at the prospect, flicking her eyes to her husband just in time to catch his slight smile. “None at all! I am most anxious to meet her. Being newly married myself, I shall have ample advice to give her on the subject.”

“Oh dear,” Basset said with a dramatic sigh. “Let us hope there will still be a wedding after that.”

“Don’t scare Mr. Bodville so!” Adelaide scolded, propping her hands on her hips. “Miss Verran is perfectly capable of making her own decisions, no matter what I have to say. And besides, I am still married to you, am I not?”

Basset bowed ever so slightly in acknowledgement. “That you are, my dear. That you are.”

Adelaide might have imagined it, but she would have sworn her husband winked at her then. It would have been markedly out of character of the man she thought she was married to, but the man she had dined with this morning, the one who had raced to Emblyn’s cottage to see after her, the one who had ridden here with her...

Perhaps he was one who winked at his wife.

She had no time to examine his manner of flirtation, however, for Mr. Bodville brightened as he looked behind her. “Ah, here she is already!” he cried, waving with an eagerness that belied his feelings about the impending nuptials.

Fighting a laugh, Adelaide turned expectantly toward the approaching guest. Miss Verran was a pretty little thing, there was no mistaking that. Dark hair, fair skin, healthy in frame, and taller than one might have expected, yet all seemed in perfect proportion. She came without bonnet, as several women and girls in the area seemed to do, and her green



cotton frock was covered with a simple, clean apron. London might not have called her a beauty, but out here among the bluebells, cornflowers, and cliffs, she was rather picturesque.

And her hesitant smile endeared her to Adelaide at once.

“Miss Verran,” Basset called with a smile, “this is a pleasant surprise.”

Miss Verran bobbed in greeting. “Lord Basset, the pleasure is mine.”

He gestured toward Adelaide with the same smile. “May I present my wife, Miss Verran? Adelaide, this is Miss Jenna Verran.”

Adelaide dipped her chin deeper than she might have normally, knowing better than to embarrass her husband by curtseying to an employee’s intended, though determined to give her as much respect as she could. “Delighted, Miss Verran. I understand you are to marry this man in a few weeks.”

Miss Verran slid her eyes toward Mr. Bodville, her smile becoming rather sweet. “Aye, madam. That I am.”

“And you are set on it?” Adelaide asked playfully. “Well and truly?”

Basset groaned, but Adelaide pointedly ignored the sound, which seemed to entertain Miss Verran.

“Well,” she said, wrinkling up her nose a little, “I’ve not been asked by other parties, ma’am. Seems on’y fitty to accept a decent proposal when it’s offered if there’s none others to be ‘ad.”

Mr. Bodville choked out a laugh, and Adelaide held up a hand to him, as though she could block him from the conversation as a whole.

“What sound reasoning you have, Miss Verran!” Adelaide praised, nodding her approval. “Quite right. And he is fairly well situated, is he not?”

“Aye,” Miss Verran confirmed. “Good position with a decent wage, and ‘e already owns an ‘ouse, which is more than

most men can boast at 'is age. My faather approves of 'im, and my mother thinks 'im ansum."

Adelaide fought the urge to smile, keeping to the game by nodding once more. "Truly, the prospects are quite marvelous. But come, let us talk more. Of marriage, of the wedding itself, everything of more interest to us women than prospects and such. Perhaps away from the men, you might tell me your true feelings." She took Miss Verran's arm and steered her away, releasing a few giggles as she did so. "Are they watching?"

Miss Verran looked over her shoulder, laughing herself. "Aye, ma'am. Jeremy looks a mite concerned, but your 'usband seems entertained."

"Excellent." Adelaide exhaled happily, relaxing into a comfortable stride with the pleasant girl. "I think the world of Mr. Bodville, Miss Verran. Your choice is to be commended."

"Thank ee, ma'am. He is very good to me." Miss Verran sighed a little, hesitating. "I pray ee, ma'am, do not feel the need to attend the wedding if ee have no liking for it. I know it is no' so fine as affairs ee will have attended, though it is kind of ee to offer."

Adelaide looked at her in surprise. "My dear Miss Verran, of course I have a liking for it! All weddings should be celebrated, and I've never been to one in Cornwall before. Mr. Bodville assures me there will be a great deal of traditional festivities to be had there. You would not ask me to miss such an occasion, surely. Not when my husband values him so."

Miss Verran shook her head. "Of course not, ma'am. Come, if ee like. I on'y thought... I presumed..."

There was nothing to do but take pity on the girl, and Adelaide covered her hand, squeezing a little. "I would once have turned up my nose at it, make no mistake. But now I see more clearly, and I can truthfully say that I would love nothing more than to attend your wedding and the festivities following."

"It would be an honor to have ee there, ma'am," Miss Verran said softly, smiling the same shy smile from before.

“And your ‘usband as well. I think... I believe Jeremy sees his lordship as much of a friend as he does his employer.”

“I believe Lord Basset feels the same.” Adelaide smiled at the thought. “Now tell me, Miss Verran. Have you and Mr. Bodville been courting for very long?”

# Chapter Fifteen



“Adelaide? It is nearly time!”

It was not often that Harrison bellowed in his own house, and even this could only just be considered such, but as he did not do so with anger or irritation, he trusted the aberration of his character and habits would not be held against him.

After all, it was his wife who had told him to remind her of the time if she took too long to prepare herself.

It would seem that it would take as much effort for her to prepare for someone else’s wedding as she had for her own.

That had been worth the effort then; he could only pray this would be the same.

He looked up at the ceiling at the base of the stairs, sighing quietly to himself as he took in the beams and plaster designs his father had been so proud of in Harrison’s youth. It was utterly pristine and without flaw, though it was nothing to the plaster scenes one could find in the ceiling in the gallery. Still, worthy craftsmanship must be appreciated, no matter how it galled him to find favor in something his father brought about.

“Something of interest up there? Personally, I’d prefer something a little less geometric and more elegant, but there will be time for that later.”

Harrison let his attention fall to the descending image of his wife, and his breath caught in his throat. She had opted for elegant simplicity, as he had once suggested Emblyn would prefer in dress, only he had never seen anything so lovely as this.

Her gown was a brilliant shade of blue he had never seen before, except in the shade of her eyes, and it shimmered slightly in the light, though he had no notion of fabrics. A faint

pattern of florals in a deeper blue dotted the skirts, while a sheer fabric extended from a short sleeve to encase the whole of her arm. Full skirts without being voluminous, and a modest neckline that only heightened the perfection in fit and figure of the ruched bodice. Her fair, golden hair was curled, coiled, and pinned in an elegant manner, yet again bearing a simplicity he had not anticipated, while a turban of sorts of the same color of her gown circled the curls and plaits like a halo.

His fingers itched to toy with the small curls at her temples, and he clasped his hands behind his back to prevent himself from doing so.

“Exquisite,” he breathed, unable to find any other word equal to the sight of her. “Utterly.”

Adelaide paused a step on the stairs, startled by his words. “Truly?”

He nodded hastily, struggling to swallow against the tide of sensations filling him. “Yes. I cannot...” He laughed, the sound a trifle breathless, and held his hand out to her. “Beyond words, Adelaide.”

She beamed, which blinded him into complete breathlessness, and held up a necklace in each hand. “I did not think the sapphires appropriate for our company, but would you advise me as to one of these options?”

It was on the tip of Harrison’s tongue to confess that he did not care a jot for her accessories, but if giving an opinion would help to hasten them along...

“The pearls,” he suggested, managing a smile. “Their blue pendant will complement your eyes to perfection.”

Adelaide’s nose wrinkled up in a hint of a laugh. “I was hoping you would pick that one. It is a lovely piece, and I further hoped, well, I did not wish to be over-trimmed.” She held it out to him. “Would you mind?”

He stepped forward at once, taking the strings of pearls and undoing the clasp. “Certainly, my dear.” Lifting the necklace over her hair and face, he dragged it up along her exposed skin

until the clasps could be fastened, smirking at the short catching of breath he heard from her.

Why should he be the only one to feel at sea in this moment?

He fastened the clasps in a moment, then brushed the knuckle of one finger along the back of her neck before he could help himself. "There," he murmured. "Perfectly situated."

He watched the skin of her neck as it turned to gooseflesh, making his smile more smug. So he could elicit such reactions in daylight now, could he? Well, well, well.

Adelaide turned, her eyes wide, her mouth tight. "Is it, indeed? From the back?"

He grinned at her perfect quip and shrugged. "Seemed so." He looked at its place at the base of her throat, now that he could see it, and nodded firmly. "Exactly right. Perfectly designed for your wearing alone."

"Don't be so tiresome," Adelaide scolded halfheartedly, though she could not keep her smile away entirely as she took his reoffered hand and finished her descent completely. "There is much enjoyment ahead of us, and I intend to take advantage of every last bit. I have been learning all the traditions from Emblyn, as well as Julia Roskelley, and even learned a few of the common dances. This time, it will be for you to not embarrass me."

"When have you embarrassed me?" Harrison asked as they moved to the front of the house for their things. "I've never accused you of any such thing."

Adelaide waved him off. "Had I been less than I was at our first ball, you certainly would have. Kindly do not forget your own duty, as we have discussed before."

"Yes, yes, I know," he said on a wry exhale. "Be attentive and adoring so you are the envy of all."

"But do not outshine the groom's devotion to the bride," she insisted with such earnestness he had to choke back a

laugh. “This is a love match, and it would be unseemly to deprive them of deserved attention.”

Harrison nodded as any obedient student might have done. “I see. I may forget some of the finer points, but I trust I will not fail you entirely.”

Adelaide rolled her eyes as she allowed her cloak to be draped about her shoulders, tying the knot quickly. “Basset...”

“You may have to be more specific at this gathering,” he suggested with a wince. “There may be more Bassets at this wedding than ourselves.”

His wife speared him with a dark look before proceeding out of the door toward the waiting carriage. He grinned and followed, tugging at his coat sleeves. Nettling her would never cease to be entertaining.

The carriage ride to the village church was not particularly long, and Adelaide was silent for most of it, which suited Harrison well enough. It left him ample time to reflect on their recent days and to consider what the future might look like.

Things had shifted slightly since that day she’d become lost on the moors. Some of the spite had left her, and some of the irritation had left him. They still bantered, certainly, and annoyed each other when they were of a mind to. She still said the most extraordinary things of a superfluous nature, though none that offended his sensibilities. She had passed another time of anticipated courses that did not come, so it seemed very likely that she was indeed with child.

The more he considered the prospect, the more thrilling it became. He had eventually managed to discuss parenting and child-rearing with Adelaide, and it seemed that, at least for now, they were of a mind as far as that went. He was content to leave the details of tending the children on a day-to-day basis, as well as the nursing of the infants, to her entirely, given how directly such things could involve her if she chose. They wanted the children to be educated, to understand and respect their neighbors and tenants, to cherish their home and heritage, and to value each other, however many there happened to be. There would be no brutality in the home, but

there would be order. There would be no distance, but there would be expectations.

There would be kindness and fun, but there would be responsibilities.

It was strange to be in such accord with each other when they had yet to manage it on any other subject, but he supposed it was better to agree on this than any other subject. He was certain that, as time went on, they would discuss it further still, and in greater detail.

He had not inquired after her physical state any further, as she had made it very plain that she did not wish to discuss such things. Nor had she seemed to slow in her attempts to make over Trevadden, to acquaint herself with the tenants, or slow in her eagerness to have Julia Roskelley teach them the pianoforte. Their first official lesson was not until next week, but it had not stopped her from testing herself on the pianoforte in the little-used music room.

Harrison had quickly learned to vacate Trevadden for other locations when she was in such a mind.

He prayed the lessons with Julia would bring improvement before confidence.

“Do you think they’ll truly do the peppering for Mr. Bodville and Jenna?” Adelaide asked as they pulled up to the church. “It sounds dreadful.”

Harrison snorted at the idea; the old Cornish tradition of beating the bride and groom in their bed with gorse was one he had never really grasped. “That might all depend on the amount of drink consumed after the service before they depart. Being good, honest, staunchly Cornish people, I imagine there will be plenty.”

Adelaide shook her head as she inched toward the carriage door. “Will we have to participate in the peppering?”

“No,” he said firmly, laughing as he stepped out. He offered her a hand and helped her down. “We’ll leave that to other guests. I will request a dance of you this evening, however. At any time you like. Fair warning, these types of



celebrations can go very late and might not end until dawn. If you grow too fatigued, we can depart whenever you like.”

“If you think I have never been to a ball that ended after dawn, you are quite mistaken,” Adelaide quipped, not bothering to remove her hand from his as they started toward the church. “That is fairly commonplace in London.”

Harrison had to chuckle rather heartily now. “Oh, Adelaide, this is no London gathering. That has finery and waltzes, manners and elegance. There is order and patterns, routines and hierarchy. This is nothing like that. There is no status, no station, no finery or frills. You will only find good food, good company, plenty of drink, and a determination to dance and celebrate until every pair of feet is worn out.”

His wife raised her chin as though he had given her a challenge to which he doubted her ability to succeed. “I will not leave of my own volition before dawn, my lord. If you wish to depart prematurely, you may do so. I believe your endurance might require more questioning than my own.”

He gave her the courtesy of looking impressed, though amusement was his primary feeling at the moment, and lifted his eyes to the gorse hanging about the entrance to the church. “Then I will challenge us both, madam. I request the first dance of the evening, as well as the last of all, no matter the time. Do you accept?”

“I do,” Adelaide replied in as prim a voice as could be heard anywhere in London. “And may the best Basset win.”

Harrison hissed softly. “I told you, there could be more Bassets there, and if Jago Basset from Sawle comes, no one will dance more than him. Of course, he’ll also be the most intoxicated, so he won’t remember any of it—”

His wife’s sharp elbow jabbed into his side, which meant his entrance into the church was one of restrained laughter and limited salutations.



She could not be certain, but Adelaide did not think she had ever enjoyed an event more than the one she was presently attending. It had been several hours since the wedding, and the stars in the deep black sky had long been their companions, yet there was no sign that the celebration would be ending any time soon.

The bride and groom had departed for their home not so long ago, and several of the guests had followed with the bagpiper to commence with the peppering, but they seemed to be straggling back now to continue with the festivities.

There was something very light and easy about this celebration and the energy with which these people engaged in it. Knowing the struggles they endured, the difficulties they faced from day to day and season to season, it was humbling and inspiring to see them honor a fine couple with so much jubilation and spirit. Laughter was the sound that Adelaide had heard most of all throughout the evening.

She could never have said the same thing for London.

She could not have said what her appearance was at the present, given the exuberant dancing she had engaged in thus far. With her condition, she had avoided anything resembling reels and jigs, but there was a natural merriment and energy to any of the dances the gathering struck up, only few of which had patterns she might have known in advance. Several of the other guests had offered to teach her what she did not know, and, after her first set of demurrals, she had given in and joined the group anyway.

It was a night unlike any other she had known, and her present state of contentment was one she had not known she could find in a place like this.

How blind she had been!

She could feel several of her curls brushing against the back of her neck, indicating that they had fallen or were in the process of falling from their hold, but she could not muster up concern for such a thing. Her turban had been removed long ago, set aside with her cloak somewhere or other, and she could honestly say she had not missed it. Many of the ladies

present had simple plaits in their hair, or wore it down altogether, and the only common sight among them were the wildflowers strewn throughout. Her choice in gown had been an excellent one, given its simplicity and durability for such activities as she was now engaged in, and while she did look finer than the other guests, she did not appear so very much above them.

And she did not wish to appear so.

It was a strange concept for Adelaide, to feel herself belonging to a company rather than competing with it. To converse with the lower class openly, not just for show or charity. To mingle among such simple folk with whom she would have almost nothing in common and not anticipate returning to finer society.

Or even to return to her home.

She had not thought of Trevadden in several hours now, though her feet ached, and her lungs burned with the excessive laughter and activity she had engaged in.

Laughter! From her! But that was what one did in such a place and among such a celebration, and she had been just as caught up in it as anyone else. She and Emblyn especially had been rather giddy together, and it had been such a comfort to have her sister-in-law with her while she navigated this new realm of activities and association.

Emblyn was still around here somewhere, but Adelaide could not be certain where at this point. Where Adelaide had needed a moment's reprieve when the more energetic dances struck up, Emblyn had joined in with somehow more energy than she'd had before.

The marvel of such a thing still puzzled Adelaide.

"You look remarkably refreshed."

Adelaide laughed a near breathless laugh and looked over at the approaching form of Julia Roskelley. "Is it strange to admit that I feel remarkably refreshed?"

"A little," Julia replied, taking the seat beside her on the bench. "But only because I know the refinement to which you

are accustomed. This..." She paused, gesturing out at those dancing a rather spritely reel that lacked order, but flowed all the same. "This is not London."

"No, it isn't," Adelaide admitted. She smiled at the sight of her husband attempting the reel with one of the Bodville sisters, his jacket long gone, and nearly careening into his own sister in the dance. "But I cannot mind that. This is so freeing."

Julia laughed quietly, brushing back stray locks of her hair. "That it is. John and I spend some time in London, but our tastes tend toward Cornwall most of all. Not that we have weddings like this often, and we do mingle with the local society who would find such an affair beneath their dignity, but it is nice to be reminded that our barriers of status can be breached when we wish it."

It was a profound thought, and Adelaide found herself nodding at it. "I would never have wished for that before. I didn't even intend to like Mr. Bodville when I met him at our ball. I was simply paying a courtesy as I thought was right, given his position with our mine, and then to hear he was engaged to marry... I could not snub Jenna after being so warm with him, and suddenly here I am. Enjoying myself immensely and having no idea who most of these people are."

"Will you regret it in the morning?" Julia asked her with a careful look around to be sure no one would hear. "When you look at it all in retrospect, I mean."

Adelaide gave her a sidelong look. "You are very forward, aren't you?"

Julia grinned without shame. "As I said, this is not London."

There was no denying that. "I don't think I will regret it," Adelaide said after a moment's thought. "The moments of pleasure and fun have been so limited since my marriage, and this certainly qualifies as both. Besides, look at Basset."

They both did so, just as he stumbled and caught himself before he could fall, and his laughter was heard above the

sound of the fiddle and other dancers. Emblyn laughed at him, and he playfully pushed her aside, back toward her partner. He gave a grinning bow to his partner before continuing on in the dance, folding his arms before him and circling the men on either side of him, just as others in the group did. He looked at least ten years younger, his hair tousled and curling more than she would have thought it capable of, and he had not stopped smiling since they'd left the church.

Adelaide shook her head, laughing at the sight of him. "Have you ever seen him like this?"

"I have," Julia told her, a smile in her voice. "I've known him since we were children, after all. But not often, and certainly not lately. Even before your marriage." She chuckled as Basset laughed again, his grin almost wild. "This is as good for him as it is for you."

There could be no denying that, not when she could see the change in him so clearly. He was utterly adorable and charming, even from this distance and in the light of torches and starlight.

He saw her looking at him as the reel ended, clapping along with the rest of the dancers. His smile remained, though it became less of a grin and more unreadable. He came in her direction, pushing his rolled sleeves up past his elbows on either side, one hand running through his dark hair.

Something tight clenched in Adelaide's stomach as he did so, and she straightened as he neared, smiling slyly. "You appear to be in need of a drink, my lord."

"Yes, please," he replied easily. "Anything at hand." He set his hands on his trim hips, exhaling roughly in apparent exhaustion. "I must say, I do not feel old on regular occasions, but at this moment, I believe I am positively ancient."

Julia reached over to the table next to her, fetching a tankard of something and handing it to him. "You dance well, Basset, and with great enthusiasm. It reminds me of a lad I once knew."

Basset smiled a little, pausing before taking a long drink from his tankard. “Oddly enough, me too.” He put a hand on Adelaide’s shoulder, looking down at her. “Are you all right?”

Adelaide reared back a little. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

He gave her a look, his eyes darting to Julia and back meaningfully.

“Oh!” Adelaide laughed once, nodding. “That. Yes, as it happens. I have no doubt I will sleep most of the day when we return home, but I have no complaints.” She fought the urge to yawn by offering a sigh instead. “We must be getting close to dawn, are we not?”

Basset looked out at the horizon. “There is light there, though dawn is likely an hour or two away.”

“These poor miners.” Julia clicked her tongue a little. “They’ll be going straight to the mines after this, and they’ll be so exhausted.”

“Oh, I told them to take the day to rest and recover,” Basset said with a faint sniff, looking back at the dancing. “Paid, of course. I thought it was best, given how much everyone is enjoying themselves. Why should the celebrations end just to return to work? And it would be a risk to their safety to work so fatigued.”

Adelaide gaped up at him and the offhand manner in which he had announced such a thing. “Did you really?”

He nodded, still keeping his attention averted as though admitting such a thing embarrassed him somehow.

When it was clear he would not say more, Adelaide smiled and reached up to place her hand over his where it still rested on her shoulder.

That brought his attention down to her immediately, seeming almost startled by the contact.

She brushed her thumb over his hand softly. “You’re a good man, Harrison Basset.”

His dark eyes searched hers as his throat worked, and then, suddenly, his mouth curved in a delicious smile that set a fire to the soles of her feet. “Coming from you, Adelaide, that means a very great deal.” He turned his hand to capture hers and brought it to his lips, the lack of gloves causing an enhanced sensitivity that Adelaide was entirely unprepared for.

Her breath caught, then rushed past her lips in an embarrassing sweep of air. “Thank you.”

He raised a brow at her, which pulled a smile from her tingling lips. “I don’t believe our challenge is valid if you sit for the whole of the evening, Lady Basset. Are you conversing with our music teacher for advanced instruction, or are you merely passing the time?”

Julia barked a laugh. “I am only the instructor until Lily returns in the spring after her child is born and young Ross is adapted to it, so there is no advanced instruction to give.”

“I was speaking to my wife, Julia,” Basset said without looking at her, his smile deepening. “Well, my lady?”

Adelaide twisted her lips, fighting the urge to laugh. “I was taking a care for myself during the reel, Basset, because certain conditions do not lend themselves to such things. But I do believe I’ve asked young Master Hobbs to partner me next, so if you would kindly step aside...”

She pointedly put her hand at his stomach and pushed him away as she stood, which made him snort a laugh.

“Fine, then I shall dance with Julia,” he shot back, holding out a hand to his old friend.

“I do not want to be in the middle of this,” Julia replied, laughing merrily but taking his hand.

Adelaide looked at her. “Trod his toes, Julia. Do us all a favor.” Then she winked pointedly at her husband and moved away to find Master Hobbs and start up the next dance.

She could only hope her husband was laughing behind her.

