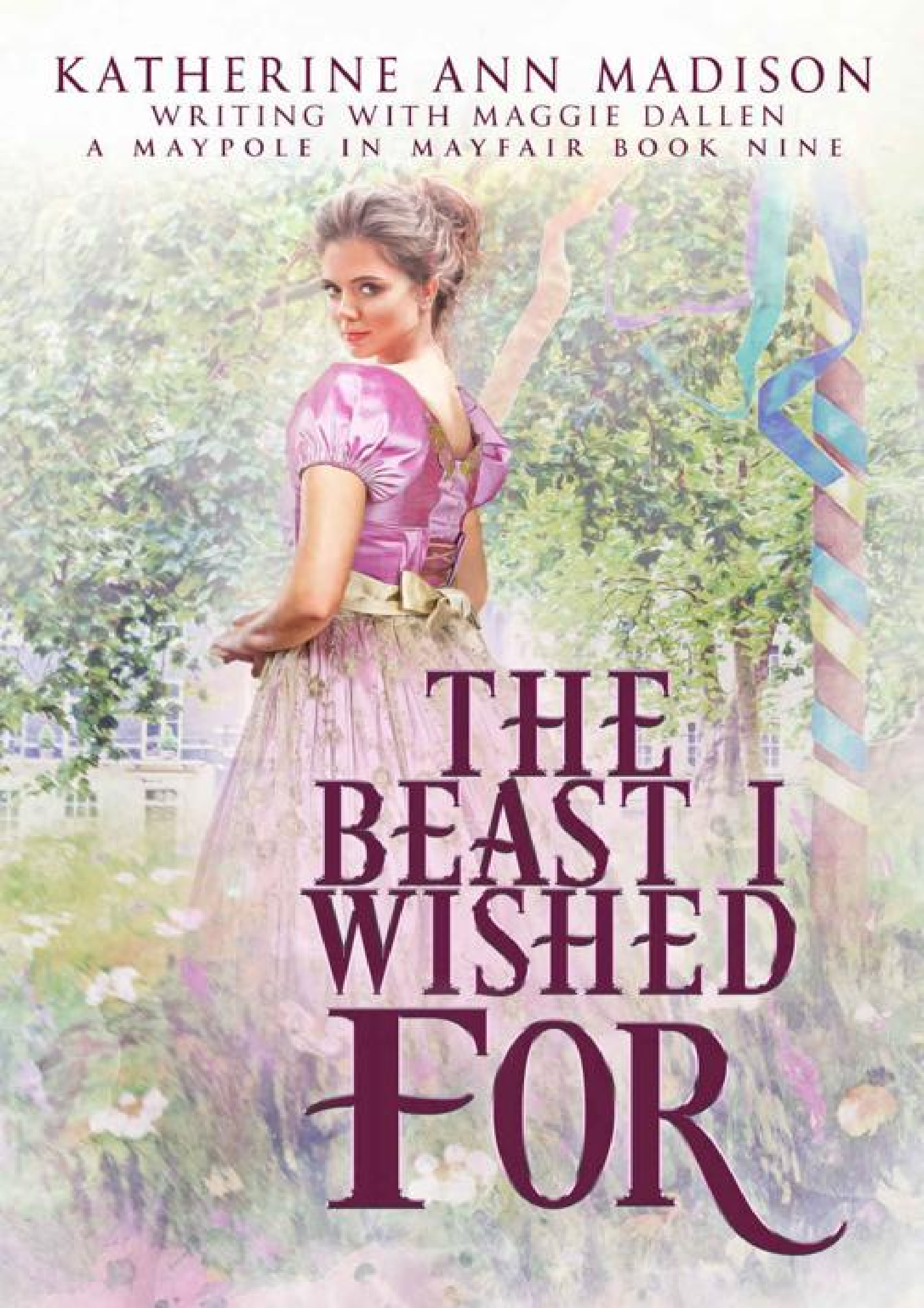


KATHERINE ANN MADISON
WRITING WITH MAGGIE DALLEN
A MAYPOLE IN MAYFAIR BOOK NINE

A woman with her hair in an updo, wearing a vibrant purple short-sleeved top and a long, flowing, light-colored skirt with a large gold sash, stands in a garden. To her right is a tall wooden maypole wrapped in colorful ribbons of purple, blue, yellow, and red. The background is a lush garden with green trees and flowers.

THE
BEAST I
WISHED
FOR

THE BEAST I WISHED FOR

A MAYPOLE IN MAYFAIR

KATHERINE ANN MADISON
MAGGIE DALLEN



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CHAPTER ONE

LADY ISABELLE REYNOLD, having just exited her carriage, stared up at the tower spires that flanked either end of the massive estate of Lord Everhart and knew with absolutely certainty that she was entering the lair of the beast.

The massive structure with its flying buttresses and soaring lines had the exact sort of gothic architecture that reminded one of dark medieval sorcerers and evil lords who locked damsels in—

“Close your mouth, dear Isabelle, it’s unbecoming,” her aunt interrupted, her gnarled hands firmly clasped about the head of her cane. Isabelle snapped her mouth closed but her nose wrinkled as she glanced over at her aging aunt.

Did the woman not understand that the start of some great story had been brewing in her thoughts? Likely not. Aunt Matilda had been a surrogate mother for most of Isabelle’s life. “It’s the exact sort of place I’d expect a man like him to live,” she said as she linked her arm with her aunt’s, starting toward the massive front door.

They passed through a pointed arch even as her aunt leaned closer. “What’s that? I didn’t hear you, dear.”

Isabelle sighed. Her aunt had been steadily losing her hearing. Which often came in handy except when attempting to have a conversation... “This house is exactly what I pictured,” she nearly yelled in an attempt to be heard.

“Why’s that, dear?” Her aunt asked, shuffling along the path to the great door.

By right, her aunt ought not to make such trips. She did best when tucked in their home where she knew the surroundings. And though her father was a lord of the realm, an earl, his real passion was mapmaking and, as he was mid project, he'd sent his sister to once again accompany his daughter.

Isabelle winced at the idea. Her father always supported her projects, the latest being Isabelle's attempt to collect unused and unwanted volumes from the most elite in London to use in the education of less-fortunate citizens and she appreciated that about him.

He was a man passionate about his hobbies and he encouraged his daughter to be the same. The problem was that he was so often caught up in his own endeavors that he couldn't actually help, and so he sent, Aunt Matilda in his place.

A situation which was growing increasingly unfair to Matilda.

"Did you answer?" her aunt asked, and Isabelle realized she hadn't. She'd been lost in thought once again. Something that had been happening with increasing frequency of late, though the why of it was a mystery even to herself.

"Sorry, Auntie. I didn't," she yelled. "The house looks as formidable as the man who owns it."

"Why thank you," a deep voice called as dread slid down Isabelle's spine. Her gaze drifted up to meet the deep penetrating stare of Baron Everhart. Tall and broad, he looked more like a pugilist than a baron. His near-black hair swept back from his face like a lion's mane, drawing even more attention to the strong masculine lines of his face.

A scar slashed across his left cheek, only adding to his rugged appearance as he lounged with a hip on one of the large stone pillars that flanked the massive steps.

How long had he been standing there? She'd been so lost in thought...

“Er...you’re welcome?” she answered, swallowing down a lump. She’d met the man ever so briefly in London when her best friend, Daffodil, now the Duchess of Hathshire, had married Lord Everhart’s brother.

He’d glowered through the entire meeting and when the duke had suggested that Isabelle come to survey the library here, Everhart had outright glared, claiming that she ought to make the visit short.

She may or may not have responded that she’d keep her visit as slight as his manners, which had only caused him to scowl all the more.

A scowl that decorated his face still, weeks later.

He stared down at her with narrowed eyes and a frown marking his lips.

She’d determined to be more polite as he was their host for the duration of their stay, and she’d not have Matilda suffer any more than the journey had already caused.

Her family only lived a day’s ride from Everhart’s home in Cheshire, which meant their visit could be brief.

That should make Everhart happy as well. Though why he didn’t like her was a mystery, it wasn’t one she ever hoped to solve.

Better to make this visit as short as her aunt could suffer. Once done, she’d have over three hundred books to donate to the Betterment of Unfortunate Souls. Members, people in need of help, would be able to borrow the books from the group’s library with the hope of changing their circumstances through education.

And once the book collection was complete...

She drew in a deep breath as she began helping Matilda up the stairs, her aging hand clutching at Isabelle’s while the other used the cane to navigate the steps.

Isabelle winced. And then she’d have to settle herself into the task of finding a husband. It was less than ideal. She’d

much rather continue her community projects, but it wasn't fair to her aunt.

Without Isabelle to care for, the woman could settle into her old age, rest and be comfortable.

Everhart pushed off his stone pillar and trotted down the steps toward them, coming to Matilda's other side.

To her old auntie, he gave a winning smile, which transformed his entire face from stern to handsome. The change was so stunning, that her foot faltered on the next step.

"May I help you, madame?" he asked, his manners making an unexpected appearance.

Aunt Matilda gratefully handed him her cane and then thread her arm through his. "Thank you. Knees aren't what they used to be."

"Really?" he said, his loud baritone apparently easy for Matilda to hear. He shifted her weight onto his arm, helping her easily move up the steps. Isabelle kept her hand on Matilda's other arm though it was hardly necessary. The older woman moved with ease, thanks to the baron. "You could have fooled me. You seem spritely as a wood nymph."

Aunt Matilda giggled like a girl and Isabelle blinked in surprise. She leaned over her aunt, staring the baron's profile. Who was this man and where was the beast she'd expected?

"How was your journey?" he asked Matilda with a kind smile.

"As good as one might expect," Matilda answered. "My bones are claiming rain, though the sky is fair and blue."

The baron met Isabelle's gaze and gave her a scowl once again, the beastly baron returning. "Perhaps it would have been better to stay at home, then."

She scowled back. Though she'd promised herself she'd not be adversarial with her host, she'd also not suffer him telling her how to treat her own flesh and blood.

Matilda snorted. "Why should I wish to do that? When one stops moving, they die, my lord."

Isabelle suppressed a smile as she looked away from the baron. There. That would teach him. They reached the top of the stairs and made their way toward the massive front door.

But Everhart only chuckled in answer. “And will you help your niece choose books from my library?”

“Oh no,” Matilda wrinkled her nose. “I shall sit by your fire and drink your brandy, I suspect.” Matilda laughed then, her no-nonsense way of speaking easing a great deal of the tension within the small party.

“You are welcome to as much as you like,” the baron was all smiles again as he chuckled at her aunt. Apparently, he saved all his malice for Isabelle.

“Thank you. I will. I leave the good deeds to my niece.” Her aunt continued. “When I reach the gates of Heaven, I shall declare that my one good deed in life was raising her.”

The baron looked at her again, his scowl back in place as he distinctly muttered the words. “A do-gooder, eh?”

She felt her hackles rise as she opened her mouth to protest.

FOR A WOMAN who looked like an angel, Lady Isabelle had an ornery streak. Adam attempted not to roll his eyes. Do-gooders were often that way. Looking down at the rest of them with their moral superiority.

Never mind that she had no idea what the real world looked like. He’d seen enough death and destruction to know for certain that at the end of the day, do-gooders didn’t make much difference. The world was still a dark place.

Not that he wanted her to understand the war in which he’d found himself embroiled. Far from it. She had this look of sweet innocence that men like him wished to protect.

Which was another source of irritation. He ought not want to give Lady Isabelle anything. Well, except books. She could

take as many of those as she wished.

“There is nothing wrong with performing good deeds,” Isabelle huffed from the other side of her aunt.

“Didn’t say there was,” he answered, pleased to know he’d irritated her. Why he should wish to was obvious enough. He didn’t want her to see the dark parts of life, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t use a bit of put down. Take some of the superiority out of her.

“Your tone implied it, my lord.” The last two words dripped with disdain. “Though I don’t see how helping unfortunate people have access to education would make me contemptable.”

Is that what she was doing? He’d forgotten. To be fair, when his brother had been explaining, he’d been a bit distracted.

Isabelle had thick brown hair and large doe eyes that had been staring up at him. And then there was the shell pink of her lips, that even in a frown, had a lovely bow shape to them.

He’d not noticed a woman in a very long time, not since before the war, and he’d not found his renewed interest pleasant.

Why now? And why her? If he were going to gain an awareness of a woman, why couldn’t it be one who wasn’t marriageable?

Because he had no interest in becoming wed.

He might have gained a barony but that was a fluke. A chance of fate that the king had seen fit to award the land to him. And while he intended to be a good steward, he did not feel the need to create an heir and keep the land.

The title hadn’t been his before, he felt no moral or emotional obligation to see the land continue to his descendants. He’d be a good steward while he was here, but that would have to suffice.

But deepening his connection to anything or anyone was no longer in the cards for him. He’d seen too much darkness to

marry some starry-eyed woman and raise a family. He was too scarred, and he didn't mean the cut on his face, to make room for any sort of attachment.

It wasn't that he didn't like children. His brother had a daughter and little Clarissa was his favorite person in the entire world.

It was just...

He was filled with too much darkness to raise children into the light. He knew it deep in his soul.

"Shall I show you to your rooms before dinner?" he asked, Matilda's hand still wrapped about his arm.

"Yes, please. Though would you forgive me if I took a tray in my room and went to bed? The trip has worn me out."

"Of course," he answered with a nod, starting toward the stairs with Matilda on his arm.

Isabelle stayed on her aunt's other side, helping her aunt as well. "I can do the same if you'd prefer, my lord," Isabelle offered.

He nearly agreed. He'd like nothing more than to see as little of Isabelle as possible. Which is why he'd planned to have both his guests on the third floor, but now that he'd met Isabelle's aging aunt, he looked down at the butler, giving a quick nod.

The man came started up the stairs behind them, and once they'd reached the top, he turned back. "See the chamber next to mine prepared."

Isabelle's brows lifted as she cleared her throat in obvious disagreement.

"What?" he asked, irritated that there was some question. He was just trying to help a guest.

But his tone must have been sharp because a crease appeared between her brows. "You don't have to ask like that. I just want to be near my aunt. She might need me in the night and..."

He let a long breath, wondering again why Isabelle would have dragged her aunt out for the task of recovering a few books. “Fine.”

He looked at the butler, who gave a silent nod in return and then hustled off to prepare the new rooms.

“It will just be a moment,” he said to Matilda as he led her toward the library. “Would you suffer that brandy and fire while we wait?”

“Wonderful idea,” the older woman answered as she patted his arm. “I know Isabelle will wish to browse your collection. Nose always in a book, that one.”

Isabelle didn’t reply as they turned into a doorway on the left, entering the library.

It was an impressive room.

He’d grown up the son of a duke, but even he’d paused the first time he’d entered the two-story library. A balcony circled the entire room, so that the selections on the second floor could be accessed and three spiral stairs were strategically placed to help the user climb up to that level.

He heard Isabelle’s gasp and then Matilda’s small laugh. “It’s magnificent,” Isabelle murmured, her already large eyes wide with wonder as her lips parted. “It’s just...”

He might normally have added in some snarky comment, but she looked so awed that even he couldn’t spoil her pleasure.

He tended to give everyone a bit of trouble. It kept life interesting. But Isabelle took particular offense, which made her even more fun to tease. And she deserved it, honestly.

But in this moment, he found himself smiling rather than teasing. “It is impressive.”

“I...” She swallowed as she turned to him. “I’m glad to have seen this room, if nothing else. Thank you.”

The words surprised him. Was she thanking him? How odd. “You’re welcome,” he answered. “But it’s your aunt you

ought to thank. She seems to have sacrificed a great deal to bring you here.”

Her gaze narrowed once again, her mouth snapping shut. “I could remind you that she already told you she likes to travel, but I think instead, I shall inform you to mind your own affairs and stay out of mine.”

He harrumphed, low and deep, the sound echoing in the vaulted ceilings. “You are my affair, as your company has been foisted upon me.”

She made a squeaking noise, words seeming to escape her for a moment before her chin tilted at a jaunty angle. “I can assure you, I shall rectify that as soon as I am able. We won’t be here for more than a day or two and then I shall cherish never seeing you again.”

Her words didn’t bring him the pleasure they ought. He’d gotten under her skin, and she’d agreed to leave. Both events should have made him happy. But as he rumbled, “Good.” The word lacked any grit.

Which displeased him a great deal. Yes, Isabelle was pretty, but he should be glad not to have her underfoot. He didn’t like beautiful do-gooders and he ought to be glad never to associate with her again.

“Good,” she fired back, her hands coming to her hips. “We’ll catalogue the books tomorrow, pack them up, and be gone the next.”

“Excellent,” he added, knowing he was just being ridiculous now.

Her nose wrinkled. “I agree. And I shall take my meal in my room as well. I’m sure you’d prefer it, and so would I.”

The butler chose that moment to enter. “The rooms are ready, my lord.”

Isabelle spun about, stomping after the other man with her fists clenched at her sides.

“She’s got real fire, that one,” Matilda chuckled. “But a heart of gold.”

He didn't answer as he began to lead the older woman to her room. It didn't matter what Isabelle's heart was made from. His was black.

CHAPTER TWO

ISABELLA WOKE THE NEXT DAY, a mixture of excitement, dread, and some unnamed emotion mixing so that she was out of bed with the first rays of the sun.

Surely, it was just because she was eager to leave. The sooner she began this job, the more quickly they could go.

With that in mind, she rang for tea and then dressed herself in a simple gown to begin the day. After pulling her hair back in an easy twist at her nape, she set out for the library, intent upon beginning before even breakfast was served. She'd be done long before her aunt was even stirring for the day and then she could spend the rest of her time entertaining Matilda.

Her father had sent Isabelle to Madame Bellafonte's school for debutantes to see to parts of Isabelle's education but also to give Matilda a reprieve. Her aunt had been almost exclusively responsible for her care since her mother's death when she was a young child.

Her heart twisted to think of Matilda's failing health. Her aunt had been her support for so long, Isabelle knew it was her job to return the favor now. She made her way into the massive room, the morning sun already shining through the wall of windows on the southeast side.

She stopped, awed once again by the space, the sheer number of rich leather volumes, the ornately carved woodwork, and the plush furniture that filled the space.

Five months prior, Isabelle had stood in the spring air, and danced about a Maypole with her friends. Each had made a

wish.

She'd told, Daffodil, Delilah, and Jocelyn, her very best friends, that she'd wished for books for her project and she did. But that hadn't been absolutely true. Or at least not the whole truth. She'd really wished for quality time with Matilda before her aunt was gone.

And something about this library filled her with hope that her wish might come true. She stared past the windows to the grounds, so focused, she nearly missed the child that sat in one of the overstuffed chairs.

"Hello," she called to the small boy who held a book clutched in his hands, his eyes wide as he stared back at Isabelle, not answering. He looked scared out of his wits.

She gave him a warm smile, trying to ease his fears. "I'm Lady Isabelle. Who are you?"

But the boy didn't do much more than squeak as a woman rushed forward. "Beg your pardon, mum."

She dipped down into a curtsy, her simple clothing declaring her a maid.

Isabelle shook her head, attempting to put the woman at ease. "There is nothing to forgive."

But the woman stepped forward, hands up, still looking nervous. "He loves the books and so I come and clean early so he might..."

Isabelle bent down so she was eye level with the child. "I love books too. It's why I came here to Castledon. Baron Everhart is going to let me take some."

"Take them?" the child whispered, his eyes lighting as they darted to his mother.

His mother frowned, her head shaking quickly back and forth. "That's not for us, William."

Isabelle grimaced. She was certain that the baron had intimidated his staff or frightened them half to death. His natural expression was a scowl, and his words weren't much better. "I shall speak to him. I'm sure he could spare—"

But the woman stepped forward. “That’s all right. This job has kept my boy in a warm place with food in his stomach. I would never want to risk asking.” Then the other woman bent down whispering. “And he’s learning to read them. It’s more than I ever did. I’m very grateful.”

Isabelle’s brows rose. Wasn’t that a thought? The baron had given this woman a job that had made a difference in her and her son’s lives. How unexpected.

With another smile, she sat on the floor. “Show me what you know, William. Maybe I can help.”

The boy scrambled from the chair and settled quickly into her lap. No more than six, he still easily fit and as his finger trailed over the page of a book of tales, he successfully read several of the words.

Isabelle passed the next hour explaining the various sounds of different letter pronunciations to the boy who was a quick study. But she also just read him the story, which she’d guess, was the first in his life.

It was a happy hour indeed, but as it blended into two, she lost all sense of time, the boy’s appetite for knowledge as voracious as anything she’d seen and she only had this one chance to help him.

But she must have allowed it to go too long because she heard the distinct sound of a throat clearing in the doorway.

Her chin snapped up to find the baron scowling fiercely at her from the double-doored entrance to the room.

The maid rushed forward, snatching her son from Isabelle’s lap all the while stuttering out an apology.

Isabelle winced as she rose. “Lord Everhart,” she murmured as she dipped into a curtsy.

“Lady Isabelle,” he grumbled back, his scowl deepening. “Would you please explain to me what you are doing.”

The maid went deathly pale as Isabelle’s chin snapped up. She’d not be intimidated and she’d not allow Everhart to hurt

this maid and her son because of something Isabelle had done. “I woke early and decided to begin.”

“You’re a half hour late for breakfast.”

Isabelle winced, glancing at the clock on the mantel. She was, in fact, late. And she was about to murmur an apology, when Everhart’s gaze swung to the maid and the boy. The maid was taking tentative steps backward with the child in her arms.

“And you,” Everhart started. The woman froze.

“Yes, my lord?” she squeaked, clutching the boy tight.

“Must bring him here again. He’s a better study than I was at his age by far.”

That had Isabelle blinking in surprise. She’d expected him to become angry but apparently that was a reaction only reserved for her.

The maid curtsied, looking relieved as she scurried off. But Isabelle was curious. Was there a kind heart somewhere inside this man?

She began to follow him toward the breakfast room. “My apologies for holding you up.”

“I am not the one you should be concerned about. Your aunt refused to eat without you.”

She huffed a breath, realizing they were back to their same argument from yesterday. “My aunt can take care of herself, my lord.”

That wasn’t exactly true. Hence why Isabelle was in the room next to the other woman. But she wasn’t telling Everhart that.

He gave her one of his usual glowers over his shoulder. “For a do-gooder, you don’t take her care into consideration, now do you?”

She wrinkled her nose and made a face at his back. “And for a mean ogre, you were surprisingly nice to that boy.”

He spun to face her. “I am always courteous to my staff.”

Had she hit a nerve? How interesting. “Then you ought to give him a few books of his own. He’s very smart and he could learn a real trade if he could learn to read and write.”

He scowled at her. “You don’t mind your own affairs, do you?”

“Oh please,” she swished her hand. “All you do is comment on mine.”

He opened his mouth and then closed it again, turning around and continuing toward the dining room. Had she just won a back and forth? She stared at his ridiculously broad shoulders and smiled. How satisfying.

THE LITTLE CHIT had just gotten him good. It actually made him smile the smallest bit to think of her besting him but then the look fell off his face again.

Seeing Isabelle sitting on the floor with a child in her lap had unsettled him. Which was ridiculous.

He didn’t want children of his own. His niece was more than enough but as he swept down the hall with Isabelle trailing behind him, he could admit that this place was very large and rather empty.

He shook his head, dismissing this particular train of thought. It didn’t change anything about what he’d been through, or what he knew about the world. He didn’t want to bring a child into this life when there was so much pain.

The soft swish of Isabelle’s dress behind him tickled his ears. It was a pleasant sound and as he turned back, he caught her scent on the air, a mixture of leather and paper but hints of vanilla that added a sweet sensuality to her fragrance.

It was exceedingly pleasant, and he found himself turning back toward her, drawing in a deep breath.

“My lord,” she said with a frown. “Do not tell me we must continue discussing each other’s affairs.”

His jaw clenched at the irritation in her voice. They were oil and water in every conversation. He no more had a pleasant thought about her and then she was sniping at him once again. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Oh good. Then you can stop, offer me your arm, and escort me like a gentleman rather than marching ahead of me as though I am some prisoner.”

His mouth fell open as he turned to look at her. A jailer? Seriously? “Your company was foisted upon me, remember?”

Her hands came to her hips. “Your manners are deplorable.”

“How’s that?”

“How many times do you think you wave that in my face. *I don’t want you here.*” She waved her hand like a flag. “I’m aware. You’ve told me. Repeatedly. Rest assured, my lord, I don’t want to be here. I will relish leaving and I will hasten to do so,” she said wrinkling her nose at him as though she had smelled something fowl.

Then, in his own house, she dropped her hands, fists clenched, and stepped around, stomping toward the breakfast room.

It was his turn to stare at her back as they finished the journey down the hall.

He’d like to be angry too. Except her hair shimmered in the low light of the hall, picking up errant shafts of sunlight, and her back tapered to a lovely waist, her hips flaring out and swaying in her skirts with an angry little sashay.

And he had this vision of her turning back to him, still angry. She’d poke him right in the chest even as he captured her hand and pulled her close and kissed all the anger right out of her.

The unexpected thought caught him off guard and he stopped, the air seizing in his lungs for a moment. What was he even thinking?

He didn't want this woman. He didn't want any woman. He'd be a steward for these lands and then he'd die alone, content that...

But that led him to another place that had him drawing in a deep gulp. He'd be content that he'd done some good with the time he'd been granted on this earth.

He both realized that his vision sounded lonely and that he was also intent upon being a do-gooder to some extent.

Isabelle turned into the dining room and as she rounded the corner, her hands unclenched, the stiff muscles of her back eased and he caught her smile as she entered, obviously beaming at her aunt.

“Good morning, Auntie. My sincere apologies for being late.”

How come he hadn't gotten an apology?

Lady Matilda started to stand. “No worries, dear. I told Adam that you were in the library working. You're such an early riser.”

“Adam?” Isabelle asked as he rounded the corner, nearly running into her. He could feel her heat as he stopped short and his name on her lips made his chest tighten as he looked down into her upturned face.

Those lips...that kissing fantasy he'd had in the hall filled his thoughts as he stared down at her. “That's right.”

Isabelle's gaze flitted down his face to his mouth and for the briefest moment he thought she might be thinking the same thing he was, but then she spun and crossed to the buffet.

Beginning to fix a plate, he watched her graceful movements until she turned to her aunt. “Blood pudding or meat pie?”

It was that moment that Adam realized that Isabelle had not started fixing her own plate but was serving her aunt. It seemed so natural. Did they do this often?

“Both,” Matilda answered with a defiant slant to her chin. “And don't start with all that nonsense about those foods not

being good for me.”

Isabelle dutifully placed small amounts of both on the plate. “Don’t be upset because I wish for you to live forever, Auntie.”

Matilda shook her head. “I won’t either way so I might as well enjoy my food.”

Isabelle crossed the room again, setting the plate in front of her aunt. “Need anything for your tea.”

He began to fix his own plate, but he watched Isabelle attend her aunt with love and care for several more minutes before she began to serve herself.

He made a note to have a servant at breakfast the next day, not that Isabelle had asked. But still.

“Did you make it far into your project?” Matilda asked as Isabelle finally set down.

“Apologies, but I did not. I’ll work double hard the rest of the day.”

Matilda shook her head. “It’s not a problem for me. Lord Everhart’s home is exceptionally comfortable despite its formidable exterior. Isn’t it funny how life can work like that?”

And then Matilda gave him a long and pointed stare. Was she comparing him to his house?

Perhaps he should let her know, there was nothing comfortable about him inside or out.

CHAPTER THREE

ISABELLE SPENT the afternoon choosing books that might suit the program. She'd check each choice with Baron Everhart, of course. Adam.

He was to come to the library this evening and review the donated selections, though he'd informed her that he doubted he'd have any objections.

She hated to give him credit on any account, but she appreciated his generosity in this.

Matilda had spent most of the day reading and then dozing. She'd pretend she wasn't, of course, but twice her cane had fallen, and once Matilda had emitted a snorting snore that had Isabelle grinning behind her hand.

As the afternoon wore on, the sun disappeared and thick, dark grey clouds rolled in, making the room dark and adding a bit of a chill to the cavernous space. Not wanting to bother anyone, Isabelle crossed to the massive fireplace, raking the coals into the middle and then adding several pieces of wood onto the pile.

The merry fire both lightened the mood and warmed the room. She was just rehangng the tools when the door opened and Adam stepped in.

His brows rose to see her and so she pointed at Matilda.