How much longer she danced, she really could not say, but the sky began to lighten, and, to her surprise, a fog began to

roll in. It was a beautiful, majestic thing, this cloud plucked from the sky and approaching as the morning dew called to it. Pulled at it, rather like the moon to a tide. The grass seemed an ocean, and the fog a wave upon it.

Some of the guests had staggered off back to their homes, but enough remained that they continued to dance, the last of the torches beginning to flicker more weakly.

“Can anybody waltz?” the fiddler called out from his position, somewhere beyond Adelaide’s sight in the thickening fog. “I ‘ave a tune for ee, if so. T’would be my pleasure to end the night w’it.”

“I can, sir,” one voice called out above a few others announcing their intention.

Adelaide froze at Basset’s voice, so deep and warm in the early morning chill. The last dance he had promised to dance with her. A waltz, did the man say? She had not waltzed with her husband yet, not at any time, and to do so now... here... like this...

Basset appeared before her then, the early light showing her things she had never before seen in him. The faint shadows of fatigue, the lines of his laughter, the mixed directions of his disheveled hair, the utter masculinity of him just as he was in a loosely buttoned weskit, unraveling cravat, and rolled linen sleeves.

Her mouth and throat dried at the sight of him, and her lips parted as though to drink in the very moisture of the air to salvage something. Anything.

“Will you waltz with me, Adelaide?” he murmured with a smile, holding out a hand to her.

“Yes,” she breathed, the word creating a faint cloud of its own on the air. She placed her hand in his and allowed him to pull her in.

Others joined them; she could hear their steps in the grass, their soft conversations, and the fiddler tuned in preparation, though his songs had been notes of purity for hours upon hours by now.



Basset's eyes were locked on her, and she could not look away if she tried. She could feel every strand of hair upon her head, falling from the pins or still in place, and each whisper of tresses across her shoulders and neck awoke something in her skin until she was nearly alight with it.

And her hand...

Clasped in his, she could feel the faint calluses she knew so well by night, the pads of fingers that had caressed her skin and twisted in her hair. She felt the pulse at his wrist that thundered against her, a cadence that seemed to thrum into her as well. Pounding at five points within her, then seven, then a dozen, then scattering into a thousand pieces in a chorus that her own heart could not match.

The fiddle began its haunting call, and Basset drew her closer, his hand finding her waist at the same moment hers found his. Their breath caught at once, in unison, a sound they could not restrain. They moved as one, stepping together in the now damp grass, their legs brushing against each other nearly every time, their bodies turning with all the grace of any ballroom in Society, yet this time, no one was watching.

No one could. The fog obscured any view, though glimpses of other couples occasionally were caught in the background. Even the music seemed to be caught up in the misty shroud, faint to her ears but somehow weaving through each and every step they took.

His fingers pressed into her waist on a turn, a subtle action that brought her closer to him, and she went without hesitation. She could see the shadow of stubble at his jaw, the tension residing just beneath its surface that seemed matched only by that in her lungs.

He lowered his hand from above them in the motion of the dance, brushing his fingers very faintly along her cheek as he extended his arm past her shoulder, the shadow of cradling her face that polite society could accept, given there was no actual contact.

Except he'd failed in that, and her cheek burned in the exact path of his fingers.

Some light of victory lit his dark eyes, and Adelaide felt a growling competitiveness take root. She matched the motion, lowering her hand gracefully and then rubbing her thumb along his rough jawline as she moved her hand into its proper position. His eyes widened at the contact, and the shoulder her arm rested upon moved on a breath that did not seem quite steady.

She would have smiled in her own triumph, had she not felt as though she were losing in this game as well. They were both losing, and they were both winning, though what exactly the stakes were seemed rather unclear.

As their hands raised overhead again, fingers gripping against each other, breath catching for them both, she was not sure the stakes truly mattered.

It was as though they danced in the heavens themselves rather than upon the ground. Adelaide could barely think due to the exhilaration of the moment, every turn in Basset's arms seeming to lift her higher, every meeting of their eyes weakening her knees. His dark intensity robbed her of sense, brought her closer, sank deep into her core in a way she could not comprehend, connecting them beyond anything she had known.

And she was not alone in this.

He was there, caught up with her, bewildered in his own right yet so focused on her alone, it was a wonder she had not caught fire. His fingers brushed hers over and over again, memorizing the pattern until neither of them could forget it, spiraling every impossible sensation into a single place connecting them.

The steps of the dance were lost on her, their surroundings vanishing among the cloud that encircled them, all other thoughts and plans and ideas fading from existence until only she and he remained, wrapped together in this moment. Yet somehow, they were moving; she could feel the ground beneath her toes, the brush of his foot against hers, the pressure of his hand at her back, the motion of her hair on the breeze, the chill against her cheek.

She was all sensation, all feeling, all light and breath, ready to burst in a shower of sparks that would fall around them like snow.

Waves rolling around and over, across and through, drowning her in their depths yet elevating her into fresher air than she could ever know.

She exhaled a rough breath leaning into his hold, giving in to the bliss that called to her.

Basset's dark eyes fell to her lips, his hold on her tightening.

She arched in, another breath hitching in her throat.

“Adelaide...”

Her lashes fluttered weakly, her fingers curling around his.

Applause broke through her haze, disturbing the ethereal and bringing her back to the cold, now unsteady earth.

Basset still held her close, his eyes a dark fire she could only hope to search. He inhaled silently, then, on his exhale, loosened his hold around her, swallowing quickly.

And then he smiled. Just a little. Just enough.

Adelaide had to smile back. She couldn't help it.

Something about that made Basset chuckle very low, and his thumb ran over the hand he still held. “Shall we go home?” he murmured.

She managed a nod. “Yes.”

He tilted his head a little. “Would it be all right if we walked?”

Again, she nodded, not knowing how far it was, but willing to go anywhere with him, so long as this moment would not fully end yet.

He nodded in return, that maddening smile still in place, and walked with her to fetch his jacket and her turban and cloak, tossing both garments over his free arm while she clutched the turban in her other hand.

They made their farewells and started the walk toward Trevadden, hand in hand, fingers entwined.

Adelaide bit her lip as they strolled in silence, her thoughts returning with a feverish whirl. What would this mean? What had they just experienced? How could she explain any of this to herself when she woke from what had to be a dream?

How would her husband feel about any of it?

Just then, Basset lifted the back of her hand to his lips, lingered there a long moment, then lowered it again, keeping her close to his side.

She released a very soft breath, the warmth of his hold reaching her heart and giving it wings.

# Chapter Sixteen



By Christmas, Adelaide's condition was physically evident, and she was not pleased about it.

Harrison, however, thought it was rather charming.

The fashions of the day were enough to mask the growing mound of her abdomen adequately for the public, but attentive eyes and curious minds would see enough. Apparently, the adjustment to her attire was more inconvenient than she or Harrison had anticipated, but if the deliveries he had seen coming of late were any indication, she was adapting well enough.

He was only grateful she was not unwell in the mornings anymore, and her energy seemed more renewed than it had been for some time, although she had never turned fully indisposed or fretful. She had too much spirit for that, and even the slightest bit of fatigue irritated her.

The last few months had been rather comfortable between them, which was a change he'd been unprepared for. They had found a routine that suited both of them, with his visits to the mine and shipping companies, and her visiting tenants and managing the affairs of the house, and then meeting together for the evening meal. Emblyn was becoming a more frequent visitor, which delighted Harrison to no end, and nothing had ever been sweeter than to come home from his business to find her already there with Adelaide.

It was everything he had wanted from his wife when he had imagined it before his marriage, and now that it was a reality... it was somehow even sweeter, given the woman was Adelaide.

Adelaide.

She was becoming an ever-increasing distraction for him, and whatever reserve he'd ever hoped to attain in his life was almost daily tested. The waltz they had shared in the early morning hours at the Bodville wedding played in his mind almost nightly, making him painfully aware of the location of his wife's rooms, which he had not visited since she had become with child. They'd both retreated to sleep after the wedding, somehow unable to speak of what they had experienced and hardly able to touch.

Apart from their hands.

Even now, if he considered that day, those moments, his fingers would splay as though they ached for the feel of hers.

And he would curse himself for not asking to stay with her, even if they only rested beside each other.

Regrets were not common for him, having developed a healthy acceptance of life and choices as they came, but in this...

Time would tell if it truly became a regret or simply a moment left unclaimed.

Nothing between them had come even close to approaching the power of that morning, and nothing on the horizon seemed so promising.

There was tomorrow's Christmas party for their family and closest friends, but he could hardly expect to be poignantly moved among such company. Adelaide would not necessarily consider herself on display before the Roskelleys, Gage Trembath, and Emblyn, but neither would she be completely unguarded. It would be good for them to have an intimate gathering like that, particularly when she was planning a truly extraordinary event for Twelfth Night.

He was doing his utmost to vacate whatever room in the house he was inhabiting when the subject came up, for fear of what she might inquire of him.

All he knew for certain was that she had planned a masquerade.

He hated masquerades.

She likely already had a costume for him, negating whatever opinions he might have had on the subject, and enhancing whatever ideas she built up in her head for herself. It would not surprise him a jot if he were given the costume of King Henry VIII, and she were given the identity of one of his murdered queens, complete with a bloodstained line across her throat.

Except lately, they hadn't fought with the kind of venom such a costume would call for, so perhaps it would not be so dramatic. He had no doubt she would want something extraordinary for herself, but what accompaniment he could provide for her designs was a mystery.

The image of her being a meek and lovely shepherdess while he was forced into the costume of a sheep suddenly flitted into his mind, and he shook his head as a shudder raced up his spine.

The fact that it was not out of the realm of possibilities was the most unsettling part of the idea.

"Pardon me, my lord," a man called from the outer hall as he passed by. "Any idea where 'er ladyship wanted these garlands an' things?"

Harrison paused his step, staring at the yards upon yards of holly, ivy, swags of evergreen, and clumps of mistletoe, their white berries glinting ominously at him.

He blanched in response. "I haven't the faintest idea. Have you been told—?"

"Ah! Most excellent, Triggs. Do come in, you and your men." Adelaide appeared from somewhere behind Harrison, her hand trailing absently along the small of his back as she reached him. "Did you manage to secure the ash as discussed?"

"Ay, milady," Triggs grunted, heaving his hoard over a shoulder and striding in, followed by several others. "Cut in size and ready for wha'ever fire ee please. Did the wife see yer bunches delivered?"

Adelaide almost squealed in response, prodding Harrison to stare at her in bewilderment. “She did! They are utterly stunning, and I’ve had all five hung about the place. She is a wonder, sir.”

Triggs grinned, an odd sight for his weather-worn, deeply lined face. “Tha’ she be, ma’am. I’ll be certain ta see ee delivered of ‘er finest batch o’ Mahogany for the holiday. Mind ee don’ drink too much, or milord’ll be carryin’ ee to yer nightly rest whilst ee sleep wi’ pixies.”

Harrison exhaled slowly, shaking his head in lieu of laughing. “I have not had Mahogany in many years. My father always drank too much too quickly, and it took four footmen to drag him to bed.” Those memories were darker than he liked, given his father’s behavior when intoxicated, but Mahogany was of such a strength, it was the fastest sojourn to unconsciousness his drinking ever was.

Fewer damages that way.

“What were you doing drinking Mahogany many years ago?” Adelaide asked with an impish nudge to his side, bringing him back from the edge of those memories.

He smiled at her, more in thanks for her interference than for the joke she was making. “It’s a tradition,” he said simply, shrugging a shoulder. “I simply wanted a taste.”

“Many a lad ‘as done far worse, milady,” Triggs assured her with another deep laugh. “Young master ‘ere was on’y curious a’ the time, an’ I recall ‘is brother bein’ far worse off.” He nodded at them both. “Where to, milady?”

“This way!” Adelaide waved them in, pointing down the long corridor. “Mrs. Elsom will see you perfectly situated.”

The men traipsed in and went where she indicated, the sheer volume of greenery in the procession slowly making Harrison’s brows rise. When the last man had gone and the door closed behind them, he turned to his wife, silently querying.

Adelaide caught his look and huffed. “What, Basset? We are hosting a Christmas gathering, and then after that, a ball



for Twelfth Night! Would you wish for Trevadden to be bare of any festive décor?”

“Not at all,” he replied as he folded his arms. “I’d simply like to avoid living in a forest if I can.”

She scowled. “Mind yourself, my lord. I will not hesitate to find a Cornish traditional curse to place upon you if it suits me.”

“Duly noted.” He chuckled now, not bothering to feign disapproval. “You are alright with all of this, Adelaide. It’s wonderful to see.”

“The benefits of progression in my condition,” Adelaide quipped, a hand moving to cradle her slight bump. “I have all the energy in the world, and nothing excites me so much as Christmas for the present. I have learned all of the Cornish traditions and adapted them to our usage accordingly.” She suddenly winced and leaned closer. “Though, I beg you, do not make me include stargazy pie. The very idea of fish heads and tails stuck straight out of the pie, I cannot...” She held up a hand, swallowing ominously and shaking her head.

He made a face himself. “No, I will not miss that, and our guests will not take offense.” He paused then, tilting his head as an image from the morning struck him. “Did you not put kippers on toast with jam this morning at breakfast?”

Her slightly green countenance cleared at once, and she looked rather imperious. “I did. What of it?”

His hands made a helpless gesture of their own volition. “Where in the world did you hear of that combination? And how did it taste?”

“I’ve never heard of it,” she retorted, “and it tasted exactly as I wished it to. I simply wanted it, so I ate it. And at luncheon, I asked for jam to accompany my cucumber sandwiches and spread it thereon. I am simply craving unusual things, Basset, and nothing else can satisfy.”

He had never heard of such a thing in his entire life, but he knew little of a woman’s state when in the condition of carrying a child. If his wife needed odd combinations of food

to keep her content during this time, so be it. He would ensure whatever she wished for would be on hand, else the walls of Trevadden could come crumbling about them. Adelaide had not been in a towering fury in weeks. She was possibly due for another instance soon.

“What is Mahogany, anyway?” she asked suddenly, her hands rubbing along her bump without pattern. “I’ve never heard of it, not even in my studies of tradition. Based on the conversation, I presume it involves spirits—”

Harrison laughed and took her arm, steering her along the corridor away from the cold of the outer hall. “It is a mixture of treacle and gin, warmed and blended together. A very good liquor, and a strong one. It’s an old sailor’s drink, which is why the locals value it so. Gin is a favorite of the free traders.”

Adelaide glanced at him. “Smugglers?”

“Indeed. A popular occupation of the region, and a hobby of the landowners. No matter how the gaugers claim to be after the parties, even they benefit from the trade.” He laughed at her suddenly aghast expression. “It’s as much a tradition as anything else you’ve found in Cornwall, Adelaide. This is a poor county, and they’ve found ways to accommodate for it.”

“Accommodating the law would be preferable,” she grumbled, her tone taking a surly edge that made him smile. She looked away, a soft exhale escaping her. “We need to practice our duet before the party tomorrow. Julia has left explicit instructions.”

Harrison nodded his agreement. “I am happy to, whenever you would like. Now?”

She shook her head. “The ladies are coming to help me finish the gifts. We may practice before dinner, if it suits.”

“Of course.” He tapped his elbow against her arm. “What gift have you procured for me?”

Her playful scowl made him grin. “What could you possibly require when you have me for your wife, and a child on the way?”

“You make an excellent point,” he allowed. “I take back my question.”

She sniffed. “I should think so. But if you are very good tomorrow and play your part well, perhaps you may have a trinket on Christmas morning.”

“I suddenly have a very clear image of the mother you will be, and the efficiency is astounding.”

He caught a slight laugh she tried to restrain. “So you see the potential, then. Excellent. I was concerned you would wait until the child was born before you saw anything maternal in me.”

Though she was bantering with him and teasing herself, Harrison found himself sobering, eyeing the tender manner in which her hand traced over the bump that was their growing child.

“No, my dear Adelaide,” he murmured, stroking his thumb over her arm, “I have no doubt you will be a marvelous mother to our child. I can see it already.” Before he could stop himself, he leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to her hair, rubbing her arm again.

She looked at him in surprise, her smile sweet and hesitant. “Thank you, Basset.”

He nodded once and moved away from her, striding down the hall to find something else to do. Anything else. Just so long as it was away from the mess of feelings twisting his stomach and the scent of his wife lingering about him.



“Have you embroidered unicorns on those slippers?”

Adelaide hummed a laugh and showed the items to Julia. “Indeed. They are part of the Basset family crest, you know. But I have also included the letter B, and if I can manage it, this will become an olive branch.”

“Extendin’ peace, Addie?” Emblyn laughed from her position near the window where she continued to work on a scarf for her brother. “That’ll be the day.”

“Addie?” Julia repeated with a smile. “That’s an adorable moniker.”

“Only Emblyn calls me that,” Adelaide informed her, giving her sister-in-law an affectionate smile over her shoulder. “I shouldn’t like it from everyone, but it suits from her.”

Emblyn snorted loudly, looking up. “Because I be common stock, an’ fine names shouldn’t fall from my lips.”

“Nonsense!” Adelaide scolded. “Because you are my sister-in-law, and I’ve grown rather fond of you, so our closeness renders a familiar moniker appropriate!” She narrowed her eyes. “If you don’t cease your self-disparaging, I shall start calling you Emmie.”

“You shall no’!” came the insistent bark. “I am no’ so brough’ up tha’ I cannot box a lady’s ears, Addie, an’ you know I’d do it!”

Adelaide chortled with laughter, setting the slippers in her lap as hilarity filled her. “Oh, bless you, Em. I can see it now, and poor Basset standing between us not knowing which way to turn!”

“You will both set a very fine example for my cousin.” Julia sighed dramatically and turned to the other woman in the room, her auburn-haired, fair cousin. “Don’t mind them, Honora. Emblyn would never box Lady Basset’s ears.”

Honora Berkeley smiled with real amusement. “I should hope not, but I’ve met more than one honest Cornish woman who would be more than up to the task, so perhaps she would, if given the right provocation.”

Adelaide smiled at the girl, who was not so much younger than herself, yet seemed so innocent by the same token. “We are an unusual bunch, Miss Berkeley, but there is much affection between us.”

“I can see that.” She focused on her needlework, which appeared to be for a cushion. “If only all families shared such a thing.”

“Hush,” Julia urged gently, putting a hand on her cousin’s arm. “John and I are delighted to have you for Christmas, no matter the reason.”

Miss Berkeley nodded, sighing a little and looking up. “I’ve been sitting too long. Miss Moyle, would you mind showing me some of Trevadden? If I’m to feel at all comfortable tomorrow evening, I should like to see what I can now.”

“O’course!” Emblyn rose at once, setting her scarf aside. “Happy to oblige ee, Miz Berkeley.”

“Please,” the girl said as she smiled at Emblyn without reserve or shame. “Call me Honora. It means more to me.”

Emblyn nodded and gestured for Miss Berkeley to lead the way out of the room, and the two of them departed with quiet conversation continuing between them.

Adelaide waited a moment, then looked at Julia. “What in the world does she mean?”

Julia exhaled in irritation, shaking her head. “Her parents have never been warm with each other, but now they are living separately. Neither wanted her with them for Christmas, and her siblings have other plans and cannot take her. I adore my cousin, and had I known the trouble...” She growled, hiding a little. “I would have invited her myself rather than simply respond to her request to come.”

“Oh, the poor lamb.” Adelaide looked at the doorway as though she could still see her retreating form. “I might have wished for less distance in my family, but I always felt wanted.”

“Honora ought to feel caught between her parents,” Julia insisted, picking up her own embroidery and angrily stabbing her needle into the fabric. “Not as though she’s an inconvenience to them both.”

Adelaide sighed, thinking of the child within her and what might have been if she and Basset hadn't found this quiet accord between them, this friendliness with moments of blistering light, this comfort with each other, even if nothing was said. She knew full well he would never send her away, but he would allow her freedom to go if she wished it. He made no demands of her, likely never would, and no matter what she did, how she acted, how her temper flared, he would treat her with respect.

He might get a few barbs in, but ultimately, there would be respect.

Was it so impossible for other couples to find the same when they did not marry for love?

"I would have thought having children would bring a couple together," Adelaide said in a low voice, looking at her friend in some confusion. "My mother... she told me that Basset and I would come together over our children, if nothing else."

"My aunt and uncle did so, to be sure," Julia told her, pulling the needle and thread through the fabric with a more steady hand. "They came together and disagreed. They came together and criticized. They came together, well, I suppose they came together to create their children, but other than that, I'm not entirely sure. There are four of them and only one boy, so my uncle probably wanted another, which was why Honora was born. Incomprehensible how they managed it."

Adelaide frowned, biting her lip, picking up the slippers, then putting them down again. She had questions, and this time, she did not have to wait for an opportune moment with her husband to have them answered.

Pressing her tongue to her teeth, she formulated the question in her mind, then turned to her friend. "My mother told me that being with my husband would be unpleasant, and you said it was incomprehensible that they had so many children. Am I missing something, Julia?"

She knew the question was forward before it came forth, but the widening of Julia's eyes and the closing of her mouth

told her it was perhaps shocking as well.

It was all she could do to avoid hastily apologizing and begging her to forget she had said anything. She needed to understand this now that she knew a little.

A very little, perhaps.

“So you disagree with your mother’s estimation, then?” Julia began carefully, her voice as stiff as her posture at the moment.

Adelaide nodded a rapid series of bobs. “I do. I rather enjoyed it, once I got over how vulnerable I felt. I was dreadfully confused in the morning. I thought perhaps my mother did not understand, or never quite managed the way of it.”

Julia clamped down on her lips, a wrinkle appearing in her brow. “It is fairly straightforward, all things considered.”

“True enough,” Adelaide agreed, wondering if her friend was shocked or fighting laughter. “It must be the vulnerability that is unpleasant. Properly done, it is delightful.”

“Er...” Julia winced and shook her head. “I can give you many, many names of wives who would disagree with you. Not me, particularly, but several others.”

“Their tastes might be different.” Adelaide shrugged, waving a hand. “There is no explaining that.”

“Some of them have had more than one husband, and the experiences could not be more different.”

Now that was a startling fact, and she reluctantly looked at her friend once more, her curiosity piqued. “What changed?”

“The man,” Julia said simply. “His treatment of her. Affection for and attraction to their husbands.”

Adelaide sputtered a near laugh. “That doesn’t signify in this case. I have no affection for Basset.”

That was not entirely true, but she could feel a slow burn of mortification starting in her cheeks, and a hasty retreat was competing with her curiosity.

Julia's expression was carefully blank. "Must be attraction, then."

The flaming in her cheeks doubled. "I doubt it," she lied.

"Then perhaps it is a third cause."

Mortification aside, Adelaide found herself inquiring. "Which is?"

A corner of Julia's lips turned up. "Selfless consideration of the husband for the experience of his wife."