Her head back, her aunt's mouth was parted in sleep, a soft snore punctuating the silence. Her cane rested precariously on one knee and Adam silently crossed, taking the cane and gently placing it on the floor.

“I told her to go upstairs and rest,” Isabelle whispered. “But she insisted she wished to stay with me.” The moment the words left her mouth, however, she knew she’d made a mistake. Adam would surely tell her how irresponsible it was to bring her aunt here, and she realized she grew defensive because he was likely right.

Which was exactly why she’d have to wed. Her aunt was too stubborn to abandon her otherwise.

But once Isabelle did wed, her aunt would be all alone with Isabelle’s father... and that was not particularly wonderful either.

Isabelle knew that Matilda needed a reprieve from chaperoning, but her father hardly had time for anyone.

Least of all, her and her aunt. Once Isabelle left...

Matilda would be all alone.

Her gaze left her aunt and met with Adam’s instead, her body tensing for whatever harsh words were coming her way.

But he only grunted. “She likes to care for you.”

“And I for her,” was her only reply as she pointed at the pile of books she’d collected. “These ten are what I’ve chosen so far if you’d like to check them.”

He lifted a blanket from the settee and placed it over her aunt before he strode to the desk where she worked.

Standing just behind her, she could feel the heat rolling off him, warming her back, as he leaned over her work.

She looked back at him, several questions flitting through her thoughts. Why did he unsettle her so? Why did she have the distinct urge to press into the warmth of his body?

His eyes glanced down the pile. “Those are fine. But after coming all this way, I should like to think...”

She braced herself for whatever he’d say next, her wish to sink into him forgotten.

“You’d take a great deal more.”

“What?” his words caught her completely off guard that her single questioning word came out in a half gasp.

“You can’t come all this way for ten books.”

She looked at the pile. “Oh. I see. Most of the donations came from benefactors in London and the libraries were smaller, so I’ve just gotten used to only taking a few volumes.”

“How many have you collected?”

“Nearly three hundred.”

He gave a low whistle of appreciation, the unexpected compliment causing her cheeks to warm.

“And how many homes have you visited to obtain them?”

Mentally, she did a quick calculation. “Close to thirty.”

“You’ve taken the time to set up meetings with thirty different peers to create this collection of reading material?”

He sounded...aghast.

And she felt herself bristling. “Well, I’ve more time than money and—”

But then he touched her back, the tingling that coursed through her, making her give a faint gasp as her words abruptly halted.

“I think it’s very commendable.”

That made her brows lift and she turned toward him, her shoulder brushing his chest. Which only made her blush all the more. But she found herself looking away and whispering, “Commendable for a do-gooder?”

He gave a light, quiet chuckle. “You’ll have to forgive me. My time in the war has made me cynical and dark.”

She looked at the scar that slashed his cheek as her mouth pursed. The scar did little to mar his handsome features, but she wondered if he’d obtained it from fighting. “I can imagine it was awful.”

“Too awful to share,” he replied stepping back, his face shuttering as he turned partially away.

She searched for something to say that might soothe him, but no words came to mind, so instead she pointed the book she’d read to William this morning. “I pulled this one too. It’s the one that I was working on with William.”

“Did you want to take it?” Adam asked, picking up the book of short stories.

“No, I wondered if...” She nipped at her lip, knowing she ought not to tell him what to do in his own home.

“Doing more good deeds are you?” he asked, cocking a brow.

“Maybe.”

He ran his fingers over the spine. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate your efforts. It’s just that I have personally never found attempting to help people makes a very large difference in the world.”

She eased herself around to face him without touching him. Then she gently pulled the volume from his hand, her fingers just brushing his, as shifted the book to crack open the spine. “I am far too small to make a difference in the world. I don’t know who is large enough to do so but I know it’s not me. Still, I know what might change one boy’s life and that would be a few books.”

“Well said,” he murmured staring down at her, his gaze unreadable. Not knowing what else to do, she handed the volume back to him. That look unsettled her and so she turned back, returning to the pile of possible choices.

But Adam didn’t leave, in fact, he shifted closer. “What are you looking for?”

“Books that might be engaging and yet simple enough for new readers.”

He nodded, setting the book for Marcus aside. “I’ll help you.”

He started in surprise. Him? Help? What had happened to her beast?

THE AFTERNOON HAD BEEN ODDLY satisfying, Adam thought as he stood by the mantel in the sitting room near the dining room.

He waited here every night until he was called into the dining room for dinner. Normally, he dined alone, but tonight he'd have company.

And he found that he was looking forward to that a great deal.

As if she'd heard his thoughts, Isabelle entered, looking like a vision in pale pink silk. Her hair was elaborately styled upon the crown of her head, the gown, skimming down her trim yet shapely frame in the most arresting fashion.

He found his gaze devouring her as she entered the room, giving him a shy smile. "Good evening."

"Evening," he replied. It shouldn't be pleasant. The thick clouds had given way to a heavy rain. It battered the roof and windows, the sound both filling the air and creating an intimacy that had him waving her closer, wanting her to be near the fire where it was warm.

"I hope you can forgive my aunt. With the weather, her bones are aching and she decided to take a tray in her room."

But this time, instead of berating her, Adam watched the tension that pulled at her features. Isabelle was worried.

"Does rain always affect her?"

"I'm afraid so," Isabelle winced, her hand fluttering up toward her face. "All the books have been packed and placed in a trunk, my lord."

His brow knitted in confusion. "All right."

“And I intended to leave tomorrow. I know that I promised to take my leave quickly, but with the weather...”

He understood and as he watched her twist her hands in concern, he resisted the urge to cover both her hands with his much larger one to calm her agitation. “I am more than happy to have you both stay until the weather passes.”

Her hands did still then. “Who are you and what have you done with Lord Everhart?”

His gaze narrowed. “I still think you ought to have travelled without her. Or not travelled at all.”

“There he is,” she replied, her chin notching up. “And I dare you to tell her not to go somewhere she wishes.”

He gave a single dip of his chin in acknowledgment. That was likely true. “Fair enough.”

His concession made her shoulders droop, the reaction surprising him. But her words caught him even more off guard. “I’m going to marry this winter.”

“Congratulations?” Something unpleasant slid down his spine. “Who is the lucky fellow?”

She snorted then. “I know you don’t mean that.”

He had, actually.

“And besides, I don’t have a fiancé yet. I intend to choose a proper suitor this winter and marry by spring. You are right, she’s getting too old to accompany me, though she won’t stop, and so...”

His eyes widened. She was going to wed for her aunt’s benefit. “And your book collection?”

He saw the way her mouth pinched, her eyes wrinkling at the corners. “Hopefully I can find a man who will support my other endeavors, but if not, I shall have to give them up.”

That bothered him, more than he’d imagined. He found the world a dark place but why did someone like Isabelle have to abandon noble pursuits?

He knew it was a reversal of opinion on his part, but her words today about not changing the entire world, but helping a few people had been moving.

Thoughtful, even. In fact, he had to confess that Isabelle was a refreshing mix of idealistic, capable, and practical, mixed with a healthy dose of hard work.

And if he were being honest with himself, he liked her a great deal. “I’m sure you can find a man who will allow you passions. Your father does, obviously.”

Something flared in her eyes a moment before she looked away. “He does allow them. But then again, he is himself, a man very taken with his own hobbies.”

He watched her carefully neutral features, wondering at the subtext of her words. “Matilda is your parent far more than he is.”

Her jaw flexed. “He’s been very understanding of my passions, as you said.”

But he could hear clearly what she hadn’t said. She’d not denied that her father was largely absent from her life, or that Matilda was more a mother than an aunt. No wonder Isabelle planned to marry for the older woman’s comfort.

Or that Matilda insisted on shuffling her niece to an earl’s home for a visit. Matilda was in essence, a marriage-minded mama. Not his first.

But suddenly he realized that Matilda might very well have been the driving force behind this visit and not Isabelle at all. If that were true, it meant that most of their first interactions, he’d gotten completely wrong. Isabelle was not the selfish woman he’d first imagined, disguising her selfishness with a do-gooder agenda.

Blast.

“Dinner,” the butler called from the door. His head snapping up, he realized that he and Isabelle had been standing exceedingly close next to the fire.

Clearing his throat, he took a step back and then presented Isabelle with his elbow. "Shall we?"

With a quick nod, her hand slipped into the crook of his arm. The warmth of her fingers slid up his biceps as he bent down to catch a whiff of her scent.

He was not supposed to like this woman. Not her smell, not her feel, and certainly not the way she treated old women and small boys.

But blast him, he did. He liked all of it and a great deal more.

CHAPTER FOUR

ISABELLE SAT JUST to Adam's right, the two of them taking up one small corner of the massive table.

It was odd, the intimacy in the large room and she twisted her hands in her lap, trying to calm her racing pulse, their previous conversation replaying in her head.

He'd not made accusations or tossed barbs at her. Instead, he'd quickly cast a great deal of insight into her relationship with her father.

That unsettled her a bit. Not even her friends had really noticed that her father's support of her projects masked his benign neglect.

How did this man see her when so many did not?

"So..." he started once the soup was served, a light fish broth that smelled divine. "Tell me more about your father."

Her heart stopped for a moment. "Must I?"

He brought a spoonful of the soup to his mouth, taking a sip before he set the utensil down. "No, of course not."

Which made her feel a niggle of guilt. He was only showing interest in her. "It's just that my relationship with him is far more complicated than my feelings for Aunt Matilda. And I don't mean to disparage him. I think the loss of my mother when I was a girl..." She stopped, realizing she was about to reveal the very details that she'd requested not to share.

"You've experienced loss too."

She shrugged, looking down into her bowl. “Life isn’t easy, is it?”

“No. It isn’t. I’ve been back from the war for two years now,” he said quietly. “And I was awarded this barony for my valor a year ago. I’m not complaining, it was a great honor, but it’s a large responsibility too.”

“One you feel equipped to handle?” She didn’t know why she asked. He needn’t share his insecurities with her.

“For the most part. Being a duke’s brother was likely a great help in that regard.”

“Of course. They trained you as a spare.”

“Yes. I know how to manage the lands to produce and invest the profits to earn. Though I’ve not really connected with the people...”

“I’m sure you will.”

He looked toward the large hearth, the fire crackling. “Perhaps. I haven’t been exactly open with the people here, I suppose. It’s been difficult after I came home.”

Her breath held in her lungs. She lifted her chin once again as she leaned forward. “What happened?”

He shook his head. “I would not want to burden you.”

She wished to reach for his hand. Comfort him. Instead, she softly whispered. “It’s all right.”

He shuddered, a small gesture she could have missed before his quiet voice filled the space between them. “We were trenched in. No getting out. I thought for certain we’d all die and so I led a charge to break out. I think I decided it was better to die in the open field than in a hole, but somehow, I and several of my men not only lived, we managed to turn the tide.” His dark glittering eyes met hers. “I don’t want you to think it was pretty or wonderful, though. Many men died because of my choice, and I watched several of them take their last breaths.”

Unable to stop this time, her hand lifted from her lap and grasped his, the warmth of his fingers, warming her when

she'd meant to comfort him. He brought his other hand on top of hers as she softly whispered. "Darkness like that casts a shadow, doesn't it?"

He stared at her, slack jawed for a moment or two before he nodded. "It does."

"I didn't speak for a year after my mother passed. I don't know why. I was only five, but I think I thought if I didn't say the words, it wouldn't be true. It was Matilda who brought me back to life. My father was lost in his own grief."

To her surprise, a few tears welled in her eyes. She hadn't been sad about her mother's passing for quite some time, but she worried after Matilda now and...

His fingers began to lightly dance over the back of her hand. But she shook her head. "Don't comfort me. My loss is old and not nearly as gruesome as what you've faced. It's I who should be—"

"Isabelle," he murmured so low and deep it vibrated through her to her very soul. "You are comforting me. I've not shared with anyone, including my brother, since I've returned home, and I appreciate your insightful and commiserate words."

"Oh," she replied, her whispered word a half sigh. Because when this man chose to be less beastly and more charming, the effect was...devastating.

"I also appreciate you sharing some of your own experiences. And I'd like for you to tell me, how did you end up deciding to use your time for social causes when most girls your age are only concerned about dresses and balls?"

"I like those too," she said, smiling in a way that made them both laugh a bit. Hers was a breathy giggle, his a deep, rich chuckle that made it difficult to think. "But I have faced the fact that life is fleeting, and that shapes how I wish to spend my time. Matilda helps. She will not waste a moment of her time, no matter how much old age tries to slow her down."

Adam's smile slipped and his jaw clenched as he looked back at her.

ISABELLE'S WORDS reverberated through him as her fingers, like silk, shifted against his rougher skin.

He ran his fingertips over the back of her hand once again. His thoughts were here in this moment. The way Isabelle felt, the way she looked, so beautiful bathed in firelight.

But they were also on the past. Perhaps he'd done something great in France, or perhaps his actions had been foolish in a way that happened to work in that precise moment, but either way, he'd stopped living after he'd nearly died. It was as though all the life had been sucked out of him.

And finally he considered the future. What and who would it hold? And for the first time since he'd returned, he'd begun to wonder if just living out his life alone was really the best plan?

But this woman, despite the heavy rain that flooded the outside, was like a breath of spring air in his dining room.

"Your aunt does, indeed, seem to live life to the fullest."

Isabelle smiled again, but this time, it was tinged with sadness. "I shall miss her terribly when she's gone."

He winced. Matilda was aging. "Is she ill?"

"Not exactly. But..." Isabelle looked away, her face growing pained. "She sleeps so much more, she struggles to move about, she..." Isabelle shook her head. "I don't have many years left with her."

He winced, understanding. "You'll see her even less when you're wed."

Isabelle nodded. "It's a conundrum. She won't stop until I'm wed, but once I am, she'll be alone with my father who hardly..." Isabelle tapered off again.

Adam understood. A woman like Isabelle had a few years to find a husband before she was declared a spinster. She could

delay the search a year, perhaps two, she'd still have an exceptionally easy time finding a husband.

Beautiful, charming, kind, and gregarious, Isabelle would be sought after. Which made his insides churn with unexpected irritation.

Which he told himself was on Matilda's behalf. "Perhaps you can find a husband who will allow Matilda to live with you both."

Her mouth twitched. "I am shaping up to be quite the catch. A husband must indulge my aging, outspoken aunt and my affection for community projects. He will be thrilled."

He laughed a bit despite himself. "Right." He looked up to find the prettiest pale blush staining her cheeks. "Though," he found himself leaning forward. "For a woman as beautiful as you, I am sure a man will make a great many concessions."

Her brows lifted even as the color in her cheeks heightened. "Did you just call me beautiful?"

"I did." And he didn't regret it. "I can give a compliment where it's deserved."

She nodded. "Like you did with William this morning."

"William?"

"The boy. Your maid's son. He's going to be very smart." Isabelle looked away, then, finally taking a bite of her soup. He'd guess it had gone cold.

If he were Isabelle, he likely would offer to put the boy through school. Or offer to educate him, himself. Was that something he was interested in? Would he enjoy helping others like that?

He'd kept his distance from everyone here, including the staff and the villagers. It had seemed easier.

The second course arrived, but he hardly noticed the food, as he stared at Isabelle. What was she doing to him? When did he suddenly have a yearning to be a better man? Or a more whole one in any regard...

“My lord?” A male voice interrupted his thoughts.

His gaze snapped up, noting a footman had entered the room. “Yes?”

“I’ve a message from the village. There has been an accident.”

Isabelle pushed her chair back, standing as quickly as he did. Their gazes met, hers filled with fear. “Adam?”

Why did he want to pull her close and tell her not to worry? Assure he that he’d fix what ever had gone wrong. “Stay here. Finish your dinner. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She gave a tentative nod as he strode for the door.

CHAPTER FIVE

ISABELLE PACED the library for what seemed like hours. Normally, being surrounded by books calmed her, but not tonight.

The clock had long passed midnight, but she didn't wish to retire. Adam had said he'd return and something in his words, had made her feel as though he expected her to be waiting.

And for some reason, she didn't wish to disappoint. That should have been her first indicator that something was off. This was the man she was actively attempting to escape. She'd dreaded coming here and now she found herself eager to see him and know that everything was all right. Why did she care about his wellbeing?

But as she made another lap about the room, she heard a deep baritone rumble from somewhere in the house.

She knew without asking that it was Adam, and she crossed the room, lifting her skirts to move faster.

Wrenching the double doors open, she started down the hall, breaking into a run until she reached the top of the stairs.

He stood by the door, soaking wet and somehow looking more handsome than ever. He'd stripped off his coat and the rest of his clothes were plastered to his body, his shoulders appearing even broader.

His hair slicked back from his forehead, already curling a bit as he dripped water onto the floor.

She froze, staring at him. She'd be curled into a shriveled ball if she'd been pelted for hours with that kind of freezing rain. But there he stood straight and tall. "Isabelle." His voice rang with exhaustion and an emotion she didn't understand but it set an alarm off in her head first and then settled in her stomach.

"Is everything all right?" she started down the stairs, lifting her skirts, to hasten her step, wanting to be next to him. Wishing to comfort. "I was worried when you were gone for so long."

"I am fine," he replied, his gaze sweeping down her as she reached the bottom of the steps, crossing until she was just a few feet in front of him. She stopped, not certain how to proceed. Did she touch him?

"Good," she let out a long breath. "What happened?"

His shoulders dropped with her question, his face tightening with lines of tension. "Lightning struck the gazebo that had been built for the autumn festival this weekend. Even in the rain, it caught fire, spreading to the stage and a few nearby buildings."

She gasped, her hands coming up to cover her mouth. "Was anyone hurt?"

He grimaced. "A few men were injured putting out the flames. Nothing too serious, but I've never seen fire like that with so much water coming down. It was terrifying."

She saw it then, the hesitation in his eyes. The fear. She stepped closer, reaching out a hand to take his, her insecurity gone. He needed support and she'd give it to him. This was why she'd stayed awake. She wanted to wrap her arms about him. Her arms itched to comfort him in some meaningful way. "That's awful."

He swiped a hand through his soaking hair. "It was worse than that. It brought back—" And then he stopped, his face spasming and she understood.

The fire had triggered memories of the war. "There is a fire lit in the library. Would you like a dram and to warm up before

bed?”

He looked at her for a moment, his eyes appearing haunted before he gave his head a shake. “I should bathe and get out of these wet clothes.”

She wanted to say no, that he ought to talk with her. He’d shared earlier and it was clear that he might need to again. But the words never left her mouth. Instead, he let go of her hand and walked away.

Just before he reached the stairs, he turned back and a hope filled her chest that he’d share, that the tenuous connection between them might grow. He could lean on her if he wished.

“I know you intended to leave tomorrow but the roads are too muddy. You’ll have to stay.” His words were flat. Toneless.

She gave a nod, not that he could see it. He’d already turned away again with his back to her as he made his way up the stairs.

She continued to stand in the foyer, looking down at the puddle he’d created on the marble floor.

It reminded her of the sadness, she’d originally thought was surliness, that hung about him like a cloak. The man needed to express his sadness to someone, and she realized that she might be the only one he’d shared enough with to help him.

Isn’t that what she did? She helped people.

ADAM WOKE this next morning to grey clouds still filling the sky, which suited his mood just fine.

He’d hardly slept, plagued by memories from his past but also feelings of regret. He should have gone to the library with Isabelle. Listened to the soothing lilt of her voice might have dulled the ache inside his chest.

She was a woman who understood how to comfort. He’d not expected that. The way she didn’t over dramatize or make

him feel foolish for his feelings.

She'd listened and she seemed to understand.

Rising, he made his way to breakfast, finding that Isabelle and Matilda were already there, waiting for him.

But neither seemed annoyed. In fact, both gave him warm smiles of greeting. Which was nice. More than nice, really. How had he not realized how lonely his home at been without company?

Because he'd been wallowing in his own circumstance.

But he sat with the ladies, eating breakfast and watching the now-gentle rain that fell outside the window.

"What a storm," Matilda said, shaking her head. "Even I heard the thunder."

He grimaced. "It was a particularly bad one."

"We'll not leave today, Auntie," Isabelle loudly called down the table. "The roads."

"You won't hear me complain," Matilda waved her hand. "I shall take up my spot in the library." Matilda winked at Adam. "I'll have to try out your brandy once again."

Adam gave Matilda an easy smile, relaxing at the words. He liked that she liked being here. He wished he was in a better mood to enjoy their company. "Isabelle, you ought to find some more books for your cause. We've got more than enough here, after all."

"Thank you." Isabelle gave him a beaming smile, one that warmed him from the inside out. When had the happiness of these two ladies started to make him happy?

And how had their presence so quickly washed away the hurt from last night?

But as he thought of the fire, some of the darkness returned. He'd left just after the flames had been subdued, not saying much to the villagers or the mayor.

It had been a miserable night and his own mood hadn't been much better. But here and now, some of those feelings

washed away.

“I’d like that, very much,” she said with a smile.

“Good.” He took a few more bites of food and then rose from the table. Part of him would like to remain with Isabelle. She had a lovely effect on him, but he needed to assess the damage in the village and decide what should be done.

He hated looking at the burned-out structures...

And just like that, his mood crashed back down again. Looking at the charred remains, hearing the men scream in pain...

His fists clenched on the table, his gaze far away as he stared off into the distance. He was so lost in his memories that he didn’t see Isabelle come around the table, didn’t know she was there until her hand touched his arm.

“Adam?”

He forced himself back to the present. This was not like the sharing at dinner last night. Then, he’d been able to rationally explain his emotions but now he was drowning in them, so fresh and raw. “I’m fine,” he gritted out through clenched teeth. Pushing off the table, he made his way to the door.

Donning his hat and jacket, he collected his horse and, despite the rain, started for the village.

He stayed on the higher road that was too narrow for carriages, but the horse could travel easily enough.

On a crest above the village however, he stopped.

From this vantage point, he could see the village laid out before him, the square, the cluster of businesses and then homes that spread out from that central point.

He’d not had a great deal of interactions with the people here. He employed them, provided for them when needed, but he’d not participated in much of the daily life.

And as he watched them clustered around the burnt gazebo, his hands tightened on the reins.

The mayor of the town saw him and waved, and begrudgingly, Adam kicked his horse forward.

Making his way down the hill, he stopped a good distance from the group of bystanders. The mayor trotted over to him, the man's girth making even his jog slow. "My lord," he huffed as he reached Adam, still seated on his horse.

He didn't wish to get down. It made him feel trapped.

He knew the villagers were not soldiers. But their stony expressions had him shifting in his saddle, his horse dancing to the side, feeling his owner's unease.

The mayor took a step back. "My lord, thank you for your assistance last night."

He gave a quick nod. "Of course. It's my duty."

The mayor smoothed down his coat. "It is a shame. We'd just built the gazebo and stage for—"

"I know. The festival."

Mister Sanbridge nodded. "That's right. I don't know how we'll have the festival without them."

"So don't have it," he said in a clipped tone that provided an outlet for his impatience. He wanted to go home and leave these memories behind. He could watch Isabelle sort books, listen to Matilda, and get his head back on straight.

"Oh, but my lord, we've been preparing for weeks and—"

"Unfortunate circumstances are a part of life." It was true. No one knew that better than him.

But the mayor shook his head. "You don't understand, my lord. People like the baker and the butcher depend on the autumn festival—"

Adam pulled his horse back, moving the animal from the mayor. "We'll see the structures rebuilt but it likely won't be until the spring." And then he turned the animal. It was time for him to go home.

He heard the murmurs of frustration behind him as he rode away, which made him kick his horse into a trot.

CHAPTER SIX

ISABELLE DIDN'T SEE Adam during the afternoon and most of the evening. When she arrived for dinner, she wondered if he'd even attend.

He had not seemed like himself at breakfast and he'd been absent all day.

She sat alone waiting in the sitting room. The clock read a quarter past seven and she'd expected Adam to arrive fifteen minutes prior. Briefly, she wondered how long she should wait before she just had her meal delivered to her chambers.

Her aunt was absent, but Isabelle suspected the other woman wasn't so much tired as attempting to give Isabelle time with the baron.

Which was silly. Despite her changing feelings for him, there was nothing romantic there. She hardly liked the man.

Except, when he smiled. Or stood still. Or when he shared his feelings with her or just talked in general.

Drat. She had come to like him and even more concerning, she found him rather arresting.

He was the man who snarked at her incessantly. And clearly didn't like her. He called her a do-gooder multiple times.

But then last night and this morning, he seemed like he needed help.

The door opened and Adam appeared, looking as dapper and handsome as ever, but still...

His eyes held a wariness that hadn't been there yesterday.

She stood, her words sticking in her throat.

"You look lovely," he said, his tone flat as he entered the room.

"Thank you," she replied, pushing the words past stiff lips. "So do you."

He swiped a hand over his face, his middle finger trailing over the scar that cut it in two. "I never look lovely."

She grimaced taking a tentative step toward him. "Right. You look very handsome, then."

His only answer was to grunt as the butler appeared in the doorway. "Dinner is served."

He turned, silently offering her his arm. Slipping her fingers into the crook, she noted the strength under her fingers. "My apologies that Matilda is absent yet again. I think your staff is too kind to her in the evening."

She felt him relax a bit under her fingers. "Good. I'm glad to hear it."

"Do you think the roads will be passable tomorrow?"

"Eager to be rid of me?" There was an edge to his voice she'd never heard in all their exchanges, and it made her hesitate.

"I..." she started but he cut her off.

"Don't explain. The answer to your question is that they are likely not passable, though I shall check for you first thing in the morning."

She gave a tentative nod before she drew in a fortifying breath. She needed to say something to soothe the aching beast who'd come to dinner tonight. "I've enjoyed this visit a great deal more than I thought."

"Is that to say that you expected it to be awful and instead it's been passable?"

"Adam."

They reached the dining room and he stepped away from her to pull out her chair. "It's all right, Isabelle. I know you're not fond of me. There is no need to pretend."

"I'm not—"

"Let's talk of something else, shall we?" He sat too, soup being ladled out.

She gave a tentative nod taking several spoonfuls of her soup, hoping that a pause might help them reset. What had happened that had upset him so?

She didn't know him that well and she wasn't certain that she dare ask. Then again, they had an evening together that could not continue like this. "I chose some more books. Thank you again."

He gave a rumbling answer that she didn't really understand as he took several spoonfuls as well. The rest of the course passed in near silence.

When the meat arrived, a braised lamb, Isabelle decided to try again. "I was able to read to William again today."

His gaze lifted and then his eyes narrowed. "What is your infatuation with that boy?"

She let out a huff of breath and then, rather than answer, stuffed an unladylike bite into her mouth. It wasn't until she'd finished chewing, making him wait, that she finally asked. "What's wrong with you?"

"Wrong with me?"

"Yes. You've been..." She searched for a word that wasn't so inflammatory, but he filled in before she had a chance.

"Myself. That's what I've been."

Her brows lifted. "So the pleasant man I dined with last night?"

His lip curled. "A fiction that could never actually be a reality."

"I see." But those words hurt. Perhaps because she'd liked that man. A bit of softness from him had turned her to

complete pudding.

“Isabelle, don’t think you know me. You don’t.”

“Clearly,” she replied taking another bite of her food, though it stuck in her mouth as she chewed, hardly swallowing it down.

“And I know you think you saw something sweet or approachable last night, but I’m not that man and you’d be a fool to think I was.”

“I see,” she answered, slowly setting down her knife and fork. “Glad you’ve made that clear.”

“I have. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d prefer to pass the rest of the meal without much conversation. You’ve disrupted my life as much as I’ll allow.”

“Well,” she pushed her chair back, standing with her chin notching as she glared down at him. He hadn’t even been like this at breakfast. Why was he treating her like this? “Don’t let me trouble you further.”

“Good,” he grunted, cutting a piece of his own lamb. “Now sit.”

“I don’t think so,” she crossed her arms, battling back the feelings that threatened to overwhelm her. If he wished to be mean to her, why had he ever pretended to be nice? It only made her realize how much she might like him if given the chance. “I think I shall allow you to finish your meal in the peace and quiet you so obviously prefer.”

He stood too. Glaring. “I didn’t say that. I just don’t want to talk about feelings or receive lectures about how I should be nicer to my staff from a little do-gooder who has no idea how cruel the world can be.”

She poked a finger in his direction then. She knew it was rude, but she was beyond caring. “Someone is doing an excellent job of teaching me, aren’t they?”