Adelaide's heart pounded in her ears. "I..."

Her friend's smile slowly grew. "Without words, Lady Basset?"

The teasing sent a cold wash across Adelaide's cheeks, and she shook her head. "It cannot be so selfless on his part. He—I may safely say the occasion is pleasant for him. Very."

Julia laughed at the added emphasis. "Of course it is. But even you must see that, if stripped back to the most elementary parts, the experience could very much be otherwise for you while still being pleasant on his part."

Adelaide had never thought of that, her previous encounters with her husband passing through her mind with complete clarity. "I suppose."

"I won't pretend to understand the relationship between you," Julia told her, reaching out to take her hand. "Nor how it is between you in such intimate times. But from what you've said, Basset is taking great care to give you enjoyment when it could so easily be his alone, especially when there was no love and little affection between you. Perhaps if you resisted him a little less, you might see him better."

"Perhaps," Adelaide heard herself murmur, somehow unable to feel her lips at the moment.

Julia squeezed her hand and went back to her needlework, but Adelaide could not do so. Not yet.

Her husband, who had fairly despised her at the beginning, had taken a vulnerable time for her and crafted it into



something beautiful. He would never have admitted it, and she would never have seen it, had she not understood the way it could have been. Her only experience was with Basset, so she could only personally attest to how he was with her, and that...

Well, that was apparently extraordinary, given their situation.

Why? Why would he do such a thing when it was not required of him? So much else she had been told made more sense, given this understanding. All of the allusions, all of the hints, all of the details that could not be mentioned in polite company.

Basset had defied all of that. For her.

Suddenly, every brush of his fingers, every pass of his lips, every soft word took on meaning a hundred times more than she had ever given it. Each would have been intentional, significant, and personal, something he could give her in a moment that could have been his alone. She could recollect everything from those nights and did so with exquisite care now, seeing each with new eyes and new appreciation.

New understanding.

The child within her suddenly moved, the feeling no longer that of a pitiful fluttering, but now a pointed shift she could put her hand upon, and it made her smile.

She might not be able to fully comprehend the gift Basset had given her, but she could certainly ensure that her gift to him might hold equal significance for them both.

# Chapter Seventeen



“Say it again. I am determined to get this right.”

Basset sighed, and he wasn't the only one to do so. He caught his sister's look behind Adelaide and fought a smile when her expression was mirroring his own feelings.

“Whatever sibling understanding the two of you are sharing, stop it,” Adelaide snapped. “This is my first Christmas in Cornwall, and I want it to be perfect.”

“Of course you do,” Harrison soothed in a not-soothing voice. “But none of us actually speak Cornish in everyday conversation.”

“That is not the point, Basset!” Adelaide groaned and turned to Emblyn. “Your accent is undoubtedly better. You tell me.”

Emblyn's smile was far more indulgent for Adelaide. “*Nadelik Lowen*,” she said slowly, her pronunciation utterly perfect.

Adelaide nodded once. “Nah-dah-leck Loh-when,” she repeated, her emphasis almost harsh.

“Good,” Harrison said before Emblyn could respond. “Now say it quickly and pretend it's German.”

Strangely enough, that did it, and her accent was spot on.

Harrison stared at her in wonder.

“What?” she shot back when he said nothing.

“That... was not supposed to work,” he admitted, blinking in disbelief. “I was humoring you.”

She scowled and elbowed him hard. “Impossible man.”

“I know. It's a wonder you tolerate me.”

Her brisk nod had him silently laughing while the three of them waited for the approaching carriages.

The footmen stepped forward in perfect unison for the pair of carriages, Gage stepping out of the first while John Roskelley alighted from the second, turning to help his wife and cousin down.

“*Nadelik Lowen!*” Adelaide called merrily, clasping her hands together.

Gage bowed with a boyish grin. “*Meur ras*. Don’t ask me anything else. I haven’t learned any new Cornish words since I was eleven, much to the shame of my ancestors.” He stepped forward and shook Harrison’s hand, plucked Adelaide’s hand up for a kiss, and pulled Emblyn into his side for a brotherly hug. “Compliments of the season, all. Did my man see the venison brought over for you?”

Adelaide scowled at him, though it failed to have any darkness in it. “He did, and I may never forgive you. It was entirely unnecessary.”

“Not at all,” Gage quipped shamelessly. “I could never eat all the venison from this year’s hunt, so why not share the bounty with my friends?” He waved at the approaching Roskelley party as though he were the host and not Harrison. “John, have you found your costume for Twelfth Night yet?”

“Why?” Julia demanded mid-curtsey. “Do you wish to dress to match?” She winked at Adelaide. “Good evening, Adelaide. Basset. Emblyn. You all remember my cousin Honora?”

Harrison smiled warmly at the pretty young woman, her deep auburn hair coiled neatly into a sort of crown he found rather festive. “Welcome to Trevadden, Miss Honora. Happy Christmas.”

“Thank you for the invitation, my lord,” she answered in a soft but somehow not quite meek voice. “May I wish you the compliments of the season?”

“Thank you.” He bowed slightly and gestured toward the house. “Please, everyone, come in.”

“Yes, yes!” Adelaide insisted, waving them all inside. “Come sit by the fire and warm yourselves!”

Emblyn laughed at them both, shaking her head. “I s’pose ee mus’ all come inside, as they both say so.”

Their guests laughed as they all entered Trevadden, and Harrison had the fleeting impression of family unity and entertainment. Of course, they were a family in the technical sense, but as for the feeling of actually being a family, he had not had that in many, many years. If ever.

He looked at the woman walking beside him, her hand absently falling to her swollen abdomen, a smile on her perfect lips.

She was his family. And she was carrying another member of his family. And she was embracing the closest member of his family nearly as much as he did. She was helping him create this family. Who would have thought either of them capable of such a thing?

And as for Emblyn, it was likely just as miraculous. She had not been raised in much of a family setting, though her mother had certainly done her best by her. Her initial reaction to Harrison’s attempts at familial connection had been bordering on the feral, and it was only through time and persistence that she was now in his life in such a warm capacity.

It was not his first Christmas with her, but it was the first where they felt truly like family.

Fighting a sudden tightening in his throat, Harrison put his hand on the small of Adelaide’s back while they waited for their friends to remove their outer things and hand them off to servants.

Adelaide did not look at him, but he felt her settle against his hand as though it was comfortable in its place there, which was a right sight better than recoiling, as she might have done not so long ago.

“I hope we might be able to convince Honora to sing for us tonight,” Adelaide said brightly when their guests returned

their attention to them. “After Basset and I portray our rudimentary musical skills, someone will need to salvage the evening.”

Self-disparaging comments from his wife? Would wonders never cease? But then, she was playing the hostess, and there was nothing she did so well as that.

“I would not mind in the least,” Honora assured her, bearing a smile that seemed truly pleased by the invitation. “I love singing Christmas songs most of all.”

“That says a great deal, considering your talents,” Gage said. “I recall your singing the last time you visited your cousin, and it was quite remarkable.”

She blushed a little, her smile deepening. “Thank you, Mr. Trembath.”

“I only speak the truth,” he insisted with a shrug. “No one would ever ask me to sing for a gathering, you can be quite sure of that.”

“Oh, please, no,” Julia begged. “I wish to enjoy Christmas.”

“So do I,” Mr. Roskelley agreed with a fervent nod. “Limit his spirits, if you please, and spare us all.”

Gage glared at him while the others laughed. “*Et tu, John?*”

Roskelley looked only mildly apologetic.

“I believe dinner will be ready in just a moment or two,” Adelaide told them all. “Perhaps we might go into the dining room now? Unless you would prefer the drawing room while we wait.”

Gage shook his head immediately. “No, indeed, the sooner we can eat, the sooner my more charming side will arrive. Surely we all want that.”

“I wasn’t aware you had one of those,” Harrison mused thoughtfully, now finding himself rubbing Adelaide’s back gently. “Interesting.”

“Basset,” Adelaide scolded with a laugh. “For shame!”

“Thank you, Adelaide.” Gage sniffed dismissively and nodded at her. “I trust you to recognize such things, considering your husband is the one without charm.”

Now the others chortled at the friendly banter, and Harrison only shrugged at the accusation.

But Adelaide’s lips pursed, the faintest hint of a smile ticking one corner. “It’s a tricky thing, charm,” she said slowly. “Quite often, I find some claim to possess it when all it turns out to be is empty air for cooling tea.”

Harrison covered his mouth with the back of his hand as laughter rippled through him. Gage looked appropriately horrified, then burst out laughing himself, as did the others.

“A merry Christmas, indeed,” Gage managed between laughter. “And to think, I offered up my venison for this.”

Adelaide shook her head, grinning outright. “That is your own fault, and no one else’s. Come, let’s eat.”

The table settings were a work of art, perfectly encapsulating the Christmas season with its greenery and winter berries, and though Adelaide had dressed rather simply in a gown of green and gold, she perfectly encapsulated the same beauty.

He assisted her in her seat, taking a very brief moment to squeeze her hand. He did not trust himself to praise her for an excellent barb at Gage, for welcoming these friends into her own life as well as their home, for making Trevadden more than the house he lived in.

He was suddenly grateful for so many things where she was concerned.

By the time he reached his own place, Honora and Emblyn were already deep in conversation about something across from each other, while the rest laughed about some joke he had missed. It did not matter much, the spirit of the meal was already everything he could have hoped.

The cook had outdone herself this year, preparing roast beef and pheasant, along with the venison Gage had provided, matched by the mince pies, Christmas pudding, roasted vegetables, white soup, three different breads, black butter, preserves as far as the eye could see, and the largest plum pudding Harrison had ever seen. Each of them had been given a glass of syllabub as well as Madeira, though how any of them would manage room for any drink at all was beyond him.

“I don’t recognize these flowers,” Adelaide suddenly said, eyeing the décor on the table suspiciously. “They were not part of the arrangements before.” She looked at Harrison, questioning without words.

He glanced at the flowers almost in passing as he began to cut into the venison on his plate. “Ah, that is the Christmas rose, my dear. Black hellebore, it is called. Beautiful and apt but, sadly, poisonous to the taste.”

Adelaide cocked her head, a crease appearing in the center of her brow. “I hardly thought of consuming it, Basset. Why are they here?”

He did his best not to smile. “I saw all of the joy you received from the greenery being put up, so I thought why not add a little color to the scheme? Real roses, particularly your favorite white ones, being out of season at the present, I thought these might do. Was I in error?”

She opened her mouth to say something, then smiled on a soft laugh. “No, you weren’t. They are very lovely and do add to the scheme indeed. I am surprised you knew about them.”

“You will find, my dear Adelaide,” Gage broke in around a mouth of potato, “that Basset knows a very little bit about a great many things and must exercise this knowledge wherever he can.”

As he’d no doubt intended, laughter rang out from the other guests, though Harrison still looked at Adelaide, her smile still perched on her lips.

As the conversation around them continued, he could only shrug a little as though to ask her if it was all right. Her small

nod at his gesture was enough, and he felt a warmth settle in his chest that had nothing to do with the meal before him.



“Shall we retire for some music and gifts?” Adelaide asked of the table, now that they all appeared to have finished the exquisite meal.

“Only if we do not have to go far, and the gifts are lavish,” Gage Trembath said without shame, continuing his trend of being exceptionally amusing and rather outspoken.

It was a most intriguing display, given there were two young ladies present who were unmarried and perfectly respectable.

Well, Emblyn was perhaps peculiarly respectable, but there was potential for a fortune from Basset, if need be.

Still, he was being rather free with his good humor, and it was difficult to say if he was being his truest self, or if he were aiming for a particular impression.

“I don’t know what sort of gift you are anticipating from us, Gage,” Basset inquired as they all stood. “By your own accounts, you have everything you need.”

“It is true,” Gage answered easily. “But I’ll have you know, I am in desperate need of a good pen wiper, and nobody ever gives it to me.”

Honora giggled at the idea, which made Emblyn grin, and the two girls linked arms and headed out of the room together.

Formal procession would have been nice as they moved to the rest of the evening, but Basset preferred informality in small, intimate gatherings, so they would not. It would have been a picture to have Gage bear one of the girls on each arm, though.

Perhaps he might do so at the Twelfth Night ball.



Basset held out his arm to Adelaide, and she took it with a smile. They moved toward the wide staircase all together, heading for the large drawing room that Adelaide had ordered to be particularly arranged for them.

“We’re not going to the music room?” Julia inquired from behind them.

Basset and Adelaide shared an amused look before Adelaide glanced over her shoulder at their guests. “We decided there was simply not enough space in the music room for a Christmas gathering.”

“*You* decided,” Basset interjected with emphasis.

She ignored him. “Some of the footmen were kind enough to move the pianoforte to the large drawing room, so we’ve arranged everything there!”

Basset shook his head, though he smiled. “There are seven of us, not twenty.”

“You have no taste for occasion.”

“Correct. I do not.”

His drollness made her snicker, and she sighed as they reached the drawing room, entering to the lovely concentration of candles and greenery, all elegance in seasonal array.

She had not anticipated Basset’s addition to the dining room décor, but there was something unbearably sweet about the simple act. The Christmas roses were so simple and delicate. It was the slightest touch, yet it added so very much.

He was not the unfeeling, aloof, disinterested man she’d originally taken him for, and she was beginning to see that all too clearly.

“Well, what do you think?” she asked, dropping her arm from Basset’s and turning to face the others.

They were all smiles, and Julia sighed as she clung to her husband’s arm. “I think it is the most perfect room at Christmas one could ask for,” her friend said. Then she winked at Adelaide. “And I think it is time for the Bassets to play their Christmas duet.”

Basset groaned his usual reluctance, though there was a hint of a smile there, and Gage pulled out a handkerchief, mimicking tucking it into his ears as he situated himself in a chair. Everyone else sat, and Adelaide turned for the instrument, her heart suddenly feeling quite unsteady.

She had been on display before for various accomplishments, as all young ladies of fortune or influence were in London, but never for something she was so inexperienced at. They had been practicing for ages and had mastered the song several times without error together, but it had not stopped her from practicing her own part several times before she had changed for the evening.

What if she failed at it now?

“After you,” Basset said with a playful gesture toward the bench.

She managed a weak smile no one else would see and sat, her suddenly trembling hands resting in her lap while he situated himself beside her.

“It will be fine,” he whispered, thankfully not leaning to do so, as the others would notice. “We’ve done it before.”

“But can we do it now?” Adelaide hissed back. She showed him her hand, the shaking visible.

He took her hand in his, squeezing gently. “It does not matter,” he assured her. “They are not company, and this is not for them.”

The implication of his statement was not lost on her, and she longed to look into his dark eyes to see if what was there matched what she felt, but she resisted.

She needed to be settled for this, not ruffled. And Basset’s eyes had a habit of ruffling her.

Raising her chin just a touch, she nodded once, and they both raised their fingers to rest on the keys. “One, two, three...”

They began to play, just as they’d rehearsed, the notes perfectly timed with each other, their fingers moving in

familiar patterns along the keys. It was not a complicated piece, particularly for a duet, but for amateurs at the art, it was enough of a challenge to take on without being especially intimidating. It would sound lovely to the hearers, provided they did the job right, but it would not compete with those who were truly skilled.

It was a flowing rendition of “The First Noël,” one of her favorites, and Adelaide took care to emphasize the melody in her part, just as Julia had reminded her. When it would pass off to Basset, the task would be his, and he had never failed to play it well before, yet at this moment, she feared the outcome.

She held her breath as her fingers danced carefully along the instrument, her hand brushing his as that hand waited a moment for its turn.

He crossed his arm over hers and began the melody he would carry for a time, and she released her breath slowly as relief sank into her stomach. She kept her left hand where it was, silent for the moment while he played, her right hand continuing on in delicate notes to accompany him.

There was something magical in the brushing of his arm over hers, though it was hardly intentional. Despite his sleeve and her own, her skin began to ignite beneath the layers, each pass sending heat farther and farther up her arm. She was suddenly acutely aware of the breadth of his shoulders, the limited space between them seeming to close with each heartbeat. His heat radiated from the closeness, wrapping itself around her despite the fact that he continued to play the instrument before them rather than move closer.

Her leg sat flush against his on the bench, and the realization that she could feel the natural tension of its strength caused a strange burning at the back of her neck and in her throat. Her mouth went dry as sensation slowly rippled its way from her hip to her knee, each connection searing her skin, even with the layers of skirt and petticoats between them.

How would she ever manage to finish the song when the only thing in her mind was the impeccable physique of the man sitting beside her?

Panicked, her eyes leapt to the page, desperate to recollect their place in the number, even as her fingers continued in their memorization of her part.

She needed to focus on the music. On this performance. On proving to her husband that they could, in fact, work together and create something beautiful.

Something joyful.

Something...

She took over the melody from Basset, feeling a small burst of relief as they turned to the last page, both of them playing better than they had practiced. They were perfectly in time with each other, their hands moving together and adapting to the movements of the other as though they had been doing so for years. The notes floated from the instrument, filling the room and seeming to take particular root in Adelaide's heart.

This was more than simply playing a carol with her husband for her friends. This was a gift they had given each other and were giving to the others and somehow also giving to themselves.

She'd never felt something like this. Never given something like this, nor had she received it. Such a small, simple thing, and yet...

They played the final notes before Adelaide realized it, and she exhaled in a rush as her mind caught up with the moment. Applause sounded from the other side of the room, and she smiled at the others, beaming with pride and embarrassment.

Basset was laughing beside her, the sound as appealing as all of her previous impressions combined. He took her hand in his, squeezing once more, this time without words.

The baby within her moved then, a strong, defined motion she had felt once or twice before, but never in her husband's company. It shifted again, pressing against her belly as though it wished to join the others in this celebration, or demanding another song for its listening pleasure.

Whichever it was, Adelaide did not want to share this moment with her baby alone. She moved the hand that Basset held, adjusting her grip on his hand to guide it to the exact place where their child had been pressing.

He froze at the contact, and Adelaide waited, staring off at nothing, willing the motion to happen again.

Then it came, a subtle but undeniable shifting they both could feel, reminding them in no uncertain terms that a child *was* growing within her, and that, before too long, it *would* be joining their family.

Adelaide smiled to herself, oddly emotional, and she heard Basset's breathless chuckle beside her. She felt his lips press against the side of her head, felt his brow lean against her, and she gave in to the sudden desire to sink into his hold.

As she'd hoped, his arm wrapped around her, just for a moment, and then they rose, accepting their now overly exuberant praise from their guests.

"Well done, Adelaide," Basset murmured as he took another bow to match her curtsy.

She glanced at him, smiling a little. "I know. But you did well, too."

He snorted a soft laugh and winked. "That is a great comfort."

Her stomach fluttered at his wink, and she moved from the instrument to the others, turning her attention to Honora and Julia. "Now I will insist that the two of you show us how Christmas carols should sound."

"Any particular requests?" Honora asked brightly, seeming more outspoken now than Adelaide had ever seen.

"Might you favor us with 'Whence is that Goodly Fragrance Flowing?'" Gage suggested as he settled back into his seat. "I've always admired that piece."

Honora seemed delighted by the request. "Of course!" She turned to Julia, and they began to converse on the details as they walked to the pianoforte.

“Meanwhile,” Adelaide said, “I will see that Mervyn brings up the Mahogany for us to enjoy.” She gestured to one of the footmen, who nodded briskly and left the room.

Left without occupation, Adelaide found herself looking between Gage and the pretty cousin of his oldest friend as she prepared to sing a song he requested. Her mind spun with sudden ideas and possibilities, her lips curving in a smile.

Basset moved to sit by his sister, then changed course and came to Adelaide instead. “You’re thinking something.”

“Mm-hmm,” she agreed, nodding slowly. “What would you say to Gage and Miss Berkeley?”

“As a match?”

Adelaide gave him a scolding look. “No, as partners for the bowling green. Yes, for a match!”

He looked between the two of them, his expression speculative. “I don’t know. I can see the merit of it, but Gage has not been the same since that business with Margaret Teague when it comes to matters of the heart. Or matrimony, seeing as the two may not be one and the same.”

“As we are proof,” Adelaide muttered, nudging him gently with her elbow.

He only nodded. “But I will say, I do like the idea. Will you suggest it to him?”

Adelaide shook her head. “Not tonight. It is Christmas, after all, and we are about to give Gage a glass of Mahogany. Who knows what he’ll say or do after that?”

Basset shuddered, which supported her thoughts adequately. “No, indeed. Miss Berkeley would never see him in the same light.” He exhaled a quick breath. “Speak to Julia about it after Christmas. I daresay she might join you in the venture.”

“Excellent thought.” She smirked up at him playfully. “Sometimes, Basset, you do have marvelous ideas.”

He looked down at her with a rueful smile. “I should think so. I married you, didn’t I?”

Adelaide quirked her brows at that. “Fortunate man.”

“Glad you think so.” He smiled more fully, a rather ticklish sort of smile, and Adelaide squirmed at it.

“Right,” she said slowly, willing herself back to sanity. “I’d best see to the drinks. It cannot be a Christmas in Cornwall without Mahogany.” Before he could contradict or agree with her or remind her that the footman was already doing so, she turned on her heel and hurried toward the door, praying the heat she was feeling was due to the energy of playing for the gathering or from the fire in the room.

Certainly not from the man she had said was fortunate to have married her.

# Chapter Eighteen



“Been a momen’ since ee’ve been below, milord. I was feared ee might’ve lost yer skills down ‘ere.”

Harrison chuckled easily and looked at the man a few paces down from him, the light from the lanterns enough to see his features, now that his eyes had adjusted. “I’ve been sneaking down to the mines since I was eleven, Martin. Even if I were away from here for a decade, I could never forget how to work in one.”

“On’y ee were naw taugh’ well enow,” another man boasted from farther down the line. “Come on naw, milor’, giv’ ‘er a whackin’.”

“Don’t listen a wor’ Breton says, milord, this tunnel is too weak fer ‘ard whackin’.” Martin turned to glare at the other man. “Cap’n Drake was on’y telling us this day afore last.”

A grumbling could be heard from several people in the closest vicinity, and Harrison wondered at that. If safety had been in question, why would they not wish to take greater care in their daily work?

Why hadn’t Drake said anything to Harrison about it this morning when they had met? Why were any of them in this tunnel to begin with?

Should they be here?

“How weak is it, Martin?” Harrison asked in a very low voice, well aware how his voice might carry in such surroundings.

Martin was a seasoned miner more than capable of being a captain should he wish to be. Yet he was down here working, day in and day out, for the same pay as all the rest and apparently content to be doing so.



Wheal Drennick was not as profitable as Wheal Lidden, but it was the oldest mine in the area, and tradition was nearly as important as productivity. So long as Drennick could still provide enough ore to sell, he would keep it open.

So long as it did not break in pieces.

“Strong ‘nuff to ‘old us, milord,” Martin assured him, his eyes serious. “An’ weak ‘nuff to take care.” He sniffed noisily and slid his gaze along the line of men. “Some of us know ‘ow ta do that.”

Harrison nodded, not feeling entirely at ease despite the attempts at doing so. He was not an experienced miner, if one were to ask, but he certainly knew his way around a mine. He knew the risks, he knew the cost, he knew what sort of care one ought to take, and he knew how arduous the work within a mine was for the men within it.

They had not had a rockfall in over twenty years in either mine, but the chance of one was always present.

He needed to avoid any possibility of such a misfortune for the safety of all concerned and to keep the reputation of his mines secure.

If his workers would not respect the mine and her weaknesses, they ought not to be working in her.

“How long has Breton been here?” Harrison asked, returning his attention to the rock before him, carefully chipping away at the line of tin.

“Since afore yer father died,” Martin grunted. “And he ain’t gained a lick o’ sense in the interim.”

Harrison shook his head, tapping his pick firmly against the wall. “Drake ought to get rid of him.”

“He’s one o’ the bes’ miners ‘ere, milord,” Martin said with some reluctance. “Insofar as amoun’ goes. Brings up more’n most, and numbers canno’ be argued.”

Unfortunately, that was true, but it was certainly an inconvenient truth.

“Then he should be in a tunnel where less care is needed,” Harrison suggested. “I’ll ask Drake to see to it shortly.”

“If ee like, milord,” Martin replied as he toiled on his own section. “Breton don’ like being told where ‘e can and canno’ be.”

Harrison felt himself growing particularly superior, which he usually avoided in his life. “If the man cannot take orders and respect authority in such a dangerous setting, then he certainly must be removed. This is not the place for that.”

“For wha’, milord?” Breton hollered as though it was his first day in a mine rather than one of thousands. “A mine is the perfect place for errything!”

As if to prove it, Breton swung his pickaxe at an outcropping near him, which seemed to shake the walls around them all.

“Martin—”

“Wait,” the older man hissed.

Every man froze as dust and rock scattered above them, followed by larger pieces of rock.

“Go!” Martin called, pushing Harrison toward the entrance. “Go!”

Harrison bolted with the rest, but the rocks from the ceiling continued to trickle down, not in a full shower but ominously and without pattern.

Something sharp hit Harrison along his cheek while another struck a blow on his shoulder, causing him to stumble just a little, though his momentum was not very affected. He followed the other men out, coming to the surface with a gasp, though he had not been holding his breath in any way. It had to be relief that coursed through him, though the burning in his throat spoke more of fear than relief.

He whirled in the grass to watch the others rush from the tunnels, and a bell clanged the warning, which made Harrison wince. Anyone within a mile or two would hear the sound and would know something was likely amiss at Drennick.

There went the reputation.

“Is everyone out?” Harrison demanded when he saw Drake emerging in a dusty cloud with several others.

“Yes,” Drake called, coughing slightly. He gestured at Harrison. “You’re bleeding, milord.”

Harrison swiped at his cheek, seeing the streak of blood on his linen sleeve. “Dammit.” He exhaled roughly and propped his hands on his hips. “Is there a reason why Mr. Breton is able to behave so recklessly in a tunnel that has been cautioned against such things?”

Drake’s eyes widened and he looked at Martin for confirmation. “Breton?”

Martin nodded once.

Drake cursed and looked back at Harrison. “It won’t happen again, milord.”

“No, I shouldn’t think so.” Harrison nodded toward the mine. “Is it a complete rockfall?”

“We don’t know until everything settles,” Drake told him. “Go home, my lord. Tend to your wounds, apologize to your wife on my behalf for your injuries. I will send you word when there is something to tell.” He looked like a man beaten down, which was the only thing that kept Harrison from barking at him for all of this.

Harrison hesitated a moment, then turned back toward his horse.

“My lord?”

He glanced over his shoulder toward the mine captain.

Drake smiled bitterly. “I offer you the compliments of the season. I hope Twelfth Night is blessed indeed.”

Harrison nodded his thanks, then continued to walk away, grumbling to himself about the folly of men and his own. Desperate to escape Adelaide’s obsession with their Twelfth Night masquerade, he had fled Trevadden. Having spent so

much time at Wheal Lidden, it was only right that he attend to business with Wheal Drennick, and this...

Well, this was certainly not something he had anticipated.

At least tomorrow evening, he would be wearing some sort of disguise so Adelaide could not fly into too much of a temper, should his cut be worse than he thought.

She was becoming an interesting creature, his wife. Sweeter than she had ever been, yet losing none of the bite in her banter. Glowing with her usual beauty, and yet having gained something more ethereal as her term of carrying their child continued. He was simply incapable of looking anywhere else when she was in the room.

And to then feel their child move within her on Christmas Eve. There was nothing to do but kiss her, though his lips had only touched her hair. They had not been intimate since her courses had stopped, and while he ached for that connection with her, he was finding such surprises in life with her without it. He would never have expected it. Not with her.

The ride to Trevadden was a short one, what with the vision of his wife to attend him, and it was easy enough to slip in through the eastern wing, which should avoid any interactions with his wife, as she would surely be preparing the ballroom. He did not need questions or prying, and he did not need to know if she was entirely unconcerned about his well-being. He simply wanted to clean up and look over numbers for one of his investments that had not tried to kill him today.

“You are filthy.”

Harrison paused a step, cursing to himself. “I’ve been at Wheal Drennick,” he answered without looking, suspecting his wife had just stepped out of the library, which made no sense whatsoever.

“Inside it?”

“Yes. And now I wish to have a bath and get changed. It was hard work.” He forced a laugh he did not feel. “And I am out of practice.”

“You are also cut, Basset. On your arm.”

He looked, having missed the slit in his sleeve that exposed a shallow cut that no longer bled. “Ah, yes. Some rock showered down while we were working. It is nothing.”

“I did not know you worked in the mines on occasion,” Adelaide said, her tone not at all disapproving and far more fascinated. Curious, even. Intrigued.

Which, of course, piqued his interest as well.

He turned slightly, facing her just a little, allowing himself to smile. “On occasion, yes. I enjoy the labor, given I am not expected to do anything of the sort by those of my own station. I find satisfaction in it, and I think it is important to truly understand the conditions and tasks of the miners if I am to care for the mine.”

“You do care a great deal, Harrison, about everything, it seems.”

She had never used his given name without expressing his surname as well, and there was nothing to do but face her completely, shock and awe rising along the course of his body from his toes up. He could not ask a question, had no words for one, and only tilted his head in inquiry.

Adelaide wrung her fingers together, her rather simple gown no less lovely for its lack of adornment. She bit her lip, a distracting motion he rather liked, her brow creasing.

He was happy to wait so long as he could look at her.

“I think...” she began, her voice smaller than he would have expected, “I think my ignorance about the nature of relations between husband and wife has also prevented me from understanding how it might have been. And how differently you go about it compared to... others.”

Harrison’s amusement faded into solemnity. “Ah.”

“Not that it is different,” she went on hastily. “I simply mean you take greater care. For me. And I do not...”

“Do not what?” he asked in a quiet tone when she did not continue.

She resumed wringing her fingers together. “Understand. I do not understand, Harrison. Why you should engage with me with more care than others do, particularly when we did not have any affection when we married. Why would you be so selfless?”

He noted that she spoke in past tense but made no comment on it. After all, she was not actively saying she had affection for him. Even so. It was an interesting choice of words.

“Why?” he repeated, taking a step or two closer. “Because I could not fathom proceeding in any other way. You see, Adelaide, I’ve seen how selfish men can be where women are concerned. I am related to two of the worst sort. I cannot be my father. I saw what his behavior and his ways did to my mother. I could only imagine what it did to Emblyn’s mother, who was very likely forced upon.”

Adelaide shuddered, a hand going to her mouth.

But Harrison could not apologize for his frankness. She needed to understand this about him. Where he had come from. Why he had chosen this path.

Why he would continue to choose it.

“And then there is my brother,” he went on, swallowing. “Who knows how many women he has taken advantage of and likely continues to do so? The selfish manner in which he has lived his life disgusts me. I am not a saint, but I won’t sin against a woman, either. I never intended to be a paragon of anything or something remarkable. I simply thought this was a better way for a man to treat his wife and his marriage. And... it has come to mean more for me than I think it might have done, had I acted as others do.”

Adelaide smiled softly at that, a finger curving beneath her lip in a thoughtful gesture. Her rich eyes seemed to see more of him than he thought visible, and while it was unnerving, it was also liberating, in a sense.

He cleared his throat. “So perhaps it is not entirely as selfless as you’ve been led to believe.”

“No,” his wife murmured, her smile turning a little lopsided, “but I think that might be better.”

Heavens, he needed to extinguish whatever was igniting in the pit of his stomach and the soles of his feet.

He nodded his thanks. “If you’ll excuse me now, Adelaide, I really must clean up. I would love to hear about your preparations for the ball when I return.”

“You would not,” she said on a surprised laugh, “but it was a noble effort. Go and wash, tend to your cuts.”

Harrison grinned and bowed, turning away and making haste toward his rooms without looking as though he was making haste. He was not fleeing his wife, after all. He was simply...

So he was fleeing his wife. There were surely worse things.

And he was rather a mess, and soaking his head would likely do him a world of good in more than one sense.

The servants had his bath prepared in fairly short order, and soon, he was sitting in the large copper tub, leaning his head back with a heavy sigh.

“Soap, my lord?” his valet asked as he collected the filthy clothing.

Harrison nodded, holding his hand out. “Thank you, Gains. Unless you have a great wish to wash my hair for me, you may go.”

His valet barked a laugh as he dropped the bar of soap in Harrison’s palm. “I will sacrifice the task this time, my lord, and throw my best efforts into preparing your costume for tomorrow’s ball.”

Groaning, Harrison began to lather the soap in his hands. “Burn the costume. Please.”

“No, my lord, I shall not,” Gains insisted. “I am terrified of upsetting your wife.” He left the room then, while Harrison laughed to himself.

“Probably wise,” Harrison said to no one in particular. He began the arduous task of scrubbing the dirt and dust from his body, wondering if he’d need a fresh tub of water to rinse in after dirtying the present body of it so.

He should have started with a swim in the sea.

He slipped under the water to wet his face and hair entirely, then broke the surface, leaning back once more.

Footsteps behind him made him chuckle. “Change your mind?”

“About what?” a voice that was certainly *not* his valet answered, and Harrison jerked with a splash.

He whirled in the tub to face the door. “Adelaide?”

She motioned for him to turn back around. “Come, let me wash your hair, Basset. Take your ease.”

With his wife washing his hair while he sat in a bath?

Not bloody likely.

But if she was willing...

He blinked, watching her, waiting for her to change her mind.

She only indicated he turn around once more.

Heart bouncing against his diaphragm and several ribs, Harrison did so, forcing himself to lean against the tub again. Cautiously, carefully, and with slow and steady breathing.

He felt her kneel behind the tub, her fingers finding his hair with a kind of hesitation that clenched his stomach.

“Soap, please.”

He held it up, afraid to move much more for fear she might slit his throat or have him confessing a great deal of emotional things he was not prepared to acknowledge to himself. This was the influence she had over him. A power that blended fear with fondness, passion with self-preservation, and left him rather windswept.



Taking the soap from him, Adelaide began rubbing it through his hair, and, impossibly, Harrison felt himself relaxing far more than he usually did in any bath, let alone in her presence. There was something soothing about the way she touched him, the manner in which her fingers rubbed against his scalp and found parts of it he was certain had never existed before this moment. His breathing began to deepen, and he settled against the tub as comfortably as if it were his bed.

He lost all sense of time, most sense of himself; the only portion of him truly aware of anything was beneath the touch of the woman washing his hair. He exhaled very slowly, not minding in the least that she would hear what he might call a sigh.

“I am having... the strangest craving at the moment.”

Harrison chuckled easily, his eyes flitting open, though he did not turn to see her. “What is it this time? Toast in chocolate? Eggs with marmalade? Perhaps a vegetable soup with tea as its broth?”

Her fingers stilled in his hair, and he caught an odd catching of her breath. “You, my lord. I think I’m craving you.”

Startled, he jerked and turned, looking up at her.

Her own bewildered eyes met his, her full lips parting on unsteady breaths.

Then her fingers tightened in his hair, and she leaned in. He arched up and met her, their lips connecting with a sweetness they had never known in any of their intimate moments.

She opened to him at once, her fingers gripping further still in his curls, sending a fire shooting through him, crying out for him to kiss her into an absolute shattering.

Yet he forced himself to cling to restraint, keeping this kiss slow, leisurely, and deep. She gave generously, her lips molding to his with an ease that humbled him, enlightened him, confounded him.

She hummed against his mouth, the friction of the sound against their joining lips fairly incendiary, and Harrison leaned more fully into the kiss, following the incomparable draw of her like a sailor to a siren.

She broke the kiss softly, exhaling a shaking, satisfying sigh as she touched her brow to his.

Harrison had no thoughts. None at all. He only wanted to kiss her again. A hundred times again. A thousand, if she'd let him.

“There,” Adelaide said, her voice suddenly stronger. “That did it. And now I am craving toast in chocolate. I thank you for the idea.” She pulled back with a fond smile, her fingers leaving his hair, her demeanor entirely unruffled by the most transcendent moment of his entire existence.

He tried to form a word. Any word. Any syllable, but none would come.

Adelaide stood, tossing the soap into the tub and wiping her hands on nearby toweling. “Don’t forget to rinse your hair, Basset. Dried soap would not suit a shade like yours.” Without another word, she turned on her heel and practically skipped out of the room.

Leaving him alone in the bath, wondering with weakened thoughts what in the world that had been.

He’d known his wife had been enjoying the strangest of cravings in her condition, but this?

Was this going to happen often?

They had never shared a true kiss during daylight, and certainly never one of that nature.

What did that mean? Or did it mean anything more than his wife having the same sort of craving she might have over a plate of beets and oranges?

Harrison shook his head and let himself sink entirely underwater.

Soaking his head was clearly a better idea than he’d previously thought.

# Chapter Nineteen



“Well, truth be told, I expected worse than this.”

“How dare you. Did you think I had no taste at all?”

“Frankly, my dear, I have no idea what your taste is when it comes to a masquerade ball.”

Adelaide glared up at him. “The theme is virtue and vice. I had the idea from Sally Penbarton when we met by chance at the chandler’s. You are greed, and I am charity.”

Basset looked down at his ensemble, then up at her. “I do not see it.”

“I do not care if you see it,” she snapped in irritation, adjusting the medieval templer and veil covering her hair. “You only have to wear it. Now hurry, we promised Emblyn we would exchange gifts before the ball.”

“If couples are to be a virtue and a vice, what are the unmarried guests to be?” Basset inquired, falling into step beside her as they made their way to the drawing room down the hall.

Adelaide sighed heavily, wondering why her husband was asking so many questions when it was really quite simple, and he would not be interested in the details anyway. He had made it very clear from the moment she had begun to plan this whole masquerade that he wanted nothing to do with it. He would attend, be in costume, and that was all.

Now he wanted to know more?

“Unmarried guests were asked to come as a character from mythology,” Adelaide told him with practiced patience. “Emblyn has selected a nymph, and I think you will find her costume rather lovely.”

“Has she? Well, well.” Basset seemed to laugh a little to himself but said nothing else.

Impossible man.

Truth be told, Adelaide was nervous about their masquerade this evening, and it was taking all of her composure not to show it. She was comfortable hosting events, could have done so in her sleep, but she was growing larger by the day with her child, and she would not be dancing this evening, which detracted from some of the enjoyment she might have found in it. Now she would have nothing to divert her attention from her anxieties, from seeing to every perceived need of her guests, from wondering if they were pleased, if they were enjoying the event, if she had done enough...

So many questions swam around her head before a single guest had arrived, and it was due to only grow worse when they did.

As though it could sense her rising tension, the child within her moved, hardly enough to set her awry, but enough to set her hand at the swelling where the motion had been.

Motherhood would be upon her in a matter of months, and she felt entirely out of her depth. Her own mother had been a fair enough example of raising children into adulthood without ruining them, but it seemed far more complicated than that. She did not want her child to feel as though it were only an afterthought in life, or that it existed for whatever purpose she or Society dictated.

She wanted better for her child than for herself.

Would that be enough?

The child was also Basset's, and he had a father and a brother of poor tastes, which seemed to indicate some tendency toward sin. But it was possible the thing was a learned behavior rather than an inherited one. After all, Basset did not even blink at the prospect of temptation.

Richard had told her that he had always been that way.

They had been writing to each other on a fairly regular basis, though not with any haste, after her response to his first letter, which she had carefully worded to avoid giving encouragement or excessive details about her life with Basset. To Richard's credit, he had not inquired as to any. He seemed to only want to establish a friendship with Adelaide, and he did not even press there.

She had perhaps four letters from him now, all told, and while he never shied away from his life of sin, he seemed to show true regret for how it had affected the relationship with his brother and with all at Trevadden. He truly struggled with his tendencies, finding the defense against them lacking and the will to withstand them weak. But he showed real affection for Adelaide, for Basset, and for his childhood home in Cornwall.

The stories he had told her from his youth were amusing and entertaining, and she wished to hear Basset's version of them as well. Yet Richard had told her more than once that, until he could prove himself, Basset would not take kindly to Richard's intervention.

So she had said nothing.

She did note that Richard never once mentioned Emblyn in his letters, and, given the circumstances of strain between the brothers and Emblyn's own background, she made no mention of her either. That was not her secret to share, and she trusted that Basset had a reason for not telling his brother about their sister.

But oh, there were days when she wanted to take her letter from Richard and show Basset the apologetic tone of it and the amiable nature with which he wrote.

She would have to give it time and let Richard become the man he thought himself too low to aspire to.

"I had no notion tha' charity wore pearls."

Adelaide broke from her reverie and laughed at her sister-in-law's remarks, glancing down at her otherwise moderately

plain ensemble. "I thought the pearls might represent goodness and elevation, much befitting a virtue such as this."

Emblyn grinned widely, her whimsical, ethereal costume of white and pale green suiting her rather perfectly. "And the gold in yer templer and veil?"

"My holy glow, surely," Adelaide protested. "And it is only right that it should stream down into the gown itself, just a touch. Charity does draw one in, does it not?"

"Suppose it does." Emblyn looked over at her brother, eyeing his ensemble. "And given the deep red o' yer coat, Harry, and the black and gold beneath it all, ee mus' be greed?"

He gave her a slight bow. "As promised." He pulled his watch from his pocket, frowning at the time. "If we are to exchange gifts, ladies, it must be now. The guests will be along shortly."

"I should like to go first!" Adelaide moved to the gifts wrapped in brown paper atop the sideboard in the room. The larger one she handed to Basset, the smaller to Emblyn. "*Nadelik Lowen.*"

Basset chuckled as he unwrapped the paper. "You will never tire of saying that, will you?"

Adelaide shook her head with a wild grin, linking her fingers together in anticipation.

He paused as he looked down at the now unwrapped slippers and began laughing in earnest, which made her grin spread farther still. "You did not."

"I can assure you, I did!" Adelaide giggled, touching her clasped fingers beneath her chin. "Emblyn could attest to my embroidery."

"A craven mythical creature of whimsy, Lady Basset? Most surprising." He looked over the slippers with a warm smile, nodding at them. "Thank you, Adelaide. Truly."

Her heart fluttered just a little, his full smile a wonder to behold. "You are most welcome." She turned to look at

Emblyn, hearing no reaction from her.

Emblyn stared at the item within the brown paper, her pale eyes wide.

“I meant to give this to you on the occasion of our wedding,” Adelaide confessed, her cheeks heating with a faint blush of shame. “But I did not like you at first, so I did not.”

“Least ee can admit it,” Emblyn murmured through barely moving lips. “Addie...”

Emblyn’s hushed utterance of her name for Adelaide made Adelaide smile. “I hoped you would like it. It is lapis lazuli, just as your brother has on his signet ring. I did not wish to place the same letter and crest thereon, finding it hardly fashionable for a young lady, but I trust the flower will suffice.”

“It is beautiful.” Emblyn’s throat worked on a swallow, and she shook her head. “I’ve never ‘ad so fine a thing.”

“It suits you,” Adelaide insisted firmly. “Not so fine as to draw comment or attention, but rather pretty, and it will remind you of your family.”

Emblyn looked at her now, her wide eyes filled with tears. “Oh, Addie.” She rushed at Adelaide and threw her arms around her in a tight hug.

Adelaide hugged her back, pleased and touched to have garnered such a response from her. She had ordered the necklace made before she ever knew Emblyn personally, before she knew her situation or her nature, before she had ever set eyes on her, and now that she had done so and loved her, it only seemed more perfectly suited for her.

If Emblyn would wear it.

Adelaide looked beyond her sister-in-law’s shoulder to Basset, who was watching the embrace with some emotion. Considering how infrequently he showed emotion at all, it was something of a wonder.

His eyes met hers. “Thank you,” he mouthed before pressing a kiss into his fingers and holding them out to her.

Adelaide smiled in return and pushed back from Emblyn just a touch. “You must promise me that you’ll wear it. A trinket does no good to anyone sitting in a box.”

Emblyn laughed, wiping her eyes. “I shall wear it, Addie, and proudly, too.” She turned to a nearby chair and held out her gifts to them. “Here. They be not fine an’ all, but I ‘ope ee like them.”

Basset received the scarf Adelaide had seen her working on, and she a fine shawl that she was immediately tempted to wrap around herself and sit by a fire. The notion that Emblyn should be skilled enough to make such things by her own hand was extraordinary. Adelaide might have been taught embroidery and practiced enough in the drawing rooms of London, but to make an entire garment herself...

She would never have managed the patience for such a thing, let alone the talents.

Basset gave Emblyn a new wool cloak of a deep green, wisely keeping the garment unobtrusive in appearance so as not to offend her tastes, but the quality was enough to ensure her warmth and comfort in it. For Adelaide, he presented a flat box she knew the shape of well, and she gasped when she opened it.

“Amethysts,” she murmured, touching the lovely purple gems with gentle fingers. “Basset...”

“I had them reset for you,” he told her in a low voice. “I thought this would suit you better than the old ones.”

“I love amethysts.” Adelaide looked up at him, tilting her head. “Did you know that?”

Basset shrugged, looking a little sheepish. “I might have. I saw you looking at the old set, yet you never wore them. I hoped this might encourage you.”

Biting down on her lip hard, Adelaide raised a hand to his face, cupping his jaw and running her thumb over his cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered.

His dark eyes turned darker, his smile very slight and lopsided. She brushed the corner of it with her thumb, her



breath catching when he captured her hand and turned to press a kiss into her palm.