His eyes widened then and she had a moment of satisfaction before she lifted her skirts to take two more steps around the table so that she reached his side. “Though, as I

tried to explain, it's a lesson I've learned on my own." She glared up at him. "But you sir, could use a few lessons on how to treat a guest and a few more about how to treat the world. You don't have to be a do-gooder to give people a bit of kindness and grace."

"What do you know about it?" he roared back, his voice raising. "You've never had to see what I've seen."

She shook her head. "No. I haven't. You're right. But I've seen enough suffering to know that I'll try to ease it when I can. Where I am able. And unlike you, I won't create it."

And then she spun, leaving the room.

THE SUNLIGHT SLANTING through Adam's curtains burned his eyes as he cracked them open. What time was it?

His head throbbed as he wrenched back the covers. He'd not been able to sleep last night and so he'd had a whiskey, followed by another. And then a few more.

He hadn't done that since the early days of his return but yesterday had been so much. And he felt like an ass.

The village had been one thing, but Isabelle...

She'd been working her way under his skin, and he'd been so raw yesterday that he'd reacted by pushing her away. Which had been savage even for him.

He crossed the room, ringing the bell. He'd likely missed breakfast, but the women were surely in the library, and he could make his apologies.

His manservant entered with a pot of tea and he gratefully took a steaming cup, swallowing down the scalding water. "Are my guests in the library?"

"Your guests?" the man squeaked, his eyes widening.

Adam's impatience flared again. What kind of question was that? "Two ladies. One old, one young."

“Lady Isabelle and Lady Matilda have left, my lord,” the man stuttered out. “An hour ago.”

He let out a low curse, taking another generous swallow of tea and then stuffing a biscuit into his mouth before he began to dress. “Who let them leave?”

“Let them?” the man whispered, taking a generous step back. “I don’t think the staff was aware they weren’t allowed to leave.”

Adam snorted, remembering Isabelle’s barb about being treated like a prisoner. “The roads after the storm won’t be passable.”

“Oh!”

“That’s right. Which is why I need to dress. They’ll need my help for certain.” The man jumped into action then, pulling out Adam’s vest and breeches from the wardrobe and helping Adam quickly ready himself.

He’d have to take his phaeton. There was nothing for it. Though Matilda likely shouldn’t be in the open air, his covered carriage was too heavy to chase them through the mud that surely clogged the road.

With marked efficiency, he had his horse harnessed to the carriage and took off with a series of quick snaps of the reins.

It didn’t take him long to find them. They’d hardly made it twenty minutes down the road when he found their carriage mired in the mud.

It was only then that Adam slowed, letting out a long breath. He’d get them back to his home and no time, settled into the library.

But the strangest feeling washed over him. Because in his heart, he felt deep inside, that might be exactly where they belonged.

Not just today but always.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ISABELLE SAT IN THE CARRIAGE, mired in the mud, and cursed herself seven times the fool. She'd done this to Matilda. The driver had gone to the village to collect some men to help unstick the vehicle but in the meantime, here they sat.

It was a brisk day, the sunshine bringing with it cold autumn air.

Matilda sat with a brick warming her seat but the older woman had been curling into herself as the air in the carriage grew colder still.

Isabelle scooted closer, wrapping her arms about her aunt. "I'm sorry," she whispered, thinking of how she'd insisted they leave this morning.

She'd been so angry.

Matilda shook her head. "We planned to leave today. You didn't do a thing."

Oh, but she had. Adam had told her to wait for him to assess the roads and she'd not. Because he'd also said a great many more things, several of those words really hurting her feelings.

"Matilda," her voice was hoarse, rough from the emotion clogging it as she hugged the woman tighter. "I should have waited to leave. I just..."

"You're confused about how you feel about the baron."

She looked at her aunt then, her brow furrowing. "What?"

“He likes you too,” her aunt continued as though Isabelle hadn’t spoken. Isabelle supposed that was one of the advantages of going deaf. Matilda could just carry on talking. “A great deal.”

“You wouldn’t think that if you’d heard him last night,” Isabelle answered loudly. “He told me I was naïve and that I didn’t understand the world. He calls me a do-gooder and—”

“Isabelle,” her aunt cut her off, clearing hearing her this time but interrupting anyway. “Don’t you feel the energy between the two of you? He needles you because he likes you.”

Isabelle shook her head. “That isn’t true.”

“Don’t you remember the boys when you were young? How’d they tease and taunt?”

She did. They’d been ridiculously annoying. “What of it?”

“It’s exactly like that. Adam teases you because he wants to push you away. He doesn’t wish to be close to you. It confuses him.”

“He’s not a boy, auntie. He’s a grown man. A large and powerful one at that. If he liked me, he’d just say so.”

Matilda chuckled. “Oh to be young again.”

“Auntie!”

Matilda only laughed the more. “Try to understand, Isabelle, his wounds are fresh and raw, and he doesn’t know if he can risk being hurt by you.”

Isabelle blinked at her aunt, the words ringing with a truth that was difficult to deny. Still, she tried. “Maybe he just doesn’t like me.”

“Pish.” Matilda swiped a hand through the air. “I know a smitten man when I see one. And he is.”

But her aunt’s assertion didn’t completely settle the matter for Isabelle. She sat holding her aunt, lost in thought until she heard the sound of horse hooves on the road. “I hear

someone!” she said to Matilda, letting go of her aunt and scooting toward the window to peek out. “We’re saved.”

Matilda grabbed her umbrella, handing it to Isabelle. “In case it’s thieves.”

Isabelle’s heart jumped in her throat. Her aunt was exactly right. It might not be a rescuer at all. What if it was a ne’er do well clomping toward them? She clutched the umbrella even as she heard a single rider dismount. “Who goes there?” she called out, waving the umbrella in the direction of the door. It was a poor weapon to be certain but the only one she had, drat it all.

“It’s Adam.”

Relief made her wilt into the seat. “It’s Adam,” she said to Matilda in case the other woman hadn’t heard.

“Of course it is,” Matilda said with a sniff. “I never doubted.”

Isabelle raised her brows even as she gave the umbrella a bit of a wave. “Then why did you give me this?”

Matilda shrugged. “I wasn’t giving you my cane. I might have needed it.”

Isabelle let out a sigh but said nothing as the door wrenched open. Adam stood in the sunlight, glaring at her with a deep frown.

Despite his look of irritation, she’d never been so happy to see anyone, and she had all she could do to keep from wrapping her arms about him.

“What have you done?” he rumbled out, reaching into the carriage and unceremoniously wrapping his hands about her waist and pulling her toward the door. Her hands automatically went to his shoulders as he pulled her to his chest.

He didn’t set her down, instead, he began carrying her, his boots sinking in the mud, toward his phaeton. “Well?” he demanded.

“Escaping a very angry beast?” she squeaked out, wrapping her arms tighter about his neck. Because despite his

irritation, his muscles were flexing under her touch, his body hard and muscular against her softness, his arms strong protective bands.

She sank into him, so glad he was there.

“Beast? Really?” he rumbled, sounding half irritated and half relieved as well.

Did she tell him that she called him that in her head occasionally? It wasn't always negative. Like right now. His strength and tenacity were literally carrying her from danger. “You do have a temper.”

“And you've got no sense. I told you the roads might not be passable.”

“You also told me that you didn't wish for my company any longer.”

“I did not. Not exactly.” But he sounded less sure. They'd reached his phaeton, but he didn't set her down nor did he lift her onto the seat. Instead, he continued to hold her, her boots dangling down and brushing his shins. “But I shouldn't have said what I did. I'm sorry.”

Had he just apologized? She opened her mouth to ask more when the thunderous sound of more horses made the words die on her lips. “Thieves?” she yelled over the noise, clutching him even tighter.

He stared in the distance, his features set in hard, determined lines as he shifted her weight to one side and then lifted her to set her feet in his carriage. “Get down and stay behind me,” he barked out, stepping in front of her to completely block her from view.

The idea of this man bodily placing himself between her and harm had her stomach fluttering with an emotion other than fear.

Without thought, she reached out and touched his back, his warmth seeping into her hand.

“It's all right,” he murmured, keeping his gaze forward. “Whoever they are I will not let them hurt you...” But he

tapered off as his back tensed. “Blast.”

“What is it? Is it thieves? Highwaymen? Murderers?”

“Worse I think,” he tossed the words over his shoulder. “Villagers.”

“Villagers are worse than murderers?” she asked, squinting at him as the party of men thundered toward them.

ADAM SPENT the next hour getting the carriage unstuck from the mud. He’d dispatched the driver to return Matilda to the house, but Isabelle stood on the hill above the road, watching the men work.

There wasn’t room for her on the bench. The phaeton only held two, and she wouldn’t have gone anyway.

She’d offered to help push the carriage no less than three times.

His little do-gooder was always ready to help.

He’d assured her all three times that the men would see the job done. They would. They just might bury him in the mud before they were done digging the vehicle out.

He could feel the hostility rolling off these men in waves. They didn’t say or do anything disrespectful, but no one seemed to want to want to speak with him either. He might have passed it off as fear of his station but not one man volunteered to push next to him. No one made eye contact, and no one had offered him a drink from the bladder of water being passed about.

And whenever one of the men’s eyes met his, the gaze turned stony.

No, he’d not been the most available over lord to these lands. He knew he was distant, but these men had jobs. Crops. Homes. No one was starving on his watch.

So why did the baker, the butcher, and the innkeeper keep glaring at him?

He was stationed with a pole behind the right wheel axle and as he used the long rod to lift the vehicle out of the mud, the other three men pushed.

With a wrenching noise, the carriage finally moved. The mud made sucking sounds as it finally gave way.

“Bravo,” Isabelle called with a clap. “Oh that was wonderful!”

All three of the other men stood, giving her a warm smiles. “Thank you kindly, my lady.”

“Do not thank me,” she cried, picking her way toward them. “It is I who should be thanking you.”

No one had thanked him. His chest tightened with jealousy as the butcher, a beefy man with forearms the size of tree trunks, reached for her hand. She took it as he helped her hop a large puddle.

“It was our pleasure,” the baker added with a happy nod.

She gave them a wide smile. “Please let us know if there is anything I can do for you.”

The innkeeper snorted. “Unless you can make a gazebo appear in the next two days, I doubt there is much you could do, my lady.”

“A gazebo?” she asked, turning to look at him. Finally.

“The fire. It burned down the gazebo,” he grimaced then, the memories of that night sparking that same ill feeling in his gut. “It’s a charred mess.”

Isabelle’s smile slipped. “How bad does it look?”

“Bad,” was his answer.

But the baker had crossed his arms. “I’ve been baking for a solid fortnight to prepare, and now, there will be no festival. All that money and time....”

They spoke as if it was Adam's fault that lightning had struck.

"I rely on the festival to fill my inn," the innkeeper grouched. "What am I to do now?"

And then he realized. The mayor had asked for help and Adam had declined. That's why these men were so angry with him.

What could he do? A stage and a gazebo could not be built in a few days. Not even if every man in the village and every footman he possessed worked on them. But another voice whispered in his ear that if he'd been Isabelle, she would have tried.

He didn't want to try. He didn't want to let people into his world. He wanted to do his duty and be done. Some of Isabelle's words from the night before penetrated his thoughts. About not trying to change the world but still acting with grace and helping where a person was able.

They made sense. And as much as he'd accused her of being naïve, he had to confess, she might have the right of it, far more than himself.

Hooking the carriage back up to the team of horses, he opened the door to place Isabelle back inside.

But she shook her head. "I want to ride with you on the bench while you drive."

"It'll be freezing," he rumbled.

"That's all right. I enjoy the air." Then she turned to the three men who'd come to their aid. "I am still considering how I might repay your kindness. But I will think of something before I leave Castledon. Promise."

Then she reached for Adam's hand. Her gloved fingers slid into his, warmth filling his palm. He settled her on the narrow bench, sitting beside her, their legs pressed together. There wasn't much choice. He was a large man and there was only so much room.

Not that he'd change a thing. Her softness pressed against him...

He remembered holding her in his arms. How had he not realized how right it would feel to be close to her?

Had he really thought to never share a single intimacy with a woman again? Ludicrous. That's the only word for it.

He'd like to pull her close even now. Settle her on his lap and whisper nothings into her ear.

Of course, he couldn't. It was inappropriate, and besides, he'd done his best to frighten her away.

Something we was exceedingly good at. Her hand thread through his arm as her torso pressed to him. He snapped the reins, starting the carriage.

"I'll have to write to my father," she said as they began moving. "Tell him I'll be arriving home later than planned."

"Good idea."

She hesitated then, he felt her breath hitch. Looking over at her, he raised his brows. "What is it?"

She nipped at her lip before she answered. "I'm not certain how long we might need to stay. I feel like Matilda might need a day or two to recover."

"Fine," he answered as though it weren't the best news he'd heard in ages.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SILENCE STRETCHED out between Isabelle and Adam as the carriage moved back toward Castledon. But the air between them had shifted.

They were pressed together on the bench, Isabelle's body fitted into Adam's to stay warm even as the sun shone down on them.

"Cold?" he asked, after several minutes had passed.

"I'm fine," she answered, dipping her cheek to his shoulder. He radiated heat and she rested her face against him, she drew in a deep breath, his scent wrapping about her.

He smelled of tobacco and fresh air. She drew in another breath, thinking how different men were from women in all the best ways.

The carriage slowed and he dropped the reins for a moment, which surprised her enough that she sat up. Rather than explain, however, he removed his coat and then dropped it over her lap. "This will keep you warm."

"Thank you," she said, drawing the garment up to her chest. It was warm, heated with his body heat, the thick wool blocking the wind.

"Lean into me again," he said, holding out his elbow. Hiding a smile, she did as he asked.

Then she drew in a deep breath. "I'm sorry you had to come after us today." Regret lanced through her. She'd put quite a few people out with her rashness.

“I’m sorry I was so rude last night.”

That made her lift her cheek again so that she might look into his eyes. Him? Apologizing? “It’s all right. I think I understand.”

“You don’t.”

She stared at his profile as she carefully chose her words. “The fire brought back memories of the battlefield.”

He started in surprise, his gaze leaving the road to look at her. “How did you...”

“My question is why are the men from the village angry with you?”

His jaw worked, his teeth likely grinding together before he answered. “How do women know such things?”

“It’s not very hard,” she answered with a shrug, but she lay her cheek down again. “Men do very little to disguise their feelings.”

He made a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat but said little else.

“Well?” she asked, pressing a bit deeper into him. “Why are they angry?”