Heavens, her heart and lungs fluttered at the contact, and her toes curled in her slippers. She had an entire evening to get through, but all she wanted was to stay in this room with her husband.

The last several days, she had been more distracted by him than she had by any other being in her entire life. She could not have a steady heartbeat in his presence, nor could she do anything to keep her mouth from drying out. She had given in yesterday by washing his hair and then, of all things, admitted her craving for *him* rather than for any food she could conjure up.

And the taste of him had not satiated a single thing. Instead, it had ignited her, and only the craving for food on behalf of her baby had broken her away from him. But her thoughts of him did not subside. Her need for him did not fade. Even now, her lips tingled in desire.

“We should go downstairs,” Adelaide managed, her hand still in his hold. “Our guests...”

Basset nodded and moved her hand to his elbow. “Yes. Let virtue and vice commence.”

Adelaide whacked his arm, shaking her head as the buzzing about her body began to dissipate in the face of his wit. “Are you going to be so droll all night?”

“Possibly,” he told her as they left the room. “Is that a problem?”

“Not at all. I will simply stand far away from you for the whole of the night.”

“You would deprive me of charity?”

She glanced up at him with a playful smirk. “You are greed, my lord. You may take what you wish.”

The quip seemed to interest him. “Perhaps I will, then. Perhaps I will.”



As a general rule, Harrison disliked masquerades. He hated costumes, he hated masks, he hated feeling so unlike himself. But tonight, he did not mind the masquerade.

He had never been able to say that before. Ever.

He had not danced much, more out of respect for his wife's condition than any real aversion to it, though he had danced with Emblyn, Julia, and Honora. He did not think Adelaide would mind that. It was probably something that she would demand he do, as the host for her splendid masquerade. She was, after all, very particular about impressions and appearances, so all he needed to do was adore her and be polite to everyone else.

He'd managed the politeness fairly enough, given his usual nature and gentlemanly ways. But as for adoring her... well, there were a number of details he had to keep in mind, including not being effusive.

He did have trouble looking anywhere but at her for most of the night, wondering what she would be doing, with whom she would be speaking, if she would risk comment by dancing...

The dinner had been spectacular, both in menu and in conversation, and all the guests he had been around had expressed their delight with every aspect of it. They had provided the Twelfth Night cake, per tradition, and the guests who had found the bean and the pea were thrilled to be named king and queen for the night. Adelaide had produced crowns for each, and there was much applause and celebration over it.

And now, as the evening had faded into morning and many of the guests had left, he began to feel the fatigue of the night, if not the entire holiday season itself.

Gage was just leaving, defying Adelaide's particular rules and coming as Apollo rather than a creature of myth. But his costume had seemed to delight Adelaide, given the sheer elaborateness of his toga and tunic, complete with laurels

about his head. And he had been very attentive to Emblyn and Honora both, each looking lovely as their token impression of nymphs.

More than that, Harrison could not say, as it had not been Gage who had commanded his attention that evening.

Wherever Adelaide went, others followed, either in looks or in motion, and it was astonishing. People, it seemed, simply wanted to be near her or to emulate her, and given her loveliness and warm nature, who could blame them? Harrison wanted to be near her himself and had concocted the most ludicrous excuses to come within her path.

He had only spoken with her a handful of times, once to ask after her welfare, once to inform her that dinner would be ready shortly, once to ask if she felt the child, once to ask her if his cravat was straight, and once to tell her that someone else had dressed as charity, though he could not tell what lady it was.

Truth be told, he had seen no such thing. He simply wanted to see her reaction to such a thing, and to place his hand at her back.

Pitiful, pathetic man.

The woman lived in his house, was ever and always at his fingertips, and had a perplexing temperament that shifted more than the tides on the sea. She had been so sweet and warm these last few weeks, he had forgotten she could ever grow truly angry or truly harsh. He could hardly recall the woman he had first met in London, and the one he had married. He barely remembered the woman who had insulted Emblyn and berated him. The spoiled, selfish creature he hadn't been entirely convinced was worth the effort.

None of that was clear anymore.

All he saw was Adelaide, and everything within him seemed to light up when she was near. For a man so generally in control of himself and his feelings, it was a strange thing. Not unpleasant, only strange.

Odd, perhaps.

Odd, enjoyable, and confusing.

“Basset, the Penbartons are leaving. As is Sir Henry and Lady Allwyn.”

Harrison blinked and looked up, unsure when he had looked down, finding nothing in his previous line of sight that ought to have captured his attention. Now, Adelaide stood before him, tilting her head toward the outer hall, her eyes dim with fatigue that matched his own but still so lovely in appearance.

“Right,” he grunted, nodding and coming to her, taking her hand without thought rather than her arm.

She did not pull away, which surprised him. In his previous experience, when in public, she preferred polite touching rather than familiar, and this was certainly more familiar than polite.

He didn't care.

Sir Henry was a business partner and a snobbish one. His wife had limited manners for Emblyn, as did her sister Mrs. Boscastle, which ought to have made them friends with the woman he had married. Yet Adelaide had no patience for them and had not, as he understood it, had any social encounters without several others present.

He could not afford to offend Sir Henry, nor Mr. Boscastle, but he did not have to make friends of them, either.

The Penbartons, however, were a fine couple with several children—a well-established family. They understood the way things were in Cornwall and embraced its diversity and culture. They did not attempt to make Cornwall into London.

He watched as the last of the couples loaded themselves into their carriages and waved alongside Adelaide as they pulled away.

“Thank heavens,” Adelaide said in a rush of an exhale, dropping her hand at once. “I thought they would never leave. I begged Sally to remain while the Allwyns did, and she was kind enough to indulge me. I simply cannot bear to hear Lady Allwyn's opinions about this and that, nor to be forced to

listen to her advice on child-rearing. If any of her children are half as obedient and docile as she claims, I will repent of my judgment, but the airs with which she expresses such things! It is intolerable.”

“The Allwyn children are monsters,” Harrison assured her as they turned back for the house. “They kick the shins of anyone they meet, male or female, and throw rocks at dogs and cats. I am not exaggerating, I have seen them do it. But I doubt Sir Henry or Lady Allwyn have seen it, as I have only ever seen the children in the company of a nanny.”

Adelaide grunted in satisfaction. “Serves her right.” She groaned now, placing a hand at her back and arching it. “I think I might sleep until next Christmas.”

Harrison chuckled easily, rubbing his thumb over the hand he held. “But are you happy with the evening? Did everything go according to your wishes?”

“Oh, yes,” she said with a fervent nod. “I think our guests will be speaking of this event for some time. We will be the envy of other fine houses.” She looked up at him with a tired smile. “You did so well tonight. A number of ladies informed me of their jealousy and my fortunate situation. Apparently, you quite adore me, and they wish their husbands did so. You’ve become quite the actor.”

He had to smile at that, wondering if perhaps he had shown more in his expression and attention than he thought. He only shrugged, squeezing her hand. “Acting is quite simple when you aren’t entirely pretending.”

Adelaide made a soft scoffing sound. “Surely you aren’t suggesting that you adore me.”

“No,” Harrison said on a gentle laugh as they started up the stairs. “But I don’t mind pretending that I do.”

Her lips parted at that, then spread into a smile. “That is oddly sweet, Basset.”

“So am I, my dear.”

They were quiet as they moved down the corridor toward their rooms. Harrison, for one, was thinking of the rest

awaiting him in his bed after standing on his feet for so many hours. He could only imagine how exhausted Adelaide must have been, given her condition.

It was astonishing he was not carrying her to her bed like a chivalrous husband might when his wife was too weak to stand on her own strength.

The idea did make for an interesting image in his mind, and one he would be only too happy to dwell upon after he had slept.

And perhaps as he was falling asleep.

They reached Adelaide's room, and he kissed her hand quickly. "Good night, Adelaide. Or good morning, as it were." He chuckled to himself and released her hand, turning to head toward his own.

"Basset?" she called after him.

He turned back, a little surprised. "Yes?"

Adelaide's eyes were wide, her breath shaking. "I... I miss you."

Harrison frowned in confusion and took two steps toward her. "I beg your pardon?"

"I miss you," she said again, this time more clearly, though her voice still sounded small. She bit down at her lip and nudged her head toward her chambers. "Will you...?"

Oh. That.

She missed him.

His chest exploded in a burst of heat, robbing him of breath. He smiled a little and nodded.

Adelaide returned his smile, exhaling deeply. "Then I shall see you in a moment." She nodded, apparently satisfied, and moved into her rooms.

Alone in the corridor, Harrison stood still in complete shock, delight and relief and anticipation cascading through him. Filling him. Awakening him. He set his hands on his hips, glancing down at the floor as he laughed softly to himself.

What must it have cost her to admit that? To be so vulnerable and to tell him...

He'd missed her too. Dreadfully. And now...

Now they need not miss each other at all.

He would not take this for granted. Would not mistake it. Would not betray it.

Everything was different between them now, and this felt more like the first time than the first time could ever have hoped to.

This meant far more.

He smiled as he exhaled another breath, swallowed once, and walked into his wife's rooms, shutting the door firmly behind him.

# Chapter Twenty



She was miserable, large, and uncomfortable. And uncomfortably large in her misery. And largely miserable in her being uncomfortable.

And still six weeks to go before she could hope to give birth.

Surely the last several weeks of one's term of carrying a child must have been a stark indication from the Almighty that one ought to think quite carefully about every aspect of the situation before undertaking it ever again. Adelaide was certainly considering her stance on multiple children and wondering how to break the news to Basset that she would certainly not be doing this ever again.

One way or another, this child would be his heir, so he had better prepare his solicitors for arranging everything well enough should the baby be a girl.

He had been very good to her as she had grown more uncomfortable and more outspoken about her being uncomfortable. He was used to her temperament and had never been fully ruffled by it, which made him the ideal candidate for her present situation. She could abuse him all she liked, and he would smile and nod, or ignore her completely, or banter with such alacrity that she felt encouraged rather than defeated.

Unless she cried.

She was remarkably prone to tears these days, which was entirely unlike her, and it was not as though she cried on a daily basis. She simply found herself crying at random intervals without any reasonable cause. Yesterday, she had cried when she had dropped a piece of ham from her fork onto her plate. Last week, it had been trying to adjust her stockings



and being unable to do so adequately. Another time, she had cried when she had woken up in the morning and felt a sharp twinge in her hips.

She had cried when Emblyn had come over with a bouquet of wildflowers. Cried when Basset had smiled at her. Cried at a letter from Richard that had praised her companionship.

Surely she ought to be out of tears by now. There could be none left to give.

And then there was the pain. She hurt at every moment of every day in one part of her body or another. Her hips, her back, her legs, her stomach, her ribs. She hurt in her head by the end of the day, even when she spent the entire day resting.

It was not often that she spent the entire day resting, as there was too much to do and she had little patience for sitting around and doing nothing, but the point remained.

Constant discomfort was punishment, and she thought it monstrously unfair that she should have to suffer for something Basset had done as well.

He must have some guilt about the thing, as he took great care with her each night when she went to bed, ensuring she was warm and comfortable, not listening when she slapped his hands away, and even rubbing her feet when they ached too much. He was as attentive as a nursemaid without any of the fussiness of one, for which she was most grateful. With her quickness to tears also came a quickness to irritation, and the causation for that was more unpredictable than what spurred her tears.

No one was spared the bursts of irritation, even if they managed to be spared the tears.

No, indeed, she would not be pursuing this again. Not while she had sense in her mind and strength in her body.

Provided her strength ever returned to its previous level.

Adelaide hefted herself up from the divan in her drawing room, needing at least five hands to press against a sore spot but managing with one to steady her and another to hold her

uncomfortably large stomach. How could she bear another six weeks of this madness?

She was likely to burst from the stretching of it all.

But in the end, she reminded herself, she would have a child.

A person at the beginning of its life, learning everything and anything from her and from Basset, from their neighbors and acquaintances, from its Aunt Emblyn, from Trevadden...

There was much to learn for herself, let alone what she must teach. She would be making so many decisions that would have eternal implications for more people than herself alone. It was a powerful knowledge, as well as a terrible one.

“Would you care for some tea, madam?” Mrs. Elsom asked when she saw Adelaide walking along the corridor.

Adelaide smiled faintly and shook her head. “No, thank you. I think I will just go to the music room and play a while. It gives me peace.”

Mrs. Elsom smiled with a nod. “Very good, madam. Should you need anything, just ring.”

A burst of irritation flickered in Adelaide’s stomach, but she was able to tamp it down. After all, the good woman was simply offering help and service, as was her job, and Adelaide was in a state of being less than able to do everything for herself.

It was no reflection on Mrs. Elsom’s opinions of her, nor an implication that Adelaide was a weak creature.

Even though she was, for the present.

Oh, this entire thing was hopeless. She was never going to have her body returned to her the way it had once been, and she was never going to feel as she did before she became with child. She would never be able to walk the stairs without losing her breath, get out of a chair with grace, walk without feeling as though she were on a sailing ship, or sleep through the entire night ever again.

At least sitting at the pianoforte gave her something to do while she sat, and there was something about the music that settled her child within her, which made everything feel better.

The music room was filled with the early spring light streaming through the large windows, and she exhaled happily. She was not talented on the instrument yet, nor may she ever be, but she did derive pleasure from playing it. Julia had been kind enough to give her plenty of simple tunes to play, some of them formal pieces she had heard in London before, others that were more common songs that might be whistled by villagers or sung as lullabies.

She situated herself on the bench, determined not to switch to a chair with a back until she could no longer sit upright. She played through a number of pieces, her child jumping about within her without making her particularly uncomfortable, then, when she selected a lullaby, settled against her left upper ribs as comfortably as though it were a pillow.

There was nothing to do but smile at the sensation. She could almost picture the babe, could nearly see its tiny nose and plump cheeks, perhaps with dark hair like Basset. She wondered at its ability to find such comfort and consolation with her when she had no way with children and no tendency toward warmth and gentleness.

That would not matter with this child. She was its mother, which meant its first companion would be her, its first source of comfort would be her, its first moments of attention would be from her.

Her nature, as once she had been, need not be the nature her child knew of her. She could be the mother she wished to be, the version of a mother she wished her mother had been. She could make this time in her life, this relationship between them, anything she wanted. Anything she thought would bring her child happiness and make their life better.

And through that, her own.

And yet she felt very strongly that her child's happiness *would* bring about her own, even if she did not consider it

from the beginning.

She had always considered her own happiness first. That had been the driving force behind her shameless flirtation with Phillip. Her determination to take charge of her marriage. Her wedding dress. Being hostess of balls and parties.

Her own happiness, all of them. But now...

“You play that one so much better than I do.”

Adelaide laughed very softly to herself, looking toward the door to the room, where her husband stood wearing a smile. “Perhaps I practice more than you.”

“Undoubtedly, you do.” He nodded and came toward her, his stride easy and comfortable, which made her smile. “If my ears are not deceiving me, you have been playing in here for quite some time. Anything wrong?”

“Other than being exceptionally large and unable to move or breathe with any ease?” she quipped, trying to keep the bite out of her tone. “No, not really.”

Basset hissed in sympathy as he reached the instrument. “I am sorry about that. It seems rather unfair that only one of us should bear the burden of this when we were both part of the production of it. Believe me, you wear the experience with dignity and grace, and you are still as beautiful as you were the day I married you.”

The tears she had thought impossible to produce were suddenly there, and she tried to swallow the wash of them. “I am not,” she protested in the weakest attempt at modesty known to man, lowering her head. “I am awkward and ungainly, and there is nothing you can do to make this better.”

“Not even shower you with compliments?” He sat beside her on the bench, his shoulder touching hers, his hand resting on her knee. “You know I am not a flatterer, Adelaide. I would never say something I did not mean.”

“I know,” she whispered, hiccupping on more tears. “That’s why I’m crying.”

He brushed a tear from her cheek, then wrapped his arm about her shoulders. “But you’re right; nothing I say, or likely do, can make your discomfort better. Much as I might try. I could carry you up the stairs whenever you like so you do not have to walk them. Or be an errand boy so you don’t have to move as much.”

“But I *want* to move,” Adelaide told him miserably. “I don’t want to feel like I cannot do something. Or that I must rely on others.”

“Hmm.” Basset paused, seeming to give it some thought. “Yes, you are independent and stubborn, so that would be galling. Perhaps look at it this way. Your present situation is giving the rest of us an opportunity to be more discerning and to serve you. It is not that you cannot do something, but that there is now an opportunity for us to do something on your behalf. Be generous with us, Adelaide. Let us learn to be better Christian people.”

His tone had become almost dramatically pleading, and it made her giggle, her tears vanishing. “You are a terrible persuader, Basset. I will try to think of it as you say, but please, do not beg for opportunities to serve me ever again. I am the dramatic one here, not you.”

“Apologies, I simply thought I would try the act on.” He chuckled softly, nudging her shoulder. “It stopped your tears, though.”

“Was that your aim?” She looked at the music before her, afraid to meet his eyes after asking such a question.

Basset rubbed his hand gently across her shoulder. “Not initially, but in bringing about your tears, I thought it my duty to remove them.”

He made no move to leave the bench, nor to slide away from her, which prodded an insistent impulse to confide something that had struck her during her playing.

“Basset...” Adelaide began slowly, one hand falling to the rise of her stomach, “I would like our son to marry for affection. Not love, necessarily, as love can grow, and

connection is important for the title and estate. But I would like him to choose his own bride based on affection. Companionship. I want him to know and like his bride before the engagement is set.”

“You don’t want him to do what I did to you.”

She winced at the implication. “Well—”

“Oh, don’t worry,” he said at once, smiling a little. “Had I known what I was doing, had any inclination of what a marriage would actually be like, I’d have never subjected you to the orderly manner with which I arranged things. Certainly, I ought to have met you, learned more of you, spent real time with you...” He broke off, giving a wry laugh. “Hell, if I’d even bothered to court you, it might have saved us both a few headaches.”

Adelaide giggled just a little, leaning into him. “I think you would have decided against me, if you’d known me better before we wed.”

“And would you have been so very opposed to me if I had not contracted myself to you in the manner I did?” Basset asked her, his voice turning rougher and filling with a note that pained her. “If I had done the thing properly and courted you, brought you white roses sprinkled with lavender and sage, asked you about Mozart and which of his operas is best, danced a cotillion and then asked for the waltz when one dance wasn’t enough... would you have hated me then?”

More tears threatened to rise, and Adelaide cradled the child within her as though to protect it from her emotions. “We’ll never know, will we?”

“No,” he murmured. “No, I suppose not.” He rubbed her shoulder gently back and forth. “I agree with you. Our child, whether son or daughter, will be able to marry their choice and not ours. Within reason, of course, but... yes, it will not be so businesslike as ours was. I think we know better now.”

Adelaide nodded, swallowing hard. She did not push away from him, did not move, feeling perfectly safe in his hold even as she hurt inside for both of them. But their child would have

better than they'd had, and if they were both committed to the idea, there would be no strife about it in the future.

At least she could give her child that.

"Pardon me, my lord," Mervyn's voice called from the doorway. "A letter has arrived from your man in London."

Basset groaned and shifted away from her, pushing up from the bench and meeting the butler halfway.

Adelaide turned as he opened the letter, watched as his eyes scanned the lines, noted the sudden tension in his expression.

"Well, damn," he said suddenly. He folded the letter, tapping it into his palm as his tongue pushed against his teeth and forced his lips to round. "Mervyn, have the carriage prepared. It seems I am going to London."

"What?" Adelaide pressed up from the bench awkwardly, struggling to do so. "Why London? Why so immediately?"

His smile was fleeting and flimsy. "My brother, Richard, has fallen victim to his own poor habits and been abandoned by those in whom he placed his so-called care. He is penniless and very ill, so it falls to me to rescue him. Again." He shook his head, grinding his teeth. "He always finds a way. And I am a fool for this."

"I don't think so," Adelaide insisted. She moved to him and put her hands on his arm. "Caring for your brother is not weakness. He may not have returned your care the way a brother should, but it speaks to your better nature that you still care. Let me go with you to London."

"In your condition?" He shook his head firmly. "You would be more miserable and likely arrive in London covered in bruises."

Adelaide gripped his arm. "I can manage. Please, Harrison. I would like to help you tend to your brother in his hour of need. Perhaps this might heal relations between you."

His dark eyes searched hers, and she could see the indecision there. "Is it safe?"

“Entirely,” she assured him, though she was not as certain as he might have liked. “The doctor says I am likely six weeks from my time, so I may still travel and ride and anything else I have the stamina for.”

That, at least, was true.

“Very well,” Basset conceded, nodding. “Order your things packed. I’ll send word to Emblyn so she will not miss us.”

“Might she come as well?” Adelaide asked on a whim. “She has never been, and as we are not going for entertainment but for family, she might enjoy herself.”

He laughed once. “Not likely, but I will invite her anyway. Be as quick as you can, my dear. It will take us long enough to get there, and it seems that Richard is in a poor way.”

Adelaide nodded and turned from the room, moving as hastily as the child and her ungainly size would allow.



It was not difficult to find Richard in London, as he had remained exactly where Harrison’s man had said he was. He would never suggest that the wastrels and blackguards of London took care of their own, but they certainly did have their own way of doing things, and that seemed to remain the case now. While Richard’s friends had indeed left him in the gutters to potentially die of his vices, some good soul had carried him to a poor excuse for a boarding house where he was being tended to.

At least he had been kept alive. It had taken an uncomfortable sum to pay off the landlady for her care, but at least now the debts were discharged, and Richard was lying abed, amidst his feverish suffering, in Basset House.

Harrison would have preferred any other location in London, quite literally any, but his wife had insisted that was no way to treat one’s family, and he could not exactly argue



without going into a very great sermon about Richard's misdeeds and what sort of family they had been to each other.

He was not prepared to get into that conversation while Richard was under his roof. If ever.

Emblyn had wisely kept away from their brother while Richard was coherent, which was not often, and Adelaide had vowed to keep her a secret if Richard ever asked.

The introduction between Richard and Adelaide had been brief, as Richard had been bellowing incoherencies and slurring every syllable, even calling Adelaide "Mother" once when his eyes had been open. He could only hope it would be enough to convince her that his brother was not a connection worth preserving.

True to her word, Adelaide had managed the journey from Cornwall without complaint, and, apparently, without pain. He did not think that was entirely true, but she refused to modify her answer in any way when he asked. It had been three days now, and she had not uttered a single word of complaint.

She had not cried, she had not snapped at him, she had not so much as flinched at the idea of nursing Richard in his sickbed, and she somehow managed to smile at him every morning over breakfast rather than staying abed and taking a tray.

It was astonishing. She was astonishing.

He had not quite seen it before, but he should have. Her bluster and haughtiness, what he had first seen in her, had hidden a heart of goodness and sweetness, no matter how she pretended otherwise. She prided herself on her strength and her invincibility, her utterly impenetrable nature, which meant that any perceived vulnerability was a failing on her part.

Harrison could not disagree more. Her vulnerability was the most beautiful part of her, the glimpse of reality beneath defenses she had convinced herself were truth. He knew he was no better, using his reserve to hide his feelings, whereas she displayed all emotions with great fanfare, except for her vulnerabilities—but they were improving in their alterations

with each other. Over the course of their marriage, they had gone from enemies to allies to friends, and now...

Well, now he craved the very sight of her. Not because of her beauty, though it was certainly no hardship to look upon her, but because she made his heart warm and his mood improve. She made him smile and gave him strength. She calmed his agitation and challenged his mind.

She was a rare creature, his wife, and he was growing especially fond of her.

Even when she barked orders at him and kept him from his tasks over some tedious thing she wanted his opinion on.

Harrison smiled to himself as he moved through the house, heading up the stairs to the next floor to see to the patient, having spent the morning with his London solicitor to ensure that affairs were in order, as well as to make sure that Richard would never be granted access to anything in his accounts or belonging to him. It was tightly secured and had been for years, but he had added additional measures even so.

There could be no assuming anything where Richard was concerned.

He heard no moaning, yelling, or cursing from the room Richard was staying in, which would hopefully imply that he was unconscious still. Or asleep. One or the other, either was acceptable. He wanted no interaction with his brother if he could help it.

There was no guilt to be felt in that, he was certain. It was not as though he wished his brother dead. Just mute.

For life, if that were possible.

Surely there was some sickness that could render him that possibility.

He would not hold out hope, however. Hope died in the hands of Richard Basset.

The door to Richard's bedroom was ajar, and he peeked in, knocking very softly. Emblyn and Adelaide were within, Emblyn changing the cool rags on his brow and Adelaide

dabbing his neck and chest with additional wet rags. Both wore simple aprons over their gowns, both wore their hair in plaits they had pinned.

Apart from their difference in looks, they were identical in attire and presentation.

That was something to smile about.

“How does he fare?” he called softly, pushing into the room and standing at the foot of the bed.

Emblyn smiled a little. “‘E fares. No more’n before, an’ no less. Doctor says ‘e may continue to fever for a few days, an’ we mus’ keep it down as much as able. Broth when ‘e be awake, and laudanum for the pain.”

“No laudanum,” Harrison said firmly, shaking his head. “He’s addicted to opium, so not only will it have no effect, it will likely do him more harm than good.”

“Which is why I suggested willow bark tea,” Adelaide answered, keeping her voice down. “He has not been lucid enough to take some, but it will be ready when he is.” She dabbed her wrist on her brow, where he noted some faint perspiration. “I think I need a rest. Would you mind, Emblyn?”

“O’ course,” his sister replied without hesitation.

He moved to the chair to help Adelaide up, and she made no comment of protest about the help, which seemed significant. Her hand gripped his and did not release it as she moved out of the room, leaving him no choice but to follow along.

Once in the corridor, he spoke. “Are you all right? What is wrong?”

She shook head, exhaling. “I am only tired. And the baby is moving a great deal, and I cannot breathe in this dress, and my back is aching, and I need this dress loosened, or there will be another body to tend in this place.”

Harrison looked at her in surprise. “What? Should I call for a maid?”

“For pity’s sake, Basset, just help!” She stopped walking and turned her back to him as she placed her hands on the wall.

His fingers flew along the buttons there, the fabric gaping easily as though it had been straining in its efforts.

Adelaide sighed heavily when he reached the buttons at the lower part of her back. “Bless you, Basset. Now, if you wouldn’t mind pressing your hands rather firmly exactly in that opening...”

He did so, adjusting his stance so as to provide more pressure. “There?”

“Yes. There.” She hissed a long sound, pressing against his hands to increase the effect. “Oh, heavens. Would you mind terribly never going anywhere so you might do this whenever I have need?”

He chuckled as he turned the heel of his hands into each side, her chemise rubbing against his skin in an almost ticklish way. “Well, I could be persuaded to, I suppose, if it will ease you.”

“Excellent.” Adelaide exhaled, her body relaxing. She turned halfway to face him a little, her eyes meeting his as she gave him a tired smile. “Your son, my lord, is being most disruptive.”

Harrison chuckled very softly, knowing full well that the baby could have been a daughter, and therefore, just like her mother. “I’m sure he doesn’t mean it.”

“He’s your son, of course he means it.”

“He’s *your* son, perhaps he gets it from you.”

They both smiled for a quiet moment, then Adelaide straightened fully, lowering her hands from the wall entirely. “Thank you, Basset.”

“Of course.” He held out a hand to her, which she took, and walked her toward her rooms, hopefully to find something that would fit her more comfortably. “You will take care,

won't you? In tending Richard. If you were to take ill with something—”

“I've already spoken to the doctor on that score,” Adelaide overrode. “What Richard has is not contagious. It is only affecting him so because of his weakness. Ill health prior to poor habits. He likely had no idea he was even in ill health, but it could have been so for years.”

Harrison made a soft sound of acknowledgement. “That would not surprise me at all. He has not taken care of himself for a great many years.”

“Yes,” Adelaide muttered, shaking her head, “so he told me.”

That made him frown. “He told you? When? Has he been lucid?”

Adelaide stopped in her tracks, closing her eyes and clamping down on her lips. “No,” she said slowly. “He told me in his letters.”

Harrison dropped her hand and took hold of her arm, his hold firm. “He wrote to you? When? How?”

“The first letter came just a few weeks after we arrived at Trevadden. He introduced himself and told me a little about his life and his sins. He did not hide anything.” She tried to shake her arm loose from him, but he held fast. “I wrote back to him out of politeness, given he was your brother.”

“And?” he pressed, his neck and ears growing hot, his pulse quickening. Her own temper was rising, he could see it, but in this, he would not back down.

“And I heard back from him some weeks later. We have been writing to each other on occasion.”

Harrison groaned and covered his face with a hand, turning away with a harsh curse.

“What?” Adelaide demanded. “What is so wrong with writing letters to your brother? I know the two of you are on strained terms, and he has never once pretended that he is a good man, let alone your equal. I have no illusions of him.”

“But you do!” Harrison laughed incredulously and looked back at her. “You do, Adelaide. You look at him with sympathy and hope, as if he is a creature that can be redeemed—that ought to be redeemed. But what you fail to comprehend is that my brother has never been repentant of anything in his life, let alone his favorite collection of sins. And he does have his favorites. I should have confided all of this to you from the start, but it is distasteful to be reminded of it, as I have failed time and time again to have any impact on him.”

Adelaide came to him, taking his hands. “Read his letters written to me, Harrison. He *is* repentant. Not of all things, but of some. See the version of your brother that I have known.”

He pulled his hands from hers, shaking his head. “There is no version of my brother that I do not know and have not seen, Adelaide. Whoever you think you know is a lie. Everything Richard says is a lie. If you do not see it now, you soon will. And if you had told me he had written to you, I might have spared you this.”

“Spared me what?” She propped fists on her hips and gave him a derisive look. “I have not been injured by him in any way.”

Harrison slowly shook his head one more time, bile rising and his mouth going dry. “You will be, my dear. You will be.”

# Chapter Twenty-One



Basset had not spoken to her in four days.

Four long, anguishing, tedious days.

How had she ever endured such silence at Trevadden in the days before she and her husband had found companionship between them?

It was torture now, particularly as she continued to grow larger in size, more pained in places, and more fatigued as days wore on. He had once loved to feel their child move and kick within her, once even speaking to her stomach as though the child could respond to his words.

Now he avoided Adelaide at every moment, even at meals, and she felt she might die for even the smallest glimpse of him.

She relied on Emblyn to tell her everything she could about how Basset had looked and acted, what he'd said, and if he'd given her any indication of his thoughts for Adelaide. His feelings for Adelaide.

If he might forgive Adelaide.

Emblyn reminded her each time she was interrogated that she did not know her brother's heart, and that her brother was the very definition of stubborn. His forgiveness would surely come, but it might wait a while.

That was no comfort for Adelaide.

She had sat beside Richard's bedside this morning, part of which he had been awake for, and they had chatted with true clarity. He had sympathy for her and begged her not to judge Basset too harshly for his prejudice.

“It is well-founded, sister,” he had said, warming her heart with his calling her that. “With time, he will see that I am truly changed this time.”

He had not been much good for conversation in the few minutes following, drifting back to sleep with the help of the willow bark tea. He had not raised a fever in two days, which was a promising sign, though he was still very weak.

Emblyn only came in during his sleep now, and Adelaide still had not told Richard about her. He had not asked after the others tending him, no doubt thinking it to all be the work of servants. She was pleased to let that misconception continue, as was Emblyn.

So long as it was Emblyn’s wish to remain secret from him, Adelaide would keep it.

Basset House had grown intolerable, so it was a blessing that she was able to procure an invitation to a ball at her aunt’s home. Anna had been delighted to receive her for the family dinner prior to it, and they had talked for ages, just as they had done before her marriage.

Only her feelings for Basset had been quite different then, and though she had written to Anna regularly about all of it, she still took some convincing over it in person.

Not that there was much to say. Or much that was easy to say. Or that there were words for what she needed to say.

What she needed to admit.

The truth was... there were no words.

Only feelings.

Feelings that shifted and turned and became nearly unrecognizable.

At the present, standing in a ballroom she knew well but could not now dance in, she was filled with an overwhelming melancholy, as well as a tender longing for her husband.

Not for his attentions or his arms, his words or his wit, but simply the sight of him. His presence in the same air she



breathed. Perhaps even a glimpse of his famous smile that never fully manifested.

Though his full smile was a wondrous thing, it was that slight one she adored the most.

For it was entirely and utterly Basset.

And she perhaps missed that most of all.

“You have never looked so morose in your entire life.”

Adelaide blinked and looked at her cousin with a small smile. “I am not morose, Anna. Only fatigued. The child is a busy little body, and he is rapidly running out of room. I have refrained from confinement as long as possible, but I think I must enter it after tonight. I have no desire to see or be seen anymore. One never mentions these things, and truly they ought to. It is utterly miserable.”

Anna looked startled, turning her attention to the dancing. “Then I shall avoid the indelicate thing as long as possible. Not that I have been receiving offers of marriage or anything of the like. I may look like you, cousin, but I am not so entertaining, nor so wealthy. Even Phillip Evans deserted me.”

“Hmm.” Adelaide shook her head, taking a careful breath. “Phillip was not what he claimed to be anyway, so perhaps that is not a great loss.”

“This coming from you?” Anna scoffed delicately. “You never cared about such things before. Knowing full well that everybody has secrets, you did not care, so long as you did not know them.”

That was unfortunately true. Adelaide had been content with the superficial things in life, the more trite the better, but now...

“I have grown up, Anna,” Adelaide told her cousin in a low voice. “And have learned what truly matters.”

“So it seems.” Anna linked her arm through hers for a moment, patting her arm gently. “I like this version of you best, even when you are fatigued. Perhaps I may visit you in

Cornwall after the child is born. I like the sound of Trevadden.”

Adelaide smiled a little and watched the dancing with a hint of longing, though she knew it would feel dreadful to dance in her condition. She did not wish to dance at this moment, she wished to dance in the body she'd had before all of this. The one that was not ungainly and awkward, the one that barely knew pain and could move in any direction, the one that loved to dance and did so with grace.

She wanted the energy she felt from dancing and the joy as well. The exhilaration and the light. The freedom.

Dancing that did not feel like dancing, just as it had that foggy morning in Cornwall with her husband. Where she had sprouted wings and flown to heights she had not known could exist.

She was ruined for all other dancing after dancing with Basset. And she did not mind that. He was her husband, after all, and that would not change. She would be dancing with him for the rest of her life, and that ought to bring her joy.

If she ever set eyes on him again. If he could forgive what he saw as a great offense. If they could come to an understanding and be on friendly terms again.

“I thought he was not coming. You said he was not coming.”

Adelaide looked at her cousin. “Who?”

“Your husband.” Anna gestured with a finger, and Adelaide followed it.

Basset stood a handful of people away, watching the dancing as though it could possibly interest him. He looked nearly resplendent in his crisp evening wear; his dark hair was neatly arranged with no hint of the curling that came when it was less tended. Only Adelaide might know about that, and the knowledge of that was secretly thrilling.

He glanced over at her then, without any searching, which told Adelaide he had seen her already and knew her exact position in this room.

His dark eyes clashed with her blue ones and locked there. He did not move, he did not blink. He also did not smile.

Yet he was here.

She had not told him where she was going, or that she was going anywhere, had not even seen him to ask if he might want to join her. He had somehow discovered her plans for the evening and had come as well. Separate from her, but he had come.

Adelaide began to hope as she had never hoped in her life.

But hope for what?

Now she was seeing him, just as she'd wanted to, and it soothed an ache in her, then brought on a new one in its place—the desire to be close to him. To touch him. To hear his voice.

More than only this.

Anything more.

The music of the dance suddenly grew in its intensity, surrounding them both and sweeping across the moment as though they did dance together. As though the fog of Cornwall was seeping into the ballroom and encasing them in it while hiding all the rest as it had done once before.

Could he feel for her again what he once had? Whatever that had been? The gentle asking after her welfare, undoing the buttons of her dress to press his hand into her back at her request, sitting next to her on the piano bench, taking her hand out of habit and never failing to make her heart skip when he did so.

The way they had begun to live their lives together, not fighting but still bantering, not hating but still challenging, laughing more than they loathed, smiling more than they scoffed. She wanted that life again, knowing she could turn to him with any concern or need and he would listen. He would respect her. He would take care of her. She wanted to know that her naivete had not ruined the possibility of the rest of her marriage, the promise it held that she might not yet fathom.

Would he come to love her? Would she come to love him? Was that in their future? Did it matter if it was?

Was whatever they felt for each other enough to overcome this mess they had created?

Could he see how she longed for him? Not only in the physical sense, but in every other, perhaps. Just as he was, just as they had been.

She longed for them.

Could that come again?

Her lips began to tremble, her tears near at hand if there were no signs of hope from him. Perhaps even in this agonizing wait.

His attention on her never wavered. He seemed as intent as Adelaide was, which was encouraging and frightening all at once. What was he seeing? What was he feeling?

What did he want?

His mouth suddenly twitched, moving in one corner just enough to make her heart leap. If he could grant her the sight of her most favorite smile, all could not be lost.

She felt her lips curve into her own smile, keeping it contained, just as he did. If he was encouraging her, she would encourage him, too.

Basset moved then, slowly working his way through the guests between the two of them. Her breath caught with every step he took, her heart growing a little less steady.

She searched his features, every particle of them, looking for a sign that all was forgiven, that he still cared for her, and that all was not lost.

She heard echoes of their own voices in her head.

*Surely you aren't suggesting that you adore me.*

*No. But I don't mind pretending I do.*

This did not feel like pretending. Not in the least.

Basset was nearly to her but shifted his step to not be beside her, but behind. She reached her hand behind her just a little, even if to only brush her fingers against his coat. She could not follow his progress unless she wished to appear like a lovesick, desperate woman in need of attention.

His smallest finger suddenly slid against hers, hooking into it as though they were shaking hands through a single finger for each of them. The grip was faint, but it was there, and that was enough.

Adelaide exhaled a stuttering sigh, closing her eyes upon the wash of tears that had finally formed, along with a dash of hope.



Harrison did not want to be standing here in his brother's rooms to have this conversation, but Emblyn was currently determined to take her turn nursing the blackguard.

"It is just a dowry, Emblyn," Harrison whispered, willing their brother to stay asleep so he might not have two siblings to fight in the same space of an hour.

"Oh," she replied in complete derision, "sommat to bribe a man to make me his wife? I'll not do it."

It was all Harrison could do not to roll his eyes. "No! Something to make sure you are cared for and have enough to live on, no matter what."

Emblyn paused in her adjusting of the bedsheets. "Dowries go to the man, do they naw?"

Harrison groaned and threw up his hands. "How do you want me to arrange this, Emblyn? I want to take care of you the way I would any full-blooded sister of mine. Protect you in all the legal ways available to me."

She shook her head as though he had told a very poor joke. "Ee'll make me a target for high falutin' types, an' far above my own kind."

“I don’t care who you marry, Em. I don’t care.” He came over to her and put his hands on her arms. “He could be a smuggler, a miner, the butcher, the son of a viscount, or Gage Trembath.”

She snorted at the idea, which made Harrison smile.

“I don’t care who you marry,” Harrison told her firmly, “as long as he will love you and take care of you. And by giving you a dowry, I can help ensure that, no matter what his station, you will be provided for. That’s all I want.”

Emblyn searched his eyes for a moment, then exhaled roughly. “Oh, very well. I s’pose it’s all well an’ good if I be yer sister, which I seem to have accepted. If ee will let me choose my own, I’ll not object further.”

It was the first time she had hinted at even remotely being interested in a husband, let alone in matters of the heart, and her wishing to have her own choice was more surprising for it. Was there someone in mind already and she’d never told him? Now was not the time to ask, if he wished the subject of the dowry closed, but his curiosity was certainly piqued.

“Thank you.” Harrison kissed her brow quickly.

“Aw, isn’t that nice? I wake up to find I have a common sister, as well as an arrogant brother. Aren’t I the lucky fellow.”

Harrison ground his teeth together, cursing in three languages. “Emblyn, please leave us.”

“No, Emblyn, please don’t,” Richard insisted. “You’ve been tending to me so well, I think you will keep our brother from killing me.”

Emblyn’s jaw tightened, and she turned from Harrison to look at their brother in the bed. “What makes ee think I won’t kill ee first, brother?”

Richard smiled at her, despite looking as though he had spent the entire night dying in a hellhole, his linen nightshirt stained from days abed. “The Cornish accent has never sat well with me, my dear Emblyn. Kindly speak with a different one. If you can.”

Harrison snarled and started toward the bed, only Emblyn pressed a hand to his chest.

“I speak how I please, brother, and ee will take it or leave it,” she snapped, stepping closer to the bed and pressing her hands into the mattress. “I do no’ care for ee exceptin’ as decent human. Now I knaw ee no’ be dyin’, I need naw need care tha’ far at all. An’ if ee think ta give our brother any more pain than yer existence already does, I will gladly kill ee. An’ I am naw so fine as ta be doubted in this. Ee mark my words.”

Richard blinked twice, seeming to lose a little more of his color as he stared into the fierce face of their sister. “Now you, I utterly believe.” He looked over at Harrison, sneering a little. “He will never kill me. He hasn’t the nerve.”

“Don’t count me out just yet,” Harrison grumbled. His hands became fists at his sides, his restraint the only thing keeping them from pummeling his brother back into unconsciousness.

“If you haven’t done away with me yet, I cannot think of a single reason why you would in the future.” Richard’s smirk revealed the lie in his words, which unsettled Harrison, even if it proved to be empty.

“Emblyn...”

His sister pushed back from the bed and turned, storming out of the room without looking at him, though Harrison suspected it was more to keep herself from raging than from anything to do with him at all.

Now alone in the room, Harrison looked at Richard more darkly. “I’d accuse you of pretending at illness, had I not carried your unconscious and feverish body up the stairs myself.”

Richard spread his hands out in an almost magnanimous gesture. “I am a talented actor, but even I cannot muster up enough pretending to play at gratitude for carrying me like an infant. I mean, what brother would do less?”

“You would,” Harrison told him bluntly. “You would leave me to die in the streets without a second thought.”

“Oh, come now,” his brother scoffed without shame. “There would be a second thought. I would most certainly search your pockets first and take whatever coin you had.”

It would have been amusing if it were not so accurate.

Harrison pressed his tongue to his teeth, collecting his thoughts. “Why have you been writing to my wife?”

Richard looked mildly impressed. “Oh, told you about that, did she? I wondered if she ever would. I told her you would hate it because you hate me, and she seemed to think it was best to keep our correspondence quiet until I had improved myself enough to be worth your consideration.” His expression turned to one of pitying condescension. “I did not have the heart to tell her that the day would never come, given I have no intention of ever improving myself to that degree. Where is your wife, anyway? I should like a chat with a pretty face.”

“Why did you write to her?” Harrison ground out, ignoring his question and his rambling. “How did you discover her identity?”

“Oh, come off it, Harry,” Richard blustered irritably, losing his smarmy manner for the first time. “Give me a little credit for resourcefulness, if not intelligence. Do you really think it was that difficult to learn the identity of the wife of Lord Basset in the weeks following the wedding? I do have some access to high society still, and I dabble in that world when it suits me. It was easy enough to learn who she was, though I had no idea she was so lovely. She must have had quite a fright when she first saw your face and learned what she would have to endure with you. Quite frankly, Harry, I wonder that you have any dowry to foist on Emblyn at all, given you must have paid a fortune to get Adelaide.”

Harrison bit the inside of his cheek to avoid roaring in his rising anger. “You will not call her that. You will address her and refer to her as Lady Basset.”

His brother gave him a dubious look. “I will do as I please. As my sister-in-law, I may call her whatever she deigns



appropriate, and I can assure you, she has given me permission to call her Adelaide.”

“I don’t care,” Harrison bit out. “If she knew what you are really like, if she knew how worthless any relationship with you is, she would not let you call her anything.”

“And whose fault is that, Harry?” Richard inquired. He tilted his head impertinently. “Hmm? Why doesn’t Adelaide know any of this?”

The questions nettled Harrison quite neatly, his own regrets and self-recriminations rising to the surface with a vengeance. He could have prevented all of this, could have kept Adelaide from the manipulations of his brother, spared her whatever insults or offenses were due to present themselves through Richard’s behavior. But he had not. He had kept his own troubles with his brother to himself, even to the extent of Richard’s very existence.

Adelaide as she had once been might have thought less of Harrison for such a brother, which was why he had refrained from saying anything about him. Adelaide as she was now, however...

He would never know how the Adelaide now would react to the revelation of Richard’s life and behavior, given she had received Richard’s version of events first.

There was no point in thinking along that line.

“Why did you write to her, Richard?” Harrison asked again, lowering his voice, his anger fading slightly as his own blame took on more energy.

“Should I not get acquainted with my sister-in-law?” Richard laughed to himself and folded his hands over the bedsheets. “Having failed so spectacularly in keeping my relationship with you in any way useful, I wondered what sort of a chance I might have with your wife. The first letter was very innocent, very careful, given I could not be sure what you had told her.” His laughter resumed, growing stronger and revealing that Richard’s weakness was not what he portrayed it to be. “I could not have dreamed that you had told her

absolutely nothing. Imagine my surprise when she wrote back to me. I was not sure if she was the most naive of women, or if she really was entirely ignorant of me. You've done her no favors, Harry."