“Because,” he hesitated again. “They want me to help them have the autumn festival but there is little I can do. We can’t rebuild the gazebo in time.”

Isabelle’s mouth sunk into a frown. The answer seemed exceedingly obvious to her but then again, while reading men’s emotions seemed easy, judging their reactions could be trickier. Especially prickly beasts. “No. You can’t build a gazebo in less than a week.”

He glanced over at her. “I heard the *but* that you did not say.”

She nipped at her lip. “Even I am not so foolish as to insert myself between a lord and his realm.”

He made that grunting noise again. “And if I were to ask?”

Her hands splayed out on his biceps, feeling the strength there. “You could allow them to have the festival on Castledon’s property. I can see the perfect spot from the library windows that could act as their gazebo for ceremony or whatever else they might need it for.”

He sucked in a breath. “But that would mean inviting them into my home.”

“I know. Just as I know you’d prefer to keep everyone at a distance.” *Especially me.*

Castledon appeared in the distance, its sharp spires jutting up into the sky as formidable as the man who occupied them.

“Then you know why it’s a terrible idea.”

“The thing that was surprising about your home is that once you get past the formidable exterior, the interior is one of the nicest and most comfortable places I’ve ever been.” She looked up at him then.

“Why are you changing the subject?”

“I’m not,” she replied, hiding her smile. “Because it is my belief that the master is exactly the same. A prickly exterior...”

He drew the carriage to stop, looking down at her. “Are you attempting to assert that underneath I am warm and fuzzy?”

She gave a giggle, covering her mouth with her hand. “I would never dare.”

He let out a bark of laughter too, so loud that several birds left their roost and took flight. With a shake of his head, he started the carriage again. “That is a lot of people to let in all at once.”

“You can keep the house locked. Even remain inside and glare at them from the library windows.”

“Why have it at all then?”

“They need the festival to support their businesses and even if you don’t wish to be personally involved the festivities,

it is in everyone's benefit to hold the event, including yours." She hesitated then. "And speaking from experience, a patriarch needn't be effusive in his affection. The smallest bit of interest would do."

Adam grew quiet then, and she knew that he understood. The silence fell between them once again, but he passed both reins into one hand and settled the other on her knee. She closed her eyes, feeling the wind whip at her bonnet strings, the air crisp but her body warm against his.

This man and this place really grew on a girl. Especially one who liked libraries...

ISABELLE WAS the rare sort of woman that if a man happened to find himself entangled, were he intelligent at all, he ought to make certain he remained captured in her net.

That was his last thought as he stopped the carriage in front of his gothic home and handed a stableman the reins.

Helping her down from the seat, he escorted her up the stairs and through the massive double doors. "About your journey home..."

"Yes?" she asked, her hip brushing his in the most tantalizing way.

He was about to say...*stay as long as you like*...but before he'd gotten out the words, his butler appeared.

"Lady Isabelle." The man cleared his throat. "You're needed upstairs immediately. It's your aunt."

He felt the fear roll through Isabelle. "What's wrong?" she cried. She made to let go of his arm, but he clamped a hand over hers, already starting them both toward the stairs.

With her other hand, she lifted her skirts, but she still managed to nearly trip on them.

Shifting her left hand into his, he wrapped his arm about her waist, half carrying her up the stairs as the butler sprinted

along behind them. “Your aunt came back not feeling well and she’s been tucked into bed with steaming pots and blankets.

“Matilda,” Isabelle cried, dropping her skirts as her hand flew to her mouth. “Oh Adam. What have I done?”

His world shifted at the fear he heard in her voice. He’d accused her of not understanding the world, but in this moment, he’d do nearly anything to take that guilt from her. He didn’t want her to know, he realized. He liked that she was so fresh and happy, full of optimism. He more than liked it, he realized. “You didn’t do anything.”

“Oh, but I did.” Her voice trembled. “I was so irritated that I—”

“Whose fault was it that you were so upset?” His jaw hardened. “I had no right to be so rude just because I’d had a bad day.”

He watched her soften, her hand resting lightly on his chest. The intimacy of the touch had him holding his breath. “It was more than a bad day, and I would have known that if I wasn’t so—” But then she stopped, her eyes widening for a moment before she murmured. “I need to get upstairs.”

He nodded, continuing to help her, but in his head, he attempted to finish her thought. All sorts of words pinged through his head but the one he hoped she was going to say was *enamored*.

It was too much to hope but he did anyway. They entered Matilda’s room, the fire roaring with several pots of steaming water hanging over the flames so that the room was filled with vapor.

“What’s wrong, Auntie?” Isabelle rushed to her aunt’s side even as Matilda gave a dry cough.

“It’s nothing dear. I’ll be fine,” Matilda answered, the cough picking up to a louder pitch. “I think I’ve caught a cold from being out in the elements.”

Isabelle let out a distressed cry as he moved closer to the bed. “That quickly you think?”

But Matilda only coughed the more. “I’ll need tea. Biscuits. Perhaps some whiskey for my lungs.

But now Adam’s brows were up even as a smile played at his lips. Whiskey? “Of course, Matilda. Anything you need,” he murmured.

Isabelle spun to him, her eyes wild with panic and he laid a hand on her waist to soothe her. Did he tell her that Matilda didn’t seem that sick? She was so worried, but even as he glanced over Isabelle’s shoulder, Matilda brought a single aging finger to her lips. Her eyes clear and bright.

His jaw clamped closed. Isabelle was normally very perceptive but as she turned back to her aunt, Matilda dropped her head again. Placing her own hand on her forehead. “I’ll need rest. Lots of it, I think.”

“Of course,” Isabelle murmured, touching Matilda’s cheek. “I’ll call for the doctor too.”

Matilda waved a hand. “Don’t bother. He won’t help.”

“And father. I should tell him.”

That had Matilda’s eyes sharp and focused as she replied, “For what purpose?”

“He should come,” Isabelle cried. “What if an infection sets in in your lungs?”

“Pish. He wouldn’t come even then.”

Adam straightened, anger sizzling through him. What kind of man didn’t come when his only sister was sick?

And then he swallowed down a lump. What kind of man left his villagers without the autumn festival they used to sustain their businesses?

He ran a frustrated hand through his hair, even as he realized that Isabelle had been more than right. Again.

Isabelle looked over her shoulder. “Would you write to him on our behalf? Tell him why we’re delayed and ask him to come. He might listen to you.”

He looked at Matilda who shrugged. Swallowing down a lump, he gave a single nod. “Of course.”

Isabelle spun back to him, tossing herself into his arms. He folded her up in his embrace, lifting her from the ground and holding her tight. Dropping his face into the crook of her neck, he just breathed her in. He’d forgotten how wonderful it felt to be the man who pleased a beautiful woman.

Behind Isabelle’s back, Matilda wagged her eyebrows. He knew a fraud when he saw one. But even as he opened his mouth to call her out, Matilda coughed again. “I think it will be at least a week before I am able to travel.”

“Take as long as you need,” he returned, slowly setting Isabelle back on her feet. “My home is your home.”

Matilda gave him a wink before she lay back down, hand back upon her forehead.

“Are you certain?” Isabelle asked, searching his face, her own gaze indecisive. “We wouldn’t want to be a bother. I know how eager you are to see us—”

“Isabelle.” He cupped her cheek in his large palm, marveling at the silk of her skin. “Despite my sour mood last night, I find that I like having you both here a great deal.”

Isabelle gave him the most tender and grateful smile he’d ever been graced with. And then she turned her face, laying a soft kiss on his palm.

The brush of her lips made every muscle in his body clench as she whispered. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure,” he said. But what he meant was that it was but a small pittance of what he’d give to her. “I should go write to your father.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, Isabelle,” Matilda said, sounding fit as a fiddle. Not that Isabelle noticed.

“You concentrate on getting better. I shall worry about father.”

Adam grimaced, knowing that Isabelle was about to experience a new cut on an old hurt. But she’d take it because

she loved Matilda. Isabelle turned away, fussing over her aunt some more.

He knew he should leave but he couldn't look away. Because as much as he wished to protect what was innocent about Isabelle, he also knew, that it wasn't just innocence that made her so wonderful. She understood a fair bit of the world and still, she chose to live her life with love.

And it was a choice, if he wanted to, he could make too.

CHAPTER NINE

ISABELLE SPENT the next two days waiting on her aunt's every whim. By the end of day one, she knew her aunt was not that ill, and by the end of the second, she suspected the woman wasn't sick at all.

Which led to the inevitable question...why pretend?

But the answer had stationed himself in the corner of the room. Adam had pulled a chair near the windows, watching the farce playing out in his home. And if Isabelle was honest, the man was enjoying it.

He laughed often from his spot, a low chuckle that never failed to reverberate through her with its deep masculine tones.

Did he find this funny? That her aunt had faked being sick to what? Ensure Isabelle spent more time with Adam?

The woman had succeeded.

Adam had hardly left except to do Matilda's bidding. From fetching her shawl, to a blanket, to a dram of whiskey, the man had been so attentive to Matilda that Isabelle might have felt a touch of envy.

Except for that he'd been the same with her.

"Sit," he'd murmur periodically. "I'll fetch Matilda's tea." And then his hand would brush down her arm.

By the end of the second day, Isabelle had had enough. It wasn't that she wasn't enjoying Adam and her aunt's company, she was. But the lie was ridiculous.

Still, she watched Adam pull the covers up to Matilda's chin, giving her aunt that easy smile that always stole Isabelle's breath. "Feeling any better, Matilda?"

Matilda gave a weak cough. "Any day now, I'm certain."

Isabelle rolled her eyes up to the ceiling. Really. This was just ridiculous. But Adam's grin only widened. "Then you'd better stay in bed."

"You're right of course," Matilda let out a dramatic sigh. "At my age, one must watch the lungs."

Had Isabelle been worried about her aunt? The woman was absolutely sound of mind and utilizing every tool to manipulate her niece. "I think it's your tongue that we ought to be concerned about."

"Why's that dear?" Matilda asked, looking as innocent as a babe.

"Because," Isabelle crossed her arms. "The devil has taken it."

Adam straightened, his dark eyes dancing with mirth. "Matilda," he started before the older woman could respond to the accusation. "I've a meeting, and if you're well enough, I'd like for Isabelle to attend with me."

Matilda's sickly expression cleared. "Of course, my lord. Whatever you need."

Isabelle let out a huff. "Auntie." She so wished to call out her aunt. This was just getting ridiculous. But Adam's hand on the small of her back stopped her.

Silently, he led her toward the door. She followed, determined to speak with her aunt later.

As they made their way down the hall, Adam kept his hand at her back. "Are you annoyed with Matilda?"

"Very," Isabelle answered on a long breath. "She's holding us both hostage."

He chuckled again. "Glad it's her and not me who is being accused of keeping someone prisoner."

That made her laugh too. “I know she’s well-intentioned but...” She gave him a sidelong glance, wondering how much to say.

“She isn’t sick,” he finished.

“Correct.”

“And she wants us to spend time together.”

That made heat flare in Isabelle’s cheeks. “You knew?”

“This isn’t the first time that a matron has tried to pair me with her charge.”

The heat streaked down her neck and chest. Were they actually discussing some sort of match between them? “Adam?” His words didn’t imply he was interested but still...

They stopped in front of the library doors, his hand still about her. “I’m sorry to cease this discussion now but...” His eyes flicked into the room. “We have guests waiting.”

That made her brows knit in confusion, even as her thoughts caught on the phrase, *we have guests*. It was so intimate and the implication...she turned to the open doors to see the baker, the innkeeper, and the butcher standing near the fire with a fourth man she didn’t know.

“I thought you might pitch them your idea to have the festival here,” he murmured close to her ear. “And I hoped to ask you and Matilda to stay for the festivities. I think perhaps it would allow Matilda to cease faking illness so that you both might spend your days in the library instead of her room.”

She looked up at him, her breath catching in her throat. “My very short visit keeps growing longer and longer.”

He gave her a soft smile, unlike anything she’d ever seen before. “That’s all right. I’m quite enjoying it.”

Those words made something inside her melt.

ADAM WATCHED as Isabelle presented her plans to the festival representatives. She gestured toward the grounds, her voice breathless with excitement as she explained her vision for the festival.

He stood back, leaning against his desk. He was likely never going to be the man that excitedly presented plans to others. But that didn't mean he couldn't be the man behind the woman.

That made him smile, even as Isabelle looked over at him. "Don't you agree, my lord?"

What had she asked? He'd been so busy thinking about what a nice pair they might make... "Agree?"

She gave him a curious smile. "That the terrace could act as the stage. It's not raised but it will provide space for the musicians and the dancers."

And that's when he realized that all four men were also watching him with questioning gazes.

Did they think he'd disagree with Isabelle? "Quite right. And you told them about the foley?"

The mayor gave him a large grin as the other three men visibly relaxed. "You're really going to allow us to use the property, my lord?" The mayor took a few steps forward, his hands clasped in what appeared to be hesitant expectation.

He gave a stiff nod, inwardly wincing. They had so little faith in him. "Yes. Lady Isabelle gets the credit for the idea, but I fully support her plan."

A cheer rose up from the men, grins breaking out on their faces. "Excellent news," the mayor crowed even as the butcher and baker slapped one another on the back.

Isabelle gave him a small smile, her eyes shining with an approval that stole the air from his lungs. She moved to his side, whispering two simple words. "Well done."

He'd done almost nothing, but he'd take the praise anyway. Looking down at her, he wished he could say more. He'd like to tell her that she made him better, and that her

warmth was slowly infecting not just him but the entire village. But more than that, he'd like to tell her that he was falling in love with her. And that somehow, someday, she'd managed to unlock his heart when he'd thought it too broken to ever be open again. "The credit belongs to you."

The meeting ended with handshakes and affectionate goodbyes, the butcher even leaning in to whisper, "That's a fine woman you've got there."

She was and he fully intended to keep her.

The other men left, leaving him with just Isabelle. She sunk into one of the wingback chairs near the fire, and drew her knees up to lounge in the seat. "Can we pause for one moment before we go tell Matilda we're staying?"

"Of course," he answered, following her toward the fire, to stand just behind her chair. "You've earned a rest. Matilda has kept you busy."

She smiled. "She has. But truly, despite my irritation, I don't mind. She deserves it, it's just, she ought to just have asked me to stay."

He came to the side of the chair and knelt down. "Would you have stayed?"