Harrison shook his head, grinding his teeth almost painfully together. "I am well aware of my own failings with my wife. What I want to know is why you have interjected yourself into her life when you know damn well I would have forbidden it."

Richard only smiled. "Because I know damn well you would have forbidden it. And because I can. You'll never be rid of me now, Harry. Your wife thinks I'm redeemable. I'll do my best not to disillusion her too quickly."

"Leave her alone," Harrison ordered in a growl, coming closer to the bed. "I will set up a residence for you, keep you in mild comfort for a year or more if you mind your gambling, and remove some of the restrictions on funds if you will leave Adelaide alone."

The offer clearly intrigued his brother, his dark eyes twinkling. "You bring me proof of these claims, Harry, and we can talk about my behavior with Adelaide going forward."

"Your word, Richard," Harrison demanded. "Your word that you will not pursue mischief with my wife if I concede this."

"I give you my word," his brother replied with a roll of his eyes, "that if I like what you offer, I'll leave your precious wife to her miserable life with you."

Had Adelaide said it was miserable? Was Richard only giving his usual opinions about Harrison's life and manner, or did he know something Harrison did not?

There was no way to know for certain, as the letters Adelaide had written to Richard would never be available for him to read. All he could do was make as certain as possible that no more harm could be done.

He nodded once at his brother, and left the room, his mind spinning on possibilities to end this once and for all.

## Chapter Twenty-Two



Laughter was something Adelaide had longed for in recent days, yet it had not been possible, nor available to her.

Until Richard had started to recover.

Now laughter was a daily occurrence.

He was a dreadful tease, she had come to learn, and he was so quick with his wit that one had to be paying a good deal of attention to keep up with him. Fortunately for her, she had always been rather astute in her observations, and her own mind particularly quick in such things. It was not quite so fun to spar with Richard as it was with Basset, but it did make her laugh, and that was an encouraging thing.

He had not had a fever in three days now, and he slept far less than he once had. His color was better, and he had managed three laps around the room before luncheon and two more before tea. His mood was cheery, his spirits high, and his discussions on how to improve his life now that he had forsaken his life of debauchery rather hopeful.

Surely Basset would see the change in him and begin the forgiving process. Trust would take time, she knew well, but if resentment could cease, it would be so lovely for all three Basset siblings to be reconciled and to enjoy life together rather than pointedly apart.

Adelaide had been determined to nurse Richard as much as possible herself, as long as her strength and the child would allow. She had formed a connection with him through their letters and was desperate to prove to Basset, as well as herself, that she could tend to the sick and the downtrodden, as a mother would have done. She wanted to know this was within her, that she could find such tendencies and capabilities, and she wanted Basset to see it as well. She knew that she was not

the mothering type, but that did not mean she could not learn to be.

This would prove that to her.

“And then,” Richard was saying, continuing with some story Adelaide had barely been listening to, “I snuck back down into the kitchens and found the rest of the Mahogany, which I finished off in the course of an hour. I have never been so violently ill in all my life, and my father was livid. More because there was no more Mahogany rather than because I had consumed such a drink so young, but the fact remains.”

Adelaide shook her head with a smile, putting together enough pieces of the story to garner an appropriate reaction. “You are a wicked man, Richard Basset, and that clearly started when you were very young. What did your mother say?”

Richard chuckled, leaning his head back against the pillows. “Oh, dear Mama. She is quite a meek, soft-spoken creature, you know. I think she nursed me back to health after my illness and simply asked me not to do such a thing again, but other than that, there was no punishment. I suspect she knew my father had taken the strap to me, so she did not see a need to say anything further. Good woman. I miss her greatly.”

“You could visit her, you know,” Adelaide suggested with a wry smile. “She is not dead. Indeed, I write to her more regularly than I do you, and I think she would welcome the chance to see you again, particularly now you are determined to lead a better life.”

He smiled at her, his dark eyes seeming almost soft as they looked at her. “Perhaps I should. You are so good, Adelaide. I’d be lost if it weren’t for you. I have no doubts at all it is your influence that has allowed my brother to keep me here as long as he has. I am so grateful.”

Adelaide blushed at the praise and shyly pushed one of her curls behind an ear. “I do not know about that. I may have insisted we keep you here while we tend you, but we have not discussed the matter since. I think Basset still has hope of you, and that is why you are still with us.”

“What an idea,” he murmured. He seemed to laugh very softly at it, then pushed himself to a full sitting position with some effort. “In that case, I must do my best to get better quickly, now I am out of danger. I must be of use. A few more laps today should help, and then you’d best get down to dinner, or Harry will think you like me.”

Awkwardly, Adelaide pushed herself up from the chair, taking a moment to find her balance when she did so. “Not likely. Come, I will help you.”

Richard gave her a bewildered look. “In your condition? Adelaide, you’ve got enough burden on you already, you hardly need my weight added to it.”

“I don’t intend to carry you,” she protested with a huff. “Just help you stay steady. I will be no good at all if you fall to the floor, so kindly don’t, and we won’t have any problem at all.”

He chuckled at that, nodding as he swung his legs gingerly over the side of the bed. “Fair enough. I can manage getting myself up if you will simply allow me to place my arm across your shoulders as I walk.”

Adelaide nodded with a quick smile. “Seems simple enough.”

“One would hope.” Richard scooted himself to the edge of the bed, exhaling slowly. Then he hoisted himself onto his feet, his hands taking hold of the chair Adelaide had vacated for stability. His legs shook, and he took several slow breaths, his eyes closed.

“Are you all right?” Adelaide asked with some concern, coming to him.

He nodded on another breath. “Yes, quite. I’ve been abed too long, so standing takes a moment for my head to accommodate.” He exhaled again, then opened his eyes, smiling. “There. Come, sister, let me use you as my crutch.”

Adelaide scowled playfully as she came to him. “What a lovely idea.”

“What a lovely crutch,” he returned without missing a beat. He dropped his arm across her shoulders, adjusting his weight. “Ready.”

They started to walk slowly, and Richard seemed fairly steady in his gait, though not quite confident in it. He gripped her shoulder hard, leaning against her enough that she put an arm about his waist to help.

“You’re too good for my brother, Adelaide,” Richard said as they walked. “Far too good. Far too beautiful. You deserve someone who appreciates that.”

Adelaide frowned at the statement. “Basset treats me very well. It was not easy at first, but we’ve found our way.”

“Finding one’s way can be an adventure.” Richard’s hand slid from her shoulder to her arm as he stumbled a little. “One never knows what one can do, or would like to do, until it is presented to them as an option.” His hand moved then, sliding under her arm to grasp the front of her bodice at the same time his mouth was at her ear. “I know how a woman like you deserves to be loved, Adelaide. I’d be happy to show you what that means. We’ve grown so close, surely you must see how it could be between us.”

Adelaide shrieked and wriggled out of his hold, shivers of distress racing through her as she whirled to face him. He stood in place, leering at her without shame, showing no hint of the weakness he’d had only moments before.

“How dare you!”

He chuckled darkly, starting for her on perfectly steady legs. “I dare where I please, my dear,” he purred as his eyes raked the length of her. “From the moment I was told Harry took a bride, I wanted to interfere, but I never dreamed he would marry such a beauty. Oh, I’ll dare with you, all right.” His eyes rested on certain parts of her, making her feel exposed and afraid.

“And once I start with you, you won’t remember any other man, let alone my worthless brother. You are far more to my taste than his.” He licked his lips as though to emphasize the

point, tilting his head as he considered her now. “Did you really think I was so weak as to need such help? I’ve been laying here for days just to keep you near me. Just to show Harry that I can charm any woman I wish, even if it takes months. And I have charmed you, Adelaide, so very well. I’ve convinced you there is hope for me. And you kept my secrets from Harry. Have you ever wondered why?”

She continued to back away, wishing the door were closer to her than to him. She’d never make it in this condition if she ran for it, and if he had his full strength...

Richard took another step, beckoning to her. “Come on, then. Let’s play this little game.”

Adelaide screamed as though he had touched her again. “Help!” she cried, sobs beginning to rise and rack her lungs. “Please, someone help!”

“Ooh,” Richard said with a shudder. “I do love a good scream from a woman. Now my brother will come to your rescue. But will you be blameless, I wonder? Secret letters from a would-be lover are so scandalous.” His grin bordered on the feral, and no hint of the man she had thought she knew was evident in any respect.

She had fallen right into his trap.

A pounding on the stairs made Adelaide’s heart skip, and then Harrison was in the room, disheveled and wild, taking in their positions in an instant. He roared wordlessly and grabbed his brother by the arm and neck, tossing him away as though he were a rag doll.

“Out!” he bellowed, picking up a laughing Richard from the floor and forcing him out of the door. “Out, out, out!”

“But we were having such fun!” Richard protested without shame, his laughter that of madness. “Now that I’ve touched her, you can hardly expect—”

Adelaide heard a fist hit flesh, followed by repeated thumping down the stairs.

“Throw him out!” Harrison shouted. “Just as he is and without a farthing! He is *never* to be admitted to this house

again. Never!”

Tremors of horror and fear began to shake Adelaide’s frame, and she gripped the wingback chair next to her for support. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks, and she found herself whispering apologies that Harrison would not hear.

Footsteps in the room brought her head up and she looked at her husband in agony. He did not seem calm, but he said nothing as he stared at her, his breathing unsteady.

“Are you all right?” he finally asked, his voice low and stiff.

She managed a shaky nod. “He grabbed me. He said... he said...”

“It doesn’t matter now,” he overrode. “I should have insisted someone else be in the room with you, and I did not. I knew he wasn’t being honest, but I never thought... I never dreamed...” He exhaled harshly, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, Adelaide.”

“I should be the one apologizing,” Adelaide whispered as she gripped the chair harder. “You tried to warn me. You said you knew him better, and I did not believe you. I have brought this upon myself.” She bit down on her lip hard, tears choking her.

Harrison softened where he stood, and he started towards her, then stopped himself as though something bound him. His throat moved on a swallow. “You were ignorant of his true nature, and you trusted what he had told you. That does not need to be forgiven. You certainly did not deserve his manipulation and betrayal. I should have spared you that. I *could* have spared you that.”

Something about his calm in this, his resignation without anger, his refusal to blame her flared her own anger, and she uttered some guttural sound of distress she hated. “You are dying to throw this into my face, Harrison. I know it! You warned me, and I ignored it! Blame me for this mess! Just rage at me, as you did him! And get it over with!” Her lower lip trembled, and she clamped her teeth together, which only



served to make her entire jaw wobble with unreleased sobs. “Please.”

Her husband slowly shook his head, his expression one of some forlorn grief that made her heart split down the middle with an emotionally resounding crack.

“No,” he murmured so softly she could barely hear him. “I will not rage at you, and I will not blame you. None of this is your fault, Adelaide. It is mine. I just wish you would have believed me.”

His mouth quirked as though he might manage a smile, but it did not happen. Instead, he nodded and turned from the room, leaving her to herself.

The moment he was gone, all air in her lungs rushed out, and her strength gave out. She sank to the floor in an ungraceful heap, her tears refusing to be silent now. She cried shamelessly, burying her face in her hands as wave after wave of tears crashed over her.

How could she have been so foolish? She ought to have left well enough alone and trusted that Harrison was the sort of man who would never have let his brother remove himself from his life without reason. He would have fought tooth and nail to keep him in any capacity, just as he had done with Emblyn. If Richard had pushed Harrison away to such an extent that there was no effort any longer, that ought to have told her quite enough.

But no, she had not been wise enough to see that or understanding enough to try. She had thought she could do what Harrison had not and mend the family. She had believed herself Richard’s advocate with the family, though she knew nothing about him but his own words.

Even a child would have made better choices than Adelaide had in this.

She was not to blame for Richard’s propositioning her, it was true, but opening her life to him as she had—and in secret—had prevented her from seeing the manipulation. This entire situation would not have happened had she simply been

forthcoming with her husband and spoken with him about the man he knew better.

He had not hesitated to come to her rescue, had not questioned what had happened, had not given her any cause for shame, and he had not seemed surprised by his brother's actions, either. She might never understand the full depravity and unrepentant nature of the man Harrison had just ordered to be thrown out of their house and their lives, but she certainly knew enough.

How long she sat on the floor while her tears fell, she could not have said, though the light through the window had shifted or faded a little by the time she felt able to stand.

But she could not get up.

The ungainliness of her body, the weight of the baby, the position of her legs and other furniture in the room made motion that much more difficult. She moved her tired, swollen legs in an attempt to get to her knees and try it that way, but it was no use. In hiding herself from Richard's advance, she had forced herself nearly into a corner, and there was not enough space for a woman of her size and restriction to move, let alone find stability.

Which meant she would have to remain here until someone came in search of her.

If anyone would.

She had not seen Emblyn today, but the girl had seemed a trifle reserved in the last day or two, and she had not come into Richard's rooms while Adelaide had been there. That could not be surprising, however, since Richard was more awake now and might suspect something of Emblyn's interactions with Adelaide.

When Adelaide did not show for dinner, would Emblyn come to look for her?

Would Harrison?

She couldn't think of him as Basset anymore, not when he had become so much more than just the man she had married. The use of his surname put too much distance between them,

and that she could not bear. No more distance, no more formality.

Just the two of them, soon to be three. That couple that had danced together in the fog, unable to look anywhere but at each other, and the child they had created together.

That was all she wanted now.

All she needed.

She sniffled softly, looking up as quiet footsteps creaked the floorboards.

Harrison came into view, face wreathed in gentle concern. His shoulders dropped on a sigh. "Addie..."

Tears eked their way from the corners of her eyes. He had never called her that before, and it meant the world and heaven combined to hear it. She shrugged very slowly. "I cannot manage to get up by myself."

He nodded, his mouth curving sadly, and this time he came to her, arms outstretched. She placed her hands on his forearms, gripping tightly before nodding. Harrison lifted while she held on, and her feet eventually found purchase on the ground, allowing her to press up to a full standing position at last.

She groaned as the pain of her size and sustained position on the floor made itself known in full force. "Thank you."

Harrison slid his hands up her arms until they were fully around her, pulling her into him. "I shouldn't have left you like that. I was too ashamed and angered to think clearly. I'm sorry, Adelaide."

With a sigh, she rested her face against his chest. "I was fully upright when you left. How could you know I would crumble?"

"I could tell you were distressed, and that ought to have been enough." He kissed the top of her head, lingering a moment. "I should have held you then. My poor Adelaide."

She hummed in pleasure. "Call me Addie, would you? I like the way you say it."

Harrison chuckled and pulled back, cupping her face. "I'll call you whatever you like, apart from Your Highness. Now, let me take you down to dinner."

Adelaide nodded, each breath seeming to come a trifle easier now he was near. She stepped around the chair with his aid, only to freeze stock-still when she felt a pop within her followed by a rush of liquid between her legs. She stared at the floor in horror, then at Harrison, who matched her looks.

She swallowed once. "I think we may need a doctor."



If there was any punishment for a man in existence, it was the sounds of his wife in the midst of childbirth.

Hours had passed, and the sounds of her distress had only grown in intensity and volume. Harrison paced in his study, forbidden to enter the bedchambers on Adelaide's orders, unable to do anything but worry and wonder from below. Others fled their house when their wife was in such a way, but he could not do it. He had refused to leave, had refused to go to bed, and he would have refused breakfast had his sister not threatened him with bodily harm if he did not eat something.

Even now, Emblyn was upstairs with Adelaide, having attended several childbirths before in Cornwall, and he had every expectation that she would argue with the doctor in his management of it.

But if she could give Adelaide some comfort in this time, he would not argue the point.

Another hoarse, harsh cry that seemed to last for an entire minute sounded from upstairs, and Harrison cursed softly, turning to grip the chair behind his desk. He could not bear any of this, and he would move heaven and earth to keep Adelaide from ever having to bear this much pain and struggle ever again.

He would go without being intimate, he would never touch her again, be miserable every day in existence while joined with her in marriage just to spare her this. How did any man ever come out of the experience with sanity intact?

His jacket was long gone, as was his cravat, and he had rolled his sleeves back only an hour ago, needing something to lessen the perspiration that his sympathetic distress was bringing about. He probably looked like hell, but as he was probably going to go mad in the next little while and thence be confined to an asylum, there seemed to be no point in being concerned about his appearance.

He heard Adelaide cry out in raw agony, some semblance of a word in its depths. He stepped to the corridor, looking toward the stairs, just in case she was saying something that he could hear.

“HARRISON!”

His heart stopped in his chest, his frame going cold. It was his wife screaming, there was no doubt of that, but could she really mean—

“HARRISON!”

He bolted for the stairs, taking them two at a time to fly to his wife’s side as fast as possible. He burst into her chambers, taking in the sight before him.

Adelaide was in her nightdress, lying on the bed, knees bent, her hair plaited but streaming from the confines of it, her face shrouded in perspiration, her cheeks flushed beyond anything he thought humanly possible. Emblyn was on the far side of the bed, grasping Adelaide’s hand, while the doctor and his nurse looked busy at the foot of the bed.

“I’m here, Addie,” Harrison assured her, crossing to the bed and taking her free hand in his, kissing her fingers gently. “I’m here.”

“I can’t do it,” Adelaide gasped, shaking her head against the pillow. “I can’t do it anymore. It’s too much, I’m not strong enough.”

“You are!” He squeezed her hand, kneeling beside her. “You are, Addie. You have been so strong already. You can do this.”

Whimpering, she shook her head from side to side. “I can’t. I can’t. I’m not—” She broke down into weary, desperate tears, continuing to shake her head.

His heart ached for her, and he looked at the doctor in desperation.

The doctor looked mildly sympathetic. “We need her to push in a moment, my lord. The baby is presenting and must come out. We told her as much, which was when she called for you.”

Harrison nodded, turning back to her. He stroked her damp hair back from her brow. “Addie, sweetheart, you can do this.”

“No,” she whispered. “No, I can’t.”

Returning his attention to the doctor, Harrison asked, “What can I do?”

The doctor gave him a searching look, then gestured to Adelaide. “Get behind her. Hold her. Prop her up.”

He nodded and stood, releasing Adelaide’s hand as he and Emblyn took her shoulders and raised her. Harrison slid in behind her, leaning her back against his chest and laying his knees alongside hers.

“Addie,” he murmured as he took her hands in his, their fingers entwining, her grip on him clenching, “you are the strongest woman I know. You took this boorish man to be your husband, even when you did not want to, and made the marriage work in spite of him.”

She managed a laugh, settling into him. “So you do admit it.”

He nodded against her, pressing his lips to her temple. “You went to the wilds of Cornwall and worked magic, wrapping it all about your little finger. You can do impossible things with shocking ease, and I am in awe of you for it.”

Adelaide exhaled a weak sob, her fingers rubbing against his in an almost anxious manner.

Harrison wrapped their entwined hands around her, pulling her as close as possible. “I cannot do this for you, love, but I would if I were able.” He exhaled, his lips at her ear. “I will not leave you for a moment. I will give you all the strength I possess if you will take it. I will help you however I can. All right?”

He felt her exhale again, felt her nod, and kissed her head quickly before moving their hands once more into the position the doctor indicated.

“Push!” the doctor ordered.

Adelaide tensed against Harrison, her grip on him excruciating as she pushed with a hoarse growl being ripped from her throat.

“Good!” came the praise from the doctor. “Very good. Another one!”

Harrison bit his lip as Adelaide pushed again, her nails clawing into his hands. “Yes, love, keep going.”

*Love.*

The endearment had slipped out twice now, and he found himself without any regret about it. She *was* his love, had been for likely some time, though he had refused to consider anything of the sort. Months and weeks of being with her, being yelled at by her, being laughed at by her, being distracted by her, being drawn to her, had all funneled down to this moment, this brilliance for them both, and love was the only way to describe it. He wanted her happiness above all else, wanted to make her smile, to see her triumph, to adore her exactly as she wished him to, though in truth this time.

He *did* adore her. Sitting behind her to offer strength while she delivered their child, there was nothing else it could be. He would not change a thing about Adelaide, not a single iota of wit or shift of tumultuous emotions. He wanted her with him always, just as she was, and to share their life together reveling in that love. Declaring it. Demonstrating it.

Embracing it.

He loved his wife.

Of all surprising things, that had to be the most surprising.

He inched a trifle closer to Adelaide now, raising her up just a touch more against him. “Breathe, my love. Breathe, and push.”

She did so, curling up a little to bear down, a guttural howl accompanying her efforts.

And then...

“Aah,” Adelaide suddenly grunted, leaning back against Harrison hard.

“And there you are,” the doctor said, suddenly cradling an infant in his hands.

The baby screwed up its face and let out a tiny wail of outrage that made Harrison gasp with a wave of emotion.

The cries continued, and Adelaide began to laugh breathlessly as she lay on Harrison, the laughter soon mixing with tears.

“Well, young sir, good morning to you as well,” the doctor chuckled as he wrapped the baby in cloth. He smiled up at Harrison and Adelaide. “A fine, healthy boy.”

Harrison had no words, could only gape at the baby while his wife laughed. “Addie...” he finally breathed.

She reached back and gripped the back of his neck. “Look at him!”

“Oh, my love...” Harrison shifted behind her, turning her face toward his and kissing her, finding her lips to be exuberantly receptive and kissing him back with a fervency that robbed him of the limited thought of the moment.

She broke off, tears streaming from her eyes as she beamed, her fingers curling into his hair. She looked back toward the baby, taking Harrison’s hand again and curling it around herself. “He has his mother’s lungs.”



“And his faather’s hair,” Emblyn laughed, wiping her eyes. “Look a’that.”

Harrison did, admiring the collection of thick, dark curls atop the baby’s head as the nurse brought the baby around the bed to them.

She placed the baby in Adelaide’s waiting arms. “Congratulations, my lord. My lady.”

Adelaide sniffled as she looked down at their baby. “Good morning, sweet boy. Welcome to the world.”

Harrison wrapped his arms around her, propping his chin on her shoulder as his own emotions became difficult to control. “He is so beautiful, Addie. Well done.”

“Beauty cannot be entirely attributed to me,” she teased. “Some of the credit is due to you.”

He kissed her cheek quickly. “If you say so, love.”

Adelaide sighed, leaning her head back on his shoulder. “We have a baby. We have a *baby*, Harrison.”

“We have a family, Addie,” he told her, nuzzling against her just a little. “We have a family.”

# Chapter Twenty-Three



The days following the birth of his son had Harrison in a very fine mood indeed. He pretended to go about his business, but the truth of it was that he took advantage of any opportunity to look in on Adelaide and baby Taran.

He could not help himself.

This morning marked three days after the birth, and he had been trying to undo the things he had started with his solicitor for Richard's bribe when he had the strongest desire to go and see his son. So up to his wife's chambers he had gone.

Adelaide had finally lost the look of extreme fatigue in her features, though, as he understood it, she was still sleeping a great deal. But she had not taken with fever or infection, which was a great blessing in his mind, and now she need only recover her strength. Harrison took breakfast and dinner with her every day in her rooms, and as the days went on, she spoke less and less, keeping her attention more on the baby than on him.

He did not mind. Taran was a marvelous child, and he was fascinated by him too.

Although, to be fair, a newborn did not do very much, though there was great satisfaction in holding him.

Harrison moved toward Adelaide's chambers quietly, unsure if she or the baby would be resting. But when he gently knocked, a reply from within told him to enter, so he did.

Adelaide sat in bed, holding a sleeping Taran, looking the very picture of motherly bliss. She smiled at Harrison. "Well, if it isn't the new papa. Come to see your son, my lord?"

"And my wife," he said easily, striding toward them. "How are you both?"

“I am tired,” she answered at once, though she looked better than he had seen her look in days. “And he is insatiable. I have just fed him, and now he sleeps, but he will wake up in less than an hour and act as though he has not eaten in the entire time he has been on this earth.”

Harrison chuckled and came to the bed, running a hand over her hair as he looked down at their sleeping son. “Well, he will probably grow out of that just in time to fall back into it as a child.”

“You are so encouraging,” she grumbled. She pursed her lips for a moment, reached up to take Harrison’s hand from her hair, holding it tightly in her own. “Basset, I’ve something I need to say.”

She hadn’t called him Basset in a few days, and the return to it felt almost cold, though he knew he should not overthink what had to be a habit. “All right.”

Adelaide wet her lips carefully, then looked up at him. “The last few days have been terribly uncomfortable for me, and I am not talking about my body. I know you must have sensed my hesitation, my reluctance, and my silence at times, knowing how I do tend to rattle away.”

He nodded, giving her a smile, though he was not certain where she was taking this conversation.

“The problem,” she went on, “is that you were there for the delivery of Taran, and I had not planned on that before it happened. You were there in the most vulnerable, emotional, disastrous, and weakest moment of my life when I had no defenses and no reserves to call upon. I have been mortified the more I think on it, and I don’t know how to face you.”

That was what she thought? The most brilliant, beautiful, moving moment of his life was something that brought her embarrassment and pain?

He knew her well enough by now to know that she meant what she said, even if only in the moment, so he did his best to give her a reassuring smile. “Just face me. I don’t remember much from those last few hours.”

She did not look convinced. “You remember everything.”

“Not everything. And it was not exactly an easy time for me, so yes, I am having trouble remembering with my usual clarity.”

She smiled with a great deal of hope. “Well, let us capitalize on that and pretend that I was marvelous and strong and did not need you.”

It occurred to him to laugh, as she no doubt wished him to, but he had spent so long pretending so many things on her behalf. Pretending that he did not recall the moment he knew he was in love with her was out of the question.

Harrison found himself shaking his head at her. “I don’t think I can do that.”

Adelaide frowned at that. “What? Why not? You just said you did not remember it.”

“I said I do not remember much,” Harrison corrected. “But there are some things I remember quite clearly.”

“I don’t want to hear this,” Adelaide said at once, looking away and readjusting Taran in her arms. “I cannot even think of it without embarrassment.”

Harrison held tight to her hand. “To me, you have never been more magnificent than in that moment, my love.”

Her eyes returned to his in shock. “What?”

He nodded once. “I am in love with you, Addie.”

She stared at him, disbelief etched in her features. “You cannot possibly... especially not after—”

“But I do,” he gently overrode. “It has been coming on for some time, but in that moment, I knew.” He shook his head, rubbing her hand, which seemed a touch colder now. “Before we left Trevadden, we had settled into a routine of our lives, and it was comfortable. You’d stopped resenting me, and I’d found all the faults I could in you, and we were on the brink of something more... something rather precious. And then, in your hour of greatest need, you called out for me.”

He broke off, shaking his head and fighting a lump in his throat. “Against your own will, perhaps, and against your inclination, and probably against any reason. My name. Not your mother, not your cousin, not your blessed Phillip, not even Emblyn. Me. And from that moment on, my heart needed nothing else.”

Adelaide’s eyes were wide now, her lips parted as she wordlessly took in what he was saying.

“Every moment of that time I recall with perfect clarity, down to the heartbeat. Your arms clinging to mine, the desperation of your touch, and the need of your soul...” He shook his head, smiling at her with all the adoration he now felt. “I have never been needed like that in my life, and I knew I loved you then. Not because you bore my child, but because you are the single most astonishing woman I have ever known. You have my heart, Addie. And until the end of my days, you always will. Whether you want it or not.”

She did not say a word as he finished, her hand doing nothing to grip his. Her bright eyes were almost childlike, something vulnerable and afraid lurking there.

His heart sank. Not only was she not going to return his sentiments, she was going to back away from them. He could see the retreat in every feature and knew she would have flown from the room had she been able to rise from her bed.

He couldn’t say anything, had no words. No feelings. No thought.

Why wouldn’t she say something?

Finally, she exhaled almost imperceptibly. “I was going to suggest a separation would be prudent,” she told him in a very soft voice, “while we’re here in London, especially.”

Harrison fought a disappointed sigh. “I am not going to stay in London and not be with my wife. I am not going to watch you be some Society pet for everyone to see, knowing now what sweetness lies beneath the surface.”

“This is who I am, Basset,” Adelaide insisted, though without the sharpness she might once have used with him.

“And seeing as I have given you the heir you need, there is no need to remain together so much. In a few years, perhaps we could have a second. The spare. Or perhaps a daughter. But for now, we ought to be like every other couple in Society. I need things to go back to the way they were. For my own comfort.”

Back? Back to fighting and avoidance and living his life without a single moment of joy within it? After what he had found and felt, he was now supposed to forget all about it?

Utterly impossible.

“I don’t want things to go back,” he told her, lowering his hand to the bed and releasing it gently. “I want things to move forward, and in this exact path. I want to see where this leads, Adelaide. I want to know the ending. Because I think it could be something extraordinary.” His throat threatened to close on emotion, and he could only plead with her to change her mind. “I love you, and if you would open your eyes, let down those walls, you might come to love me in return.”

Adelaide only shook her head. “This is all too much. I can’t—” She bit her lip and looked away, her throat bobbing ominously.

Well, at least she was not ruling out the possibility of eventually loving him, so he supposed that must be taken as a small victory. If she was not ready to consider such things, to take a chance with him, then he would not push.

But neither could he stay.

“Very well,” he told her, keeping his voice low for the sake of the still-sleeping Taran. “I can see you are not ready for this conversation. My apologies. But now you know where I stand, so I will give you time to decide what it is that you truly want. My task in London is done, and I think my presence here might affect your decision, so I will take my leave in the morning.”

He bowed, turning from the bed, and headed for the door.

Adelaide uttered a choked version of an exhale behind him. “And where will you be while you wait?”

He looked over his shoulder and met her eyes. “Home.”



Adelaide was a fool.

It had taken her a little more than twelve hours after Harrison had left to acknowledge that, but the fact remained.

She had been unable to sleep the night after he'd left, tossing and turning in her bed, acutely aware of the emptiness beside her, which was bizarre, as he had never slept beside her for the entire night. Yet she had missed him so desperately that she had soaked her pillows with tears.

Knowing he was not there, would not come, and she could not see him... was intolerable.

She had suggested the separation when the memory of her blatant weakness and vulnerability had embarrassed her back into her defenses of distance and aloofness. She wanted to place a barrier between them, something that would keep her heart safe from his touch, where she would not feel so exposed and without protection from pain.

And then he had told her such wonderful things—that he loved her, that he adored her, that he wanted the sort of marriage that every girl dreamed she would have, and she panicked. She had fled from the face of happiness, finding the prospect of it too much to bear.

But this was Harrison Basset she was talking about and married to.

She was and would always be safe with him, even at her most vulnerable moments. He would treasure her vulnerability and respect it, not exploit it. He would not manipulate her to his own ends and means, but he'd allow her the freedom to be herself.

He loved her.

He *loved* her.

And heaven help her, she loved him back.

Adored him. Worshiped him. Wanted nothing more than to be held by him.

He had known that before she had, and though she had likely broken his heart, even for a short time, he had not yelled, had not raged, had not closed his heart to her.

Unless he managed it in the few days they had been apart. He had gone back to Cornwall, but he had certainly been clear that he was inviting her to follow. He was waiting for her to decide.

Well, she had decided.

It had taken some time to convince Emblyn that they would be packing up and heading for Cornwall so soon after the birth of Taran, but Adelaide was just as stubborn as any of the Basset line, so it was a waste of an argument.

Besides, she had said, if she could travel from Cornwall to London by coach when she was heavily pregnant with her child, she could certainly travel back to Cornwall from London with her child in her arms.

As Emblyn wished to return to Cornwall herself, having never quite taken a liking to London, she was happily persuaded.

Taran travelled about as well as any other infant of barely a week might have done, learning to sleep rather well in a coach by the second day. His appetite had not abated in the least, but he was easily satiated with his mother so close at hand.

It was a less enjoyable journey this time, given that Harrison was not with them to tease or to converse with or to lean upon, but Emblyn provided enough entertainment with stories from her life to pass the time. She spoke of a young man named Joshua often enough, which made Adelaide wonder about the nature of their true relationship, and she decided that, after she was fully reunited with her husband, she would ask him what he knew about the mystery man.

Trevadden was soon before them, and Adelaide's heart began to race. She grinned at the facade of the house, wondering where Harrison would be, what he might be doing,



if he had expected her so soon, if he would smile when he saw her or stick to his reserve.

She would be serious and composed for this reunion of theirs, ensure that he could see the depth of her emotion without the dramatics of it. He would certainly appreciate the effort on her part for such a thing.

The carriage came to a stop in front of the house, and Adelaide lunged for the door, having left Taran safely in Emblyn's capable arms while she saw to her reunion with her husband. She marched directly into the house, looking all about as though Harrison would have been waiting for her at the entrance.

"Welcome back, my lady," Mervyn greeted with a warm smile. "I trust your journey was tolerable? His lordship told me about the arrival of young Master Taran, and we are all so pleased for you."

Adelaide smiled as she took off her gloves and bonnet, already feeling more at ease simply by being at Trevadden. "Thank you, Mervyn. Miss Emblyn currently has charge of the baby, if you wish to see him. Do you know where I might find Lord Basset at this moment?"

He bowed slightly, his smile turning knowing. "His lordship is in the music room, ma'am."

There was nothing else that could have made her smile quite like that.

"Thank you, Mervyn." She patted the back of her hair and moved down the corridor, hurrying as fast as she dared with the composure she wished to portray when she saw Harrison again.

She could hear the music coming from the room, the piece a simple one, but certainly his favorite, and she was reminded of all the times they had sat together before the pianoforte to practice their duet and how comfortable that had been. How easy. How enjoyable.

How important.

Though the venture of learning together had been innocent enough and hardly something significant, it had become a beautiful thing for the two of them to share, and they had found true friendship in it.

Friendship, which then turned to love.

When had that shift begun? When did romance first creep into their relationship? She had found him attractive from the start, so she could not lay the claim there. She had enjoyed their intimate relations before she could properly tolerate him in conversation, so that must also be ruled out.

There was no moment of truth, no stamp upon the timeline of their marriage that could be traced back. There was simply life with Harrison, and that had been enough.

More than enough.

Adelaide peered into the room as she reached it and grinned at the sight of her handsome, wonderful husband playing with his usual intensity and focus. He would not hear her come in unless she barged, and she had no intention of doing so.

Calmly, with great poise, she glided into the room as though being presented at Court, though there could not have been more difference between court dress and her simple traveling attire. Still, she doubted Harrison would care when he noticed her presence.

She timed her approach to the music, knowing how far he was into the piece and roughly how many measures were left in it. She was almost directly behind him when he finished the piece, and she swallowed the moment his fingers lifted from the keys.

“Good day, Lord Basset.”

He froze, his hands halfway to reaching for the pages of the song. Slowly, he turned on the bench and looked at her, his expression unreadable, though his mouth was fairly relaxed in its almost-smile position.

“Good day, Lady Basset. So you have... come to Trevadden. How long will you stay?”

“Quite a while, I should think,” Adelaide replied in her most proper voice. “It is our home, after all. Our son should live most of his life here, particularly while he is young.”

“I see.” Harrison’s mouth twitched, but he kept it in check. “I confess, I did not think to see you so soon.”

“Yes, I know.” She smiled at him but kept the smile small. “But I have come.”

He turned more fully on the bench, his eyes searching hers. “You seem quite serious, my lady. Are you well?”

Heavens, this restraint was difficult. However did he manage it when his emotions were rising?

“I am,” she assured him. “You see, I realized what a coward I was in London, and that I should embrace what I feel for you rather than fear it. In such a delirium, as you can imagine, I wanted to run and throw myself at you when I returned to Trevadden, and then confess how deeply and how ardently I love you, but I know that you would hate such a display. So I am standing here, sedate and repentant and—”

“Try it.”

His interruption took her off guard. “What?”

“Try it,” he said once more, his expression unchanged. “Try running and throwing yourself at me. See where it leads.”

Adelaide cocked her head in helpless confusion. “You cannot be serious.”

“And yet I am.” He pushed up from the bench and gestured toward the gardens just beyond the room. “I’ll step outside and wait, and if you want to run and throw yourself, you may.”

With that, he inclined his head and strode out the door from the music room directly to the gardens.

She stared after him, wondering what in the world had come over him, and then was struck with a wave of euphoria that she had been entirely unprepared for. She grinned wildly, picked up her skirts, and raced after him, barely catching sight of his broad smile before she threw herself into his waiting arms.

He caught her to him, crushing her into his hold while swinging her about as they both laughed like children. Then he stopped and his mouth came crashing down on hers, branding her his for all time, if she had not been so devoted already. Again and again, he kissed her, barely giving her a chance to catch up, let alone to do much else. She cupped his jaw and poured herself into his kiss, into his goodness, into all that he was and with all that she had to give.

Harrison moaned into her kiss, breaking off with a gentle nip at her lower lip.

“I’d have taken you any way you’d come,” he murmured, shaking his head. “Whether you’d run or flown or walked or crawled. Silent or shouting, smiles or tears, I’d have taken you.”

“I love you,” Adelaide whispered fiercely. “I am so sorry I was afraid of this, that I pushed you away, that I...”

He silenced her with another kiss, this one nearly as intoxicating. “No apologies. I love you just as you are and with more feeling and intensity than I know how to express or convey.”

Adelaide rubbed his jaw, her other hand brushing back his dark hair. “You poor dear. Are you overwhelmed with it all?”

“Quite,” he said simply. “Feels like the brink of death, and yet I’m beside myself with joy. It’s the strongest thing I have ever felt in my entire life, and I don’t even know how long it’s been there.”

She smiled and kissed him very softly. “I’ll help you find a way to bear it. I’m accustomed to strong emotions, you know. But hardly one so tender. You can help me there.”

He stroked her cheek with his thumb, his touch sending shivers down her spine. “You love me tenderly, and I’ll love you fiercely, and we’ll see how we get on.”

“That sounds perfect.” She leaned into his touch, her smile turning dreamy. Then, on impulse, she winked at him. “But every now and again, I get to be fierce, and you be tender.”

Harrison grimaced, lowering his hands to her arms, rubbing almost absently. “That could take some practice and effort.”

Adelaide hummed a laugh, linking her hands behind his neck. “Well, as neither of us are leaving this marriage, we do have some time. In a few weeks, there will be even more opportunities for practice.”

That seemed to interest him, his dark eyes turning somehow darker. “Indeed?”

“Indeed,” she replied with a suggestive quirk of her brow. “Near constant, I’d say. If and when you like.”

He kissed her again, long, slow, and lingering, lighting up parts of Adelaide she did not know existed. “I’ll always like to, sweetheart,” he murmured, his lips brushing hers. “I’ll always love. And if you’re willing, I would dearly love to stay with you tonight, just to hold you.”

If a heart could melt, hers did then. She tugged him closer and touched her brow and nose to his. “I would dearly love for you to stay with me every night; what do you say to that?”

Harrison’s beautiful, captivating grin blinded her. It was immediately followed by his kiss, which ignited her. After which, they returned to the house, where he held and kissed his son, which delighted her.

And that night, as her husband held her in his arms, Adelaide told him again how she loved him, which enraptured them both for many, many months to come.

# Epilogue



“I don’t know why I let you talk me into this.”

“You are the one who suggested this! I would have been perfectly content to remain at home with the children, but you said you had a surprise for me, and that I only needed to pack a few things!”

“Yes, but I didn’t intend for us to have somewhere to go every single night. There is nothing I hate more than being pointlessly busy.”

Adelaide shook her head and frowned out of the carriage window, which made Harrison grin secretly. He was not all that bitter about coming to London for the beginning of the Season, and it really was a surprise he had planned for his wife.

It was just too much fun to prod her, even after four years of marriage.

She had not been to London since Taran had been born, and with the arrival of his twin sisters just a year later, Trevadden had been rather bustling with children. Yet still, Adelaide had found time to host teas and luncheons, visit the mines to look in on the bal maidens, arrange charity work for the local villages, and drag Harrison to every ball and soiree Cornwall had to offer.

He had only ever heard her complain about Cornwall once in all that time, and it was only a complaint that Cornwall was so far from Scotland, where her cousin Anna lived with her husband.

He had yet to tell her this, but he was arranging for them to spend Christmas in Scotland this year, which could disappoint

the neighbors expecting the annual Twelfth Night ball at Trevadden, but he was willing to risk their displeasure.

It would be worth it to see his wife glowing with happiness.

“Did you see Emblyn’s letter today?” Adelaide asked, their previous argument forgotten. “It seems that Taran thought Emma and Kerra needed toast with jam while they wore white pinafores.”

Harrison winced at that. “Your son is going to be a terror, Lady Basset.”

“*Your* son,” she insisted firmly, “is a menace, but his creativity deserves praise. And his generosity.” She glanced at him, smiling in the way that never failed to upend his knees. “He must get that from his father.”

Harrison instantly pulled her over to him, one hand cupping her face as though she were made of porcelain. “You and I both know,” he breathed, his thumb brushing her full lower lip, “that he gets that from his mother. Along with his sweetness.” He pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “His tenacity.” He kissed her chin. “His loyalty.” His lips dusted her cheek. “And most of all, his charm.”

He kissed her full on the mouth now, her hand seizing his cravat to pull him even closer, to crush them together in a feverish rush of passion that had taken them over the entire time they had been in London. He drank her in, followed her lead, and found each of her favorite places to be kissed, making her sigh with each of them.

He reached for her hair, and she suddenly slapped his hand away, rearing back. “Oh no, you don’t,” Adelaide ordered, holding up a hand. “You will not disrupt this hair. Faust spent ages on it, and I intend to keep it in place.”

Harrison glared at her while his pulse tried desperately to fade back into its normal pace. “Your hair,” he repeated flatly. “You are ending a very pleasant exchange because of... your hair?”

His wife gave him a severe look. "Do not underestimate a woman's feelings about the condition of her hair, particularly when some effort has been exerted for it. It is a rarity that there is perfection in it, so it must be appreciated when it occurs."

"I see." He narrowed his eyes. "And what if I want to appreciate the perfection of your hair when it is completely free from any pins and plaits, when it flows like a river of gold?"

"That, you may feel free to do later." To prove her point, she rose from her seat and moved to the other side of the coach, giving him an utterly superior look.

Harrison could only sigh in defeat. "Very well, I will concede. But only because I am greatly looking forward to watching you be flocked by admirers tonight."

"You are?" Adelaide's perplexed look was utterly adorable. "You hate when I am flocked."

"True. Which is why I intend to storm the place and push aside all the dandies to claim a dance with my wife that someone else has asked for." He grinned rather smugly. "It has such a heroic tone to it."

Adelaide coughed an incredulous laugh. "Whatever happened to your reserve in public and wishing for a lack of demonstration?"

"I need no reserve with my wife," he shot back. "Not where she is concerned. It is my task to adore her all the days of my life, especially in public, so that others may envy the marriage she has and the love she enjoys."

"There is a fine line between adoration and obsession," Adelaide murmured in amusement. "And I think you found it."

Harrison shrugged. "I will not apologize for it. We are so rarely in London, I thought I might remind the world where I stand with you."

"Impossible man."

"Yes, so you've said."

"I love you."



He smiled at that, just as he always did when she said it. “I love you. And I will not storm, you know. Just push people aside.”

“Oh no, storm away, by all means,” she insisted. “The more spectacle, the better. Besides, I’ve a better reason than most to dance with my husband.”

“Oh?”

She nodded and crossed back over to his side of the carriage. “Yes. I do.” She took his hand, removed his glove, and placed it on her stomach. “In the autumn, my lord, we will have an arrival.”

Harrison gaped, staring at his hand as though he somehow might feel the baby that was growing therein. “Truly?”

“Truly,” Adelaide laughed, her fingers lacing with his on her stomach. “I waited longer than usual to make certain, and it is certain.”

“How have you kept this from me?” he wondered aloud, looking into her smiling face. “I’ve always known when you were carrying the others.”

“I’ve been very careful this time,” she quipped. “And I have better ways of distracting you from astuteness now. It was really quite simple.”

Harrison shook his head and kissed his wife again, fervently but without insistence, keeping his hands away from her hair. “I love you, Addie. So much.”

She laid a hand alongside his cheek, smiling in a way he was certain he did not deserve. “I love you, too, Harrison.” Her eyes moved to the window, and her smile turned impish. “Well, well.”

“What?”

“There’s a fog out.”

He glanced behind him, where, sure enough, a low fog was making itself known in the late hour. “So there is.” He looked back at his wife, flashing her a crooked smile. “What are you thinking, Lady Basset?”

“A waltz out of doors, Lord Basset. Do you think our hosts would approve?”

He chuckled and brought her hand to his lips. “I will get special permission. Let us see how a London fog lends itself to a waltz, and if Cornwall does it better.”

“I don’t care who does it better,” Adelaide told him, curling into his side, “so long as it is a waltz with you.”

Harrison nodded at that, kissing his wife’s very carefully and perfectly set hair. “I quite agree, my love. I quite agree.”

# About the Author

Rebecca Connolly has been creating stories since she was young, and there are home videos to prove it. She started writing them down in elementary school and has never looked back. She lives in Ohio, spends every spare moment away from her day job absorbed in her writing, and is a hot cocoa junkie.

COMING SOON

*Something  
Borrowed*

Cornwall Brides

Book Three

“Love, honor, and keep...”

by

REBECCA CONNOLLY