She looked into his eyes, her lips parting as her gaze drifted to his mouth. "Yes."

"And if I asked you to stay even longer..." He paused, attempting to decide if he extolled all his merits. He'd support her causes, keep her aunt here.

Or did he just tell her that he'd fallen in love?

But in the pause, a knock sounded at the door. He rose. "Come in."

The butler appeared with a tray in hand, a letter resting on the inlaid gold piece. "For you, my lord."

He picked up the letter, turning it over and noting Isabelle's father's seal. With a grimace, he slashed open the note and quickly scanned the contents, his frown deepening.

“Is everything all right?” Isabelle rose, coming to stand in front of him. “You look troubled.”

He let out a long sigh and then handed her the letter.

CHAPTER TEN

ISABELLE'S EYES blurred as she skimmed over the words her father had written. *Too busy...nearly done...I'm certain she'll be fine* jumped out at her.

Why couldn't her father put them first just this once? Was that so much to ask? Her hand fisted in the paper as her spine straightened. She'd not cry.

She had vague memories of her father being a loving man. One who put his family first. Were those a myth? Or had her father's heart closed when her mother passed?

Adam's hand touched her waist again. "Isabelle?"

She looked up into the eyes of another man who had proclaimed his heart had also closed. But she didn't see distance in his eyes, what she noted was concern. "I'm all right. Auntie did warn me."

His other hand came to her cheek, his large palm cupping her face as his thumb skimmed over her cheekbone. "You don't have to pretend with me. I see your strength and your hurt."

Her breath caught and held in her lungs. Had he really just said that? His words laid her open and she found herself sharing her pain like a fountain of bubbling water. "It's just that I thought maybe once, maybe when he was about to lose one of us, he'd actually see what he had and then he'd be there. But not even the possibility of death will open his heart to us..." Her throat closed as the air stuttered out of her chest.

But the tears didn't come. Instead she found herself crushed into Adam's embrace. His hard chest was surprisingly comfortable, as she lay her head on it.

"He's a fool," Adam rumbled. "There have never been two more lovable women in the world."

Her head snapped back up, her gaze meeting his. Had he really just called her lovable? But before she could ask, he was moving closer, his nose just brushing hers, their gazes still locked together.

She tipped back just a little more until his lips barely brushed hers. It was a whisper of a touch, nothing more than that, but her entire body came to life, every nerve ending singing with joy as he repeated the light touch.

He did it again, and again until she was humming with energy, her body pressed to his. With each pass, he lingered longer, pressed closer, until finally they seemed to breathe each other's air and all Isabelle could think was that she wished for more of all this man had to give.

But how much would that be? She pulled back a bit to look at him once again. He'd been by her and her aunt's side for the past two days and that meant something to her. And he'd followed her advice to hold the festival at Castledon. Did that mean he might have affection to give?

He still held her face and his thumb skimmed over her bottom lip. "Isabelle," he murmured, his voice rough and craggy. She shivered at the sound, her nerves humming.

"Adam...I—" But he shook his head, cutting off her words.

"Isabelle," he started and something in the tone frightened her just a little. It held a note of seriousness that made her worry. Was he going to tell her that he could never be what she needed?

He had warned her. But in this moment, she wanted a safe harbor. A place where her heart might fill more.

Her lip trembled as she stared up at him. "I'm not certain I want you to tell me."

He gave her a confused look, his brows drawing together. “You don’t?”

She shook her head. “No. You’ve been so wonderful the past few days. Rescuing us and sitting with Matilda. Tomorrow you can tell me that this kiss didn’t mean anything —”

But he covered her lips with his thumb. “It means a great deal.”

“Oh.” That was the only word she seemed capable of uttering as her gaze widened in surprise.

“Isabelle. I was going to suggest that you and Matilda stay.”

“Stay?” A woman of her station did not just simply stay with a man who was not her relation. Not without...

“As my wife,” he added, his voice so low she thought she might have misheard him.

“Your wife?” Now she was just being ridiculous. But the words were difficult to fathom. He couldn’t mean them. Not really.

He gave one single jerk of his chin. “You need a titled husband who will allow you to serve the community. I find that highly appealing.”

“You do?” There. She hadn’t just repeated his words.

“And you’d like a home that would be comfortable for your aunt with a man who would welcome her. I could give you both that luxury.”

“Oh.” Why had words suddenly escaped her? Her chest felt tight and her brain hardly worked as she struggled to take in enough air.

“Tell me you’ll think about it.”

“Of course,” she answered in a rush of breath. The offer was everything she needed. She’d planned to marry. She had no great illusions of love. The match was meant to provide for

Matilda as much as herself and what Adam offered. It gave her everything she hoped for.

So why did a niggle of disappointment settle in her belly?

“I would provide for you both. I know I didn’t make the best first impression...”

Those words made her shoulders slump in some sort of relief. Was he worried about her answer? “Oh Adam. It’s a wonderful offer. Matilda and I would be so lucky to find ourselves in your home.” But she noted that she hadn’t exactly said *yes* either.

It was the perfect offer for them and all that she’d hoped for. The only problem was that somewhere along the way, she’d developed feelings for this man, ones that went far beyond convenience.

And having loved her father for all these years and never having that affection returned, she just wasn’t certain she could enter such a bargain ever again.

“Promise me you’ll consider it?”

“I will,” she answered just before his lips descended over hers one more time.

His kiss erased all her thoughts. Her worries and her hesitations. But she gave her head a small shake. She couldn’t afford to lose her faculties now. She’d need to keep her wits about her.

ADAM WOKE the next morning groggy and grumpy from a poor night’s sleep. Which only irritated him further.

Why waste a proper night’s sleep on a problem that would surely be better solved if he were well rested?

He grumbled to himself as he tossed back the covers. Then again, perhaps there was no solving a botched marriage proposal. And he’d most certainly botched it. The look on Isabelle’s face had been one of shocked reluctance.

Fool.

How could he blame her? He'd spent her first three days in her company telling her how much he'd disliked her.

And then he'd spent the next two being an absolute beast...her word. And finally, he'd declared his affection for her, likely far too late.

He let out another rumble as he pulled his nightshirt over his head and stepped into the waiting bath of water, scrubbing at his skin.

He had tried to make amends by allowing her to move the festival to the grounds. Then again, that likely benefitted him far more than it did her.

Having the event here had smoothed relations with the village a great deal. Blast it, but even his attempts to please her were failing.

He scrubbed at his hair, pulling at the strands before he rinsed, rose, and began to dress. What else might he do to convince Isabelle he was a sound choice for husband? He could give her more books. He had a very large collection.

Tell off her father? That one he found particularly satisfying. How could the man deny Isabelle his affection? She deserved the best of everyone around her.

He could promise her a fund for community projects or...

A knock sounded at the door. "My lord?"

"Yes?" he replied back to his butler even as he continued to tie his cravat. "What is it?"

"Your brother, my lord."

"What about him?"

"He's here," the butler called back.

That made Adam blink in surprise. Blake was here?

Grabbing his jacket, he started for the door. "The duke is here?"

"Along with the duchess and your niece," Reeves nodded.

“Why?”

The other man raised his eyebrows a fraction of an inch. “They did not deem to say.”

That made Adam smile a bit. “Right. Apologies.”

The man gave a jaunty nod of acknowledgment as Adam started down the hall toward the front parlor. Though he had no idea why his brother was here, he was suddenly very grateful and eager to speak with his older brother.

As a man who’d recently wed for the second time, surely Blake would have some advice for how to properly woo Isabelle.

Just as he reached the top of the stairs, however, Isabelle appeared outside her door. She might be the only person he wished to see more than Blake and he paused to wait for her. Her smile was shy as she started toward him. “Good morning.”

He waited until she’d reached his side, holding out his elbow, he softly murmured, “Good morning,” in reply even as he tucked her hand deeper into the crook of his arm. “I hope you slept well.”

She nipped at her bottom lip even as she gave him a shy smile. “Can I confess that my thoughts were so full, I found it difficult?”

Those words made him feel better. At least she really needed to think before rejecting his offer. “Mine too.”

A blush crept into her cheeks, the sort that always stole his breath. “Do you think we might discuss your offer later?”

He gave a quick nod. “Of course. Though, we do now have company.”

“Company?”

“Isabelle,” Daffodil cried from the bottom of the stairs. His new sister-in-law was as effervescent as she was lovely and the name of her friend, echoed with her enthusiasm.

“Daff?” Isabelle replied, her smile changing from shy to elated in a second. He had a moment of jealousy. He wanted her to smile like that at him.

She didn’t take her hand from his arm. Instead, she began tugging him down the stairs, a gesture that made him laugh. He didn’t mind her joy over her friend, now that he was included in it. “Did you invite them?” she cried, giving him a beaming smile of his own.

“I wish I had thought of it,” was his reply. “I had no idea it would make you so happy.”

Behind Daffodil, Blake appeared. His brother’s eyebrows were climbing up his forehead as he looked from Adam to Isabelle and back again.

They reached the bottom and Isabelle finally let him go to toss her arms about Daffodil. The two women began to babble to one another, their words so quick, that he could hardly make them out.

Blake stepped up to his side. “Let’s leave them to it, shall we?”

Adam gave a nod as he reached out to shake his brother’s hand. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Well, I thought to see my brother and Daffodil knew that Isabelle would be here, and she hoped to see her friend.”

A very reasonable explanation.

“But now that I’m here, I think we might need to have a chat.”

Adam scowled at his brother. “About?”

“Isabelle.” And then, without another word, Blake turned and started for the back of the house.

Adam let out a rumble of frustration. Dukes. They thought everyone should bow to their wills. But despite his irritation he found himself following. Because his brother was correct. They did need to talk.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“STOP STORMING AHEAD LIKE A BLOODY BEAST,” Adam growled at his brother as they passed the garden and started toward the upper road that led to the village.

Blake stopped, turning toward his brother, his thick arms crossed. “Beast?”

Adam felt his mouth twitch. “It’s what Isabelle has called me on more than one occasion. But it occurred to me that you may bear a familial resemblance.”

Blake snorted, which did, in fact, sound rather beastly. “We are direct, and perhaps a bit gruff.”

“We are.”

“Which is why, I’m going to say that I’ve never seen you look at a woman the way you do Isabelle.”

Adam glowered at his brother. “So?”

“Your intentions?”

“Marriage.”

Blake gave a nod. “Excellent. That settles it then.” And then his brother started down the path once again.

Adam let out a long breath of frustration. “Why are you walking away?”

“My legs are stiff from the carriage.”

“Blake,” he broke into a trot to come alongside his brother. “Would you slow down please.”

“Why?”

“Because...” He raked a hand through his thick mane of hair. “It isn’t settled not at all.”

“What do you mean?” Blake stopped again, turning toward Adam.

“I mean that I proposed—”

“You proposed?”

“Yes, and she said she’d think about it.”

“Think about it?”

Why was everyone just repeating his words? “Yes,” he gritted out. “That’s what she said.”

Blake cocked his head to the side. “And how exactly did you propose?”

“Well,” he scrubbed at his jaw. “You know. I told her how I could support her causes. They’re important to her and she’s very good at them. And I...” But he winced, sensing that something was wrong. “Said that I’d be happy to have her aunt here with us to live out her days. You’ll meet her later, and you’re going to really like her.”

Blake raised his brows. “And? What else did you say?”

“That she could think about it...” But he shifted, discomfort making his teeth grind together.

“And, just out of curiosity, did you mention your feelings?”

Ah, there was the source of his discomfort. “Well...I...”

Blake nodded. “Listen. When I first proposed marriage to Clarissa, a very wise man told me that I ought to make certain I shared with her my deep and abiding affection.”

“Who suggested that?”

“You.”

Adam nearly choked. Because now that his brother mentioned it, he did remember giving that advice. How could

he have forgotten? “But what if she doesn’t return my feelings?”

“Then you’ll know. But if you don’t share, you might lose her just because she doesn’t understand.”

That was an excellent point. The truth of it settled in his gut. “A week ago, I thought never to marry, let alone love someone. How am I going to open my heart that completely?”

“You’ll find a way. You’re a very competent person.”

Brothers. They had a way of getting to the heart of a matter. “Let’s keep walking. I could use the exercise as well.”

Blake nodded. “Good idea. Walking is good for the mind.” And then his brother began moving again, his thick legs eating the ground as he took long strides.

Adam fell behind, content to think of his own thoughts. Blake was right. He’d have to find a way to share more of his feelings with Isabelle. She’d spent a lifetime with a distant man and she likely needed to know that wasn’t the sort of husband he’d be.

If anything, he was smitten past the point of reason. And now that he considered it, of course Isabelle would want to know that’s how he felt. How had he not seen it sooner? He raised his head as he made to call out to Blake.

Except that he caught his brother swiping a hand through his own dark hair, his fingers jerking through the strands looking agitated.

He stopped, his head cocking to the side. He’d been so focused on his own problems, he wondered what he missed. What was wrong with Blake?

ISABELLE HELD her friend’s hands in her own. “I’m so happy you’re here!”

“Me too,” Daffodil gave her a large smile but Isabelle noted that it didn’t quite reach her friend’s eyes.

Isabelle pulled Daff close, holding her in her arms. “What brings you all this way?”

Daffodil shook her head, her hair brushing Isabelle’s cheek. “I wanted to see you.”

Isabelle leaned back, still holding her friend close. She didn’t speak, giving Daff the room to say whatever she wished.

“I...” Daffodil’s eyes grew the slightest bit watery. “Tell me about you and Adam.”

Isabelle narrowed her gaze, studying her friend. “We can discuss me later. Tell me what’s troubling you.”

Daffodil shook her head. “You first. It’ll be easier.”

Isabelle nodded, holding back a wince. “Well. I thought I disliked him, but it turns out...”

Daffodil smiled at that. “I thought so. I’ve never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you.”

Isabelle blinked in surprise, remembering Matilda’s words. “Really? You’re certain?”

“Of course I am,” Daffodil answered. “He appears completely smitten.”

“Well, his proposal was—” She’d been going to say practical but Daffodil’s gasp cut her off.

“He proposed. You’re going to be my sister?” The squeal of delight was unmistakable.

“Possibly.”

“Wait. What?” Daffodil pulled back, grabbing her hands. “Tell me everything.”

And so she did. All of it. Even the kiss and the rescue, the villagers, and her aunt. By the end, Daffodil’s eyes were dancing with merriment.

“What’s funny?” she asked, finding herself smiling at her friend.

Daffodil shook her head. “Not a week has passed and he went from being completely opposed to marriage to proposing?”

Isabelle’s stomach dropped at the implication of those words. “I suppose he did.”

Daffodil shook her head. “You’ve nothing to worry about. If you feel the same, you should say yes.”

Isabelle choked a bit as she tried to argue. “But if he cares, why didn’t he just say so—”

Daffodil squeezed her fingers. “Listen. Men struggle with feelings. It’s part of the reason they need us. You’ll have to lead the way there. Think of it as your version of the carriage rescue. He can carry you through mud but you’re going to need to help him sift through emotions.”

“Daffodil,” she cried, nearly laughing out loud. “When did you become so wise?”

Daffodil shook her head. “Maybe it’s a product of becoming a mother.”

“Clarissa is doing well?”

Daffodil nodded but her gaze had grown distracted again. She looked away barely nodding. “She’s very well.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“I’m going to be a mother again. I’m pregnant,” her friend whispered. “Already.”

They’d been married for five months. It wasn’t unheard of. “That’s wonderful!”

“Maybe,” Daffodil whispered. “Except Blake has completely retreated from me since I told him the news a few weeks ago.” Daffodil chewed on her lower lip, tears beginning to shine in her eyes. “We’d talked about a family, I thought he’d be happy.”

Isabelle’s eyes widened in surprise as she held her friend once again. She wished she had some advice, but in this regard, she had no experience at all.

Daffodil swiped at her eyes before pulling away again. “Let’s talk of happy things, shall we? I hear there is going to be an autumn festival.”

Isabelle shared the plans, but in her heart, she was worried for her friend. Which was why, when she heard Blake and Adam enter the house again, she excused herself and followed Adam up the stairs.

He looked back at her as he reached the top. “Hello.”

She smiled, joining him, as she threaded her arm through his. “How did you know I was there?”

“Your skirts. I’d know the sound of them anywhere.”

Something warm slid through her. Perhaps Daffodil was right about his affection. But now was not the time to focus on herself. “Adam,” she leaned closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Can we talk?”

She felt him stiffen. “Are you going to reject my proposal?” She heard the hurt in his voice and her insides went completely soft.

“No,” she replied, squeezing his upper arm. “My apologies, I didn’t want to speak about us at all but about Daff and Blake.”

His eyes widened as he started down the hall, leading her to his study. “What’s wrong?”

“Daffodil is pregnant,” she replied softly, not wanting anyone to hear. “And she claims that Blake isn’t happy about the news.”

Adam’s eyes widened as he turned into the study. “Of course.”

Did that make sense to him? “You understand?”

He gave a nod. “His first wife died a month after Clarissa was born. Infection.”

She gasped, understanding. “Oh dear.”

He winced. “No wonder Blake seemed so gruff.”

That made her smile. Both of the brothers turned a bit surly when there were feelings involved. “Can you talk to him?”

Adam nodded and then he was pulling her close. “I will. And thank you for telling me. My brother is my only real family the way your aunt is yours. I’m glad to know.”

She gave him a warm smile as her body fitted into his. “I’m glad to help you.”

He leaned his forehead down to hers. “We need to talk about us.”

“We will,” she answered, suddenly feeling far surer about everything. “But first, help your brother. I’ll still be here.”

“You will?”

She gave a small, husky laugh that hardly sounded like her own. “I promised the lord of the house, I’d stay for the festival. And I keep my promises.” Especially to those she cared about.

“So you did,” he replied, tipping his mouth closer to steal a light kiss. “And there is no rush to leave after that. I’ll have more brandy ordered for Matilda.”

That made her laugh. “You’re spoiling her.”

“We’ll see about that,” he answered, sliding away. “And you and I will talk soon.”

“Soon,” she answered, letting him go but already missing his heat. “Help Blake first. I’ll wait.”

He gave a quick nod before he left the room.

Isabelle found that she’d clasped her hands over her heart. Hopefully, he’d allow her to give it to him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE MORNING of the festival dawned bright and sunny, the crisp autumn air blowing the multicolored leaves about on the trees.

Isabelle rose from her bed, crossing to the window. Villagers already milled about, creating makeshift stands and decorating the foley for the ceremony that would declare the best baked goods, meat, and cheese.

The festival was an opportunity for local people to promote their businesses and to come together as a community.

Isabelle had never been prouder to take part in anything. This would make a difference in these people's lives.

She had created an area of her own amongst the booths and stalls. She was going to have a reading nook for children. She'd read them stories and Adam had even helped her to fashion mats for each child to sit on while she read them stories.

Stepping into a bath, she tried to contain her excitement. She and Adam had yet to discuss their feelings, but yesterday evening, Isabelle had caught Daffodil and Blake in an intimate embrace that told her, whatever Adam had said to his brother had worked.

A smile tugged at her lips. Had she been worried that Adam might be like her father? Her father would never have taken pains to smooth someone else's marriage. Adam might be gruff but underneath that was a caring heart.

And today, she hoped to tell him so. But she also needed him to know that her own heart had become involved. Would that worry him?

Her stomach fluttered with nerves. Neither Daffodil nor Matilda thought so but neither of them had to stand in front of a man and declare their affection.

Still, Isabelle had never been one to back down from a challenge and she wouldn't today.

Rising from the water, she quickly dressed and then began to twist her hair up into a coif.

The door opened, her aunt stepping inside. "Why don't you have a servant helping you?"

Isabelle shrugged. She was too impatient for such an exercise this morning. "There's too much to do today."

"Busy all the time," her aunt murmured as she stepped up behind Isabelle, twisting a lock of hair and pinning it back.

Isabelle arched her brows. "You're looking much recovered, Auntie."

Matilda winked. "This place can rejuvenate a person for certain."

"Touché," she smiled at her aunt in the mirror. Then she drew in a deep breath. "Do you like it here enough to stay?"

Her aunt's hands stilled in her hair. "Did he propose?"

"He did."

"And he explicitly invited me here as well?"

"He did."

Matilda began twisting the locks of hair with deft fingers that made her seem ten years younger. "He's got it worse than I thought."

"Got what?"

Her aunt laughed as she worked. "Have you answered?"

"Not yet."

“Why not?” A section of hair pulled, causing Isabelle to cry out.

“Because,” she reached up to still her aunt’s hand. “I need to tell him of my affection first.”

“Why?” her aunt asked, batting her hand away to keep working.

“He offered as though it would be a match of convenience, but I’m afraid I feel a bit more than that and...”

Everything in her aunt softened. “Ah. In that case, proceed.”

She had not needed her aunt to tell her that. But one did not deter their matriarch from mothering. It was impossible.

A tray arrived for breakfast, the party having agreed that a more formal affair would take too much time.

Isabelle could hardly bring herself to eat in her excitement, but she managed some tea and a crust of bread before she set off outside to greet everyone and make her final preparations.

But as she approached her spot along the terrace, she found a large baron already waiting there.

“Adam,” she called with a wave, taking a few skipping steps toward him. “I thought you were going to watch from the library?”

He chuckled. “And miss listening to you read? Never.”

She blushed then stepping close. “How is Blake?”

“Very well,” he answered, his hand skimming down her arm. “Thank you for your help.”

She gave a small nod as she shifted closer. “Does that mean it’s time to discuss us?”

“I think it is.”

She could feel his heat, her hand drifting to his large chest as she tipped her head back to look into his eyes. “Oh good.”

“Good?” he smiled at her then, that look that she loved as his arm snaked about her waist.

“I think it’s good. I want to answer your question but also I need to tell you—”

“My lord,” the mayor called with a wave. “I must thank you.”

The couple broke apart, disappointment lancing through Isabelle. Would she never get the chance to tell him how she felt?



ADAM WATCHED Isabelle reading to a group of children, their gasps and cries of joy and mock fear filling him with laughter and joy.

How could he ever thought to miss this part of life?

And when had Isabelle made him realize that despite all the darkness, there was also light. He listened to their shower of giggles as Isabelle imitated the voice of a giant and barely repressed his own grin.

She was joy personified in his moment and he wanted to feel all of it.

The story finally ended, and the children scurried off, eager to tell their families about the story.

Adam knew he only had minutes before she began the next, so swooping over to her he reached for her hand, pulling her up from the stool where she sat.

She looked up at him, her gaze questioning but merry as he pulled her toward the hedged garden on the east side of the property. “Where are we going?” she gasped as he wrapped an arm about her to keep her moving.

“We need a moment to finish our conversation,” he said, opening the gate and pulling her inside. “One that will not be interrupted.”

She slid into his arms, her hands threading about his neck. “We do, indeed.”

He pulled her close. "I know you had things you wished to say to me."

"I do," she answered, her fingers twining into his hair.

Which was an excellent sign. Women did not generally touch a man this way if they were about to reject them, did they? Still, he had a few things to say before he asked. "May I speak first?"

She nodded as he drew in a breath, skimming his fingertips over her cheek. "The other day I promised you a life filled with your passions and time with your aunt."

"You did."

"But what I did not say, because my feelings frightened me ___"

"I can't picture you afraid of anything."

That made him smile. "Yes, you can. I know you know that I've been afraid to open my heart again."

Her fingers stilled on his neck. "I suppose I did know that."

"But what I wanted to say..." He drew in a deep fortifying breath. "Is that you, my sweet Isabelle, have opened my feelings again, and I have a deep affection for you."

"You do?" she asked in a whisper.

He gave a nod. "More than affection. I..." Another breath. "I'm in love you, Isabelle. I might have been from that very first moment, I just couldn't admit it to myself."

He felt the shock stiffen her body as she leaned back to stare up at him, her eyes wide. "You...you love me?"

"I do," he held her tighter, afraid to let her go. "I can only hope that you'll develop the same affection for me in time. But I promise you, if you'll consent to be my wife, I will apply myself to giving you all that you deserve in this life."

She stared at him for several seconds saying nothing. The silence stretched for so long that he wished to shift in nervous frustration. She didn't step out of his arms, which might have

comforted him except she just appeared frozen. “You love me?”

He’d seen shock before and if he wasn’t mistaken, she was displaying the signs. “Do you need to sit, my love?”

She shook her head, her body leaning into his. “No. It’s just...” And then she swallowed down a lump.

“What?” he asked, his heart beginning to thud heavily in his chest.

“It’s just that I was going to tell you that I...”

He splayed his hands out on her back.

“That I love you too.”

The words pierced straight through him. “Isabelle.”

Her fingers were back in his hair, dancing through the strands. “I don’t know when it happened. But I hesitated to answer your proposal because I knew I wanted more than just a convenient match. I wished for your heart.”

He tried to speak and then decided that words were hardly necessary, so instead, he used his lips to capture hers in a long, slow kiss.

The festival could wait. But after a few minutes tangled together, he raised his head, finding his voice again. “Wait a moment.”

“What?” she blinked, her puffy lips, turning down into the most adorable frown. “What’s wrong?”

He swiped his thumb over her plump flesh. “I just realized that you haven’t actually answered my question.”

“Oh.”

“Will you, Lady Isabelle, consent to be my wife?”

“Yes,” she replied with an angelic smile. “Yes, I will.”

“Good,” he said as he dipped his head again, placing a soft kiss on her parted lips. “Because I can’t imagine my life without you.”

That made her laugh. “You’ve lived without me for years.”

“As a beast,” he chuckled. “But now I’m ready to be a man. Your man.”

And then he kissed her again.

EPILOGUE

SEVEN MONTHS LATER...

THE SPRING AIR danced through the trees at Clifton Hall and blew into the open windows of the Duke of Hathshire's estate. Blake and Daffodil's home.

Isabelle waved to her husband across the great hall as he stood with the other men. All of her friends had come to celebrate the christening of Daffodil and Blake's new baby boy, Christian. And they'd all brought their new husbands.

"Come," Isabelle called from the sitting room that adjoined the large space. "Come meet my sweet little boy."

The women filed in. Jocelyn first, followed by Daffodil's sister, Delilah. Next came Jane, and finally Isabelle.

She looked about the stunning space, the rich polished mahogany shining in the large and lavish room. How far each of the girls had come. Had it really been less than a year since they'd danced about the Maypole and made their wishes?

Delilah must have been thinking the same because she fell back, her blonde hair shining in the morning sun. "Can you believe Daffodil has had a baby? It feels like yesterday we were all together dreaming of our futures."

"What did you wish for?" Jocelyn asked even as they crowded around Daffodil and Christian.

Daffodil's eyes shined. "I pretended to wish for independence, but the honest truth, I always wanted Blake. A

man to whom I could give my heart.”

Isabelle knew she'd made the very same wish and she craned her neck to peer through the door and catch sight of her husband. Her heart.

A hush fell over the woman, the only noise the coos of the new baby and the sighs of the ladies. With luck and providence, they'd have their own families soon.

And perhaps a wish.

“He's perfect, Daff,” Isabelle whispered. “All that any of us could wish for.”

“Wish?” Jocelyn asked with her sparkling smile. “Now there is a thought.”

They all laughed. Had their wishes really come true?

Delilah leaned closer, clearing her throat. “Did you know that in the next village over, Wedmore, there is a well...”

Isabelle's brows lifted. “What do you mean?”

“I heard some ladies whispering at a soiree,” Delilah waved her hand. “You know how I am about fairy tales, so naturally I had to listen.”

Everyone leaned a bit closer. “Anyway. The Baroness Heartland swears that five girls made wishes in the well and their wishes came true.”

Jane wrinkled her nose. “Is there any proof? Do we even know the girls' names?”

Delilah shrugged. “We're proof, Jane. Look at us.” And she spread her arms wide. “We made wishes that came true.”

Daffodil reached for her sister's hand. “What are you proposing Lila?”

Delilah shrugged. “We could make another wish...”

Isabelle looked back at her husband. She didn't want to tell Delilah, but she suspected she was also expecting. And she knew each of her friends had a wonderful future ahead of them with the men they'd chosen. “Our happily-ever-afters are

already happening, Lila. We'll leave the wishes for girls who really need them."

And then Isabelle reached down and touched the tiny toes of baby Christian.

"You're right," Delilah answered, bending down to kiss her nephew. "The wishes should be saved for girls who need them most."

Isabelle placed a hand over her stomach. She hoped some lucky group of women stumbled across the well and made their wishes...

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